

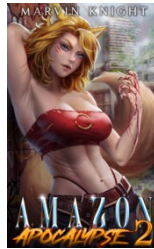
MARVIN KNIGHT



AMAZON  
APOCALYPSE 2

# AMAZON APOCALYPSE 2

MARVIN KNIGHT



# CONTENTS

[The Story So Far...](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[Chapter 76](#)

[Chapter 77](#)

[Chapter 78](#)

[Chapter 79](#)

[Chapter 80](#)

[Chapter 81](#)

[Chapter 82](#)

[Chapter 83](#)

[Chapter 84](#)

[Chapter 85](#)

[Chapter 86](#)

[Chapter 87](#)

[Chapter 88](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Carter's Final Stats](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Links](#)

# THE STORY SO FAR...

Once upon a time, Earth was normal, and I was just another cog in the corporate machine. I worked an office job in a modest size town and had a good relationship with my boss and coworkers.

Then the System arrived, and our familiar world was shattered.

The System planned to throw us in its swirling cocktail of extraordinary worlds called the Arcadia Multiverse. Assuming we survive the integration, that is.

Among these many new worlds was the realm my lost childhood friend Myrina hailed from. Before she'd disappeared, she'd claimed to come from a place called the Amazonian Empire. Her claim had seemed insane then, but after the arrival of the System, I had no choice but to believe.

When the System came, she offered me the support of her people, assuming I could complete a quest to prove my worth. I gladly accepted.

Guided by her advice, I kept my head above water, learning to swim while others sank. I helped my coworkers

navigate this apocalypse and saved many good people.

Among them were Sakura, my former boss, and Bridget, and intern from our office. Both of them took a liking to me as I led the shelter to victory and safety, and with their help we turned our old office complex into a shelter that could protect those who hadn't yet gained the levels to protect themselves.

Things were not easy, though. Sakura grappled with the changes the System wrought more than most. It transformed her from a human into something called an oni, and now a crimson horn juts from the center of her forehead. With it, she's gotten odd looks aplenty, and if not for my support and the many points she dumped into her strength stat, she might have been cast out entirely.

Bridget had her own battles to contend with. She'd unwittingly become the object of interest for the office's resident asshole, Craig.

Craig thought himself a better fit for leader of the shelter. If he'd been all talk, we would have just ignored him. But the trouble was he had the levels to back his claim up. He'd been among the first to get a gun operational, and he'd used the weapon to great effect getting levels faster than anyone else in the office, even me.

The friction between Craig and me reached a boiling point, resulting in my untimely death. Assisted by his small army of goons, Craig murdered me and tossed my corpse in a dumpster.

But I hadn't been the only guy to die at Craig's hands, and I found the afterlife full of angry ghosts. With their help, I rose from the dead with a Epic-rarity spellcaster class, the Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge.

Using my newfound power, I killed Craig and avenged the fallen, restoring peace to the shelter and saving Bridget and Sakura from a grim fate.

But my resurrection didn't come without a price. The System hates cheaters, and after patching the trick I used to revive myself, it marked me with a Death Curse, forbidding

me from getting experience points from killing monsters while simultaneously luring monsters to my location.

Things seemed grim until Sakura came up with a solution. My experiences in the land of the dead gave me the skill to drain levels from those willing to give them, and Sakura volunteered to do just that.

With her help, I found a way around my curse. I'd fight monsters and give her the experience, then she'd give me some of the levels she gained. It was the perfect team, though monsters still sought me out whether I wanted to fight them or not.

To avoid drawing them to Crownhill, the two of us left for my farmhouse in the countryside and planned to settle in for a long stay in my happy little valley.

But the System was far from done with Earth.

Ours was not the only world the System had devoured. Many others were in the integration process as well, and the System intended us to fight them for supremacy over our combined realm, known in the Arcadia Multiverse as a Shard.

Among our foes were Goblins, Trolls, Ogres, and Wolfmen. The goblins surrendered to me after I stormed their camp and defeated their chief, Wubwub. The Wolfmen, however, were a tougher fight.

When we returned to Crownhill to warn them of the danger, we found it already under attack by the Wolfmen. I rallied the remaining humans, and together we fought back.

During the fight, Bridget was infected with the Wolfmen's curse, which turned her part wolf. To save her, I had to fight the Alpha Wolfman in single combat, using my spells and my class skills as a Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge.

The fighting was tough, but we won and stopped Bridget's transformation just in time. So far, all she's shown is a cute set of wolf ears and a bit of unnatural speed, but I suspect there's a few new tricks she isn't telling me.

After saving humanity from the Wolfmen, Bridget returned to my Farmhouse with me. Following her transformation, like



Sakura, she had become different and in search of a new home. I was happy to provide, and she was happy to contribute levels to me, just as Sakura did.

With the three of us together, the future was looking bright.

But far across the multiverse, I heard word from Myrina. After finally completing her patronage quest, she came to see me once more. It was a joyful reunion for me. Less so for my two lovely companions, but I know they'll come to love Myrina if they just give her a chance.

Danger lurks across our Shard, and we'll need Myrina's help to fend off the Ogres, Trolls, and more importantly, whatever the System throws at us next. After all, our enemies were leveling just as fast as we were.

But Myrina has a lot on her mind. Her clan is at war, and I fear I'll be drawn into events that span the multiverse far sooner than I'm prepared for.

## CHAPTER

# ONE

“Our man...” Bridget purred, arm thrown over my chest.

“That’s right!” Sakura said, toying with Myrina’s token around my neck. It had just started glowing a moment ago and caught everyone’s attention. “Carter’s our man! Just the two of us! And we’re not sharing. I’ll lay the smackdown on any hussy trying to worm her way in.”

“And I’ll help you.” Bridget let out a small laugh as she drew little circles with her finger over my bare skin. Her nails were a little sharper than any human’s ought to be. Now that I thought about it, her teeth were sharper, too. And the corners of her hair stuck up like little wolf ears. There wasn’t anything under them, but it gave her a distinctly wolf-like appearance.

The curse she’d inherited from the Chaosborn Lycans we defeated was still growing stronger. I wondered if it would affect her personality. Sakura’s impulsive and hot-tempered personality had certainly come to the fore after the System awakened her dormant Oni lineage.

“We were here first!” Sakura rubbed her cheek against me. The horn jutting out of her forehead was warm to the touch.

It was flattering to be fought over, and I’d like to think I could have come up with something clever to say in reply. But my head was busy. The moment Myrina’s Token started glowing, I’d received a prompt from The System.

**Quest Completed!**

**Congratulations! You have satisfied all requirements for patronage as laid out by your agreement with the faction: the Amazonian Empire.**

**Your patron has been granted another opportunity to speak with you.**

The moment the message cleared, golden light flew from the medallion, assembling itself into a familiar form. The toned body of a warrior woman coalesced across the bed as the three of us sat up. Red hair fell from her shoulders, and her fine armor was inlaid with enchantments like the ones I made to create Mana Bombs.

Though she looked fully human, now that I'd seen more of the universe following Earth's integration, I couldn't help but notice a certain sense of otherworldly beauty. And now that I'd ascended to D-Grade, I realized I'd never seen Myrina with a pimple or blemish of any kind.

My childhood best friend really wasn't human, just as she'd said.

"Carter, you did it! I knew you would." Myrina's projection jumped onto the bed. She phased right through it since she was merely made of light, but a moment later her head popped up from the mattress. She wrapped her arms around my chest in a big, warm hug. "I missed you."

I returned Myrina's tight embrace. "It's good to see you again, Myrina."

Off to either side, Bridget and Sakura crossed their arms and stared at the projection of the red-haired woman locking me in a hug.

"Carter? Did you forget to tell us something?" Sakura gave me a hard stare.

Myrina stuck out her tongue in reply. "Ah, you two must be Carter's concubines. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Concubines?!" Bridget huffed.

"Hey! You're the concubine. I was his first lover! And Bridget was second. We're his two and only!" Sakura tried to

pry Myrina's projection off me, only for her hands to go right through the projection.

"Nope!" Myrina smiled widely as she pointed from Sakura to Bridget. "I found him first. You're second at best. And that means you must be third."

"What! No way! I was second." Bridget jumped to her feet, and soon Sakura had done the same.

"She's trying to steal our man, Bridget! Pin her arms while I teach her a lesson." Sakura pounded her fist into her palm.

Myrina had slipped right through Sakura's gasp before, but she hadn't realized Myrina was just a projection. She wasn't really here, so any attempts to 'lay the smackdown' on her would be completely futile.

But I knew Sakura wasn't the type to give up in the face of the impossible. This was going to take a while. I flopped back down on the bed. Probably best if I let the three of them sort this out amongst themselves.



Sakura and Bridget soon discovered that Myrina was just a projection, and grabbing or punching her didn't do much of anything. But, as expected, that didn't mean they stopped trying.

If Myrina had offered to talk things out, they might have gotten tired and given up early. But Myrina was having some fun of her own.

"That's right! Thank you two for keeping my best friend Carter here company. I would have hated for him to have to survive the apocalypse on his own." Myrina let out a smug laugh. "But I'm here to take him away for his tutorial. You two can just wait patiently while I haul him off to my home and do who knows what with him!"

"I'm going to... argh!" Sakura swept her hand through Myrina's head, grabbing nothing but air each time. "Bridget! Grab her and pin her!"

Bridget wrapped her hands around Myrina's waist, trying to pin her down. She fell right through Myrina's projection.

"That's it!" Sakura lowered her shoulder and body-slammed Myrina's projection, only to fly right through it. She landed on the corner of the bed I was lying on, snapping the frame in half.

I groaned as I suddenly found myself wedged into a mattress that now bent itself into a 'V' shape around me. Then I let out a long sigh. It seemed Myrina hadn't lost her... combative sense of humor. It was one of the reasons I found myself so often on the losing side of a wrestling match with her. I doubted my house would survive the fight if she were present in person.

Crawling out of the mattress, I realized I'd have to be the peacekeeper. It could wait, though. First I needed to wake up. I kept a coffee maker near my bedside table and set a pot to boiling, letting out a yawn as I did my best to ignore the nearby catfight.

When the machine spat out my cup of wakey-wakey, I took the first sip and sighed before returning to the commotion.

"Alright, ladies. I suppose some introductions are in order. Sakura, please put the chair down." It took a bit of convincing, but I had my professional face on and the no-nonsense tone must have won everyone over. One by one, Bridget and Sakura turned from attacking Myrina's projection to merely glaring at her.

For her part, Myrina stuck her tongue out, clearly enjoying herself. The fighting would have ended much sooner, if not for her taunting and teasing.

"Okay. Sakura, Bridget. This is Myrina." I waved to the smug, red-haired Amazonian warrior who still had her tongue out. "She was my best friend when I was a kid and she lived down the street. She's the one who gave me this token. And she's the one who warned me about the coming of the System. If not for her advice, I probably wouldn't have survived until now. And that means you two would be living under Craig's

cruel and absolute rule. In a way, you have her to thank for your freedom.”

“That’s right! You may now bow down and thank me.” Myrina tilted her chin up. “And don’t worry, I promise to take very good care of Carter during his tutorial. When the two of us spend long hours alone... Just the two of us... Me and him, working up a sweat as I take him through all sorts of exercises.” She threw an overly exaggerated wink my way.

“Oh yeah?!” Sakura picked up the chair again with a glare in her eyes.

“And Myrina,” I continued, “these two are Sakura and Bridget.” I pointed from one to the other. “Sakura was my boss at my office job, and Bridget was an intern there. I couldn’t have survived the apocalypse without them.”

“The two of them seem to be adequate concubines, Carter. They’re fortunate to serve you. You and I can order them about like little minions. They can pick up the loot we leave behind when we hack our way through battlefields and deadly dungeons!”

Sakura’s grip around the chair’s legs turned white-knuckled. “Call us concubines one more time, I dare you!”

I sighed. “Myrina, don’t you have something important to tell me?”

Myrina laughed. “Oh... fine, Carter. I just wanted to see if your companions had the right attitude. I like them. They have a proper Amazonian mentality and would fit in well back home. You really did complete my patronage quest quite well.”

Sakura curled her other hand into a fist. “I’ll show you an Amazonian mentality...”

Bridget crossed her arms and shook her head. “How did someone like you make friends with our Carter?”

“By kicking ass!” Myrina grinned. “And that’s just what I will teach him to do. And maybe you two as well, if you’re lucky. Since you’re part of his faction, you two are also eligible for his tutorial. Assuming... well...”

Myrina grimaced, looking embarrassed for the first time since her appearance.

“Assuming what?” I frowned.

Myrina coughed and ran her fingers through her long red locks. “The System doesn’t exactly make this kind of thing cheap. It’ll cost me a small fortune to bring Carter to Themyscira. I do have one small fortune I’m willing to part with, but finding two more is going to be difficult.”

“I see...” I ran my fingers through my hair. In other words, Myrina could bring me to her tutorial, but not Bridget and Sakura. They weren’t going to like that.

“No way!” Sakura jabbed a finger at Myrina. “You’re trying to steal our man! I knew it!”

“Nah, I just want to borrow him for a bit.” Myrina waved her off dismissively. “Don’t worry. I’ll bring him back... eventually.”

Bridget glared. “Earlier, you said you were going to steal him.”

Myrina stuck her tongue out again. “And if I was to steal him, you two are too weak to stop me! Maybe I should hang onto him until you get more levels and skills under your belts.”

I could practically hear Sakura’s teeth grinding together.

I had done an awful lot of studying and preparing to get ready for surviving an apocalypse. But none of my training had ever involved learning how to manage three angry women ready to fight over me at a moment’s notice. It hadn’t even come up as something I’d have to worry about.

And yet, here I was.

“Alright, I’ve had just about enough of you...” Bridget shook her head.

Sakura frothed at the mouth, her face a deep crimson with barely restrained fury.

Myrina smiled. “Good. I suppose that means the two of you won’t refuse the offer to spar with me if I can get my family to spare the funds to bring the two of you to our place to train?”

Bridget tilted her chin away. “I’ll fight you anytime. But even assuming Carter wants to go with you, what can you offer him? We’re doing pretty well for him, ourselves. He’s leveling fast, thanks to us—he’s already the highest-leveled human on this shard. What can you really do for him that we can’t?”

Sakura’s reply was a mutter of barely restrained anger. Her white-knuckle grip on the chair in her hands was so great that the wood splintered and shattered.

Myrina strode forward confidently, one hand on her hip near the shiny blade in a scabbard nearby.

“I’m pleased you think Carter is doing so well. If he’s really the best on this shard, he has even more potential than I thought.” Myrina flashed a row of perfect white teeth at me. I wondered if she’d also unlocked the Charisma stat—and if she had, what level she’d gotten it to?

“But this is just one small shard on a newly integrated world,” Myrina continued. “You have a couple of species that have no idea what they’re doing fighting against one another. I doubt anyone on this shard has anything close to an optimized build. And I bet nobody knows how most System features work.”

“You’re saying you can explain things to him? Why can’t you just do that here with whatever you’re doing now?” Bridget asked, hands on her hips clenched into fists as she glared at Myrina.

Myrina shrugged. “While useful, my senses are pretty limited within a Farwalking Tablet. I can do so much more when we are up close and personal. Not to mention, only I can appear this way. I can’t do the reverse to let him talk to people where I am. Also, I’d like to take Carter to some of our professional Theory Crafters back home, since they can do far more for his build than I can.”



“You can relay the information for him,” Bridget replied.

Myrina shook her head. “It would be nice to run some dungeons with him, too. My clan has full access to a few. I want to see him fight for myself! Who knows, maybe we’ll even earn enough doing dungeon runs that we’ll be able to bring you two along next time.”

“There’s plenty to fight and kill here,” Bridget protested.

“You’ll steal him!” Sakura said, finally calming herself down enough to use words again.

I sighed, thinking of how best to make my plans known. I was going with Myrina, that much was certain. Attending her tutorial was an easy decision. There was so much I didn’t know about the System that she could teach me. Not to mention that it had been so long since I’d seen my old friend. I’d been ready to leave with her the moment she appeared, though I figured it would be best to keep that thought to myself, since I suspected Bridget and Sakura wouldn’t be pleased to hear it.

Instead, I appealed to reason. We needed knowledge. Myrina had it. All I had to do was take a little trip to get it. They might still be unhappy if it were just our lives on the line, but there was more at stake here than just our fates.

“I have to go with Myrina. Sakura, Bridget, she knows all about the System, and we know basically nothing. My class is difficult to master, and I want to make the most of it. This is a golden opportunity to prepare for the threats we’re going to face, and Myrina might very well save our lives... maybe the lives of everyone in Crownhill.”

Myrina smirked, making eye contact with Sakura as she did so. It looked like she enjoyed stoking Sakura’s barely restrained fury. I remembered how Myrina loved to wrestle, and suspected her people weren’t called Amazonians without reason. From the look in her eyes, I could tell Myrina really did want to fight Sakura and take her measure.

And Sakura wouldn’t say no. She’d always had a short fuse, and I’d had to calm her down at work plenty of times.

But ever since the System awakened her Oni bloodline, her rage had come out of whatever closet it had been buried in and had been amplified tenfold. She hadn't changed so much as everything that had been Oni about her had amplified who she was.

“Don't worry,” Myrina began. “The System won't let him stay on my world forever. He's from a newly integrated world, and the System doesn't like people interfering with these sorts of things this early in the game. If it did, I'd come to your world myself instead of needing Carter to come to me for his tutorial—as would every patron hoping for influence over a new world. No, it'll give him the boot in five days. Then he'll be back in your loving arms.”

“Five days? Do we have your word on that?” Bridget asked.

Myrina lost her smirk and her expression turned serious for the first time since she'd appeared. “My word and my sacred bond. Besides, I really need him. I want to introduce him to my family. I hope that if I show off his handsome face a bit, people will change their minds about subsidizing his training. That'll make it much easier to pay the cost to have the two of you brought over for some training, as well. And then the three of us can have our fight.”

Sakura, cheeks red, jabbed a finger at Myrina. “You're introducing him to your family?! I haven't even introduced him to my family yet!”

Bridget put a hand on Sakura's shoulder. They whispered furiously for a moment before turning back to Myrina and me.

“Alright, here's the deal,” Bridget began, all business. “Carter comes back stronger, or we'll take it out on your ass when we finally meet you in person! This isn't some romantic getaway, it's a training mission.”

“And you!” Sakura grabbed me by the shirt collar. “No candlelight dinners, no picnics, and no drinking from the same cup of coffee! Just because you have two girlfriends doesn't mean you get to add a third!”

I chuckled and held my hands up innocently. “Sakura, Bridget, don’t worry. I love both of you. I’ll learn a lot and share everything I know with you when I get back. Hopefully Myrina and I can get some more money so the two of you can join us in person. But if not, I’ll share everything I learn with the two of you.”

Sakura wrapped her arms around me in a hug. She grabbed me so tight I had to tap her back a few times so she’d loosen up enough for me to breathe.

“We’ll be gaining more levels while you’re gone,” Bridget promised, wrapping me up in a similarly tight embrace. “Don’t linger with your childhood friend too long. Otherwise you’ll fall behind.”

“Don’t worry. It’s just five days. I’ll be back before the two of you know it.”

## CHAPTER

# TWO

I spent a few minutes packing my things while Bridget talked with Myrina. Sakura busied herself with a futile attempt to repair the chair and bed she'd accidentally destroyed in her rage, pointedly ignoring Myrina as she did.

I listed out the things I'd need in my head. A change of clothes, toothbrush, deodorant, snack, and a few odds and ends. I stuffed it all in my gym bag and realized I still had extra room. Looking around, I saw a couple of my Mana Bomb components. They were mostly strands of loose copper torn out of destroyed buildings back in Crownhill, with a few odds and ends to help the magic settle in.

They packed flat as they were, fitting into my gym bag nicely. Plus, I could assemble them into thirty or forty Mana Bombs. I'd meant to finish crafting them anyhow, so I might as well bring them with me in case I had any downtime while training with Myrina.

While simple, they had been my most useful creation as an artificer to date. If I had anything that could sell on Myrina's home world, it would be these. Maybe I could make a bit of extra coin.

Hoping for handouts from Myrina's family wasn't how I worked. I'd been raised to earn my own way, so if I could figure out a way to make enough money to teleport Bridget and Sakura over to Myrina's home world for a tutorial session, I'd be much happier.

“Hopefully, Myrina’s world doesn’t have an Amazonian TSA...” I muttered to myself as I filled my bag the rest of the way full with Mana Bomb-making supplies.

I stood as I finished, hefting my bag over my shoulder. “Alright, I’m ready.”

Sakura turned to scowl at me. “You’d better come back in one piece.” She swiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Bridget gave me another warm hug. “We’ll take care of the farmhouse. You take care of yourself.”

I flashed both of them a smile. “I promise I’ll be back before you even miss me.”

Taking a deep breath, I took a step closer to Myrina. “Alright, so what do I need to do?”

“Step outside. I need to activate a teleportation array on my end. Your world doesn’t have a teleporter, which is part of why this is so expensive.”

Myrina winked out, and I was left standing in my bedroom. Tromping down the stairs and out the door, I waited on my lawn for several minutes. I was wondering if something had gone wrong when the world abruptly began shifting around me.

Shimmering colors folded in a perfect circle in all directions. I wanted to reach out and touch them, but decided it would be best to test things, first. I grabbed a blade of grass from the ground at my feet and held it out. The point that touched the shifting array of colors vanished as though it had never been, leaving the blade of grass smoothly cut.

“Yeah, definitely not sticking my hand in that,” I muttered.

The actual teleportation took a while. Eventually, the land outside my farmhouse faded away, leaving behind just the patch of grassy dirt beneath me. I was wrapped in a sphere of shimmering, shining colors.

Eventually, I sat down and fiddled with some spare wire. There wasn’t much to do otherwise, so I assembled a few

more Mana Bombs. I got through ten of them before the colors started fading.

The shimmering wall of light diminished much faster than it had formed. From what I knew about enchantment from my Artificer Job, I guessed the Teleportation Array on Myrina's end made the spell much more efficient. Factions with a proper teleportation network in place could likely get around much faster than the lengthy wait I'd just experienced.

When the light finally faded, I found myself somewhere far from where I'd departed. The chunk of grass beneath me crumbled atop a platform on the roof of a building overlooking a city unlike anything on Earth.

Most of the buildings were made of stone, though I spotted some thatched roofs here and there. Everything was painted in bright colors, and there were rows upon rows of narrow streets far too small to fit a car through—though they were still wide enough to walk or guide a horse along.

There were a few tall towers that reached for the sky, along with a couple of large complexes that seemed to be sprinkled throughout the city—complete with walls and gardens that fenced off each little private square. From the rooftop I stood upon, I could see thousands of people on foot. It was too far for me to make out their features, but from their long hair and the short dresses they wore, I suspected all, or nearly all, of them were women.

It was a bit like someone had taken inspiration from a city like Boston and did their best to copy it using only medieval tools. This place was certainly far larger than any settlement that had ever existed in Earth's history, though it was not quite to the scale of Earth's cities before the integration.

“Carter!” Myrina jumped forward, wrapping her arms around me.

This time, I felt the warmth in her limbs. For the first time in a long time, this was the real her in the flesh. I then realized one thing I hadn't noticed when she was using her Farwalking Tablet. Myrina was a lot taller than I thought.

I was taller than the average man, even more so now that I'd upgraded my race. Even still, hugging Myrina gave me a face full of her breasts—not that I was about to complain.

“You're finally here!” Myrina squeezed me tight, lifting me straight off my feet and spinning me in a little circle. “I can't wait to show you the city! There's so much to tell you! And so much to do!”

Besides a little extra height, she was much as she'd appeared to me before. Red hair, perfect smile, athletic build, with a smile that was equal parts playful and possessive. And this time, both those traits were focused squarely on me.

“Mmfff...” I said in reply.

Myrina might have given me a chance to say something wittier, but a harsh female voice cleared her throat behind us, interrupting our reunion.

“Miss Myrina, there's the small matter of payment. A transportation like that isn't cheap,” the voice said.

Myrina put me down with a sigh. She reached for a pouch at her waist and tossed it to the woman. Now that my face was no longer buried in Myrina's chest, I could get a good look at the woman she'd tossed the pouch to.

Her skin was green, and her ears tapered to points. She stood even taller than Myrina and was more muscular than Craig had been. I used Examine on her.

### **Orc Teleportation Technician - Level 64**

The orc turned to glare at me. “Did you just Examine me? You're lucky I'm in a good mood. Some people would charge extra for such rudeness.”

I realized my mistake and bowed my head. “Apologies. I was only curious. I'm from a newly in—”

Myrina clamped her hand over my mouth. “From the boonies! Ha ha... Nowhere important.”

The orc rolled her eyes. “Look, Miss Myrina, I know a teleport to a newly integrated shard when I see one. I knew there was a reason you wanted this done on the rooftop instead

of inside with everybody else. Out of respect for your family, I won't tell anyone. But you'd best keep that boy on a tight leash around these parts. He could get himself into trouble."

Myrina bowed to the orc. "Keep the bag for your discretion. Please teleport us to my clan. The public array in Valkyrie's Watch is fine."

The orc turned the bag upside down, and gold spilled out in large quantities—far more than could ever have fit in the bag. I eyed both the bag and the orc with interest, though I didn't dare use Analyze on the bag after such a harsh reaction to my using Examine.

After a moment, it appeared the orc was satisfied. She waved her hand, and a light shone from the ground beneath me. That same colorful energy enveloped me in a flash, and we reappeared in a smaller, less magical, and more medieval city perched on a mountaintop.

"Welcome to Valkyrie's Watch," a guard spoke in the dull monotone of someone who'd given the same speech a thousand times that very day. "Note to all visitors: Martial law is in effect. Do not stay out after sunset unless you're a guard or have permission from a member of the Samhain clan. Place your bags on the table to be searched."

"Don't worry, Olga, it's me," Myrina said as she kicked dirt off the Teleportation Array—all the dirt that I'd been sitting on had come all the way from Earth.

I winced a bit. Hopefully, that wouldn't cause a plague outbreak or introduce invasive species of insects. I had expected to walk through some kind of a decontamination chamber, since I was a visitor from another world. But it seemed things were a lot less formal here than I'd expected. "And there's no need to search Carter's bags, either. He's with me."

The guard finally looked up from the book she'd been staring at. Blinking, she took in Myrina's crimson hair and armor.



“Ah... Lady Myrina Samhain. You and your guest can go right through.” The guard waved us forward, and I followed Myrina closely, gratefully tucking my bag under my arm. It looked like I’d dodged security, after all.

I made a mental note of Myrina’s family name. *Samhain*.

Myrina had mentioned she was from a clan of Amazonian warriors—a big clan, too. Her clan’s name would be worth remembering.

“Sorry for the trouble.” I sheepishly ran my hand through my hair. “I didn’t mean to cost you extra back there.”

Myrina shook her head as she pushed through the crowd towards the back door. She seemed eager to leave the building we’d teleported into. “It’s my fault for not explaining more to you beforehand. I was just too excited. Just... stick close to me, alright? And follow my lead. You don’t want to wander off around here, especially at your level. Oh, and put this on.”

Once we were out on the street, Myrina reached into another bag at her waist. It was just like the one she’d tossed to the orc, although this one looked a lot nicer. From it, she pulled out a long cloak, which she fastened about my shoulders. She pulled the hood up over my head, then wrapped an arm tightly around my shoulders as she guided me to the stairs.

“Is that some sort of bag of holding?” I gave the bag at Myrina’s hip a curious nod.

“Yep! There are lots of Dimensional Storage items for sale here. It’s part of the reason I told you to become an Enchanter. They can make a fortune. Did you pick up the job, by the way?” Myrina asked.

I shook my head. “Not quite, but I picked up something similar.”

My Artificer job was a combination of Runesmithing and Enchanting, and it was a higher rarity than the Enchanter job Myrina told me to pick up. But Myrina must have taken my words to mean I’d accepted a lower-rarity job.

“Don’t worry. While it would have been nice to have a way to help sell your value to my family, it wasn’t strictly necessary. One of the dungeons I’m planning to run with you sometimes gives out bags like the one I just gave away. If we’re lucky, you’ll go home with one of those.”

Myrina’s eyes roamed the cobblestone streets around us as we walked, and she kept me pressed tightly against her side. Her free hand stroked the sword at her hip.

I eyed her. “You’re jumpy, Myrina. Is something wrong?”

I was a little worried, seeing her so nervous. This city, Valkyrie’s Watch, was supposed to be a city under the control of her clan, right?

Myrina turned to me briefly before she began eying the empty streets again. “Nothing’s wrong. Don’t worry, Carter, I’ve got us. The city’s usually better patrolled, but most of my family’s soldiers are out reinforcing the border garrisons, so we’ve had something of an uptick in crime. I’m being paranoid, is all. For my peace of mind, though, keep your hood up.”

I hefted a piece of the cloak she’d given me. “It’s something to do with why I’m wearing this, isn’t it? I take it men aren’t welcome on Themyscira?”

Myrina shook her head. “Not exactly. Men can walk the streets just fine under one condition—they have to be strong enough to defend themselves. Us Amazonians can get a bit rough to be around whenever there’s a hysteria outbreak. And a cute wizard-type like yourself might find himself the cause of a fight.”

“I see. I’ll have to watch out for that then.” I pulled the hood a little lower over my face.

We walked through a large merchant district, complete with vendors shoving fruit and vegetables in our faces. Myrina didn’t like the press of bodies, so she guided us down a side road. On either side of this street were weapons and armor shops. I heard the familiar ring of hammers on anvils.

It seemed like they were forging these things by hand. That was interesting, because even the blacksmith back in Crownhill was working on getting a power hammer up and running again. I ticked Myrina's home world one notch closer to medieval, not that there weren't clear signs of creature comforts.

For one, the city didn't stink of sewage—which told me they knew something of plumbing. And the water in the public fountains was crystal clear, largely thanks to the enchantments I saw lining them. I would have to study those, since I could certainly use an endless supply of clean water.

All in all, the city was soundly... so-so. It was a bit primitive for my tastes, but the magical items scattered about meant I wouldn't suffer unduly during my stay. I'd camped in rougher places as a child.

Myrina was quick to change the subject. "So, how do you like the city? Impressed?"

"It's pretty neat," I replied.

Myrina rolled her eyes. "I can tell you're not that impressed. Most people have trouble picking their jaws up off the floor when they walk through this place. Earth was surprisingly developed for an unintegrated world. I've read scholars' reports that said your world was integrated tens of thousands of years ahead of schedule. The Arcadia Multiverse's System must have been afraid you'd expand beyond your own world and advance to the point you'd start your own System!"

I couldn't help but feel a little bit miffed at the thought that humanity had been on the verge of something great. What would have happened if we had continued on our own path for a few centuries longer? What might we have invented then?

But there was no use spending too long pondering what might-have-been. The integration had begun, and the Earth I knew was gone. All I could do was to make sure that what emerged from the ashes would be strong enough to stand on its own in the face of the Arcadia Multiverse's established factions.

“Why did the System choose us anyway? I mean, why Earth?” I asked.

I expected Myrina to shrug and say she didn't know, but apparently, she'd done her research on Earth before my arrival.

“Based on what I read, your world was seeded and destined to produce sapient people based on a standard template. It's why you and I look so similar, despite having different evolutionary origins. The trouble is that your world went above and beyond what it was seeded to do. Most cultures are still stuck in worlds of swords, knights, and kings at the time of their integration. And they have a commensurate population for the stage of their technology.

She switched to the voice of a teacher giving a lecture. “You see, population matters an awful lot to the System. Conscious beings create distortions on the energy plane the System exists on. In the old days, before the first races created the System, these energy distortions created monsters and other strange anomalies. The System was created to redistribute that energy in a less destructive fashion. Mainly, that meant concentrating the monsters in dungeons or spawn locations outside of settlements. It made the worlds the creators of the System inhabited vastly safer places.”

“But as the uses for monsters and System-created abilities and jobs grew, the energy the System controlled grew too scarce. The creators of the System had grown dependent on their ability to use the power the System granted, both to enhance themselves and also their lives. And with it growing in scarcity, they found life becoming harder. So, they decided to extend the System's umbrella of protection to new worlds. They found several realms where there were chaotic planes filled with energy just waiting to be harvested. Doing so made these primitive worlds safer for the local inhabitants. It also provided another region to harvest energy from for the users of the System.

“Occasionally, a planet, like Earth, becomes too densely populated to serve as a mere source of energy. Monsters start slipping through, given the System's limited presence. The only option to keep Earth's energy plane under control was to

perform a full integration earlier than expected. With its local infrastructure in place over your world's energy plane, the System can utilize your world's power far more efficiently and control whatever slips through."

That was about what I'd expected. Earth was nothing more than a river the System had filled with water wheels. But now, it seemed the flow was too great to harvest, so the System had to build a dam.

Myrina must have read the tense expression on my face. She gave my shoulder a pat. "Yeah, Earth probably would have done great things without the System's interference. That's true. But there's the flip-side of that coin, too. Would you guys have made it as far as you had if you had to deal with constant monster attacks? If the System's energy management system had suddenly started breaking down, would you have survived? If the Integration failed, it would have been a disaster for you. At least this way, you guys get to benefit from the power the worlds of the Arcadia Multiverse have been harvesting from you for so long!"

"I suppose..." I muttered, still not entirely satisfied. The System clearly didn't have Earth's best interests in mind. To it, Earth was just another resource. But what if it wasn't? The System surrounding Earth was a new one, and while it was connected to the greater whole spread throughout the Arcadia Multiverse, it wasn't continuous.

Someone clever could find a way to take control of the local System—someone clever and with access to knowledge they weren't supposed to have. Someone like a Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge.

Myrina broke me out of my thoughts when we reached a castle at the far end of the city. It was surrounded by tall walls and looked like it had been built to withstand artillery fire instead of just swords and arrows. Each brick was individually enchanted to add strength to the wall as a whole, and if the mana flowing through it was as strong as I suspected, even those massive ogres back in Crownhill wouldn't be able to batter these walls down.

My opinion of Myrina's clan went up a notch. The rest of the city might be medieval, but Myrina's people had more tricks than most.

Myrina threw me a beaming smile when she saw that I was finally impressed. "We're here! Home, sweet home! You can take the cloak off now and I'll show you around."

## CHAPTER

# THREE

A pair of tough-looking women standing a full two heads taller than me manned the gates. Myrina waved to each of them.

“I’m back!” Myrina said.

Each of the guards eyed me from their position atop the walls and I felt my spine tingle as I felt them use Examine on me. Apparently, when Examine was used officially, it wasn’t considered rude.

“Welcome, guest. Lady Myrina, you will be responsible for him while he’s here.” The guard smiled at me beneath her helmet. “Not that he looks like he’ll be trouble. He seems like a polite boy.”

“Carter here is great! He’s the guy I was telling everyone about.” Myrina placed a hand on my back, and I waved to the guards as I took down my hood.

It was a bit of a weird experience, the way the guards looked over me as Myrina tried to sneak me into her house. I’d left high school behind a long time ago, but the height of the guards and the way they spoke made me feel like I’d suddenly turned back into a teenager again.

I glanced at Myrina. I knew she was the same age as me, but she was at least D-Grade, as well. The bonuses to lifespan probably meant people like us could afford to have their adolescence last a lot longer. Maybe we really were unruly teens in these guards’ eyes.

Either that, or Amazonian culture had a few peculiarities to it I hadn't yet learned. I figured it was better to be safe than sorry, so I made a silent promise to be as polite as possible... for Myrina's sake.

"A pleasure to meet you all." I bowed my head slightly to each guard, just as I'd seen Myrina do. "And rest assured, I shall respect Myrina's home as though it were my own. You have my word."

The guard smiled wider in approval. "A *very* polite boy! With a cute face and an attitude like that, you'd best watch out or it'll become your home for real. Ah, if only I were a hundred years younger. You're a lucky lass, Lady Myrina!"

Myrina guided me through two layers of castle gates. "Sorry about that. You know how guards are."

I shook my head as I passed Myrina back her cloak. "Don't worry about me. I came here expecting a culture shock. It's not as bad as I thought it would be. I always figured men would be banned from anywhere ruled by a bunch of Amazonian warriors."

Myrina grinned at me. "Great! I'm glad our eccentricities don't bother you too much. And don't worry, things are a lot easier for men at a high enough level. In a few years, you'll be able to walk this city like it's your own backyard. Plus, we're a bit insular here in Valkyrie's Watch. People are a bit more multicultural in the port cities and teleportation hubs."

She grabbed my hand in hers. "But enough of that. Let me show you around the Samhain Clan's original seat of power! We're more spread out than we used to be, so most of my family is elsewhere, but this is the fief where it all started for us."

Myrina led me through her family castle's courtyard. The stone walls surrounding the castle must have had an enchantment on them because the ground around the estate was quiet. I couldn't hear the wagons rolling along cobblestone streets outside the walls, or merchants shouting their wares in the city. It was like we were in a country manor instead of on the edge of a sprawling, mountain city.



“This is the garden! The soil isn’t as good as it was a few years ago when we had a bunch of gardener-class people come through and freshen things up. Normally, there are ripe fruits and vegetables everywhere, just waiting to be plucked. Past the garden, we have the barracks. You won’t need to go in there—that’s where the guards stay. And then we’ve got the servants’ quarters past that. You won’t need to go there, either. Oh, but overlooking the garden is the study! You like books, right? We’ll spend some time in the study going over everything we can figure out about your class and your skills...”

Myrina took me through one room after another. The castle had seemed pretty big from afar, but now that I was actually here, it seemed even larger. I suspected there was some sort of spatial magic at work, just like with her bag of holding. The Runesmithing symbols I saw carved on certain doors suggested to me that they might open to locations other than a place physically behind them.

“Oh, and there’s my big sister, Cyra. Hi, Cyra!” Myrina waved to a woman who was a mirror image of her, only scaled up a bit larger.

I would have only come up to her stomach. And she wasn’t just tall. Each of her thighs was as wide around as my head. Her arms weren’t much smaller. She wore a black headband around her forehead that kept her red hair out of her eyes, though she kept her hair shorter than Myrina did. All in all, she looked like a bigger, brawnier version of Myrina.

In movies and games, one common complaint I’d often heard was the idea that a dainty chick with a sword couldn’t possibly win a fight against a well-armed and trained man. But next to Myrina’s big sister Cyra, I had more in common with the dainty chicks than she did. The huge, muscular orc woman would have merely looked athletic standing next to Cyra. Hell, the Alpha Wolfman would have looked like a lightweight next to her.

I unconsciously took a step back. She had a grim expression on her face and only briefly glanced up from the shield she was polishing to wave at Myrina.

“Cyra, this is Carter. He’s the guy I was telling you about,” Myrina said cheerily.

Cyra stared at me like a woman who’d just put down her own dog. It was sad, bitter, and just a tiny bit envious of her younger sister.

I wonder what that’s about...

“Hello, Carter,” Cyra muttered, eyes glancing over me before turning to Myrina and then back to her shield.

We stood there for a moment. The smile spread across Myrina’s cheeks slowly fell until it vanished entirely. Cyra said nothing more as Myrina led me away.

“Aww, she’s still in a bad mood,” Myrina whispered to me. “Her boyfriend... uh... he died recently. She just needs some space. I was hoping to get her to run some dungeons with us, but I doubt she’ll say yes, now.”

I nodded, taking careful note of Myrina’s sister and the layout of the rest of the castle. Cyra didn’t seem like a bad woman, but the dead-eyed look she’d given me was a bit depressing. I wouldn’t cross the room to slip by her, but I was pretty sure we weren’t going to be sitting down for coffee and donuts any time soon.

“There’s food over there.” Myrina pointed just across from where we’d met Cyra. “There’s a mess hall right in front, though I usually eat in my room. We only have one cook in the castle right now, so don’t miss the mealtime bell! If you don’t get your food when it’s ready, you won’t be getting anything at all,” Myrina explained.

Despite the castle’s fortifications, it was rather well-outfitted. As the clan that ruled over Valkyrie’s Watch grew, they’d clearly sacrificed some defensibility for increased comfort. Rooms that might once have been packed full of bunks for troops had been repurposed for storage and recreation.

“You ladies aren’t afraid of a little weight training, I see.” I pointed at one of the nearby rooms. It hosted row after row of enormous dumbbells. This was the third such room I’d seen.

“Oh, that.” Myrina blushed. “It’s for bulking. It’s actually the reason I’m taller than usual right now.”

“Bulking makes you taller?” I frowned. I knew what bulking was to bodybuilders, but it certainly didn’t increase one’s height. At least, it didn’t when humans did it. As for Amazons...

“Sure does.” Myrina nodded. “It’s a racial bonus for our kind. We can put on extra body mass and then store that extra body mass in the energy plane. Some of the toughest Amazonian warriors look like they weigh a hundred pounds at most! But in actuality, they’ve bulked and compressed themselves so many times they weigh as much as a mountain!”

I let out a low whistle. “Impressive.”

“More important than that, the extra mass helps us heal wounds or keep our footing when using our full strength. Lots of people invest in the Strength stat only to get knocked on their asses the moment they use it to lift something. The System grants a lot of power through stats, but without the ability to leverage those stats to their fullest, you might as well not have them.”

Myrina flexed her bicep to demonstrate. It was indeed bigger than I remembered—big enough to make Sakura jealous. No wonder Myrina looked so much taller than she’d been before. She’d probably been bulking since that first farwalking visit, using the Amazonian racial trait to increase her mass.

Since I’d taken an interest in the weight rooms, Myrina showed me a few more of them. When she noticed I wasn’t getting quite as excited as before, she took me down into the castle’s basement.

“Alright, check this out. The game room!” The room lit up, and several magical tablets came to life.

“What’s this supposed to be?” I asked as I poked at an elaborate set of enchantments.

“It’s video games! Or at least the closest thing my sister and I could find to video games.” Myrina poked one of the tablets, and the enchantments on top of it came to life. I realized then that they weren’t really enchantments at all. They were images. The one I’d grabbed depicted a stick figure woman getting chased by a dragon. It was a primitive attempt at a video game, but it was a game.

“This must have quite the enchantment on it...” I flipped the board over, and sure enough, a large array of symbols had been carved on the back of it.

“Yup! It cost Cyra quite a bit. All of these did. She’s the one who put this room together. All I did was offer some advice to help her get started.” Myrina shrugged.

My mind went back to the dour older sister we’d seen polishing her shield with a look in her eyes only a step away from death. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine her spending her days down here playing games on magical tablets.

“Your sister is a big gamer, huh?” I asked curiously.

Myrina shook her head. “Nah. I just told her about what I’d learned back on Earth. She read it was a good way to lure guys into coming home with you. That’s what she built the place for.”

I barked a laugh. Looking around, the room really did look like a mimicry of a gamer’s den rather than something actually used as such. The furniture was right, but the chairs appeared to rarely have been used. The same was true for the various game tablets on display. The whole place was far too clean.

“Well, what do you say?” Myrina asked, looking hopeful as she wrung her hands together. “Think you could stay here in the castle a while as my guest? I want to make this a good tutorial, after all.”

“It’s a splendid castle, Myrina. Do you have anywhere I can set my bag down? A guest room, maybe?” I asked.

Myrina’s eyes lit up. “Oh, right! Let me show you to my room. We can keep your stuff there.”

Myrina led me to one tower off to the side of the main keep. We went up a winding set of stairs to a room roughly the size of my entire house. The ceiling was quite high, as well—just as it was throughout most of the castle. That wasn't as much of a surprise as it might have been before I'd seen Cyra's sister, though. She was a veritable giantess. If other Amazonians were built to such proportions, everything would need to be oversized.

“We do have guest rooms, but they're all the way on the other side of the castle.” Myrina waved a hand around her expansive living quarters. “If it's alright with you, I'd rather you stay here with me. You're my guest, not the clan's. I can have a second bed and some dividers thrown up if you'd like. I have a private study over there I hardly ever use.”

“Will your family be okay with that?” I asked. “A guy staying in your bedroom?”

I'd already made one social blunder for the day. I didn't want to make any more.

Myrina laughed. “We're Amazons, Carter. Not humans. There's a reason why I'm asking if it's alright with *you*. I'll be just fine.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “What, you're not scared of having a diabolical wizard in your bed-chambers? Who knows what sort of dark magic I could cast upon you in your sleep?”

A bright spark lit up in Myrina's eyes. I'd seen the same one in her eyes when provoking Sakura and Bridget. “Oh, yeah? Well, maybe I have designs of my own on a cute, diabolical wizard I've lured into my lair. And I'm betting I can spring my trap a lot faster than you can spring yours.”

In the blink of an eye, Myrina vanished from where she stood. I didn't even see where she'd gone. Suddenly, she was on top of me, and I was on the ground. Her eyes gazed into mine hungrily.

“Well, mister diabolical wizard?” she whispered in my ear. “Show me your most powerful spell.”

I swallowed, my breathing coming faster. I felt her breasts as they pressed against my chest, and my pants were suddenly too tight. Myrina had put me in the same position many times when we were kids, but this time I was distinctly aware that she was a grown woman.

Bridget and Sakura knew how to make their intentions known, but Myrina was a level all her own.

“I... uh... probably shouldn’t use my spells in your room. I might break something...”

Myrina’s smile widened, and she stood, pulling me to my feet as she did so. “That’s right, I still have to show you the sparring ring! What do you say you and I take a tumble for old time’s sake? It’ll be good to get a baseline on your current abilities. This is supposed to be your tutorial, after all.”

## CHAPTER

# FOUR

Myrina led me to her clan's sparring ring. It was an impressive arena filled with sand, surrounded by wooden stands. Unlit torches and posts for stringing a tarp overhead littered the area.

If the castle we were in hadn't made it clear that Myrina came from a warrior clan, this did. The arena was big enough that even if the relatively empty castle Myrina had just walked me through had been full to the brim, there would be room for everyone to watch a fight—and then some.

“Want a weapon?” Myrina gestured to a rack of wooden practice weapons. Despite being made of wood, they looked like they would still hurt quite a bit. But the chips and scrapes along their rounded edges told me the warriors who practiced with them didn't care.

Myrina grabbed several practice weapons to outfit herself—grabbing a wooden shield and strapping a short sword to the back of it, before picking up a large spear in her other hand.

I glanced at the rack. There were a lot more weapons to choose from. Clubs, warhammers, spears, polearms, axes, chains, and a hundred other things I had no name for. On the technological spectrum, they were all strictly medieval. I supposed some swords were long and thin enough to have come from the Renaissance period on Earth and, if made of metal, would require careful forging.

But there was no sign of firearms on display anywhere. The closest thing to such a weapon was an old wooden

crossbow with padded bolts. It was so dust-covered, that it looked like it hadn't been used in decades.

The only thing I had proficiency in was a sword, so I grabbed one.

“A sword... a bold choice.” Myrina nodded to the weapon in my hand.

“It's the only thing here I've ever fought with before.” I waved to the other weapons with the tip of my wooden practice sword.

Myrina gave me a noncommittal shrug. “No shield?”

I shook my head. “I need my other hand free for casting spells.”

There was also plenty of armor, and Myrina tossed me a bucket-looking helmet before putting one on herself. It was stuffy inside, caked with sweat from who knew how many warrior women. I put it on anyway, along with the padding Myrina passed me next. She suited up as well, then tossed me a pendant.

“Here. I'm higher level than you in both my race and my class. This pendant equalizes things. You'll have to share your levels with it, but nothing more.” Myrina pointed to the center of the pendant.

I pressed my finger on the spot she indicated, and the magic within it stirred to life.

**Would you like to share your status screen information with the Level Equalizer?**

I accepted yes on the System prompt and tossed the pendant back to Myrina. She frowned when she accepted it.

“Alright, first lesson, Carter. Never provide more information from your status screen than is absolutely necessary. This item only requires your race and class levels. You just sent me your entire status screen.”

“I trust you. You'll need to see it anyway if you're to train me.” I gave her a shrug.



“True enough...” Myrina shook her head. “But it’s a bad habit. I’ll help you go through your privacy settings later. Since you showed me so much trust, I’ll do something similar for you. The pendant will make it so you’ll get notifications whenever I use an ability. That’s a big advantage in a fight. Use it well.”

I grinned. “You just want to show off your awesome skills, don’t you?”

Myrina cut short a brief giggle before her tone turned serious again. “You saw straight through me, didn’t you? But please keep all my skills between just the two of us. I’ll do the same for you. They aren’t secret, but you should never inform enemies about yourself if you can help it. It’s just poor strategy.”

“Your secrets are my secrets, Myrina. I think I promised you that a long time ago.”

“You did. That, you did...” Myrina’s voice trailed off as we walked to the center of the arena.

I frowned, curious about something. “Can I ask what level you are normally?”

“My, Carter, how forward of you.” Myrina laughed. “But sure. If you’re curious, go ahead and use Examine on me. You’ve basically stripped yourself bare for me, so letting you examine me is the least I can do.”

I activated Examine, looking Myrina over for the first time.

### **Myrina Samhain (Amazonian War Chief - Level 69)**

“Level sixty-nine?” I asked.

Myrina nodded. “Yep!”

I frowned. Somehow I thought she’d be higher. I’d made it to the mid 30’s after just a few weeks with the system. I would have held my tongue with anyone else, but Myrina was probably the only person I could ask something like this.

“Shouldn’t your level be higher? I’m level 34 and I’ve only had the System for a short while.”

Myrina laughed. “Good one, Carter. You’ve been spoiled by the System. You probably don’t know how valuable being part of a newly integrated world is. The System hands out levels and stat points like candy for every little thing. You’re already stronger than the average backwoods villager, even here in the middle realms on Themyscira.”

She waved her hand back and forth, from palm up to palm down. “Granted, frontier worlds like yours tend to have higher levels for the average person, regardless. Over time, people tame the monsters and other anomalies of a planet to make it safe enough that extra levels aren’t necessary to survive. And after even longer, the ways to gain levels get monopolized by powerful families and factions. You, on the other hand, are fortunate enough to be attacked by monsters constantly, and thus provided with constant leveling opportunities.”

“That makes sense, I suppose.” I shrugged.

I hadn’t exactly considered myself lucky. But now that I thought about it, my Death Curse wasn’t attracting any monsters at all to Myrina’s family castle. I’d been keeping an eye out for bugs or giant rats, thinking they’d slip past the guards, but I hadn’t seen any monsters at all. They’d likely all been hunted down and slain for experience points long before they made it to me.

Curiosity satisfied, Myrina and I squared up against one another. I held my sword loosely at my side. She crouched low in a wide stance, shield held in front and spear held overhead. She’d drawn it back to its fullest, and all I could just barely make out, was her eyes staring back at me through the gap between her raised shield and helmet.

I couldn’t help but notice the casual grace with which she moved. She walked like she’d worn the equipment all her life. In contrast, I struggled to keep my helmet from wobbling on my head. I hadn’t adjusted to not being able to see out of the corners of my eye, either. I hadn’t realized how much I’d depended on my field of view for spellcasting. This would make targeting Myrina much harder.

I'd have to hold off on my spells—at least at first. I'd test her abilities with my own for a bit. My Sword proficiency was nothing to brag about, but the System had given me substantial bonuses. Maybe I could hold my own? I felt Myrina use Examine on me, so I did the same to her.

**Myrina Samhain (Amazonian War Chief - Level 29  
[Adjusted])**

Thanks to the pendant, she was only level 29. That was weaker than the Alpha Wolfman. The pendant must have taken the average of my class and racial levels instead of picking the higher of the two—and it had rounded down at that.

I'd been a bit nervous before, but with her level lower than mine, I was suddenly more confident of being able to pull off a win. Myrina probably wasn't used to fighting at a lower level than she normally was. And the System had given me a lot of unique titles and bonuses for participating in the integration.

I could do this. Hell, I was the strongest person on the Crownhill Shard—the defender of humanity in my corner of the world. I'd beaten the Alpha Wolfman in single combat! And Chief Wubwub, too. I would—

“Are you really going to hold your sword like that?” Myrina asked.

I shrugged, raising the point a little higher in something approximating a ready position. I'd seen Olympic fencers standing similarly. The sword I was holding seemed a little heavy for the stance, but it was all I could come up with.

“I'm ready when you—”

I didn't even get the chance to finish before Myrina was on top of me. She didn't move quite as fast as she had in her room, but she'd still crossed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. One moment, my sword was in my hand, the next it connected with Myrina's shield and flew into the sand.

Myrina was on top of me again for the second time in the past hour, and this time, she had her practice spear pointed straight at my heart.

“How'd you do that?” I asked, voice full of awe.

“Check your notifications. You should see the skill I used listed there. The pendant is sharing some of my system messages with you.”

I looked, and sure enough, it was there.

**Myrina has used Celestial Agility (Epic)**

**Myrina has used Titan’s Strike (Common)**

**You are disarmed.**

“An epic movement skill?” I pulled off my helmet, eyebrows raised. “Impressive.”

“You like?” Myrina grinned as she stretched. “Good. Because there’s a lot more where that came from.”

She kicked the sand where my sword landed, knocking it into the air where it soared end over end for a moment before landing gracefully in her waiting hand. She tossed the sword to me in the same smooth motion.

I fumbled it as the blunted blade rapped against my knuckles, and the sword landed on the ground at my feet. I grimaced. Perhaps it was time to revise my expectations for this duel downward.

Myrina was good. That trick wasn’t the kind of thing she could pull off without spending a whole lot of time fetching discarded swords in this very ring.

I put my helmet back on and grabbed my sword from the sand. “Alright, let’s go again.”

“Eager. I like it. You’ll make a good student.” Myrina raised her shield and spear again.

“Ready!” I shouted, and this time, I was prepared for Myrina’s charge.

I sensed the notifications coming and realized I could move them to the part of my vision that was covered by my helmet anyway. I read them in the same moment I conjured an Eldritch Blast and used Eldritch Augmentation. I’d need the stat boost if I wanted to keep up with Myrina’s incredible speed.

**Myrina has used the ability Combat Instincts (Uncommon)**

Suddenly, Myrina shifted tactics. Instead of a headlong charge, she fainted. From the name of the ability she'd just used, I suspected it was something like my Exploit Weakness ability that allowed her to find gaps in my attack patterns. Two could play that game.

Myrina threw a few probing jabs with her spear tip, and I deflected them as best I could with my sword. She was faster than me, though, and it was all I could do to keep up. If I was relying on my sword to win the duel, I'd be in trouble.

But I was no swordsman. I was a spellcaster.

I activated Exploit Weakness. Her shield was completely black in my vision. Hitting it with any of my spells would just be a waste. The same was true for her helmet. She covered her face so well that hitting her there with a spell would be nearly impossible, but my ability led my eyes lower.

Her legs were open, so I targeted them. Myrina barely pulled back in time to avoid the blast. It wasn't a win, but it relieved the pressure on my sword arm, which had been on the verge of failing me a moment ago.

I swapped to a Mana Bolt, casting it twice in quick succession to keep Myrina from closing on me unimpeded. Mobility and distance were my allies here. Myrina was clearly a melee combatant. If I could keep the fight to one at range, I'd have an edge. It was the same strategy that had won the fight against the Alpha Wolfman.

I used Power Jump, catching Myrina off guard as I cleared a quarter of the arena's length in one massive leap. Between that and Sure Step, I hoped to stay out of her reach. But then Myrina hit me with something I hadn't expected—it was like being dunked in a frozen lake. My body froze, and I felt like a mouse who had just caught a hawk's eye.

**Myrina has used Killing Intent (Rare)**

**You are frozen!**

I struggled against the ability, shaking it off a moment later. But a moment was all the time Myrina needed to charge my position. She closed on me with her spear again, and this time, I wasn't fast enough with my spells to keep her back. Our little game of cat and mouse had turned into a melee fight, exactly what I didn't want.

I turned to run, but Myrina cocked back her arm and threw her spear, cutting off my Power Jump before it could even begin. I realized the only thing I could do was face her. She drew the sword attached to the back of her shield and I raised mine to defend.

**Your Sword proficiency has increased to Level 25!**

**Your Dodge proficiency has increased to Level 24!**

I lasted three exchanges before she had her short sword at my throat. The fact that she had a shield meant she could shove my weapon aside while I couldn't do the same to her.

"Dead," Myrina declared.

I dropped my weapon, raised my hands, and pulled off my helmet. "Seems so. And you were right. I'm impressed by those abilities of yours."

But when Myrina pulled off her helmet, the jovial smile I'd expected wasn't there. Instead, there was a scowl. "You didn't use even half of your abilities, Carter."

My smile fell from my lips. "Myrina... most of my abilities aren't meant for a practice ring. They're meant for battle. That's how I earned them, and that's how I use them. I've already shown you the only abilities I can use safely."

"Use them." Her glare was like steel.

I stared into her eyes, meeting her gaze with mine. "Are you sure? Can we at least ensure a healer is standing by?" I asked.

Myrina jerked her head toward the back of the arena. "We have healers on staff full time in the castle. They're watching the fight right now, from the window to your left."

Glancing over, I saw a shadow standing behind a curtain with her arms crossed. I grimaced. It seemed I was out of excuses. I didn't want to hurt Myrina, but I would not do her the discourtesy of holding back if she told me not to. I put my helmet back on, and we walked to the center of the arena.

“Ready when you are,” I said.

Myrina charged, but this time, I was the one who caught her by surprise.

I clenched my hand. “Blood Sacrifice.”

## CHAPTER

# FIVE

The instant I used Blood Sacrifice, a quarter of my health pool vanished. Myrina stumbled as she coughed up blood. I ignored the pain surging through me. Iron Will made it a moot point. I grinned through bloody lips; I'd made Myrina stumble.

She wanted a real fight, so she was going to get one. I didn't hesitate to press my advantage. Myrina was strong, fast, and extremely well-trained. In many ways, I felt like a peasant facing down a knight. She fought with precision and experience. She even had good tactical sense and great situational awareness.

But there was one thing I had that she didn't—a willingness to bleed.

I hadn't learned to fight in harmless duels or from the guiding hand of an instructor. No, I'd learned to fight after being placed in situations where I either killed my foe or they killed me. My fights ended in death, and I was used to pain—both my own, and that of my enemies.

In a true life-or-death battle, there could be no hesitation. Nor could you let taking a hit distract you from the fight. In a real battle, a single mistake could cost you your life. And so I pressed my advantage.

In her moment of weakness and confusion, I hit her with the unexpected. Dropping my sword, I pelted Myrina with a barrage of spells from either hand. There was little point in



dueling her with a blade, since she'd already proved how vastly superior she was in that domain.

To her credit, Myrina recovered swiftly. She didn't just stand there and let me pelt her with spells. Despite her moment of weakness, I only managed to get three good hits on her. And that was not nearly enough to win the fight, though it was enough to lay on a few Corrupting Marks.

I could sense her confusion as she tried to figure out why she was still taking damage. I put more distance between me and her, coupling Warp Step with Power Jump and Eldritch Augmentation to stay mobile. Even with so many abilities active. I was having trouble keeping my distance from her.

Myrina had two movement abilities of her own, Celestial Agility and Wind Walker. She took to the air, feet treading on nothing as she closed on me mid-jump. She lunged, spear extended, and shield raised. That shield was proving far more troublesome than I'd realized it would be. She guarded her core with it well, and I couldn't get a spell off on anything higher than her thighs—at least not if I wanted it to do any damage.

It was all I could do to dodge that spear of hers and keep my distance. Once she closed on me, the fight would be as good as over. So I refused to let her get close. I stayed just out of reach, one Warp Step at a time.

I sensed Myrina's eyes narrowing behind her helmet as she took me more seriously. She lashed out with her Titan's Strike ability, each blow she unleashed kicking up sand in all directions and making the ground tremble.

“Don't think you can win by running and hiding!” Myrina shouted.

I laughed. “That's where you're wrong, Myrina. Surely you've noticed by now that I have a host of those Corrupting Marks on you. Each one is doing a bit of damage—at least until I snap my fingers. Then they can do a whole lot of damage all at once!”

Myrina cursed. “A damage-over-time specialist? I should have guessed you’d be one of *those* wizards.”

“Nimble and witty?”

“A pain in the ass!” Myrina spat back in reply.

The ferocity of Myrina’s attacks increased when she realized she was on a timer. To cope, I had to do something I’d been hoping to avoid, but it looked like I couldn’t avoid the issue, after all. I should have expected it, really.

Mania was the main resource of my class. It was what made my class an epic rarity, instead of me just being a normal spellcaster. Myrina was too fast and too strong for me to fight on even footing while hobbling myself. I’d have to use every last tool I had available.

“Brace yourself, Myrina...” I shouted. Then, I activated the first level of Mania.

**Your Mania has increased to level 1: Dissonance.**

**The world grows distant, and your mind fills with the allure of forbidden knowledge. The effectiveness of all Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge spells and abilities is increased by 20%.**

Suddenly, Myrina’s increasing desperation meant little. Eldritch Augmentation strengthened my limbs even more. Exploit Weakness revealed more weak points. Warp Step carried me further. My health bar filled as I drained her health to fill my own. When it was full, I cast Blood Sacrifice again.

Myrina was bleeding from the corners of her mouth and had stopped in the center of the arena. She shoved her spear into the sand.

“Giving up?” I asked. But then I stared closer at Myrina behind her helmet. Between bloody lips, she was grinning.

“No, Carter. I’m just getting started. That ability you used is something else. You broke out your trump card? Well, it’s time to show you mine.”

**Myrina Samhain has activated Tempo of Battle (Legendary)**

I felt a chill as Myrina activated her legendary ability. Something in the air changed, and I went on the defensive. I kept myself all the way on the other side of the arena from Myrina, throwing my spells from as far away as I could manage.

At first, it didn't seem like anything had changed. Myrina moved the same as before.

Or was she a hair faster than before?

I frowned. I couldn't really tell. I let her close on me, and the spear thrust I narrowly dodged told me she really was a bit faster. Her blows seemed to carry more strength behind them, too.

"Is this really a legendary skill?" I called out from across the arena.

"You haven't seen anything yet! This is my answer to wizards like you," Myrina laughed.

I frowned at the odd hint. I finally thought to check my Corrupting Marks. Thanks to the pendant and the information she was sharing with me, I could see her exact health and status effects. My Corrupting Marks were still dealing damage, but Myrina wasn't getting any weaker!

Her health pool grew larger as fast as I damaged it. But more than that, Myrina's Vitality stat wasn't the only one that was increasing. Her Strength, Agility, and Perception were all increasing as well. She was getting stronger the longer we fought!

Suddenly, I realized what Myrina's legendary ability did. It increased her stats the longer the fight went on. My Corrupting Marks were still dealing damage, but she'd added more health points to her total.

The thought terrified me. This one legendary ability was antithetical to my entire combat strategy. I'd gotten used to being able to wear powerful foes down over time, but that wouldn't work against an enemy who got stronger the longer we fought.

Suddenly, attacking from a distance and stacking up Corrupting Marks wouldn't help me. Myrina's growing health pool was enough to counter the damage I was doing, and she was getting faster and stronger by the moment. Pretty soon, I wouldn't be fast enough to get away and she'd overpower me with her raw stats.

Myrina forced me to break with my winning strategy and engage her more aggressively. I needed to land more hits and to land them faster. I needed to be riskier with my dwindling mana pool, converting it into health points to fuel more blood sacrifices.

I snatched my sword from where I'd dropped it on the ground. While my mana pool was extremely impressive for my level, I was throwing around too many spells. I needed some way to keep the pressure on Myrina up while conserving mana.

At the same time, I needed more power. Stronger spells. The will to do battle. Before I even knew it, I'd slipped into the next level of mania.

**Your Mania has increased to level 2: Furor.**

**Your lust for battle grows and threatens to overtake your sanity. The effectiveness of all Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge spells and abilities is increased by 40%.**

I attacked recklessly, throwing myself at Myrina's exposed flank. Warp Step took me to the side, she spun her spear around faster than she could turn, and I lashed out with my sword. It was a clumsy strike, but Eldritch Augmentation took my power to new heights. What I lacked in skill, I made up for with raw stats. Even if the swing was clumsy, it still came at her in the blink of an eye.

"Yes! This is what I wanted to see!" Myrina laughed even as she shrugged off an Eldritch Blast to the face.

But the more I attacked, the stronger Myrina seemed to grow. The notification I received from her told me nothing of her skill's exact abilities. Still, I thought I had a good idea of

how it worked. It had something to do with the number of exchanges in combat—either that, or it scaled off the number of times she was hit.

As the tempo of our match increased, so did her increase in power. When I first attacked with the might of Blood Frenzy at its fullest, I landed several blows in quick succession. But as Myrina gained strength, clear wins for me came less and less frequently.

Faster! Stronger! More power!

The thoughts swam through my mind before I was even conscious of them. The Mania I already had was a wild and greedy beast. And it was not one easily tamed.

**Your Mania level has increased to level 3: Blood Frenzy.**

**Your grip on sanity grows looser, and your lust for battle grows. The effectiveness of all Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge abilities is increased by 80%.**

My assault redoubled, and soon Myrina was bleeding once again. Her blood only made the desire for battle grow all the more within me. The warrior before me was my prey, and I was the predator. Through a sword or spell, victory would be mine!

Even now, my Corrupting Marks ate away at her health, finally making progress despite that damned legendary ability of hers. I just needed to continue, relentless attack after relentless attack. I would cut through her defenses and leave her broken and defeated. Her health points would replenish my dwindling reserves, and I would be on to my next fight before her corpse finished cooling.

I only needed just a few moments longer before I could detonate my Corrupting Marks and deal the final blow. Perhaps one final boost from the fourth layer of Mania, and I could finish things right away...

I stopped my mad thoughts in their tracks. Corpse? The fourth layer of Mania? This wasn't a life-or-death battle. This was a sparring match. What was I doing?

And the fourth level of Mania? The last time I'd done that, an evil god from another world had reached through my soul and turned me into a puppet. The last thing I wanted was another encounter with the Chaos Wolf.

I needed to calm myself down. I forced myself to halt my ruthless barrage of attacks, and pulled myself away from detonating my Corrupting Marks. The moment I hesitated, though, Myrina struck with the weight of an avalanche.

I felt the shaft of her spear clip me in the helmet, knocking me sideways. I tried to roll with the blow, but she was on top of me immediately. She shoved her shield into my chest, flinging my arms wide. I grabbed her spear by the shaft to keep her from getting a clean strike with it. I still had Eldritch Augmentation active, so I had the strength stats to contest Myrina's grip.

She didn't bother wrestling me over it, though. She drew her short sword and stabbed it into the ground inches from my neck.

"Victory!" she declared.

She sank down, sitting on my chest with her knees pinning my arms. With a heaving sigh, she pulled my helmet off and checked the side of my head where she'd hit me for a lump. Sensing none, she pulled her own helmet off and crouched low.

"That was a very, very good fight, Carter. I'm impressed."

I felt her lips on my cheek for a moment. My brows were furrowed too tight to respond. I was focused on dispelling my gathered Mania. Myrina understood I was doing something, and she toyed with my hair a bit as she looked me over for bumps and bruises while waiting for me to finish.

When I finally opened my eyes, she was still sitting beside me. She held my hands in her own and rubbed at my bumped and scraped knuckles. I'd taken several hits to the hands with my clumsy attempts to ward off her spear.

"That is one weird ability you've got, Carter." Myrina smiled down at me. "If it were a skill, I would have guessed it

to be a legendary—like my Tempo of Battle. But it's not a skill, is it?"

I shook my head, coughing out a bit of sand. "No. It's part of my class. I'm a Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, remember?"

"Oh, I remember." Myrina pressed her knees tight to either side of my head. It felt a bit weird to have a conversation in this position, but it seemed like Myrina was enjoying her victory and wasn't going to be letting me up any time soon. "I did a bit of research on you. Your class is a rare one, I'll give you that. But it's not completely without precedent. It's all in my tutorial's itinerary. But first, I want to enjoy my prize for my victory!"

I arched an eyebrow at her. "I don't recall betting on the outcome."

"Every battle has a prize, Carter," she snickered. "The victor just has to know how to claim it."

She leaned low over me again. The way she was sitting on top of me was starting to feel less and less like the aftermath of a fight and more and more like the prelude to something else.

"And what kind of prize is that?" I asked.

Myrina leaned low, eyes fixed on mine as she pressed her body against me in the sand. My heart beat faster. Myrina was truly a beautiful woman. She had the body of a warrior, toned and athletic. But more than that, she and I shared a connection I wasn't sure I'd ever have with anyone else.

"The prize," Myrina purred, "is you, my handsome captive. What do you say I—"

A voice cut Myrina short. "The prize is learning why you won or lost and growing stronger from the match."

From the stands, a figure emerged from the shadows. I wasn't sure how someone as big as Myrina's sister managed to sneak up on us, but we'd been rather focused on our fight. She stood alone among the empty stands, gazing at each of us with deadly seriousness.

It was Cyra. It seemed I was going to meet her again, a lot sooner than I thought.

She turned her gaze to me. “I watched your match. Well done, both of you. Both of you, go get patched up and then I will tell you where you went wrong.”



## CHAPTER

# SIX

Myrina got up from me in a hurry the moment her sister appeared. A blush made her cheeks as red as her hair and she kept her eyes on the ground. At her side, her hands balled into fists.

“Big sis! Uh... what are you doing here? Were you going to spar with someone? Carter and I were just leaving...” Myrina grabbed me by the arm, hauled me to my feet, and then put herself between me and her older sister.

Cyra placed her hands on her hips. “I came to see how things would work out between you. I couldn’t help but notice you didn’t ring the bell and invite others to witness your match. I figured this was an informal one, but someone should keep an eye on you both just in case. Safety and all.”

The way Cyra stared hard at her sister made me think she had more than safety in mind.

Myrina nodded. “That’s right. This was just a friendly little bout between me and Carter. I just wanted to see where he was at, is all.”

Cyra nodded. “You’re wearing the pendant to reduce your level to his?”

Myrina grabbed the pendant from around her neck and tossed it aside. “Like I said, just a friendly sparring match. I’m doing his tutorial, after all. I need to know where he’s at to train him to survive an integration.”

“Right. The patronage thing you were asking about.” Cyra sighed, drumming her fingers against her thigh.

While Myrina and her sister talked, the medic watching the fight from her glass window came out. She looked roughly the same age as Myrina and me, though that meant little when dealing with other species and the System. She had black hair and slightly pointed ears.

An elf like Lyra, perhaps? I wasn't sure if it would be rude to ask, so I kept it to myself. Besides, I was busy listening in on what Myrina and her sister were saying.

The elf waved her hand over my limbs, and golden light enveloped me. She peeled the armor off me and tucked her hands up under my shirt to make sure the light got everything, and pretty soon I was feeling as good as new.

“Thank you.”

The healer gave me a tight-lipped smile in reply.

Myrina glanced back at the healer and pulled her shirt off right there in the middle of the arena. She was wearing something akin to a sports bra beneath it, but it still surprised me. The elf had shown greater care for my sense of modesty than Myrina's. But I suppose it shouldn't have surprised me. Different world, different norms.

When the healer was finished, she spoke. “Lady Myrina. Your mother contacted me a moment ago. She would like to see you.” The healer cast a glance back at me. “It's about your guest.”

“What about him?” Myrina scowled.

“She didn't look angry, fear not. I suspect she just wanted a few assurances from you,” the healer replied.

Myrina's shoulders slumped. “Let me just drop Carter off in my room first...”

“No need for that.” Cyra waved Myrina off. “I promised you two I'd help go over the fight. That includes him. I'll keep him company, don't worry.”

“You’re not going to spar with him, are you?” Myrina eyed her sister.

“Sis, do you really think that little of me?” Cyra shook her head. “Nope. I’m going to do just what I said. I’ll help him shore up his weaknesses. Probably run him through some drills, too. You know how Mom likes to lecture.”

Myrina sighed. “You alright with that, Carter?”

I nodded. “I’ve never had formal weapons training. I basically learned by doing. It might be useful to have an instructor.”

Myrina hugged me, promised she’d be back as soon as she could, then pointed to her own eyes and then to her sister, as if to warn her she was watching.

Cyra and I watched her go. The healer retreated to her alcove a moment later, leaving just me and Cyra standing in the field.

“I hope Myrina hasn’t given you a poor impression of our clan,” Cyra said. “She’s young and spent a lot of time on an unintegrated world when she was little. She never quite learned what is proper and what is not.”

I chuckled. “Nothing of the sort. Myrina and I have been friends for a long time. I’m just happy I finally get to spend time with her again.”

Cyra’s eyes locked on me, and she seemed to put some puzzle pieces together. “Ah, that’s right. You must be her friend from that unintegrated world. She’s mentioned you before. I should have guessed as much when she was so adamant about us providing patronage to someone despite no longer having assets available for that kind of thing.”

I winced. “I heard from Myrina that your clan is at war. How bad is it?”

Cyra glanced around, checking to see if anyone was listening. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Don’t repeat this anywhere else, but if Myrina trusts you with her secret legendary skill, I’ll trust you with this. The war isn’t going as well as we’d like, and odds are we’re going to lose a

lot of our vassal clans. Things aren't going to be pretty on the other side of this."

"Who's the enemy?" I pictured women even more towering and monstrous than Cyra and whatever giant of a woman her and Myrina's mother must be.

"A bunch of wimpy little summoners and crafters," Cyra spat. "They were one of our oldest vassals. They made our weapons, and we protected them. It was a good deal, right up until they decided they wanted to be in charge, instead."

She sniffed. "The difference in size between our clans is still pretty big, and anybody else at our level would have crushed them long ago. But they're a terrible match-up for us. We Samhain are second to none against anything we can hit, but pretty much helpless against summoned specters. It's not your problem to worry about though."

I shrugged. "It could be. I've dealt with my share of specters."

Cyra shook her head. "Myrina's barely qualified to guard our trade caravans. You? Well... don't leave the castle without a guard detail. Myrina wasn't as discreet as she should have been bringing you here, and I'd give even odds of our enemies kidnapping you to blackmail her for information. Nobody wants that."

I winced. I'd worried I wouldn't be powerful enough to impress Myrina's family. But from the sound of things, I was not just a resource drain, but also another person they had to protect.

"Shit. If I'd known I'd be this much trouble, I wouldn't have come." I ran a hand through my hair.

Cyra gave me a pat on the head. "It isn't your fault. You seem willing to learn, at least. Maybe in a couple of decades, you will be strong enough to help, and we'll all owe profound apologies to Myrina for doubting her. Come on, I promised my little sister I'd teach you how to use a weapon, and I'm going to keep that promise. Pick up your sword. I want to see your grip."

It turned out that despite my Sword proficiency, I didn't know how to use a sword. I did everything wrong, from where I placed my fingers, to how I stood, to where I placed my feet. Even my shoulders were wrong, according to Cyra.

“Damn. How the hell did you fight as well as you did?” Cyra chuckled. “I'm actually impressed. But let's not get those bad habits ingrained any deeper than they already are. See my hands here? That's how you hold a sword. Not too tight, not too loose. Good. Get the grip right and Myrina won't be able to disarm you with a swing of her shield like she did.”

“You saw that?” I winced.

Cyra nodded. “I saw it. Both times.”

I winced again.

“And when she tripped you with her spear. And when she clobbered you in the side of the head. And all the other many, many fuck-ups.” Cyra shook her head, sighing.

I had a lot to learn. Fortunately, Cyra had a lot to teach me. She wasn't kidding when she'd said her mother liked to lecture—Myrina was gone for hours. It had been mid-afternoon when I'd arrived, and when the sun set Cyra was still drilling me in the practice arena.

I would have collapsed from exhaustion if I had still been human. Fortunately, all the enhancements to my body meant I was more durable than usual. Even so, I wouldn't have managed to do so much training if not for Cyra calling out the healer every hour to cast a rejuvenation spell on my aching muscles.

But I didn't quit, not for a single moment.

Cyra was giving my training her all, and I wasn't about to let this opportunity slip by. She carried the tone and disposition of someone who'd done this before. She must have trained as an instructor at some point. But more than that, I was already seeing incredible results.

**Your Sword proficiency has increased by 8 to Level 33!**

**Your Dodge proficiency has increased by 7 to Level 31!**

**You have gained the Spear proficiency!**

**You have gained the Combat tactics proficiency!**

**You have gained the Shield proficiency!**

“Well, shit...” Cyra cracked her neck as she stretched. “You learn damn fast. And that’s not just the compliment sandwich thing they tell you to dish out when teaching. I’m being serious when I say you’re picking things up faster than anyone I’ve ever taught. Do you have some sort of bonus to practicing combat skills?”

I shook my head. “Nothing for combat proficiencies in particular. I had the Blessed of the System title that the System gives to all newly integrated worlds, but that’s already worn off. The only thing that could be helping me is my racial bonus.”

“Oh?” Cyra peered at me curiously. “Mind sharing? I might be able to help you better if I know a bit more about you. Most racial bonuses aren’t a secret, since they’re so widespread, but I’d understand if you want to keep yours to yourself.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Especially if it’ll help you help me.”

I flipped through my System menus until I got to my racial description. It described the bonuses I’d picked for myself upon evolving to D-Grade.

### **Homo Acceleratus (Rare):**

**Humans of the Homo Acceleratus classification learn, grow, and progress through jobs and proficiencies at an enhanced rate. Born with an innate knack for improving themselves, practice and experience yield greater results for them than for other species.**

**Individuals of this bloodline may not be blessed with longer life or innate power granted from birth, but they are gifted with enhanced future potential. If**

**ignored, they may amount to nothing. But all those who find a passion to pursue can flourish to incredible heights.**

**This racial bonus is characterized by the following:**

- **Faster Job leveling.**
- **Faster Proficiency leveling.**
- **No cap on number of total number of Proficiencies.**
- **No skill decay regardless of time since last used.**
- **Abilities plateau at higher levels, allowing for a higher potential mastery**
- **Bypass restrictions on good, evil, lawful, neutral, or chaotic for unique abilities.**

“Okay... wow. Whoever chose this one was ambitious. It’s rare for all racial bonus boons to scale. This one gives nothing at all passively, but makes up for it with some very impressive bonuses if they’re put to proper use. I’ve seen some of these modifiers before, but never so much all at once. Most progenitors choose immediate power over greater future potential...”

Cyra read through the list, letting out a low whistle. “Yep. That explains why you were picking things up so fast. Seems like you should work more training and practice into your daily routine. Your racial bonuses are geared toward making the most of your experiences.”

“You think I made the right choice?” I asked curiously.

Cyra’s eyebrows rose. “It was you who picked it? Huh. Interesting. Well, it’s too early to say for sure. Racial bonuses can be great, but only if you develop the techniques and training plans to make the most of them. The Amazonian racial bonus to condense additional mass was worthless until we had the infrastructure and training plans to eat a lot of food and turn it into muscle. If we were dirt-poor peasant farmers, it’d do more harm than good by encouraging us to eat ourselves out of house and home. I’ll have to read about what

an accelerata bonus is good for. Other races have picked it before, no doubt.”

“I wonder what my optimum preparation would include...” For a moment, I allowed myself to ponder the future.

Cyra shrugged. “Probably lots of schools. Classrooms, training halls, academies, apprentices, squireships, that sort of thing. I’m not too familiar with the process, but some of the factions in the Arcadia Multiverse force their kids through ages upon ages of study before they’re so much as allowed to look at a monster. For many, that can mean thirty or forty years of training, assuming you’ve got a way to get them to D-Grade without fighting.”

“That sounds tedious. And expensive.”

“Many factions shove their kids into accelerated time pocket spaces.” Cyra shrugged. “That’s what we do. I’m not sure if you noticed it during your brief jaunt through the city, but you probably didn’t see anyone below the age of eighteen. Well, there are some kids, there just aren’t any here.”

“The System allows that?” I asked curiously.

Cyra shrugged. “Encourages it, even. I think it likes the fact that most regions of the world are adult-only spaces.”

Now that I thought about it, when walking through the city with Myrina, I hadn’t seen a single child. Nor had I seen any in my tour of the castle.

After a brief break, Cyra took me through some more practice drills. Now that she knew about my bonuses, she seemed eager to drill even more into my head in the little time she had with me.

**Your Taunt proficiency has improved by 3 to Level 11!**

**Your Regeneration proficiency has improved by 4 to Level 24!**

**Your Dual-Wielding proficiency has improved by 6 to Level 11!**



**Your Sword proficiency has improved by 6 to Level 39!**

My abilities had come a long way in just one day of practice. Cyra seemed excited to see me take her instructions to heart, and by the end of the sparring session she looked like she had something of a smile on her face. It was a far cry from the dispirited scowl she'd worn when I'd first seen her. But eventually, she held up a hand for me to stop.

She cupped her hand around her ear and frowned.

"What is it?" I asked, hearing nothing.

"Mother finally stopped lecturing Myrina," Cyra explained. "It took a few hours, but I think she's good now. She'll be coming down soon, which means my time with you is almost done—at least for today. I'll still be around if you want to train more. Teaching you the basics has actually been good for me. I gained one teaching proficiency and those don't come easy to me these days. Maybe with a little more instruction, I can pick up a Sword proficiency point of my own."

"Myrina's been getting chewed out this whole time?" I felt a little nervous on Myrina's behalf.

Cyra and I had been practicing for hours. What exactly had Myrina just gone through? I'd been feeling bad for putting Myrina and her family through so much trouble, as it was. Now I felt even worse. Especially since Cyra had helped me so much. I really owed the Samhain Clan. Myrina seemed to think I could repay them in the future, but from what little I'd heard, it looked like they needed help now, not in the distant future.

The only problem was that I had little clue how I *could* help them. Myrina had made it perfectly clear that I was just one small man from a little world of no relevance here in the heart of the Arcadia Multiverse. And Cyra had made it clear that I couldn't even leave the castle safely on my own, let alone help her family repel their enemies. At my current level and with my current resources, I couldn't see anything I could do to help them.

“It’s not your fault,” Cyra said when she saw the look on my face. “The blame lies with Myrina. She won’t be happy with me for telling you this, but she’s had something of an unhealthy obsession with you—despite not having seen you for years. That obsession led her to giving you our Patronage token despite Mother’s wishes. Any blame she receives is her own fault.”

“What can I do?” I locked eyes with Cyra. “I want to help, but I’m not sure how.”

Cyra met my gaze and sighed. She shoved her sword back on the training rack, then did the same for mine a moment later. “You can’t. Not yet. And if you want my advice, steer clear of Mother’s line of sight. Or any of the elders, really. You’ll just make things worse for Myrina. But I do have one warning for you.”

Her expression turned grim. “Myrina doesn’t have the best judgment. She may try to make things... more official with you than is proper. The ways of we Amazonians are not your ways. I’m not sure how much you know of us—”

“Nothing,” I answered.

Cyra tapped her finger against her chin, puzzling through how best to explain things. “So... imagine a powerful wizard king who rules over an entire planet. Myrina’s father—who is also my father—is just such a man. If you have ambition, I’m sure you’ll want the same for yourself. Someone in that position can afford to sire ten thousand children as his heirs and take whoever is the best for his wives. Who the mother is doesn’t matter much to him, though he’ll still try for the best.

“But we Amazonians pay an enormous price for every child we bear. The process is more taxing on us than it is for normal women. Our training is intense—too intense to allow for a healthy pregnancy. This means any Amazonian seeking to have a child must step away from the training grounds for at least a year—often for several years. It’s a major vulnerability, both for ourselves and for our clans, so we seek to do it as infrequently as possible.”

“I think I get it. You want the best possible man to father any children you have.” I nodded in understanding. If Amazonians could rarely afford to step away from combat long enough to carry a child to term, they needed to make every child they had count.

Cyra gave me a sad smile. “Just so. That need is so ingrained in us and our culture that rituals have formed around it. Every Amazonian who wishes to be considered a proper member of Amazonian society can only ever choose a man who can at least match them in combat. Preferably, he should be able to best them.”

She sighed, and that forlorn, dispirited look crept over her features. “While some Amazonians break with tradition, our clan does not. Perhaps we could make an exception at another time, but right now we are at war. Already, our vassal clans are questioning our power, so we can’t afford to do anything that would make us look weak. I know that all too well.”

Cyra averted her gaze, fighting to hide the tears welling up in her eyes. “If you lie with Myrina, you will be forced to prove you are worthy of her. That would mean a duel like the one you fought today, only her level would not be restricted.”

“Shit.” I’d had a hard enough time against Myrina with her restricted to my own level. If she was at full power, I was certain to lose. Even if I was willing to risk the attention of the Chaos Wolf, the fourth level of Mania probably still wouldn’t be enough to secure me a win.

Cyra sighed, hiding a snuffle. “Myrina does not have the greatest impulse control, so you will have to be the responsible one. Ask for what happened to me and my former lover if you want proof.”

“You’re saying...” I trailed off.

“If you sleep with Myrina, you will die.”

## CHAPTER

# SEVEN

“I ’m back!” Myrina called as she ran into the arena at full speed. She launched herself at me like a missile, wrapping me up in her arms. She pressed her cheek against mine, pulling me off my feet. “So sorry I took so long, Carter. Mom was mad at me.”

“About that. Sorry, Myrina. I didn’t think my presence here would...”

Myrina set me down and bopped me on the nose. “Don’t be silly. It has nothing to do with you. I just made some decisions my mother doesn’t agree with, is all. I’m sure you did much the same... before, well... you know.”

I shrugged. Both of my parents had died just after I’d left for college. That had been a rough year. The only good thing about it had been Myrina’s unexpected visit; that was when she’d given me the Amazonian’s Patronage token.

Once upon a time bringing up those painful memories would have hurt. But not anymore. What was done was done and the past was in the past.

Myrina wrapped me up in a tight embrace, anyway. I returned it, though it was a little awkward doing so with Cyra standing behind the two of us boring a hole right through the back of my head. The scowl she’d been wearing earlier returned with full force now.

Cyra clearly wasn’t happy seeing Myrina embrace me like this. After what she’d just explained to me, I realized she knew

it could only lead us both into a world of hurt. With that in mind, I broke the hug off as quickly as I could.

“So... uh... your sister was showing me how to use a sword. I picked up a few proficiency levels in it.”

Myrina’s eyebrows rose as she turned to her big sister. “Did she, now?” A grin started to spread across her face.

“He’s a talented student,” Cyra admitted, then shrugged.

Myrina’s grin spread even wider, and she pulled me right back into her arms, rubbing her cheek against my own. “What did I tell you, Carter? As soon as my family sees your handsome face, they’ll have no choice but to support your training. I’m a genius!”

“You’re not a genius,” Cyra rolled her eyes with all the confidence of a life-long big sister. “And I was the one helping Carter, not you. But now that you’re back, I’m sure you’d prefer to train him yourself.” Cyra turned and started to walk off.

“Wait, Sis!” Myrina yelled. “I want you to run a dungeon with us. We need your help! The spatial one. Carter needs a dimensional storage item.”

“I suppose,” Cyra sighed. “I do have some free time. This week was supposed to either be my honeymoon or time to grieve. Since it’s the latter, maybe some fighting will take my mind off things. How’s the day after tomorrow sound? Carter should have at least three days here, right?”

“Yay! Thank you, big sis!” Myrina clapped her hands together.

I nodded my thanks as well. “Thank you very much, Cyra.”

Cyra took her leave, and soon it was just Myrina and I in the practice arena. Myrina let out a long yawn. “Well, I spent the last few hours getting chewed out. I’m sure you’re tired, too. Let’s go to bed early. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow, after all.”

Glancing up at the sky overhead, I noticed that the sun hadn't set yet. With my twenty-first century background, it seemed odd to go to sleep as soon as it got dark. I supposed Myrina's culture was more in tune with the natural cycles of light and dark.

I had seen a few magical light sources back in the city I'd initially teleported into, but Valkyrie's Watch was equipped with only mundane lamp posts. The rest of the locals weren't too far from a medieval level of technology, so it was no surprise to find their sleeping habits were the same.

Myrina led me back to her room. I was surprised to see that the changes she'd said she'd make were already finished. The side of the room previously housing a cozy chair and a shelf full of books had been partitioned into its own separate chamber. And not with some flimsy curtains, either. Someone had actually built a wall right there in the middle of the room. It was complete with a door and everything.

"Good. The servants got my message." Myrina rapped her knuckles against the wall. It rang with the dull thud of wood. "I would have preferred if they'd made it a stone wall, though." Her cheeks suddenly turned a rosy pink. "If you hear snoring tonight, it's Cyra next door, not me, okay?"

I chuckled. "Okay, Myrina."

"Well, they set a bath up just outside. I'm sure you'll want to clean up after a sparring session and then several hours of training. Bath, then bed, okay? I've got to go register our little dungeon diving party for the day after tomorrow. I don't want you leaving this place without a dimensional storage item! Plus, I want to claim your first dungeon dive."

Myrina departed and I found the bath she'd indicated. It was a large bronze tub that looked like it weighed at least two thousand pounds. I would have been shocked by the size of it. Still, thinking about Cyra, it made sense that Myrina's family needed enormous bathtubs—at least if they wanted anything usable.

I disrobed swiftly and slipped into the tub. There was quite an array of soaps, brushes, towels, and perfumes off to the

side. I wasn't sure what was for Myrina and what was for me, so I ended up digging my own stuff out of my bag of supplies.

I'd been carefully watching the door for Myrina's return—Cyra's warning still keen in my mind. I figured if Myrina was going to try to set something off her family would disapprove of, now would probably be when she tried something. I was just finishing up when she returned.

“All settled! We have a dungeon slot just past noon, day after tomorrow, and we'll have four hours to complete the dungeon. It's less time than I'd like, but with Cyra there, she can hack through just about anything in the blink of an eye. Are you about done in there?”

“Just drying off now.” I grabbed my towel from my gym bag and hastily wiped myself down.

Myrina pushed the curtain aside and poked her head in. She pulled her hair back, grabbed her tunic by the collar, and yanked it over her head. A moment later, she landed in the bath with a big splash.

“Ah... that's the stuff. Nothing better than a cool bath after a good workout.” Myrina sighed. Then I heard her sit up in the water. “Wait a second. They forgot the bubbles. Bummer.”

“You still like bubble baths?” I laughed. She'd been rather fond of them as a kid. I'd have thought she'd have outgrown them by now, though.

“I don't have to have a bubble bath.” Myrina pouted. “It's just... nice.”

“Alright. If it'll make you feel better, I'll hunt down your bubbles. Where would they be?” I asked.

“The servants would know. They're in a closet somewhere. But don't trouble yourself, Carter. It's not a big deal. Just hang out in my room for a bit. It's—”

“No, no! I won't let you go without your bubbles. Besides, you already took me for a tour through the whole castle. I think I know where I'm going.” I left the room before Myrina could talk me out of leaving.

Truthfully, I'd been waiting for the opportunity to get away from Myrina for a bit and talk to a servant in private. Myrina had been shielding me from things, that much was clear. I was pretty sure she was looking out for my best interest—in most things. But I still needed to keep my head on my shoulders.

How much political capital with her family had Myrina expended on my behalf? Was she right to do so, or was her mother and clan elders right to think I was just a resource sink they could ill afford? And what had all that been about, when Cyra had said I'd die if I slept with Myrina?

I had too many questions that Myrina either couldn't or wouldn't answer. I needed the excuse to figure things out for myself, and from how tightly Myrina had been glued to me for most of the day, I doubted I'd get many opportunities like this one.

When I slipped out the door, the hall was empty. It looked like there was some kind of an outpost for guards to check everyone walking down the hall. This wing seemed filled with the bedrooms of the clan matriarch's precious daughters; I wouldn't be surprised to find it well guarded.

But with their clan at war, the post was empty. As was the one after that. Myrina's family had deployed all the resources they could spare to fighting their war. They'd stripped their castle of all but a skeleton crew. But while guards were lacking, there were still plenty of servants.

Wandering the halls, I eventually found a small alcove where several of them had gathered. They looked like they were off-duty, chatting quietly. All of them were women and were dressed in black and white uniforms. Most of them had a drink in hand.

“—And pop! Cyra turned his head to paste. Damn shame, but I heard he was an arrogant prick anyway. Any spawn he sired on Cyra would have been a pain in our ass for years hence,” one servant was saying.

“You hear Lady Myrina brought someone over this time?” another added.



I stepped back out of view when I realized they were talking about me. If I was ever going to get some honest thoughts, this would be my best chance.

“What? Another spoiled princeling already?”

“Maybe... maybe not. The guard I talked to said he was rather polite. He spent a lot of time with both Lady Cyra and Lady Myrina today.”

“I thought the clan matriarch ordered all her daughters to stop chasing romance until the war is over?”

“She did, but Lady Myrina brought him over anyway. She spent an entire year’s worth of allowance and her tournament winnings to do it, too. That’s more coin than you or I will see in a lifetime. Her mother was furious. You could hear her yelling all the way from the servant’s quarters. But somehow, Myrina convinced her to let him stay.”

“Damn. To make Lady Myrina give up so much, this must be one handsome guy.”

“Eh, he’s alright. Less refined and cultured than Lady Cyra’s former admirer, though he did look a bit more battle-hardened.”

“High level?”

“Nope. Twenty-nine average combined race and class level is what I heard.”

“You’re telling me Lady Myrina got seduced by some peasant boy?”

There was a round of laughter from all the gathered servants. Eventually, the one who seemed to know more about me than the others continued. “But it wasn’t good looks that won Lady Myrina over. Rumor is she knew him from that training adventure she was supposed to go on to a newly integrated world, so he’s an old friend. You know, the training adventure her mother canceled when the Shadefall rebellion started?”

The others murmured something that was probably an affirmation.

“I don’t know if he’s a prince there or not, but it probably doesn’t matter. It’s rare for any kingdom to survive the integration anywhere close to intact.”

The conversation started drifting off towards the topic of newly integrated worlds. I gave them a minute or two on this new topic since it would be a bit embarrassing to have me walk in on a conversation where they’d been gossiping about me.

I knocked on the nearby piece of wood politely and hoped the smile on my face was at least halfway charming. I’d never considered myself a social butterfly, but my points and bonuses to Charisma had proved their worth before. Hopefully they would again.

“Pardon me, I’m sorry to intrude,” I announced.

Several of the servants glanced over at me, then rapidly went quiet when they saw an unfamiliar face. The women were a mix of races. Some had green skin and pointed ears. One was huge with leathery bluish skin that looked like it was partially frozen over. Another was covered in orange striped fur, making her look like a tiger. Each looked tough and brawny, which seemed to be a favored attribute here on the world of the Amazons. I kept my curious glances quick and polite, but the same couldn’t be said of them.

I felt their eyes on me and felt more than one tingle running up my spine. I scowled a little at that, but quickly hid the expression. I thought using Examine on someone without their permission was considered rude.

“Myrina is in the bath right now and missing some supplies. You wouldn’t happen to know where those would be, would you?” I asked.

“Oh, shoot. Her damn bubbles. I knew we forgot something,” the tiger-furred servant growled. She placed her mug of ale down on the short table and stood. “I’ll get them for you. Wait right here.”

I shrugged and did as asked, staring down the other servants. They remained silent, eyes darting between me and

their cups. Apparently, whatever conversation they'd been having earlier wasn't something they considered fit for my company. Which wasn't terribly surprising, I supposed, but it did give me a good opportunity to direct the conversation where I wanted it.

"I'm Carter, by the way... Myrina's guest."

There were a few muttered hellos and greetings. From the looks on their faces, that was something they'd already known or guessed.

"Mind if I ask you all a question?"

"We're here to help," the leathery blue-skinned woman replied.

"I keep hearing rumors of something that went down with Cyra recently. I spoke to her a little while ago, and she still seemed to be in a bad mood. What was it?"

The servants glanced at one another warily. "Uh... you don't want to know, lad."

I met their gazes with a firm and steady look of my own. "Trust me, I do."

The blue-skinned woman sighed. "I suppose you would. But don't say I didn't warn you. You see, last week Cyra brought home a would-be lover. He was brash and overconfident, thinking he could best Cyra in combat and prove himself worthy of her, then go on and use his magic to save the Samhain Clan from being overthrown."

All the servants shook their heads.

"He didn't last five minutes," the blue-skinned woman sighed. "More balls than brains, that one. Don't you go ending up like he did. His death broke her heart and Cyra's a tough girl. Myrina isn't as hard as her sister. I don't think she could take it if she had to smash your head to bits."

"Smash... my head?" I asked skeptically.

The blue-skinned woman nodded. "Yep. That's how Cyra's lover died. Had his head squeezed between her thighs until it popped. At least it was quick."

I gulped. When Cyra had said I'd die if I slept with Myrina, that is definitely not what I had pictured. My mind went back to Cyra's patient hand as she trained me earlier that day.

"She wouldn't do that," I replied.

The servants gave me a dark chuckle in reply. "Oh, she would."

"I don't believe you."

The blue-skinned woman flashed me a mouthful of sharp teeth. "I used a recording crystal to copy it. Stuff like that always sells well on the black market if you know who to sell it to. Here, take a gander." She pulled a cellphone-sized tablet from her pocket that looked like it was made of polished jade.

She brushed her finger across a series of activation runes along the side and an image slowly appeared from the cloudy and blurry mass within the stone. Compared to a cellphone, it was a blurry, hazy mess. It also looked like it was dedicated to playing this single video.

But from the delicate way the blue-skinned woman had handled it, the device was likely quite valuable. I handled it just as carefully. The video played and I saw Cyra with a handsome and well-dressed man in the same sparring arena I'd fought Myrina in.

It did not take long before the man in the video was absolutely destroyed by Cyra. His spells were worthless against her raw power. She was too fast and too strong for him to hit, let alone beat. But worst of all, how she fought reminded me far too much of my sparring match with Myrina.

Sure enough, the fight ended with the man's head exploding between Cyra's thighs. His body twitched and quivered as he wet himself in death. Whoever was recording this had zoomed in to get a really good view.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, my knuckles white and my gaze locked on the tablet. Eventually, the tiger-furred woman returned and plucked it from my hands.

"Girls! What are you doing, torturing the poor boy?"

Having snatched the jade tablet from my hands, she tossed it back to the ogress. My own gaze was distant. Cyra hadn't been kidding when she'd given me her warning. She hadn't been exaggerating, either. That had really happened. She'd really done that—killed her former lover because he hadn't measured up.

“So, if I tried for anything serious with Myrina... that's...”

“Yep.” The blue-skinned woman snorted.

I walked back to Myrina's room in a daze, only loosely holding onto Myrina's bubble bath supplies.

She called out as soon as I opened the door. “You're back! I was wondering if I needed to get dressed and go search for you.”

“Sorry... I... uh... got lost a bit. Your servants helped me find my way,” I replied.

Myrina caught my pale and worried gaze. “Is something wrong, Carter? You look pale. Are you feeling okay?”

“I'm fine. Here are your bubble bath supplies.” I pushed the supplies through the curtain towards the bath. But instead of grabbing the soap bottles from my hands, Myrina grabbed my wrist and pulled me straight through the curtains.

She stood from the water, perky bare breasts dripping wet as she held me, peering closely as she inspected me. She looked my face over, examining me up and down as she touched my forehead.

“Oh, I get it. The servants said something to scare you, didn't they? I should have guessed as much. I never should have let you go out there on your own.” She pulled me close to her, and soon my face was buried in her firm breasts. Her nipples dragging against my cheeks felt like daggers raking across my soul.

“Don't worry about anything they said. I've already spoken with Mother. Everything is going to be just fine.”

But despite Myrina's comforting words and the boobs pressed against my face, the same warning kept playing

repeatedly in my head.

*If you sleep with Myrina, you will die.*

## CHAPTER

# EIGHT

I spent most of the night stiff as a board. I sat bolt upright several times as I lay in bed when I thought I felt Myrina's arms around me. Each time I looked around and realized I was alone.

The door to my little side room in Myrina's chambers had just been blown open by the wind. I wasn't surprised to discover the old castle had drafts, though, so each time I closed the door and settled back in to get some sleep.

Not that I got much sleep. Cyra's warning and then the video the servants had shown me kept playing over and over again in my head.

"I'm fucked..." I muttered. "Completely fucked."

I would have to be blind not to notice Myrina's interest in me. And I had just as much interest in her. But the problem was that if either of us acted on it, her family would force her to crush my skull between her thighs.

While there were certainly worse ways to die, I had no plans of dying at all. At least not anytime soon. I needed to think.

I needed to have a conversation with her, obviously. Myrina had to know what my issue was. The only problem was that she seemed intent on ignoring it. Considering she'd brought me here against the wishes of her mother and her entire clan, I doubted she cared much for the rules or traditions that had forced Cyra to do what she'd done.

But that didn't mean I was willing to risk my life on her being able to convince her family to make an even bigger exception on my behalf than they'd already made. Me just being here was causing trouble. Myrina's ability to win more favors for me would be quite limited unless I figured out a way to make myself useful to the Samhain Clan.

I'd have to talk to Myrina. I wasn't sure if we could ever be lovers, given this restriction. I supposed it might be possible that I'd surpass her in a few decades if the integration was as fruitful as Myrina and Cyra claimed it would be. She'd be a goal to work towards; something to aspire to.

I'd share that idea with her, along with the notion that I didn't want to lose her as a friend. With her family's restrictions, that's all the two of us could be if I wanted to keep her patronage. Which I really and truly did. Just one day of training with Cyra had taught me things I didn't even know I needed to learn. Myrina's family had probably forgotten more tips and tricks concerning the System than I'd ever learn.

My only problem was figuring out how to let Myrina down easy. It took me the whole night to come up with a solution. It wasn't until the morning light was creeping over the horizon when I realized I'd had a solution at hand all along.

Why was I even thinking about Myrina?

I had two lovely ladies back home. Bridget and Sakura. They'd made it clear that the two of them wanted me all to themselves. Myrina was a friend—a good friend I couldn't afford to lose—but at the same time I could barely handle my existing girlfriends.

Adding a third to the mix would make things impossible, even if I had the permission of the other two, which I most definitely did not. My heart rested easy knowing I already had the excuse I needed. I just hadn't seen it until now.

I'd tell Myrina I just wanted to be friends. It wouldn't be my favorite thing to do, especially after Myrina had done so much, arranging this tutorial for me. But if the alternative was my head getting squished into paste, I could see no other option.



As soon as I had the opportunity, I would break the bad news to her. Satisfied at last, my final few hours of sleep were peaceful and pleasant.

I woke to find the sun shining through the nearby window. I dressed and opened the door, expecting to find Myrina up and about. She was still in bed, though, lying in a heap of blankets surrounded by a fortress full of pillows. She must have had a restless sleep, as well.

I poked around her room and figured she wouldn't mind me using what looked like a workbench. It looked like she was halfway through riveting together a set of pink chain mail, so I carefully moved that aside to lay out my wires and started bending them to finish making my Mana Bombs. I still didn't know if these things would be worth anything, but I figured it was worth a shot.

### **Your Artificer Job has reached level 9!**

I finished the last Mana Bomb just as Myrina stirred. I caught a rapping at the door and found the tiger-furred servant I'd met last night stepping into the room with a tray full to the brim with hot tea, bread, scrambled eggs, sausages, and a few strange blue vegetables I couldn't name.

"Thanks, I'll take that," I said as I accepted the tray.

There were plates for two on the tray, so I took my portion and pulled up a seat beside Myrina's bed. I knew there was nothing quite like a hot tray of food to get me out of bed, and Myrina was no different. I laid her tray out before her and let the smell waft over her.

"The tea's not bad. I prefer coffee still, but I could drink it," I said as Myrina groaned and then rose from the sheets like a zombie.

"Crap, is it already morning?" Myrina yawned.

"Rise and shine!" I pushed her plate toward her.

Myrina sat up. She'd been naked under that heap of pillows. Apparently she slept in the nude, since she was once again showing off her perky breasts as she stretched. Then she dug in without a care.

She paid it no mind as she ate, though, so I paid it no mind either.

“What are the blue things?” I poked the strange fruit.

They reminded me a bit of tomatoes, only these were blue. They’d been split in half and fried on a pan. The food looked and tasted good, though it was plainer than I’d expected for someone of Myrina’s status. There were only four basic ingredients, with no spices, and everything besides the sausage was fresh and local.

Back home, I would have just assumed Myrina’s family was just trying to eat healthy, but given the technological level of the rest of the city, I figured it might be because there were no spices to be had. Or at least no trade routes still open to transport them here.

“Bluefruit. It’s supposed to be good for you. They’re not too bad, just tough to eat.” Myrina gave one of her blue fruits a tentative poke with her fork. The cooked fruit oozed a strange blue liquid before sliding right back off her fork. “They’re slippery little buggers. Always slipping away from you.”

The utensils we held were made of silver, but quite obviously forged by hand. The forks had only two tines, like something out of the Middle Ages, so while they were great at stabbing, they were not so good at scooping. Modern utensils would have handled the blue fruit just fine, but armed as we were the fruits were rather tough to eat.

They weren’t terrible, all things considered. They reminded me of a cross between okra and mangos. Somehow, they managed to be hearty and sweet at the same time.

“No fair. Why’s eating them so easy for you?” Myrina looked at the odd fruit neatly balanced on my fork.

“Innate talent,” I smugly proclaimed.

“Oh yeah?” Myrina eyed me with a sly grin. She lurched forward and ate the fruit right off my fork.

“You thief!”

Myrina grinned, swallowed, and then raised her arms over her head. “To the victor goes the spoils!”

I shook my head, then went for a sausage. When I did, Myrina lunged forward again and ate that too. “Mhmm... being spoon-fed my breakfast in bed? You’re going to spoil me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Alright, two can play at that game.” I speared Myrina’s sausage fast as lightning and moved to eat it. I got one good bite on the end before I felt Myrina’s lips brush against my own. Suddenly, the other half of the sausage was gone.

“Too slow!” Myrina giggled to herself.

I shook my head. “I hope you don’t do this to all your guests.”

Myrina laughed. “You’re my first guest, so I guess the answer to that would be yes. Yes I do.”

Myrina went quiet for a while, a smile still lingering on her face. There was a scarlet hue to her cheeks, and she shot darting glances up at me from beneath her eyelashes.

I groaned. That was just going to make this conversation all the harder. An icy hand gripped my heart, but I’d known what I needed to do from the moment I got out of bed this morning.

“Myrina... I heard some things from Cyra,” I said.

“Don’t believe everything my sister tells you, Carter,” Myrina hurried to reply.

I sighed. “And I heard things from the castle servants as well.”

“The servants love to gossip. Don’t believe everything they tell you, either.”

“They showed me this little jade tablet. It contained a video of Cyra’s fight with her former boyfriend.”

“T-those can be faked!” Myrina insisted, dropping her fork and reaching to take my hand in her own.

I met Myrina's gaze with a steady and level expression. "Myrina, you never were a very good liar."

Her shoulders slumped. Sure enough, the smile she'd been wearing was gone, having been replaced with an upturned pout. Her eyes were wet, too. These weren't the tears I feared, though, but if I didn't make this quick I was sure they would come.

"I... well... it's just..." Myrina trailed off.

"You don't have to say anything. I understand," I said.

"That's just not fair. I didn't even get to confess my feelings yet."

I chuckled. "You weren't exactly subtle. But it can't happen, Myrina. You have to know that."

"It's just a stupid tradition. I could just tell my family we were postponing the duel... for a few years. Decades maybe, centuries if we had to." Her fingers curled around mine, but I pulled my hand back.

I shook my head. "If that could have worked, your sister would have tried it. No, I think I have a pretty good idea of the kind of situation your family is in, and it's not one where they can afford to be flexible. You already burned all your influence and capital getting me this far. You shouldn't push it any further."

"I can handle my family!" Myrina insisted.

"Okay, then what about mine?" I asked curiously. "You know I have Bridget and Sakura waiting for me back home. They were suspicious enough with me running off with you. Honestly, I was surprised they let me run off alone with you at all. The two of them are quite territorial, and it would be wrong of me to take things further with you without their permission. And for that reason alone... I'm sorry. But if you were hoping for something serious to happen this week, or however long I'll be here, it just isn't going to work."

"So... what?" Myrina scowled up at me, and now there really was a tear running down her cheek. Her fingers balled into fists on the table. "Are you going to take off as soon as we

are done eating and spend the rest of your stay here training with Cyra while I sit up here in my room?”

“I wouldn’t do that to you, Myrina. After all, we’re friends—best friends. I have no plans on giving that up.” After a moment’s hesitation, I reached out and took her hand in mine.

“So... you’re not leaving?” Myrina asked, a hopeful note in her voice.

“No. I’m not going anywhere, Myrina. And I’d like to keep being your friend... if you’ll have me?”

Myrina’s chest heaved and she turned away, gaze locked on the window outside. I gave her all the time she needed to think. Eventually she turned back around to face me.

“A-and as my friend... you’re going to stick around, right? Still be under my patronage? Still train with me? Still do fun stuff together?”

I chuckled. “I wouldn’t be much of a friend if I didn’t, would I?”

She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, and a moment later the smile was back on her face. “A-alright. Friends. I can work with that.” Under her breath, she added a few quiet words that she probably thought I couldn’t hear. “... for now.”

## CHAPTER

# NINE

Breakfast took far longer than it should have thanks to our talk, but eventually we finished. Myrina recovered from it a lot faster than I would have thought. There was a decent chance she was just feigning a cheery attitude and would let it hit her in full, later. But whatever the case, I intended to be the best friend I could be.

I owed her that much, at the very least, considering how much she was doing for me.

Myrina went right back to messing with me and ended up getting food all over herself in the process. Fortunately, last night's bath was still waiting for her, though it had long since gone cold. Myrina dove in anyway and cleaned herself off.

I got dressed, then emptied the gym bag I'd brought and filled it with my Mana Bombs. Myrina told me we'd be going to see those Theory Crafters of hers today, and perhaps get a little shopping done on the way back. It was a good thing I'd made the Mana Bombs that morning.

Now would be the perfect time to scout for a place to sell them.

Myrina was finished and dressed by the time I'd packed my things. She wore a rather fetching set of deep red cloth-covered armor that matched her hair. It was dotted with metal studs that held armored plates on the inside.

I took the same cloak Myrina had given me the day before and put it on. I was taking Cyra's warning the previous day to heart. There was no need to take extra risks.

“Do you think I could have a sword too?” I asked.

“Sure! My armory is your armory.” Myrina opened what I had previously believed to be a walk-in closet. And in a way, it was. But it was filled with armor and weapons, instead of dresses and purses.

I looked for something suitable for myself. I wasn't used to fighting in armor, nor would much of Myrina's stuff fit me. The cloak she'd given me was thick, though, and upon asking her about it she told me it was enchanted to catch arrows and glancing blows. It would do for armor.

For a weapon, I picked a short sword. It was only the length of my forearm, but it was about the same size as the survival sword I'd practiced with.

Myrina wore a grin as I belted it on my waist, barely stifling a giggle.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing...” She eyed me sideways and smirked.

“Really... what is it?”

All I got were giggles in reply until we were out the door.

“Tell me what's so funny,” I demanded, heaving my bag onto my shoulder.

“Okay, okay! That sword you are wearing is one my mother got me as a kid. It's from a set named *'Babies' First Weapons!*”

I groaned. “I take it that's why you waited until we were outside. So it would be too late for me to switch?”

Myrina gave me a pat on the shoulder. “If we get ambushed, leave the sword fighting to me. On second thought, maybe you should flash that weapon around. Our assailants might die of laughter.”

“Haha. Very funny. Let's just get to these Theory Crafters of yours,” I grumbled.

Myrina led me through the streets. We avoided the back alleys and side roads. Our conversation died down as we

traveled, and I stuck close to Myrina's back. She was every bit as wary as I was.

Myrina might have been playful and overly impulsive at times, but dumb she most certainly was not. She was on her guard for danger, and more than a few times she locked eyes with suspicious people lurking down dark alleyways. Perhaps they would have tried something if she wasn't so vigilant, but when she locked her gaze on them and reached for her sword, they all turned away.

Thanks to her vigilance, we reached our destination unmolested. The building before us was a relatively unremarkable complex. The fact that it was made of stone instead of wood, however, made it more impressive.

There was a sign hanging from the door. *Marol & Lindel Theory Crafters*.

"This is the same place I went to at F-Grade and E-Grade. Marol will have a harder time helping someone at D-Grade, but she should be able to give you some tips. If you break past level 100 and hit C-Grade, you'll have to go somewhere else, but she's good for where you are now," Myrina explained.

If there had been financial advisors in the Middle Ages, I imagined this was what they would have looked like. Wooden doors. Stuffy air, a few small offices lining the wall, with a receptionist to direct people where they needed to go.

Myrina walked up to the counter. "Hi, we have an appointment?"

The receptionist scanned her paper and found what she was looking for. "Ah, Marol will see you, now. Furthest office on the left. It's the big one."

I stared at the door appreciatively. "If this is the same Marol that's on the sign, I'm impressed."

"She's one of the founders." Myrina smiled as she wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled down my hood. "Only the best for you, Carter."

She opened the door and led me inside. A portly woman sat behind a large wooden desk. She stood the moment Myrina



entered. “Ah, Lady Myrina! I must say I was shocked to find your name on my list for today. I thought you were finally free of me!” Marol said. She smiled wide and held out her arms, familiar creases lining her face as she grinned.

“Hello, Marol. The appointment wasn’t actually for me. It’s for Carter here.”

Marol nodded in understanding. “Ah. I see. That makes more sense. Here I thought you’d encountered trouble on your path. I spent the last half hour trying to figure out what it could have been.”

“Sorry, Marol. I didn’t want to put Carter’s name down, though. And I’d appreciate it if you could keep this meeting just between the three of us. Consider Carter my little secret.”

“A secret lover?” Marol’s eyes twinkled. “You wouldn’t be the first from a mighty clan to take a secret beau. But come, sit. Sit! Let’s look at this dashing young fellow you’ve brought for me. A wizard type?” Marol asked.

“Scholar, actually,” Myrina replied, though she made no effort to correct Marol on me being her secret lover.

Marol turned to me expectantly.

“My class is called ‘Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge.’ My race is Homo Acceleratus. And I’m just a friend of Myrina’s—a close friend, but just a friend,” I explained.

“Oh, yes, of course, dear.” Marol threw me an exaggerated wink. “I’ll need to see your racial and class Status Screen. Don’t worry, though. I am sworn by oath to keep everything I see secret. It’s why people come to Theory Crafters, after all. Otherwise, people would just go to the strongest person they know and ask for advice.”

I turned to Myrina, who nodded. A moment later, I provided Marol with my Status Screen. She hovered over it for nearly a minute, tapping her fingers against her desk as she studied it.

Her eyebrows rose a few times, and I was pretty sure she was impressed. I sat a little straighter.

“I see... I see... a moment please.”

“Can I speak in front of her?” Marol shot a glance to Myrina.

I nodded.

“These are some extremely unique titles, here. And five of them are legendary!” Marol shook her head. “But I suppose that’s to be expected of a forerunner. I’ve seen examples of forerunner status screens during my academy days. Some were more impressive than yours, but all of them had already reached level 100. To accumulate five legendary titles at D-Grade is practically unheard of.”

I rose a little higher in my seat, and I felt Myrina’s hand stroke my back. She, too, looked proud on my behalf.

“But this Death Curse you have here? It prevents you from gaining any experience from killing monsters? And it also sends those same monsters your way to kill you? How in the heavens did you make the System angry enough to inflict something like that on you?”

Myrina knew the story already, so I didn’t bother explaining the whole thing. “The same way I got my Death Defier title. I died, but refused to stay dead,” I replied.

“Mhmm... that would do it.” Marol nodded. “I see you found a way around it, though. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here. I take it you’ve been completing a lot of quests? Executing criminals?”

“And the unique skill given to me by Soul Vampirism. It lets me gain levels and stats from willing donors.”

Marol’s eyebrows rose. “Any willing donors? So, you could, in theory, buy a few hundred slaves at the market, have them slay the monsters that come near you or each other, then take their levels as they gain them? That is truly a terrifying skill, and one many would envy, including me. Keep it safe and keep it secret.”

“In theory...” I shrugged sheepishly. Once again, I was reminded that this wasn’t Earth. The moment Marol saw the skill, her first thought had been to buy slaves and make them

kill each other to generate experience. I feared that kind of ruthless thinking was the way of the world in the Arcadia Multiverse.

Not that it would be practical, or even possible, for me. Even if I'd been ruthless enough to round up a few dozen women back home to enact such a plan, the only skill I could activate Soul Vampirism with was Fabulous Phallus, and that ability required consent for me to use. I doubted I'd get consent from a slave.

The realization that it probably wouldn't work was almost a relief to me, and my tense shoulders relaxed. I didn't want my need for the power to protect those I loved to be at odds with my own morals.

"Alright, your race and class have me stumped. I'll need to go to my books..." Marol stood from her seat and peered at the shelf behind her. Myrina and I waited patiently on the other side of her desk.

Her fingers flipped through the shelves, finding nothing on those that appeared to be more commonly used. She turned her attention lower to books covered in dust—books that looked like they hadn't been moved in years.

"Ah... here it is. Your race is not too uncommon. Less common than the Elementa or Superia versions of humanity, but I'm sure I have it... Yes, here it is! Recommended build guides for Homo Acceleratus."

She laid the book on her desk and flipped through the pages until she found the page she sought. "There are several archetypes proven by history to be quite effective for your race. Yours is a flexible one, but the sum of the ideas is to pick racial skills that resonate with your class and scale with proficiencies. Your additional gains with skill proficiencies form the backbone of your racial bonus, so you're going to want to make the most of that.

"Additionally, you will want to incorporate daily training into your routine. There are a few tips here... ah..." She looked up at me. "Do you meditate, young sir?"

I shook my head. “Not particularly.”

“I’d like you to start. Meditation is highly useful for all Scholar-type classes. And at high proficiencies, it can improve mental stability and even lifespan. Combine that with a high Regeneration proficiency and you might be able to eke out most of the bonuses that the Superia racial path would have gotten you, assuming you are diligent enough to continue training every day.”

“I am.” I nodded, making a mental note to obtain and perfect the Meditation proficiency. “I already have the Regeneration proficiency.”

Marol smiled in approval. “That’s good. Normally, that is by far the harder one of the two to get. You must have been dealt quite the injury to obtain it.”

I chuckled. I’d nearly died from the rat bite. Heck, I had died not long after that. If others had to go through something like that to gain the Regeneration proficiency, I wasn’t surprised it was rare.

“You’re doing a good job putting points into Intelligence. That will synergize the most with your class. I think I see the general idea of what you were going for here. You intend to be a mobile spell caster durable enough to get up close and personal?” she asked.

I nodded. “That’s right.”

“Hmm... normally, I would recommend against being so greedy with your path. There’s a reason most wizard types tend to be made of glass. They don’t have the stats or abilities to spare. Yours is a path that will demand far more resources, though: better skills, better equipment, and better stats. You essentially must excel in two fields, instead of just one. That makes things exponentially harder for you. I wouldn’t recommend this path if you were a normal person. Attempt it and fail and you’ll forever be trapped as a mediocre combatant.”

She met my gaze. “But you’re different. You’re a forerunner, and you’ve already accumulated a plethora of

incredible titles. And with your world's integration, there will be plenty of unique quests. You'll have to take far more quests than others to ensure you gain the resources needed to fuel your continued advancement. But if you manage it, you'll come out of this a true elite of the Arcadia Multiverse."

I took a deep breath. "I'm not afraid of hard work."

"He is quite diligent," Myrina assured Marol. "And we would like nothing more than for him to be the best."

Marol smiled. "I can see you are quite proud of him, Lady Myrina. But understand that this will be no easy feat. Nor without risks. He may die."

I snorted. "I've died before."

Marol shrugged. "So it seems. Since you are confident in your path, let's see what improvements we can make."

She scanned my status screen again, looking for abnormalities. "You have quite a few skills, but not all of them align with your intended build. Like Surging Strength, here. You are not a strength-based combatant, and your Strength score is not all that impressive. I would discard it in favor of a stealth skill.

"Normally I would tell you to ditch some of these useless proficiencies, as well, but since your racial bonus removes your proficiency cap, you might as well hang onto them. You should consider casting your spells in unusual environments to pick up extra proficiencies, like Neutral Mana for example, but you should try for every aspect.

"Ordinarily, I would favor any mobility skill, but jumping isn't as flexible as I would like. Either upgrade Power Jump, discard it in favor of a stealth skill, or exchange it for another combat spell like Arcane Blade. You already have a high Sword proficiency, so you should consider using magic to enhance that.

"Going forward, I would consider picking up another damage-over-time ability. You've been leaning heavily on this Corrupting Mark ability. If you pick up something that lets you slow or weaken your enemy, you'll be a valuable member of

any party. Also, if you get the opportunity to improve or enhance your Lifesteal skill in any way, you should do so. It will improve your suitability dramatically.”

I took a few mental notes. More damage-over-time abilities, something that worked with swordsmanship, and considering picking up a few stealth skills. It all sounded reasonable. I’d done the best I could with the free abilities the System presented me with, thanks to my Blessed of the System title, but I’d only ever had three choices at a time.

I glanced at my own character sheet. “And what about my Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge Class? Does your book say anything specific about that? Any idea on how I should allocate my stats? Or what the rest of the levels of Mania do? Or how to avoid the drawbacks involved with using it?”

I mainly was interested in how to use Mania past the third level without getting possessed by the Chaos Wolf, or something like it.

Marol’s smile turned into a frown. “I hate to say it, but you’ll have to find a Theory Crafter higher ranked than me to get more than just speculation. I don’t have any books with specific information on your class like I do for your race. But I do have some general knowledge of the Scholar classes.”

Marol cleared her throat and prepared for a lecture. “The Scholar line of classes predates the System, and it is commonly believed that the System was created by a group of individuals who eventually came to have what we now know of as Scholar Classes. In their time, there were no levels, merely the power of the energy plane and ways to grasp that power, like you did to take levels without them being awarded by the System.”

“So that’s why I got this class?”

“Likely so,” Marol replied with a nod. “All scholars do something similar. In the days before the System, some gathered this power from the energy planes directly. Those who spent each day gathering power so that they had the strength to defend their civilizations were called cultivators. Your class proves that their methods of gaining power are still

viable, though with the advent of the System their primitive techniques for injecting themselves with higher-order energies are now obsolete. The energy processed and administered by the System is far safer and easier to obtain. Still, for someone like you laboring under a Death Curse, alternative routes might be more viable than others.”

I ran my fingers along my chin. This would bear more looking into. When I had the funds to visit a Theory Crafter who knew more about my class, I would need to do so.

“And one last general note. I see you have both Charisma and Luck unlocked. I’m impressed. Not many discover the hidden stats so early—not without being guided to the stats with the intent of picking a class based off of them.” Marol looked me up and down with genuine praise.

“Thank you.”

“Have you tried applying stat points to them on leveling up?” Marol asked.

I shrugged. “Not seriously. I might have spared one or two points somewhere along the way, but they never seemed as important as my other stats.”

Marol nodded. “Ah... then you haven’t hit your limit yet. Most people reach it quite early. You can only place so many points into Luck or Charisma. The System bars you from expending more, except under unique circumstances. In a way, you could consider both of them broken stats. They are too powerful to be abused and would lead our society down paths other than what the System’s creators wanted for us.”

I frowned in thought. That made some sense. I pictured an immensely beautiful woman who dumped every skill point she gained into Charisma. She might be killed by a rat, but that wouldn’t matter if her Charisma reached the point that she could wrap the nearest king around her finger until she’d turned him into a mindless puppet. It would be an ignoble end for a warrior who otherwise would never have fallen in battle to the woman.

And for someone who was incredibly, unnaturally lucky? I needed even less imagination to figure out how that might be trouble. A man like that could kill the nearest king through simple, stupid chance.

“I see you understand. Yes, the System finds that being too lucky or too charismatic defies the natural order of things. It will prevent you from placing too many points into those stats, compared to your other stats. It’s the reason those stats are hidden—there’s no point in focusing on them, early on.”

“I see. So I should just keep ignoring them?” I asked.

Marol smiled. “I didn’t say that. I said that you couldn’t place points into them. But remember what I said about the cultivators of ancient days? They could increase their stats without the need for the System. They produced many artifacts, elixirs, and alchemical treatments meant to increase what we now know as the Luck and Charisma stats. Be on the lookout for such items. As someone of a Scholar class, you may be able to make use of them more than most.”

That was intriguing. When I’d first seen the stats, I’d wondered what it might be like to dump everything I had into luck and run into every encounter hoping for the best.

“I will keep that in mind. Thank you, Marol.”

“I’m afraid that’s all I have for you. I’ll do a little more research and write something up for you if I think of anything else. It will be sent to Myrina at the Samhain Castle.” Marol sat back down, our meeting evidently ending.

I shook Marol’s hand, as did Myrina. With plenty to think about, I left a little better armed for the future.



## CHAPTER

# TEN

My visit to Marol's Theory Crafting office proved more fruitful than I'd dared hope. I had a lot to think about going forward, and it was comforting to know that someone with generations of System knowledge had identified no major blunders I'd made by accident.

"Hopefully that shores up any weaknesses you were developing." Myrina patted my shoulder. "If I had the full support of my clan, I could afford to take you to several bigger and better Theory Crafting offices. They'd know much more about what makes Scholars of Forbidden Knowledge powerful and give you an idea of how to make the most of your class."

"You've already done far more than I could have asked for," I replied.

"That was probably the first time Marol pulled out that particular tome. It likely took her back to her academy days! Here in Valkyrie's Watch, she deals with Amazonian Warriors, Amazonian Archers, Amazonian Brutes, Amazonian Barbarians, and the occasional Amazonian War Chief, like me... and probably not much else. You made her prove her certification, today!"

I grinned. Marol's limited background knowledge aside, her tip about picking up the Meditation skill alone made visiting her worthwhile. Picking up the Meditation skill was something I was eager to do as soon as I had the chance to sit down and focus on it.

"So what's next?" I asked.

Myrina reached for the dimensional storage bag at her waist and gave it a pinch. She frowned, apparently not liking what she found.

“Well, we’re going to go shopping. Ideally, I’d take you to the best magic shops around. But we’re on a tighter budget than is ideal. Bringing you here pretty much obliterated my savings. I still have a few old weapons and piles of loot I could auction off for additional funds, but I wanted to get you something.”

“You really don’t have to, Myrina.”

“No. I’m your Patron, and this is your tutorial. You’re leaving here armed, trained, and equipped, whether you like it or not.” Myrina scowled at me. She’d brook no argument on this.

“Alright, where to?” I asked.

Myrina bit her lip. “There’s only one store that sells gear fit for spellcasters. We don’t have many spellcasters in Valkyrie’s Watch, so there isn’t much of a market for it. In fact, the store mostly exists to buy gear looted off corpses and resell it in bulk off world. This’ll be the first time I’ve gone there to buy instead of to sell.”

She led me down the streets again. This time, the path was a bit more winding than before. The castle where Myrina lived was visible the whole way, and with it for reference, I was starting to get the lay of the land. Valkyrie’s Watch wasn’t a large city. It certainly wasn’t as big as what I was used to, but the lack of cars made it much more tightly packed. There was no need for parking lots or streets wider than a wagon.

We were nearly around the corner when someone jumped out at us. She was a woman in rough-spun canvas that looked like it’d served as a burlap sack in a previous life. She held a rusty dagger in one hand and held it before her.

“Your money or your li—”

She didn’t even finish her demand before Myrina’s sword tip was lodged in her throat. Her eyes went wide as she choked

on her own blood, then Myrina drove her sword the rest of the way through and put her out of her misery.

“You alright?” Myrina asked as she wiped her sword clean on the former burlap sack and sheathed it.

“This happen often?” I asked.

Myrina had reacted as fast as lightning. I hadn’t even had time to get a spell off, and the would-be thief was already dead.

Myrina shrugged sheepishly. “These days, I never leave home without a sword. Back when we had more guards to patrol the streets and more coin flowed into the city, things were easier. Things will get better when the war is finally over.”

Myrina scooped up the body by her hair and unceremoniously tossed the entire corpse into the bag at her waist. It shouldn’t have fit, but it did.

“Shame she had nothing on her. I’m completely broke, but she was a pauper. Still, the corpse might be worth something where we’re going.”

I shook my head. I was once again reminded that Myrina was no Earthling. My experiences had hardened me more than most people of Earth. But not even I could shrug off a murder attempt and then plan to sell the corpse of my would-be killer like I was picking up a penny off the side of the road.

Shortly after getting ambushed, Myrina showed me to a shop. A sign above the door depicted a maniacal wizard cackling with a wand in one hand and a spellbook in the other. There were no windows or goods on display, but given what Myrina told me about this store, I doubted it needed any.

Being the only place to buy or sell magical equipment in the city likely meant it did not need to showcase its wares. There was no one else to compete with.

Myrina rapped on the door before pushing it open. “Hello? You’ve got customers.”

“Yeah, yeah. Throw your loot on the table, and I’ll tell you if it’s worth anything,” said a voice from inside the store.

A man stood behind the counter. He was the first man I’d seen since arriving in Valkyrie’s Watch. He wore blue, wide-sleeved robes and had a long white beard; in truth, he looked much like the maniacal wizard on his sign out front.

Myrina reached into the pouch at her waist and pulled out the corpse she’d just killed by the hair. “Think a necromancer would buy this?” she asked. “It’s still warm.” Myrina let the corpse flop onto the table.

The man behind the counter jumped with a start at the sudden appearance of the body. “Damn, girl. You should have told me you were selling a corpse. Now I’ll have to wipe the bloodstains off my counter.”

Myrina rolled her eyes. “Your counter is already covered in bloodstains.”

“Only because you crazy Amazonians keep trying to sell me corpses,” the wizard grumbled. He peeled back an eyelid on the corpse and held up a finger. A magical flame lit on his finger, and he used it to dilate the corpse’s pupils.

“Quite fresh indeed. I’ll get her on ice. She’d make a decent undead brute for a necromancer. I’ll take her for a single gold coin,” the wizard said.

Myrina shook her head. “Actually, I was hoping to trade. I’m looking for a wand for him.” Myrina jerked her thumb over her shoulder back at me.

I waved.

The wizard stroked his beard. “Alright... there are a few I can let go for cheap. Hold on a moment.”

He stepped into the back room. Myrina gave me a pat on the shoulder and said she was going to take look at the weapons on a rack by the door. I nodded and remained standing at the counter. Minutes later, the wizard returned with two handfuls of hand-length wands made of wood.

“Pick one of these, lad. Just one, mind you. Unless you’ve got coin to spare.”

“Wait a moment,” I said as I reached around to the bag I’d been carrying. “I have something I’d like to trade as well. Let me know what you think it’s worth.”

From my gym bag, I withdrew a single Mana Bomb. I held the tight bundle of wire in my hands, inspecting it one last time to ensure it looked right before passing it off to the wizard.

He accepted it graciously, stared at it a while in puzzlement, and then looked up at me. “What the hell is this thing?”

“It’s kind of like a magical hand grenade.”

The wizard stared at me, uncomprehending.

“Right... well, it deals pure magical damage. It doesn’t do much against living creatures, to be honest, but it is very useful against specters and ghosts.”

The wizard stared at it a while longer. “I’ll be honest, you’d have more luck at the auction house with something like this. I’ve never seen the item before and wouldn’t know how to sell it. My partners are all on wizard worlds, with thousands of spells to deal magical damage. You’d be better off selling this here at auction up the street. I’ll give you a second wand if you want to sell it. Or maybe one of those charms on the wall there?”

Ultimately, the charms on the wall looked interesting enough to part with one Mana Bomb. I was a bit disappointed they weren’t as precious as I’d hoped, but I guess expecting I’d be rich solely from having an Epic-rarity job was too much to expect. The Arcadia Multiverse was big, and my little invention couldn’t be that unique.

**You have gained a Basic Wand. +100 Mana to Pool.  
+10 accuracy to Spells.**

**You have gained a Pendant of Magical Fire. +10  
Intelligence. This pendant can be activated to**

**generate a Fire Shield. The item will break after said Fire Shield is used three times.**

**Your mana can now draw on this pendant to take on the Fire Affinity.**

All in all, I was happy with my purchases. I reunited with Myrina and caught her eye lingering on an enchanted axe. It was one of the few items on display.

Glancing at my haul, she seemed disappointed we hadn't gotten more. "I wanted you completely outfitted with top-level equipment," Myrina moped. "And all you're getting is E-Rank starter gear..."

"This is E-Rank stuff?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Yep. Most of the stuff in that shop was E-Rank. In fact, most of the stuff you'll see for sale on the streets is only suitable for E-Rankers. D-Rank equipment is usually behind the counter or in special back rooms. You can generally deduct one rarity rank as a rule of thumb. What's legendary at the E-rank is only the equivalent of epic at the D-rank. Maybe even just rare, depending on the item. The labels don't change, but the stats never lie."

"What do people who reach C-Rank do to get their equipment?" I asked curiously.

Myrina laughed. "They don't shop here, that's for sure. The only C-Rankers in the city are my family members. If they need equipment, they check the family vaults. D-Rank is generally considered the highest the average person can hope to reach. It's where the level gap grows to the point that it becomes insurmountable."

She shrugged. "It's easy enough to reach level ten, and a bit harder to reach level 25. But reaching level 100 takes mountains of enemies slain. A soldier in the Samhain Clan might reach C-Rank during a war like the one we're fighting, but that's it. Still, otherwise, it's just major clans who control dungeons that can produce such fighters. There simply aren't enough experience points to go around."

I nodded along. “Interesting. I suppose quite a few people would like to visit a newly integrated world for the monsters there.”

“Precisely so,” Myrina replied.

I sighed. Once again, the magnitude of what the System had taken from me with its Death Curse weighed heavy on my heart. There were many monsters to kill, and they all wanted a piece of me. I could slay as many as I wanted, though, and I wouldn’t get so much as a single point of experience. For that, I needed to kill people... or use the little workaround I’d found with the help of Sakura and Bridget.

“What do you say we check out that auction house the wizard mentioned?”

Myrina brightened. “I was just about to suggest the same thing. I’ve got some junk to sell off. It won’t be worth much, but an auction should be coming up soon. Sometimes magical stuff goes cheap there since there are so few magic users. And you can try selling whatever it is you brought from Earth in that bag of yours.”

Myrina led me to the auction house. As soon as Myrina flashed her crimson hair and announced she was a member of the Samhain Clan, we were swiftly swept away by a staff member and taken to a private room.

“Lady Myrina, it’s an honor to have you at our establishment.” The auction house employee bowed to Myrina. She threw a half-hearted glance my way. “And Lady Myrina’s guest, of course.”

“Thanks.” I fought to keep from shaking my head. It was pretty clear the auction house only gave us special treatment because of Myrina’s family name.

“I feel embarrassed to be taken to the back room,” Myrina laughed ruefully. “I’m just selling some junk.”

“Junk or no, you are a Samhain! How could we not pay our respects to the clan that rules over Valkyrie’s Watch?” the attendant replied.

Myrina shrugged. “You asked for it.”

“I have some stuff to sell as well,” I added.

“My assistant will appraise your items while I deal with Lady Myrina here.” The attendant waved me off. Not being a Samhain, I clearly didn’t rate the back room.

With a shrug, I made my way over to a smaller desk where the assistant stood. She looked like a younger, smaller version of the attendant Myrina was talking to. I doubted they were mother and daughter, but niece and her aunt sounded about right.

The assistant looked me over as I poured all the Mana Bombs I’d made out on the counter. She looked the odd bundles of wire over carefully.

“I’ve never seen anything like these. What are they... toys?” the assistant attendant asked skeptically.

I shook my head. “Quite the opposite. They’re weapons. Enchanted explosives. They’re one-time use and they detonate to deal neutral mana magical damage. They carry no physical force or energy, though, so they’ll only damage specters and the like.”

The assistant attendant shrugged. “These things may be useful. Perhaps the Samhain Clan will buy them for their war effort. Heavens know they’ve been burning gold like it is fire starter. Some of them might throw some coin away to test a fancy new gadget.”

I shrugged. “I can only hope.”

I had thought about offering the Mana Bombs to Myrina’s family directly, but I figured this was the better course. I doubted handing over a few handmade toys would impress Myrina’s mother. Besides, I desperately needed some pocket change. I’d been told skill books weren’t cheap, and if I wanted to make the most of the Theory Crafter session Myrina had paid for, I’d need to buy several of them.

I figured it’d be best to just sell them. But if I kept working on my Artificer class, I was sure I’d eventually come up with something that would sell my value to them and take some



heat off Myrina's back. She'd put a lot on the line to bring me here.

“Alright, I can give you five gold now for each of these. Feel free to use them to bid on the upcoming auction yourself. All told, that should be one hundred and fifteen gold.”

“Hmm... I'd hoped enchanted things would fetch more.” I'd seen the prices in the wizard's shop. The pendant I'd purchased had been listed for one hundred gold. Suddenly, I felt like he'd given me a very good price for the one I'd traded.

“Enchanted things are usually quite valuable. However, these are single-use items.” The assistant attendant shrugged. “I have to make a conservative estimate. If your items sell for more, we'll credit you half of the total to your account.”

“Only half?” I frowned.

The assistant attendant held her hands out. “We are only offering you that deal taking Lady Myrina's referral bonus into account. Most new customers only receive thirty percent of their item's sale price.”

I sighed, but such was the way of the world. The only shop in town that might have purchased them told me he wouldn't buy more than one. We shook hands and I accepted the package of gold. It was made of three distinct rolls, all neatly bundled, as well as a few loose coins.

Clearly, the packages were used as higher-denomination currency and only broken open when one needed change. They were heavier than they looked, and if not for my levels in strength, it would have slipped right through my fingers.

My heart lightened when I felt the weight. Perhaps that hadn't been such a poor deal after all. I'd just traded some scrap wire for five times its weight in gold. That wasn't a terrible deal at all. Heck, before the integration, this would have been five years' worth of my salary.

Myrina finished a moment later, and I smugly held up my bag of gold to compare with hers. Mine was noticeably bigger.

“Well well well...” I chuckled. “Are you jealous of the size of my package, Myrina?”

Myrina reached out to heft my package, flicking me a coy smile as she squeezed it. “It is a pretty big and hard package. You better watch out. If I didn’t have the Samhain Clan attached to my name, I would reach out and claim your package for myself.”

She giggled, and I laughed. The two of us took our seats in a private booth reserved for Myrina’s family. Nobody else in the Samhain Clan was attending the auction, so we had the room to ourselves.

“Attention one and all!” came the attendant’s voice who’d seen to Myrina personally. “Today’s auction is about to begin!”

## CHAPTER

# ELEVEN

The attendant, now the auctioneer, brought her gavel down with a bang. The dull roar of chatter running through the room went quiet.

“First up, a collection of items specifically tailored for those looking to add stealth to their arsenal of abilities! Introducing the Shadow Guise skill book! It allows the user to cloak themselves in shadows, remaining hidden from all prying eyes. It’s Uncommon Grade, a step above average. Bidding starts at one hundred gold!”

My eyes widened. Already, I was seeing exactly what I needed. I was the first to raise my hand.

“One hundred gold from the Samhain Clan! Can I get two hundred? Three hundred?”

There was some brief hesitation in the crowd, as though they were afraid of bidding against Myrina and me in our booth. But eventually, one brave soul raised their hand, and the bidding frenzy began.

“We have two hundred! Do we have three hundred? Three hundred! Four hundred! Five hundred! One thousand!” The auctioneer began talking faster and faster, and soon, it became clear that the skill book would sell for more than ten thousand gold.

“Well, crap...” I muttered, slumping back in my seat in defeat. Suddenly my purse was feeling a whole lot lighter.

“Yeah, skill books cost a fortune and a half,” Myrina laughed. “That one was uncommon as well, which means it will fetch an even higher price.”

I shook my head. “And to think the System was giving them out like candy during the integration.”

Several more items came up one after another. To me, every one of them sounded interesting. But I lacked the funds to bid on any of them.

“Ring of Regeneration! Starting at five hundred gold!”

“Elixir of Insight! Grants one Intelligence stat point! Great for any of your friends and family who are too dumb to realize they shouldn’t dump everything into Strength. Going for one thousand gold!”

“Quickfinger Gloves! Perfect for an archer class! Bidding starts at two thousand gold!”

The auction reached a frenzied pace, and eventually, Myrina’s items came up for auction.

“Next up, ladies and gentlemen, is an assortment of arms and armor. Lightly used, but enough to fully equip several fighters,” the auctioneer explained.

“Hey! That’s the stuff I brought in!” Myrina pointed to the stage.

“Bidding starts at four hundred for the lot!”

Myrina’s items sold for a thousand gold, though I couldn’t help but notice that being plain metal, they hadn’t sold for nearly as much as the enchanted weapons and equipment had sold for. Perhaps that would be the trick going forward. I would need to grind my Artificer skill and unlock some of those recipes, then buy used armor and spruce it up with a little magic. From the look of things, I could triple my money doing that—assuming I could acquire the supplies to make enchantments cheaply.

“Nice. That’s eight hundred for me.” Myrina grinned. “Now I can finally bid on stuff. I’m not broke anymore!”

My eyebrows rose. “You get eighty percent from the auction house?”

Myrina’s hand shot up to cover her lips. “Shoot. I’m not supposed to talk about that... but yeah.”

I shook my head. Life really wasn’t fair. But it wasn’t much different from most contracts on Earth before the integration. The little guy gets squeezed, and the people who already have money get a generous deal that helps them make even more.

Myrina had a few more items up for auction after that, each of which were sold individually, but the armor had been the biggest lot.

Shortly thereafter, my Mana Bombs finally came up.

“We’ve got something interesting for you here! Selling in four lots of five, we have Mana Bombs! These devices unleash a burst of neutral mana upon activation, dealing damage exclusively to magical entities. They’re safe to handle for flesh and blood people, though they’ll do no measurable damage unless you’re fighting ghosts or specters.

“Now before you get too excited, we’ve got no data on how much damage these things do. They’re new and untested, and to be fully honest with you all, the claims the seller made about their effectiveness can’t possibly be true. This auction house has to warn you to make your purchases at your own risk! The auction house will not be liable should these items not perform as described. With that in mind, bid away!”

I scowled. I had been perfectly honest about the Mana Bomb’s capabilities! Considering the cut I was giving the auction house, I figured the least they could do was to give my items the benefit of the doubt. But no, it seemed they cared more about maintaining their reputation.

But that was fine. After they sold this lot, people would test them. Word would get around. I was glad the auction house had broken the bombs up into lots, since that meant word of their effectiveness would spread that much faster. All I needed was somebody to bite.

“Come on...” I whispered to myself, hoping for high bids. Nobody was biting as my eyes darted over the crowd.

“One hundred? Can I get one hundred?” the auctioneer asked.

Eventually, someone timidly raised their hand.

*Yes!*

“Two hundred? We have two hundred. Three hundred? We have three hundred! Do we have four hundred?”

The first lot ended up selling for four hundred. Bidding slowed down a bit after that, with the next two lots of Mana Bombs going for three hundred. The auction house had paid me a hundred and fifteen up front. Working the numbers in my head, I had a little over five hundred gold to spend. Four and a half times the already hefty package in my hands.

“You look excited.” Myrina elbowed me in the side.

I realized then that she hadn’t seen my Mana Bombs. Both times I’d had them out, with the wizard and the attendant, she’d been elsewhere. I chuckled, deciding to play up the mystery. Myrina seemed fond of calling me an evil wizard, I might as well act the part—well, at least a little bit.

“Little do you know, I, Carter the Magnificent, have achieved one more goal in my dastardly plans!”

Myrina rolled her eyes. “Keep your secrets, then.”

Several more items came up for bid, one after another, and each time I considered splurging on them. I noticed a trend in the prices, though. Skill books or weapons suited for warriors were generally quite expensive, but items intended for casters were much cheaper. Clearly, Valkyrie’s Watch was running a wartime economy, where the value of military goods was far higher than those not directly applicable to help the Samhain Clan fight their enemies.

I could work with that. I wasn’t a fighter, after all. I didn’t need to buy a new sword or armor. Spells or the materials to build enchanted materials would do just fine, and the prices were lower, too.

Whenever raw materials came up for auction, I looked it over to see if it'd be useful in my capacity as an artificer. If it was, I bid on it, hoping for a deal.

“Now presenting an old set of orichalcum armor. It's made entirely out of metal in the style of the Knight Templar but still flexible enough for an Amazonian to use. Granted, it's shaped for a man, but an industrious blacksmith could pound it a little larger and fix the minor gash in the center.”

“That's a minor gash? Looks like it was hit by something the size of a wagon!” shouted someone in the crowd.

She wasn't wrong. The orichalcum armor looked to be little more than scrap metal. Perhaps a giant elephant had shoved a tusk straight through the breastplate, shook the knight wearing it around, and then stomped on his chest for good measure, pounding him flat.

The tarnish on the metal made it clear that it must have sat in a riverbed for at least a hundred years after that. Odds were the armor had been discovered by explorers or adventurers roaming the land in search of treasure. They'd brought back what they found, even if it was just a half-complete set of old armor.

“Bidding starts at one hundred! Do I have one hundred?”

I raised my hand. While the armor itself was useless to me, that didn't mean the metal was. A lot of artificer recipes I'd unlocked called for orichalcum. If I could get my hands on that armor, I could smelt it down and use it for something new.

Nobody else bid, and I was pleased to get the scrap armor.

“You know that thing's a piece of junk, right?” Myrina asked.

I shook my head. “Junk to you. Valuable to me.”

Myrina shrugged.

Several more ingredients went up for sale. People were starting to get up and leave, and it was clear that the best items had already sold. If the auction house had anything interesting

left to sell, they gave no indication of such. Even Myrina looked like she was ready to collect our things and go.

Which was why I was excited to see the next skill book come up for auction.

“Now presenting a skill book for the Arcane Blade ability! While only a common rarity, it can help you turn some noodle-armed spell caster into a real warrior! Its power can envelop a physical material, preferably a knife or existing sword, and coat it with a field of arcane energy that deals damage based on the user’s mana! It’s very useful for anyone with a large mana pool who wants to play at being a warrior as well. How about it? Bidding starts at two hundred!”

I raised my hand immediately. This was one item that Myrina’s Theory Crafter had called out by name.

“Carter, do you even have two hundred gold?” Myrina asked.

“Just barely,” I replied. After buying the armor, I had a little over four hundred gold to my name.

“Two hundred from the top box! Do I have three hundred? We have three hundred!” the auctioneer shouted.

I cursed inwardly. I needed that skill book. I raised my hand again. “Four hundred!”

“We have four hundred! Five hundred? We have five hundred!”

I slumped in my chair. It looked like I wasn’t going to get the skill book, after all. I glared at the general audience. A lone young woman in the crowd was bidding against me. She had her eyes turned back toward our box and looked to be staring straight at Myrina and me with a grin on her face.

“That little shit...” Myrina sat up from where she’d been sitting. “She knows it’s us and is bidding against you because of that. Well, I’ll show her!”

Myrina raised her hand. “Five hundred!”

The woman in the seats lifted her hand a second later, raising the price to six hundred.



Myrina raised her hand again. “Eight hundred!” she shouted.

The auctioneer glanced at the woman in the seats, who raised the bid to a thousand.

“Fifteen hundred!” Myrina shouted, glaring at the other woman in the audience. Grumbling under her breath, she said, “I’ll teach you to fear the might of the Samhain Clan’s purse.”

“Uh... Myrina? The skill book would be nice to have, but didn’t you say you were broke?”

Myrina went pale. “Crap. You’re right. Sorry, Carter. I got too into it.”

I slapped my palm against my face and sighed.

“Fifteen hundred going once! Going twice!”

Fortunately, the woman in the stands must have thought she and Myrina were still in a bidding war, because she raised the price again.

“Two thousand! Going once... twice... sold!”

Myrina flipped her hair back with a scowl on her face. “Dirty rotten thief. We had that.”

I was relieved that Myrina hadn’t won it, though. I was pretty sure this auction house didn’t take kindly to people bidding more than they could afford.

I stood. “Let’s go, Myrina. It’s time to collect our prizes and our money.”



Myrina was still grumpy about losing the Arcane Blade skill book after we collected our leftover gold and our items. I was happy enough with my sack full of scrap metal tucked away in my gym bag. Myrina had stuffed the whole thing in the dimensional storage bag at her hip, so I didn’t have to carry it around.

“If I wasn’t flat broke, I would have bid her into the ground!” Myrina balled her fists. “She stole that skill book from me! From you!”

“Yes, she did, Myrina.”

“I hate her. Did you see that stupid look on her face? She was challenging me. And at the end of it, she thought she won.”

I sighed. “Let it go, Myrina. It’s just a skill book. Arcane Blade is a common-grade skill. It can’t be that rare.”

“Even if we get another, identical skill book, I’ll still have lost this one. I wanted this one here and now!”

I shook my head. “Let’s look around the shops. I still have some gold in my pockets and want to get some local clothes. I stand out too much in jeans and a t-shirt.”

I glanced around. If not for Myrina’s cloak, I would have been getting many more stares with how strangely I was dressed. Bright fabrics seemed rare around here. Especially fabrics with more than one color to them.

“Or we could track that girl down and teach her a lesson!” Myrina pounded her fist into her hand.

I sighed, wrapping an arm around Myrina’s shoulder.

I was starting to fear that I attracted a certain type of woman. Myrina and Sakura would either be best friends or mortal enemies. Probably both. But whatever the case, one thing was clear. I’d be the one stuck keeping them out of trouble.

At least Bridget had a good head on her shoulders. Though the more I thought about it, the more I recalled how, now and again, I’d seen a feral glint in Bridget’s eyes that terrified me. Was she hiding a wild side and even more headstrong than Sakura and Myrina?

“Hey! Carter, I see her! She’s over there. I’m going to go give her piece of my mind.” Myrina stared into the distance, apparently spotting the person who had bid against us.

I groaned. “No, Myrina. Let’s not. That’s a bad idea.”

I grabbed the back of her shirt but that just meant I was dragged along behind her. I knew how this tale ended. Myrina, the daughter of a powerful family in the city would confront

this seemingly lone warrior without backing or a faction to support her. Then, she'd turn out to be some ancient master in disguise or some incredible genius who would make the entire Samhain Clan sorry she'd ever come to their city.

But Myrina's cheeks were flushed with fury and with her stats, I had little chance of restraining her. With a sigh, I held on. All I could do was hope to de-escalate the situation.

"You!" Myrina jumped, landing atop a nearby building with me clinging to her back. She shouted down at the other woman with the imperiousness of an empress. "You bid against me for the Arcane Blade book. I need that book."

I groaned. At least she hadn't started by reminding the woman who her family was and how she'd definitely be destroyed if she didn't show the Samhain Clan appropriate respect or something equally bombastic.

The woman looked fairly plain, but I realized that, in and of itself, was remarkable. This was a city full of powerful Amazonian warriors, and yet this woman looked like an average human. She clearly hadn't placed her stat points in physical attributes.

"It's my skill book, now. Get your own, Samhain!" the woman shouted.

"Who do you think you are?" Myrina growled.

Oh crap. This is where it begins. I moved to stand in front of Myrina with my hands up.

"Listen, we don't want any trouble. Congratulations on winning the auction. I hope you make the most of the Arcane Blade spell."

I felt a tingle run up my spine and realized I'd just been Examined. I tried to do the same to the woman, only to receive a stabbing pain in my skull.

**Your Examine skill has been blocked!**

Myrina must have tried to do the same thing I had, because she clutched her head as if a sharp pain ran through it.

“Ouch! What’s with that skill? Are you some kind of assassin? How’d you get in the city?”

“A Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge? That’s a spellcaster class, isn’t it?” The woman asked, staring at me as she completely ignored Myrina. “No wonder that one wanted the Arcane Blade skill book. But letting the Samhain Clan make allies with spellcasters would be very bad for us, so I’m afraid you’ll have to die.”

I glanced down at my stomach as a ray of agony tore through my guts to see a spike made of shadow jutting out of my stomach.

**You’ve been critically injured!**

## CHAPTER

# TWELVE

“Carter!” Myrina screamed when she saw me collapse at her knees. She shot a glance at the vanishing figure running off into the distance, then shouted at the top of our lungs.

“Enemies! Enemies in the city!” Myrina yelled, touching a device she had around her neck at the same time. “We need a healer right away!” The device looked a bit like a pendant, and I sensed a flicker of mana.

She tore the pendant off and it sprouted tiny wings, then flew like a bee in the direction of the Castle. Myrina fussed over me for a few moments, but I wasn’t paying attention.

My vision started going dim, and I turned my attention inward. I’d been caught entirely off guard. Myrina’s home city wasn’t exactly safe, but I’d expected trouble in the form of thugs and bandits, not a surprise attack from some assassin. Based on the power of the shard of shadows sticking out of my stomach, that assassin had been a far higher level than me.

An ordinary caster who focused almost exclusively on spellcasting stats would already be dead. I was damn lucky I’d put so many points into Vitality. Otherwise, I would have died on the spot.

As it was, things weren’t looking good.

The initial strike had cut my health bar down by two-thirds. Worse, the shard of shadow was still dealing me damage the longer it stayed in me.

Notifications scrolled past my vision.

**You've been afflicted with Shadow Toxin!**

**You are poisoned.**

**You've been afflicted with another dose of Shadow Toxin!**

**Your damage from poison will increase.**

**You've been afflicted with another dose of Shadow Toxin!**

**Your damage from poison will greatly increase.**

I had to act fast. I first activated Mind Over Flesh, expending mana points to generate more health. It wouldn't save me, but it would buy me time.

If I wanted to survive this, I had to get this shard out of me. Reaching down, I tried tugging at it, only for my hands to pass right through it. Somehow, the shard had attached itself to my flesh. Through blurry eyes, I could see sickly purple veins spreading out from the shadow shard and into my own flesh. It was crawling into my body. It was alive.

But if it was alive, it also had a health bar.

“Back!” I spat past bloody lips. Myrina took my shirt off and clawed at the shard, though her hands passed right through it, just as mine had. She was desperate to get it out of me, but was helpless to do so.

Charging a mana bolt, I unleashed it on the shard.

A wave of absolute agony tore through me. I felt like someone had just shoved their hand in my guts and then torn a chunk of them out. This shard had attached itself to me thoroughly enough that I feared that was an apt analogy.

I hardened myself. I had an iron will—at least according to my stat sheet. I'd come back from Death itself. With it, I'd fought off the Rat Matriarch's bite. Something like getting caught up in a war that had nothing to do with me wouldn't be my end. I wouldn't allow it.

I switched from Mana Bolt to Eldritch Blast. Perhaps that would deal more damage. To my great fortune, it did. Eldritch Blast coated the shard, and I heard something akin to shattering glass. The hazy mass of sickly veins running across my stomach faded.

“I’m alright,” I croaked, trying to reassure Myrina, though my words were weak.

The poison affliction stopped growing the moment the shard was gone. Thanks to Mind Over Flesh and my proficiencies, I was able to keep up with it—if only barely.

**Your Poison Resistance Proficiency has increased by 5 to Level 6!**

**Your Regeneration Proficiency has increased by 2 to Level 26!**

Notification after notification trickled by, until eventually, I had myself stable. Bit by bit, I started gaining ground on the poison, though my mana bar wasn’t looking too good. I’d be in trouble if it ran out before I had things under control.

I would survive, but it wouldn’t be without pain or risk.

Myrina must have realized I was stable enough to move, because I felt her toss me over her shoulder and start running toward the castle. Halfway there, I felt the same familiar wave of warm light that I’d felt at the end of our sparring match.

**Your poison has been cured!**

**You have been healed! You are now at one-quarter health.**

**You have been healed! You are now at one-half health.**

**You have been healed! You are now at three-quarters health.**

**You have been healed! You are now at full health.**

**Your Regeneration Proficiency has improved by 2 to Level 28.**

I opened bleary eyes and felt myself return fully to the waking world. There was a loud bell tolling loudly overhead, it rang and rang and rang. The city streets were filled with shouting, and I heard armored feet pounding across cobblestone streets. There was fighting too, and the clashing of swords.

The whole city was in an uproar for little old me. It was a bit flattering.

“Carter? Carter!” Myrina shook my shoulders.

I yawned. “I’m a little tired, but I’m fine, Myrina, I’m... just low on mana.”

She pulled me tight to her chest. “I’m sorry. That was way too close.”

I chuckled. “It wasn’t your fault. Besides, I’ve lived through worse.”

“I just knew that stupid witch was evil the moment I saw her,” Myrina growled. “I should have immediately called my whole family down on her head! Now she’s got a stupid head start and might get away...”

I shook my head to shrug off the exhaustion from low mana and from healing. I was starving, too. That was probably a side effect of redistributing biomass after being healed. Someone like Myrina, with a racial trait that bolstered total mass wouldn’t feel the change, but for me, I sensed the gnawing in my guts keenly.

“Got anything to eat?” I asked.

The healer who knelt beside me reached into the pouch at her waist and produced a few biscuits, likely brought along for just this purpose. I quickly scarfed them down, feeling much more energetic after doing so.

“Is he okay?” Myrina asked the healer. Before the healer could answer, Myrina realized she could just ask me. “Carter, are you going to be okay?”

I nodded. “My stats have stabilized. I’m at full health, though not full mana. I’m not in danger of dying, though, if



that's what you're asking."

"Healer, fetch a mana potion for him. System knows we've raided thousands off them of wizard corpses. There have to be some in the vaults. Get him as many as you can find. I want him able to defend himself," Myrina ordered.

The healer bowed and departed in search of mana potions.

Myrina took a knee. "Now that I know you're going to be alright, I'm going to help the others. The rest of my family is already searching the city. Apparently, the person who attacked you was an agent of the Shadefall Clan, our mortal enemies. She must have been here to spy on us."

"She wasn't exactly discreet..." I grumbled. I figured a spy would be far more careful to keep their cover.

"That spell book must have been important enough to her to make some waves. And when she saw you, she must have discarded her cover." Myrina shrugged. "I don't know the specifics. All I know is that we're going to beat everything she knows out of her. And after what she did to you, I intend to do the beating personally."

Myrina slammed her fist into her open palm.

I bent my ear to listen to the city again. As before, the ring of boots on cobblestones and the clang of weapons clashing sounded throughout the city.

"It sounds like you've mobilized an entire army out there. All this to chase one spy?" I asked.

I couldn't believe that the Samhain Clan had mobilized their entire clan over an attempted assassination of someone who wasn't even an official guest of their clan.

Myrina shook her head. "It's just one spy-turned-assassin, but the Shadefall Clan are not honorable fighters like us Samhain. They're summoners, specifically Shade summoners. They love to summon powerful ghosts to cause chaos in our ranks. Only a few types of enchanted weapons can damage them, so we have to mobilize extra personnel to mitigate the damage these Shades can do. We can't afford to have an incident here in Valkyrie's Watch. This is the seat of our

power, so letting the Shadefall Clan cause trouble here where we are supposed to be strongest would undermine our credibility. We're trying to corral the shades where they can't cause harm to the people here, and then we can slowly whittle them down."

"Shades, huh?" I ran my fingers over my bare and recently wounded stomach. "Let me guess, they can only be wounded by magical damage?"

Myrina looked surprised. "You've fought this kind of dastardly foe before?"

I nodded. "You could say that. Bring me with you. I'll throw a few spells at the shade. If it's giving your clan trouble, it's bound to be a higher level than me, but I should be able to help whittle it down."

This sort of thing would be perfect for my Mana Bombs. Hopefully a few of them had found their way into the right hands. If so, I was certain they'd prove their worth.

Myrina bit her lip in thought. The healer returned just then with both arms full of blue potions.

"Ah, mana potions? Perfect." The little vials of blue liquid were just what I expected a mana potion to look like. "I'm assuming I just drink these?"

The healer nodded.

"Normally, those things are even more expensive than health potions. But the Samhain Clan has no use for mana potions, so we have plenty to share." Myrina smiled, hand on her hip.

I popped the cork on one of the potions and downed its full contents. The effect wasn't instantaneous, but my mana regeneration rate soared. A ten-minute timer appeared in one corner of my vision. Apparently, I would have to wait before consuming another mana potion. But this was enough to ease the pounding in my head and prepare me for a fight.

"Alright, Carter. I know you're no coward. If you want to fight, then follow me!" Myrina led the way, with me close behind her.



### **Local Quest Available!**

**The Samhain Clan is calling all able-bodied fighters to repel the spectral threat plaguing Valkyrie's Watch!**

**Assist them in removing specters for a minor increase in favor with the Samhain Clan.**

**Assist them in capturing the spellcaster responsible for summoning these specters for a major increase in favor with the Samhain Clan.**

As we ran through Valkyrie's Watch, one thing soon became certain. The city was haunted. And not in the eerie sounds around every corner and creepy groans in the dark of night kind of haunted. It was haunted in the sense that there were ghosts with knives for fingers chasing citizens and guards through the streets.

"Lady Myrina, it's after me!" a guard screamed as a ghost the size of an ox chased her. The massive halberd in her hands was useless against this foe, its blade passing right through it.

Myrina grimaced. "My weapons aren't enchanted, so we'll have to count on you, Carter."

I nodded. "I've got your back, but don't let this experience go to waste. Party up with me."

### **Ironhide Boar Ghost (Level 42)**

Myrina quickly accepted my party invitation, and I was surprised to get a request to join from the guard as well. She must have heard free experience points in my exclamation and decided to get in on it, hoping for a piece of the action herself.

I accepted her as well. Since she'd led the Ironhide Boar here, being able to talk to her through the party system would be handy.

Besides sharing the experience, I also had another reason for forming a party. My leadership bonuses boosted my stats when I was leading one, and the moment I felt the boost from

Myrina and the guardswoman hit me, I stood a little straighter. Each of them had a much higher level than mine.

Plus, doing a little spell damage while in a party now might help me build up to an ultimate. I wanted to have one of those ready in case we ran into something my normal spells couldn't handle.

"I'll hold its attention while you whittle it down!" Myrina immediately put her words into action, attacking the Ironhide Boar Ghost. Her sword passed right through the beast, but she had its attention.

"Over here, you overgrown piece of bacon!" Myrina yelled.

The boar turned, evidently sensing Myrina's blow as an attack, despite the fact that it hadn't done any damage. The boar turned to chase this new prey, giving the guard a moment to catch her breath and giving me an opening to attack.

Mana Bolt and Eldritch Blast appeared in either hand, and I unleashed a barrage of bolts at the ghost boar.

The ghost boar cried out in rage, snapped at Myrina, but then turned toward me.

I turned to make my hasty escape, hoping to take the boar by surprise again, but there was no need. Another figure jumped in front of me.

"I'll draw it away! You keep doing your thing, boy!"

The guard lashed out with a swing of her halberd as the ghost boar tried to close with me. The blow passed right through the ghost, doing little besides stirring up a gust of wind and cracking the cobblestones. But just as with Myrina's attack, it drew the ghost boar's attention.

Perhaps it held some visceral fear of warriors in its afterlife, not realizing that it was now beyond their reach. It turned on the guard, thinking her the bigger threat.

*Perfect.*

That pattern continued for several minutes, Myrina and the guard passing aggro from the boar between them. Their

teamwork was admirable, but the fact that they couldn't damage it was less than ideal. The guard and lady of the Samhain Clan out-leveled the boar but they couldn't bring it down because of their lack of magical damage.

Not without me. It took dozens of spells, but with the two of them keeping the boar busy, I unleashed those spells to my heart's content.

"Eat this!" I yelled, targeting Exploit Weakness just as the ghost boar opened its mouth. One last Mana Bolt slammed into the roof of its spectral jaw, scoring a critical hit and bringing it down for good.

"Victory!" Myrina raised her sword high overhead.

"Loot!" the guard yelled as a tiny gemstone dropped from the edge of the ghost boar's tail and fell to the ground. "So that's where that thing was. I'm not sure I can split it three ways without destroying it."

Myrina shook her head. "Keep that one. You did good work. Besides, there will be plenty more where that came from!"

I cleared my notifications. I'd improved my proficiency once again. My ranged attacks in particular hadn't gone unnoticed.

### **You have gained the Spell Sniper Proficiency!**

Your ranged spell-based attacks can now deal critical strikes! The probability of a critical strike will increase as your Spell Sniper proficiency increases.

"Onward!" Myrina roared, sprinting with her sword overhead as she charged toward the next battle. I trailed along behind the bellowing red-headed battle maiden who screamed a battle cry at the top of her lungs.

She didn't need to run far. All her shouting attracted the attention of another ghost.

### **Spectral Flame Serpent (Level 45)**

"By the blood in my veins and the sword in my hands, you will foul this city no longer!" Myrina screamed at the serpent.

She jumped, cracking the stones beneath her and whipped her sword down in a strike so fast that the air cracked in its wake.

She charged the ghost, looking for all the world that she planned to behead it with a single swing. Except, she must have forgotten it was just a ghost, because instead of landing her deadly blow, she soared straight through the beast and slammed into the side of a building across the way. Myrina rose from a pile of loose roof tiles a moment later, just as ready for battle as she'd been before.

The guardswoman with us charged in, far less impressive in her charge, though more pragmatic about it. She ran by its face, taking a swipe through what would have been its neck to get its attention.

Meanwhile, I lashed out with spell after spell, doing all the real damage and slowly whittling away at the ghost serpent's health while stacking up a host of Corrupting Marks.

Killing the spectral serpent took several long minutes of fighting, but with the three of us working together, I had plenty of good opportunities to land critical attacks.

Myrina passed me the little red gemstone that dropped this time. I suspected it was some sort of monster core like those I'd gotten used to dropping on Earth. Only this one had something done to it. There were symbols carved along each side of it in intricate patterns.

Studying it in the brief window between fights, I realized what this was. Someone had slain the real Flame Serpent, then used its core to make the ghost we'd just fought. That was a clever use of enchantment. This Shadefall Clan that the Samhain Clan was at war with likely had a lot of supplies, blueprints, and tools useful for a beginner Artificer.

Suddenly, I was just as eager to have a chat with the woman who had attacked me as Myrina.

## CHAPTER

# THIRTEEN

Over the next several hours, I helped Myrina and her family's forces take down ghost after ghost. More than once, I cursed the System for barring me from gaining experience from killing monsters. I likely would have gained several levels with the great level differential between us, given how much stronger these things were than me.

As it was, the guard we were with leveled up several times, while Myrina gained a level of her own.

"Finally! About time something good happened because of these ghosts!" the guard laughed in excitement at her new levels.

I got hit a few times during the fighting, and with the level difference, each blow was incredibly painful. But Myrina and the guard took many more blows than me and shrugged them off. How could I do any less?

I was fortunate the healer had given me so many mana potions, and that the Samhain Clan had so many mana potions to give. The number of spells I was casting would have drained my mana pool dry many times over if not for the fact that I was chugging down one of those little blue potions just about every ten minutes or so.

They gave me a pounding headache, and I was afflicted with something called Potion Sickness after the third one. But now was not the time to pull my punches. Potion sickness dealt me a little damage over time, but it was nothing I

couldn't heal using life steal. The amount of damage I was dealing kept my health constantly topped up.

The longer we fought, the more guards joined up with us. Soon, our party wasn't three, but six. Myrina had a special title as a War Chief that let her form a party of her own within my existing party. Some of the higher-ranking guards had that skill as well, meaning we all grouped up like a small army. I imagined the larger armies of the Arcadia Multiverse relied heavily on these kinds of networked parties to organize their forces for large-scale battles.

A few times, we got lucky, and a guard swinging their weapon blindly through the ghosts ended up hitting the core floating around inside it.

"I think I got it. Yes!" a guard shouted excitedly as the ghost we were fighting collapsed before I had to fire off a single spell.

That must have been how the Samhain Clan had been dealing with these foes with no magic. They just kept swinging until they got lucky, hit the core, and destroyed the specter the hard way.

My mind went back to what Myrina had told me. The System always leaves a path. Well, this seemed like a damn narrow path for the Samhain Clan. While it did exist, it required an overwhelming advantage in manpower to utilize with any effectiveness.

The Samhain Clan had ten guards of higher level throwing themselves at the ghosts attacking their city. And even then, they barely were able to keep the threat contained.

A bad matchup, like what the Samhain Clan faced, was truly a major disadvantage. If this was how all their fights went, I wasn't terribly surprised to discover that the Shadefall Clan was winning, despite being the smaller clan.

Even if they had a hundredth the warriors, if each of their spellcasters could throw the forces of an entire city into disarray with a few summoned monsters, that would be more than enough.



Apparently the Samhain Clan had ensured the one responsible for this mess didn't get away. After we finished off the spectral stragglers causing chaos in the city, Myrina led our band toward the densest group of the Samhain Clan's forces.

The ones fighting here were the strongest guards they had, as well as the full-fledged members of the Samhain family. I spotted Cyra, standing with a spear in one hand and a shield in the other as she threw a few probing jabs at an enormous wolf.

Unlike Myrina's blade or those of the guards, Cyra's weapon glowed with a distinct red hue. It left small wounds on the wolf's hide with each blow, proving that—unlike mundane weapons—her spear was magical enough to deal real damage to the specters.

“There's Mother up ahead!” Myrina pointed with her sword.

In the distance, I spotted a woman who looked more like Myrina's big sister than her mother. She had the same fiery red hair as both her daughters. I had expected her to be even bigger than Cyra, but the opposite was true.

Myrina's mother's build was perhaps a bit more muscular than her daughters', but not by much. In fact, she quite closely resembled Myrina, except for the bandage that stretched from shoulder to hip. She must have been heavily wounded recently, though that was no surprise, considering her clan was at war.

Despite her wounds, she moved well. And her power! She soared overhead with a glittering blue sword. Unlike Cyra's spear, which must contain some low-level enchantment, that sword blazed with blue flame. Each slash cut deep gouges in the monsters before her.

Still, despite the damage she was dealing, I couldn't help but see a look of frustration on her face. She moved so fast and gracefully that the weapon in her hands couldn't keep up. Its flames guttered out after a few solid blows, and she was left dodging and weaving between spectral attacks until they lit once more.

She was vastly over-leveled for the weapon in her hands. But this was apparently the most magical weapon the Samhain Clan had in their arsenal, so she was stuck with it.

I wasn't sure what she was doing, jumping nimbly between monsters like she was. Her foes surrounded her, and for a moment, I was worried. Myrina only looked proud, though, as she pointed toward her mother.

Then, something unexpected happened, and I realized what Myrina's mother had been doing. She'd been grouping the specters together for a special attack.

"Throw the Mana Bombs!" Myrina's mother shouted as her sword ran out of power.

Two guards in back pulled back their hands and threw familiar-looking balls of copper wire.

They exploded in a familiar burst of raw mana. While the burst of power was far too little to wipe out such high-level specters in a single pair of explosions, they did something I didn't expect. The explosion swept away their ghostly forms, just as they had for the specter I'd designed them to fight back home.

And in that moment, the locations of each of their cores was revealed.

Myrina's mother moved as fast as lightning. With the locations of the cores revealed, she could finally unleash her true speed. In the blink of an eye, she shattered each revealed core, leaving them to drift to the ground as little more than dust.

"See this, Shadefall?" Myrina's mother shouted to a figure standing at the top of a burning windmill. "Your pets will not save you. Surrender, and we will be merciful."

"That would be a first for you, Kyrina Samhain! Your reputation precedes you," the woman up on the windmill shouted back. I recognized that voice. It was the woman who stabbed me.

"Wow! You see that? I've never seen that weapon before!" Myrina gushed. "Mother must have pulled her special toys out

of the vault or something.”

I knew better. Those were no secret weapon, they were the very Mana Bombs I’d sold at the auction earlier today. I figured they’d reach the hands of Myrina’s family, but I hadn’t thought they’d end up with her clan quite this soon.

But it seemed that Myrina’s mother wasn’t shy about using them. Nor had it taken her too long to figure out they were the perfect weapon to combat these phantoms. Hopefully she’d see the value in them. And if and when I revealed I was the one who’d made them, she’d see the value in me, too.

“We should go help Cyra!” I said.

Myrina nodded. Our entire group rushed to reinforce Cyra, who was struggling as she fought alone against her foe. Several broken cores lay on the ground around her. She’d clearly been battling for quite a while.

Myrina and the guards swarmed the specter, an enormous lizard resembling a wingless dragon. It was a higher level than anything we’d fought so far, but it was already wounded.

I fired my spells at it, but soon realized it was weak enough that I could finish it.

“Disassemble!” I shouted, and the giant lizard specter came apart at the seams. Mana streamed out of it, dispersing into the air, as the core flew out and into my hand. I stared at it in surprise. “Huh... suppose I should have tried that trick sooner.”

While it didn’t work every time, it worked much more often than expected. None of the ghost monsters we were fighting had much in the way of mana reserves, so they had a hard time resisting my Disassemble spell—even though they were a far higher level than me. Just dealing a little damage to them was enough to make the attack land home.

Tearing through monster after monster while Myrina and Cyra guarded my flanks and an entire contingent of guards cheered me on was exhilarating. For the first time, I felt less like a former office worker turned amateur wizard and more

like a powerful spellcaster who could wreak havoc across battlefields.

“Go, Carter! Crush our enemies! See them driven before us! Hear the lamentations of their house cats! Heavens know that’s all these treacherous witches have waiting for them back home!” Myrina mocked, eyes locked on the Shadefall Clan assassin hiding at the top of the windmill.

The fire the Samhain guards had set was spreading; it wouldn’t be long before it reached her. The guards at the base of the windmill kept splashing buckets of oil as high on the windmill’s walls as they could to accelerate the process. It was clear they intended to burn her out.

What was she doing up there? Surely, she had to know the end was near. Her enemies surrounded her, and while her summoned pets were intangible, she was not. Once the Samhain Clan had her, they wouldn’t let her go.

With Cyra’s ghost dealt with, our entire group ran to the windmill and the foes Myrina’s mother was dealing with.

“More Mana Bombs!” Myrina’s mother yelled.

The guards threw another wave of Mana Bombs, and fast as the blink of an eye Myrina’s mother shattered every core she saw, pretty much the instant they were revealed. Another wave of ghosts died as quickly as they appeared.

“You’re finished! Surrender!” Myrina’s mother shouted at the spy at the top of the burning windmill.

“All done with those? Here, have some more playmates!” The spy from the Shadefall Clan shouted. She tossed a handful of glittering cores down. In moments, they would spawn more ghosts.

But I wasn’t about to let that happen. Using Exploit Weakness, I targeted the cloud of falling cores. Mana Bolts sprang from my hands one after another, striking cores before they could form into summons. I hit three of them, shattering them outright before they could become a threat.

The remaining two took a little more work, but I discovered that if I hit them with Disassemble just as they

formed, I could cancel the process right as it began. My timing was good, and only a single ghost out of the entire batch formed.

Instead of a host of ghosts, there was only a single ghostly rat the size of a horse.

I blasted it with every spell I had as I strode toward the mill with a small army behind me. After battering the thing into submission, I clenched my hand and used Disassemble, crushing its limited mana and taking its core in my hand.

I tucked the core away in my pocket and smiled at Myrina's and Cyra's mother. "A pleasure to finally meet, Ma'am. You must be Myrina's mother." I bowed my head to her.

Kyrina Samhain looked me up and down. And much to my delight, she seemed impressed. I'd been hoping to make a good impression, and apparently, I'd made the cut.

"I welcome all the help we can get," she replied. "Your spells are more potent than your level would suggest."

I shrugged. "I have a few tricks up my sleeves."

"Any tricks that can help us capture a rogue spellcaster hiding in a burning windmill?" Kyrina asked.

I glanced up at the figure above us. She was busy stomping out flames as she fiddled with a monster core. I was pretty sure I had a good idea of what she was doing. She was making one of those monster summons—likely one that could get her out of this mess.

"Maybe. But I have a question for you. Can you fly?"

"Not unless you have a spell that'll give me wings," Kyrina replied.

"Then grab a bow. I suggest you try tying one of those Mana Bombs to an arrow."

Kyrina searched her guards for one wielding a bow, then quickly commandeered it. She shoved a Mana Bomb over the arrowhead and nocked it, waiting with the bow half drawn.

“Be ready to fire. She’ll try to make her getaway any moment now.” I turned to Cyra and Myrina. “Somebody ought to catch her when she tumbles out of the sky.”

Just as I’d suspected she would, the Shadefall Clan spy tossed out one final monster core. This one formed way up at the top of the mill, taking the shape of an enormous raven with a wingspan large enough to stretch thirty feet in either direction.

It flapped twice as it took form, then grabbed the spy in its talons before taking off from the windmill.

“Too slow, Samhain!” the spy shouted down from overhead.

“Now!” I yelled.

Kyrina let her arrow fly, and it struck the raven dead-center. I cast Disassemble on the Mana Bomb right as it struck, causing it to detonate while passing through the raven. The ghostly bird vanished, and the spy it carried fell from its claws.

Myrina and Cyra were there to catch her. Between the two of them, they restrained the spy and quickly had her tied up. Kyrina flashed her daughters an approving smile before turning her attention to me.

Kyrina Samhain placed a hand on my head, combing through my hair affectionately.

Though her grip was gentle, I could tell she could have bent steel with one hand, if she wanted to. For a spell caster like me, letting a warrior this powerful get this up close and personal was terrifying, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end at the sense of danger this woman exuded.

This woman was truly dangerous. I didn’t dare use Examine on her, but I was pretty sure she was not D-Grade like me or Myrina. She was more likely C-Grade, and a strong one, at that.

“Well, aren’t you something?” she said as she pulled me up beside her, one arm wrapped tight as steel around me.

## CHAPTER

# FOURTEEN

I couldn't tell if Kyrina was holding me so firmly as a show of her personal strength, her wariness around spellcasters, or just because she was every bit as handsy as her daughter. It was probably a combination of all three. Whatever the explanation was, I felt very much like a mouse caught in the grasp of a cat.

Did she want to eat me or play with me? Thinking about it, I realized those might not be mutually exclusive.

"It seems I owe my daughter an apology," Kyrina began. "You've got a good head on your shoulders and good spells to boot. You've earned a debt from my clan today. We have little to spare right now, but when the integration is over and we put this rebellion down, I promise you'll have a dozen of our finest warriors to help you establish a clan of your own on your home world."

My eyebrows crawled into my hairline. What she promised was no small thing.

"Until then," she continued, "ask for any boon. If it's within reason and within my power, I will grant it."

"I'm very flattered. I understand Myrina brought me in without your permission. Please don't blame her for it. That's boon enough for me," I replied.

Kyrina looked at me and smiled. "Charming *and* loyal. My two favorite qualities in a man. If only you were about a hundred and fifty levels higher. Very well."

She loosened her hold on me to meet the eyes of the host of Amazonians that surrounded us. “Let it be known here and now, any contempt I held for Myrina for her recent activities is officially rescinded.”

Myrina and Cyra returned, holding the bound and gagged prisoner overhead.

Kyrina looked at her daughter. “If any elders give you trouble, I will deal with them personally.” That last bit she added with the air of an official declaration. With the words spoken, it felt as if a weight had lifted off my shoulders. And yet, it felt like Kyrina’s arm around my waist pulled me in tighter.

Myrina saw her mother holding me and gasped in indignation before rushing toward us. “Mother!” Myrina complained as she grabbed me. “Get your own childhood friend! This one’s mine.”

Myrina grabbed me, but even her strength wasn’t enough to free me from her mother’s grasp.

“No, I think I’d much rather tell him all about the silly things you did as a little girl. Did you know she cried for weeks when we took her home? Apparently, she didn’t know how she’d survive without the Internet. Ridiculous!” Kyrina laughed, and Myrina puffed out her cheeks, face flushed red.

“Apparently, there was a certain someone she was talking to on it. And now I’m pretty sure I finally know who that was. Let me tell you the story about when—”

Myrina covered my ears before her mother could reveal any more of her secrets.

What followed was a lot of yelling on Myrina’s part, followed by smug laughter from her mother. Eventually, she released me from her grasp, and I was quickly pulled into Myrina’s, who posted herself protectively between me and her mother. She eyed her mother warily the whole time, as if afraid Kyrina might try to steal me again.

As soon as Myrina put some distance between her and her mother, she turned and pulled me in for a tight hug.



“Carter! That was awesome! You were awesome! Yes, yes, yes!” She lifted me off my feet, giggling and twirling all the while. “I just knew you could win my family over, if they met you in person. And you did! In fact, I’m afraid you just made a little too good of an impression on my mother. I will have to hide you from here on out for an entirely different set of reasons, now.”

“Myrina...can’t... breathe...” I managed to choke out.

“What? Oh! Sorry.”

She set me down, releasing the vice-grip hold she’d had on my ribs so that my lungs could expand again and I could breathe once more. Myrina’s grip was even tighter than Sakura’s. I felt this would only get worse as I gained more levels.

I would need to sneak more levels into Strength at some point, just to avoid getting the wind knocked out of me when my girls snatched me up in a hug.

“I’m glad things worked out,” I panted, still catching my breath.

Cyra wandered over while Myrina and I were chatting, wearing a big grin on her face. “The prisoner is being taken back to the castle. She’ll be locked in the dungeon beneath the west tower,” Cyra explained.

Myrina arched one eyebrow, eyes darting left and right before whispering just loud enough for me to hear, “But didn’t Mom convert that one from a regular dungeon into a sex dungeon?”

Cyra’s smile fell. She turned back the way the guards had gone, disappearing towards the castle with their prisoner in tow. “Hold on one moment. I’ll be right back!”

Myrina and I returned to the castle, where everyone was gathering in the dining hall. The place had been empty when Myrina had shown it to me, so I had thought the castle was nearly empty. But it seemed most of the castle’s residents must have been up and about, because now the place was packed from wall to wall.

“Looks like we’re having a victory feast!” Myrina grinned at me. “I hope you like ale. Try to go a bit easy on it, though. We have a pretty strong brew. And after the show you put on, I suspect quite a few will want to share a toast with you!”

She clapped me on the back, and before I knew it, I had a plate in one hand and a drinking horn as large as my head in the other.

The plate was little more than a wood plank, but the horn was a finely sculpted and carved chunk of antler from some enormous beast. The fact that it was far more decorated than the plate told me something about what the Amazons valued most—at least when it came to their food and their drink.

Arrayed along long wooden tables were platters of boiled roots. I couldn’t name them, but calling them turnips, carrots, or potatoes wouldn’t be far off. Besides the vegetables, there were generous portions of meat, including chunks of herb-seasoned beef and venison roasted over an open flame.

Baskets of buttered bread were being passed around, and I took one of them. The rolls went well with the rest of the food, which was being served buffet style. I found that a lot more comfortable than some stuffy, formal affair. It was interesting to see that the main family of the Samhain Clan, including their matriarch, feasted side by side with their guardswomen.

It was all a little much for a victory over what had been nothing more than a single, enemy caster, but I bit my tongue and kept such thoughts to myself. The Samhain Clan was clearly doing their best to celebrate the day’s victory.

Everyone looked to be digging in, so I did so as well. Halfway through my plate, I felt a tap on my shoulder. When I turned to see who it was, I found Myrina’s mother, the matriarch of the Samhain Clan, looming over my shoulder.

“Mind if I take a seat?” she asked.

I slid over. “Not at all. It’s your bench and your feast, after all.”

“Ah, but you’re the hero of the day. It’s only polite that I ask.” Myrina laughed and then met my smile with one of her

own. When she did, it reminded me far too much of Myrina. I couldn't believe that the gorgeous redhead sitting next to me was not only my best friend's mother, but likely at least a century older than me.

She had a timeless appearance. It looked like she could be anything from a senior in college to a thirty-something-year-old career woman.

"It was a team effort." I shrugged, not wanting to steal much of the glory in this victory for myself. Many had fought harder than I. I just had the right class for the job.

"Don't be so humble. That would have been a much more difficult fight without your aid. And either way, it would have been humiliating for me and my family," Kyrina explained.

"I was happy to help. The combat experience alone was worth it for me."

Kyrina smiled. "Still. I will not see you go unrewarded. That boon you asked for was for my daughter, not for you. So here, let me give you something as a personal thank you." Reaching behind her, she pulled something from her belt and then slid a book across the table.

It was a skill book. And one I recognized. Arcane Blade.

"I heard you were at the auction today looking for this when our spy so rudely snatched it from your grasp. It only seemed proper that I right that wrong."

My eyes went wide as I accepted the book. Gratitude welled up within me, and I gave Kyrina a genuine smile. "Thank you. I promise to put this to good use."

I spent the next few seconds fiddling with the front cover. Should I learn it here and now, or wait until later?

"You know," Kyrina continued, "I don't think Myrina told you what exactly we're up against, did she?"

I shook my head, eyes darting from my food to the book to Kyrina.

"War or rebellion, whatever you call it, the Shadefall Clan was raised from the mud in my great-great-grandmother's day.

The Samhain Clan nurtured them like they were kin—for many were. They weren't skilled fighters, so we protected them while they delved into crafting arcane trinkets to aid us in battle. Our partnership made us strong. We led, and they followed."

Kyrina let out a long sigh. "But now the Shadefall Clan has decided their skills are too great to remain subordinate, and they've turned their enchantments against us, their former rulers. Ordinarily, this would be no great issue for a clan such as ours. The Samhain Clan is an old one, and though I am its matriarch, I am far from its most powerful member. Some of our elders are more skilled than I, though I have the birthright to lead.

"But it's our ancestors who truly keep the Samhain Clan strong. Unlike my name, theirs stretch beyond Themyscira. They are heroes of legend and power, far beyond the norm. Most left our world behind to stay with their husbands, each a warrior or wizard king strong enough to hold a planet in his iron grasp. But one or two always stay around, to look after our ancestral home."

She shook her head. "The trouble is, the one staying behind right now was particularly intimate with a crafter of the Shadefall Clan many centuries ago. She has just as many descendants within their branch as within the main family and, therefore, refuses to lift a finger during what she calls this 'civil war'. We're on our own."

The heavy sigh she let out seemed to age her before my eyes. "And the Shadefall Clan's initial strike to wipe out our unaligned crafters and destroy our armories of magical weapons was expertly calculated. We're hard-pressed right now, between their attacks and manning the garrisons along our borders against the usual threats."

"I don't envy you," I replied. "That sounds difficult."

I was glad she'd felt comfortable enough to tell me all this. And I felt a bit guilty for keeping things from her. I still hadn't told her I was the one who had made those Mana Bombs she'd

used to such good effect today. And at this point, I wasn't sure I would.

As good a host as they'd been, I couldn't forget that they had a lethal tradition that would end with me dead on an arena floor should I get too close to Myrina. While I already planned to help them, I had to look out for myself, as well. It was a potentially deadly balancing act.

How much to tell? And how much to keep secret?

Kyrina shrugged, then clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Well, that's our tale. Enjoy the skill book, lad." She turned her head, searching the hall until she caught Myrina's eye.

Myrina had been watching the two of us chat with a wary expression.

"Myrina!" her mother shouted.

"Yes, mother?" Myrina asked.

"What's your guest here doing with an empty tankard? Get the boy some ale!" Kyrina Samhain laughed, her jovial expression returning despite her grim words moments ago. "Here, I can share."

Kyrina poured out half her drinking horn, which was easily three times the size of my horn, into mine, until it overflowed with foamy ale.

"Drink up!" Kyrina said.

The tiny sip I took nearly knocked me off my feet. Myrina hadn't been kidding when she'd said they made a powerful brew.

**You are intoxicated!**

**+4 Charisma**

**+4 Strength**

**-4 Vitality**

**-4 Agility**

**-10 Intelligence**

“Bah, you sip like some sort of spell caster!” Kyrina barked a laugh, then remembered the person she was talking to *was* a spellcaster. “Well, I suppose it just means the clan will save money on ale. But feel free to help yourself to as much as you can drink, if you manage to polish that off.”

I muttered something incomprehensible. Just that one sip left my head pounding and my legs felt ready to give out from underneath me.

Myrina frowned, looking me up and down. “I’m going to get you some water. Be right back!”

Shortly after Myrina vanished, Cyra appeared with a massive horn of her own. It was every bit as large as her mother’s, but due to her larger scale this one appeared closer to normal size.

“Carter! Lots of guards want to toast you. Come! But first, a toast from me. To victory!” She clanked her cup against mine, then looked at me expectantly.

Gingerly, I took another sip from my still-overflowing drinking horn.

**You are very intoxicated!**

**+6 Charisma**

**+6 Strength**

**-6 Vitality**

**-6 Agility**

**-12 Intelligence**

The second sip wasn’t as bad as the first. In fact, the flavor of the ale was starting to grow on me.

“Now let’s introduce you to all the guards you helped today! They are all eager to meet you outside of battle,” Cyra clapped me on the shoulder. I swayed unsteadily in my seat. Cyra seemed to realize I’d have a tough time walking, so she slid one hand around my back beneath my shoulders, and carried me along beside her.

“Woah, Cyra, your ceiling... moves...?” I said, suddenly dizzy.

I would have to be careful not to drink too much of this stuff. The Mana Bombs were one of my best cards to play, and I wanted to keep them close to the vest as long as I could.

“Ha! I guess that means the ale is kicking in. You’re lucky! Most of us won’t feel as good as you until we’re three horns in at least!” Cyra congratulated me.

Cyra presented me to a dark-skinned Amazonian warrior with curly black hair. She had tribal war paint across her face, though they might have been tattoos. While the main branch of the Samhain Clan was mostly redheads, likely due to the powerful bloodline of Kyrina Samhain herself, their guards were from all over.

They seemed to have an even wider range of complexions and appearances than people did on Earth. A few guards looked human in form, but were shades of blue, green, or gray. And their hair was even more exotic than their odd complexions. Perhaps they were a race like humanity, seeded on a world that had integrated long ago.

This one might have been the guard Myrina and I ran into first, the one who had joined my party early on. She’d been wearing her helmet and armor at the time, of course, so I couldn’t tell.

“You there!” she said, eyes wide with delight.

She took a knee so the two of us were at eye level, then shifted the drinking horn in my wobbling hand so that it rested on her impressively well-endowed breasts. She must have had a very special set of armor to hide a rack like that. “You really saved my ass back there! Your fighting skills were impressive, and you saved my ass. A toast to our victory!”

The large-breasted woman puffed her chest up as she drank. Man, what a view.

“Need help?” she laughed as she positioned my drinking horn between her breasts with a raised eyebrow.

I nodded dumbly, and she used her breasts to lift my drinking horn to my face, where I took another sip.

**You are extremely intoxicated!**

**+8 Charisma**

**+8 Strength**

**-8 Vitality**

**-8 Agility**

**-14 Intelligence**

“Whoops. Looks like we’re starting to lose him! I’ll hang on to our spell caster friend for a bit while you enjoy the party, Lady Cyra.”

“Thanks!” Cyra handed me off, and the guard carrying me set about introducing me to the rest of the Amazonian warriors.

**Your intoxication level has reached blackout drunkenness!**

**Your memory is impaired!**

Everything that happened after that was a hazy blur. Visions of wild dancing and drunken revelry filled my mind, though I couldn’t quite be sure what was real and what was a dream. While the hazy specifics were lost to my mind, I had a terrible feeling that everyone else could remember them quite clearly.

I awoke from the haze with that one thought, dreading figuring out what exactly had happened these past few hours. A message flashed before my eyes before vanishing.

**You are no longer intoxicated.**

I dismissed it swiftly after finding myself in a very unusual scenario.

I was shirtless, hands bound to the table I was lying on top of. I was bound to something narrow and made of black leather. From how it cradled me, I suspected it had been



crafted specifically for this purpose. The cuffs that held my hands were built into the padded leather cushion beneath me.

I moved my head around, and looking up, found myself in a dark, torch-lit room. The stone walls and the cold iron bars around me reminded me of a dungeon. Above me and to my left, I heard a familiar voice.

“Be gentle with him, Mother,” Myrina pleaded.

“Oh, please. I’m sure he can take it,” Kyrina Samhain replied from somewhere behind me. I felt her place her hands on my bare back.

“Are you sure that isn’t too big?” Cyra asked nervously. “That is a pretty big one...”

Kyrina laughed. “I heard what you said in battle today. The boy’s no coward. He’s taking my best and biggest one right away. Isn’t that right, Carter?”

*Alright, what the hell is going on?*

“Mmff?” I tried to call out, but all that came out was a muffled cry around my gag. There was a wad of cloth in my mouth. My cries became more frantic.

Kyrina stroked my bare back. “Hear that, Cyra? He’s angry at you for doubting his abilities. What a brave lad. Alright, let’s get started!”

“Mmmmff!”

I felt a sudden piercing pain... on my left shoulder.

Kyrina hovered over me with a massive pen in her hand, brow dripping with sweat as she drew something on my back. Each stroke was agony, and if I hadn’t been tied to the odd device I was bound to, I probably would have jerked out of the way, ruining whatever Kyrina was doing.

“Almost done...” Kyrina said, finishing the final strokes. “There we go! Finished. Myrina, dear, hand me some healing salve.”

**You have received the Lesser Mark of the Samhain Clan!**

**This mark is given to fellow warriors held in high esteem by the Samhain Clan's main family. This mark shows you have fought alongside the Samhain Clan, and they recognize your abilities!**

**Your reputation with the Samhain Clan has increased from [Burden] to [Associate].**

**Reveal this mark to members of other factions, and their opinion of you shall increase or decrease based on their opinion of the Samhain Clan.**

**Improve this mark to the Greater Mark of the Samhain Clan to gain additional bonuses and favor with their clan!**

**This mark can be concealed by unequipping the associated title.**

I worked the cloth in my mouth around a few more times and eventually spat it out. I worked my jaw back and forth a few times before speaking. "W-what is happening?"

"Look, Carter. We match!" Myrina showed me the back of her hand, and a symbol flashed into existence on it. It depicted a stylized version of the castle we stood upon resting above Valkyrie's Watch. Her mark was about the same size as mine, but brighter, more vivid, and with greater detail.

"That you do," Kyrina replied. "I used the rest of the ink bottle on him that I used on you, daughter. It helped me tie his mark to yours. You're his main connection to the family, after all, so it only makes sense."

"Yay, it worked!" Myrina jumped on top of me. She rubbed a bottle of salve on my shoulder, which soon went from feeling like someone had just jabbed it with a red-hot poker to something approaching normal.

"Hey, it looks pretty good." Cyra nodded appreciatively, peering around Myrina. I turned my head as much as I could to get a good look.

It looked similar to the mark on Myrina's hand that she'd shown me, but over the top of Valkyrie's Watch, a rain of

mana bolts circled like a halo. Beneath it, the dark energies of Eldritch Blast seeped from the ground.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Myrina said. “Look, the Mana Bolts are appearing on mine, as well. We really are connected!”

“You will be for as long as you both bear the mark. Your mark and his will slowly come into synchrony,” Kyrina said.

“Friendship marks!” Myrina wrapped her arms around my bound form and pressed her cheek against mine.

Kyrina sighed. “I just wish you’d let me put it on his ass instead. It would’ve been funny if he had to drop his trousers every time he wanted to prove his identity!” She stifled a laugh.

Myrina scowled at her mother and held me tighter. “Don’t touch my Carter, Mother. Get your own!”

“I’m sure it’s very nice,” I replied. “But I have a few questions. Ah... but before then, is there any chance somebody could untie me?”

Though it seemed I was no longer intoxicated, my head was still pounding. Inwardly, I swore never to drink again.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTEEN

We turned out to be just where I feared we were—the Samhain Matriarch’s dungeon. And not the one for torturing prisoners. Based on her cheery mood, this seemed to be her happy place. She acted like a kid in her playroom.

Apparently, Myrina’s mother was into exactly the things one might expect of the powerful matriarch of an Amazonian Clan. I suppose now I knew why she’d stayed behind to rule her ancestral clan, while her sisters in the rest of the Samhain Clan’s main branch had gone off and gotten married. It was safe to say that she intended to take the man’s usual role in any relationship she was part of.

Thankfully, Myrina untied me before her mother could make too many jokes about testing her other toys. Soon, I was on my feet again. The moment I climbed to my feet, though, I regretted it.

The world no longer spun. It pounded. Every step felt like someone had climbed inside my skull and was trying to break their way out with a hammer—a very big hammer. I clutched my temples.

“Ha! Looks like you drank a bit too much,” Kyrina laughed. “Ah, well. Next time, you’ll know your limits better, right?”

I struggled not to glare at her while she looked down at me with a smug smile. She was conveniently leaving out the fact that she’d been the one to pour me an enormous horn of ale.

“Get him a hangover potion. We need him in top form for our dungeon dive today!” Myrina said.

*Today?*

That meant I’d been blackout drunk for pretty much the entire night. This was the last time I planned to ever touch Amazonian liquor.

Cyra reached into her back pocket, already having a hangover cure potion prepared.

I snatched the potion immediately and downed its entire contents.

**You drank a Hangover Cure potion.**

**Your headache has lessened.**

**Your potion sickness has worsened.**

**You have taken damage from the Hangover Cure potion.**

“Ah crap,” I muttered, then explained the Potion Sickness notification to them, wiping some blood from my lips.

I’d guessed there had to be a drawback to pounding one mana potion after another. If not, there would be little point dumping stat points into Intelligence. There would have been little need for a large mana pool, if spellcasters could simply chug potion after potion to bolster their regeneration to the point it was no longer needed.

“Sorry. I wouldn’t have given you the Hangover Cure if I’d known.” Cyra rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly.

“Don’t be. That headache hurt a lot more than the damage I’m taking now. I’m using one of my abilities to regenerate from the damage. I’ll be fine in a few minutes and no longer suffering from a hangover to boot.”

I flashed her a smile, but then turned back to Kyrina, who rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

“Hmm... potion sickness is harder to solve. From what I’ve heard, there’s no cure besides getting the blood pumping and working it off,” Kyrina said.

Inwardly I cringed. The last thing I wanted to do at this moment was to have Cyra or Myrina—and probably both at once—drag me out to the arena for exercises or training.

“I know. How about you two go on a little mission for me? It will give Carter a chance to stretch his legs and hopefully shake off that potion sickness before you head into the dungeon.”

“What kind of mission?” Myrina asked.

“A mission for these...” Kyrina reached into a pouch behind her and produced one of my Mana Bombs, holding it reverently in her palm.

“The explody things! I saw those. Where’d you get them, Mom?” Cyra asked. “Did you have them tucked away in the armory for our moment of need? Did one of the ancestors pick them up while adventuring?”

Kyrina’s eyes glittered. “Not so. They’re a recent acquisition. They appeared in the auction house just yesterday. I got this one from a guard who attended and purchased a lot of five, hoping they would be useful in fighting the Shadefall Clan’s specters. And as it happened, the guard was right. Despite their low level, these devices are incredibly effective against all ghost-type monsters and summons. Which is exactly what we need to turn the tides of this war.”

Cyra rubbed her hands together, and Myrina’s expression turned bright.

I stood a little straighter in my chair with a smirk on my face. I’d let Kyrina finish complimenting my brilliant invention, then reveal that the man who made them was right in front of her. I’d already won her favor, now I’d win her over completely.

*This was fantastic!*

“We need the one who made this,” Kyrina began. “Honestly, I can’t tell if it’s rune smithing or enchanting. It almost looks like parts of each. Whoever made them, they’re a lifeline our clan desperately needs.”

Myrina nodded. “Okay. So we track down whoever crafted them and offer them a lucrative contract?”

But Kyrina shook her head. “If they were merely a skilled enchanter or runesmith, we’d do just that. But remember what happened to all our existing enchanters and runesmiths at the start of this war?”

Cyra shook her head sadly. “All of them had their throats slit in the middle of the night. And our armories were burned to the ground.”

“Exactly so. Whoever this crafter is, we must immediately place them under our protection,” the matriarch continued.

“And we can’t take the risk of negotiating. We know there was at least one spy in the city; there are probably several more. We need to hunt down this crafter and lock them away in the castle!” Cyra exclaimed.

Her mother nodded. “Once they’re safe, we can negotiate with them for more of these mana bombs. But we will be getting more of them, one way or another...” Kyrina laughed, and this time, the laugh carried dark undertones that made the words I was about to speak catch in my throat.

*Less fantastic.*

I couldn’t let myself become a prisoner here in Myrina’s home. Her family seemed nice enough, but I wasn’t here to be locked away in some castle room crafting mana bombs day after day. While my Job might benefit from a long stay behind bars, the same wasn’t true for my Class. Or my companions back on Earth. Or Crownhill, for that matter.

I bit my tongue. Suddenly, I had a bit of a dilemma on my hands. Did I tell Myrina’s family that I was the one who made the mana bombs?

If I did, they would likely prevent me from risking myself on a dungeon dive with Myrina and Cyra later on today. That would stifle my growth and ruin the whole point of this tutorial.

And based on what Myrina had said, I would return to Earth sooner or later, called back to my world through the

power of the System. After all, it didn't let go of important individuals from newly integrated realms so easily.

And so if I spoke up now, I would waste my best shot at learning how the Arcadia Multiverse worked and collecting a whole arsenal's worth of unique items, skills, and knowledge to bring back with me, in exchange for what might wind up as a few job levels.

Or perhaps not even that. The hardest part about making new mana bombs would be creating the wire mesh they were made from. It had been easy for me, because on Earth there was plenty of machine-made copper wire.

But here? Where blacksmiths worked with an open fire, a hammer, and an anvil? I'd probably be expected to make the wire myself.

How did someone even make wire by hand? I imagined a long process of pounding and pulling. How would the Samhain Clan react to knowing how long it might take me to produce something usable?

And while I might have won the favor of Myrina's mother, the Samhain Clan was still a faction at war. And she didn't even have total control over her clan. Though I'd gained her lesser mark, she'd made it clear that neither the elders nor the ancestors cared much for me.

Though I wanted to help them, I didn't want to do it as a virtual prisoner. And giving away too much right now meant that was exactly what I'd become. I'd lose my freedom, and with it, my opportunity to build my own powerbase. Once I'd done that, I could treat with Myrina and the Samhain Clan on my own terms.

There had to be an alternative solution I wasn't seeing. I grimaced inwardly. I'd already kept my mouth shut since I'd arrived. I could keep it shut a little longer while I thought things over.

Before I knew it, we were back at the auction house.

"Let's split up," Cyra ordered. "I'll talk to the auctioneer. Myrina will talk to the attendant. Carter, see if any of the



assistants know anything.”

I nodded along, and pretty soon, I was standing face to face with the assistant I’d sold my mana bombs to.

“Hello again,” the assistant greeted me. “I see you and your companions are in quite a rush. Are you here to sell more of those Mana Bombs? They sold much higher than appraised, and I’m allowed to raise your cut of the proceeds to sixty percent.”

I glanced back at Myrina and Cyra, who were each gesticulating animatedly as they spoke to their respective targets. Both women they spoke to, however, simply shrugged after each of their questions.

Little did Cyra and Myrina know the person who could answer their questions was right here, in front of me.

“Do you have somewhere more private we could talk?” I asked her.

She nodded. “The booth where I assessed your items before. Some wish to sell their items discreetly. Especially those obtained through battle and taken by the right of conquest. Come.”

She led, and I followed. When she drew the curtains shut, the noise from outside grew dim.

“Now, what is it you wanted? Do you have more items to sell?” the assistant asked.

“First off, I didn’t get your name before. I suspect I’ll need it going forward.”

“Misa,” the assistant replied. “My aunt inherited this establishment last year from my grandmother. Originally, it was supposed to go to my mother, but... well...” Misa shrugged helplessly, and I sensed there was more to the story there.

But I had pressing matters to attend to. “Listen, Misa, I would like the two of us to come to an arrangement. You see, it turns out those Mana Bombs are a great deal more valuable than either you or I knew. And I’d like to get them into the

hands of the Samhain Clan, though I'd like to do so discreetly."

"We value our customers' privacy here at the auction house," Misa assured me. "Unless, of course, the local ruling clan comes looking for whoever made a certain item that is in high demand. Which, based on what I hear outside, seems to be exactly what is happening. I take it you don't wish for me to reveal your identity to your companions?"

"Not at this current time, no. I have a lot to do and can't afford to be stuffed away in a dungeon, making Mana Bombs for them. And I doubt I'd be able to make many more of them, even if I was. The resources available here aren't what I'm used to. So, in exchange for your discretion, I'd like to make you an offer."

Misa eyed me suspiciously. "What kind of offer?"

"The kind that gives you a cut of everything I sell. Mana bombs, and eventually... more. You could end up making quite a bit of coin. A lot of that would go to me, of course, but I'm willing to share if it will keep your lips sealed. I know you offered me sixty percent of the sale price. If you list the items yourself, what cut would you get?"

Misa tapped a finger to her lips. "You're asking me to be your agent? This is quite exciting. My cousins have always taken on private clients and rarely need to tend to booths for their wages. As for my rates, as a member of the family that owns this establishment, I pay no listing fee at all. We would split all the money we make between us, me and you, assuming we have a deal?"

Misa's eyes glittered with a spark of greed, and I knew I had her. Asking for her silence would have bought me little, but the promise of nigh-infinite riches if I were to supply her with magical items, gave her an incentive to keep my secret to herself.

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it would work—for now. Perhaps I'd come clean to my companions in the Samhain Clan, preferably when I'd either earned their clan's full support or I'd secured enough bargaining power that telling

them wouldn't cost me my freedom. I left the auction house quite pleased with myself.

Myrina and Cyra couldn't say the same.

"Damn it! Nobody had a clue," Cyra cursed. "This search is going to take longer than I thought."

"Apparently, whoever sold those Mana Bombs sold them to the auction house just before the auction began. Carter and I probably walked right by them! They could have been sitting in the stands nearby the whole time," Myrina all but shouted as she waved her hands. "I would have guessed the spy from the Shadefall Clan sold them, but her job is not compatible with them," Myrina growled, her hands balling into fists.

"Quite the mystery..." I admitted, chuckling. "But some good should come of this, right? After all, if it's tough for you to discover who is making and selling these Mana Bombs, it should be even tougher for the Shadefall Clan to figure it out."

"It makes me worry that we'll never see those items again though. You saw how much mother liked them..." Cyra muttered.

I smiled. "Oh, don't you worry about that. I'm sure whoever made them will sell many more of them before you know it."

After that, I made sure we paid the wizard a street down a visit, as well. I figured it would be significantly harder to convince him to keep quiet, but the opposite was true.

"There you are, lad. I've meant to ask you about that trinket you sold me," said the wizard.

"I meant to talk to you about the same thing," I replied, "but you first."

"While the enchantment work was fairly rudimentary, my clients have been curious about the wire used to make it. It's perfectly smooth and without flaw! What smith did you commission to craft such a thing? Many an enchanter would love to get their hands on a supply of that stuff." The wizard shook his head in wonder.

“That?” I shrugged. “It’s from my home world. I’m afraid until our integration is complete, you’ll be hard-pressed to get more of it. But I can bring some with me the next time I come to visit the Samhain Clan.”

The wizard’s eyes lit up with glee. “Truly? You can get more of it? And—more importantly—you can get some for me to sell to my clients?”

“I can indeed. But you’ll have to keep our business connection a secret. Rare materials and crafts the kind I am making will make waves—especially with the war the Samhain Clan is fighting against the Shadefall Clan.”

The wizard stroked his beard. “Yes... I see... they wouldn’t be too happy about someone bypassing their embargo on selling magical goods to or through the Samhain Clan. If you can get me more of that magnificent wire, my lips are sealed.”

He held out his hand, and I shook it.

With both potential leaks sealed, I returned to speak with Myrina and Cyra who had waited outside. They had considerably less success on their respective missions. I had to feign defeat as well while in their company.

We returned from our quest in defeat. Myrina’s mother promised to send more people after the mysterious Mana Bomb maker. I was actually pleased she’d continue to investigate. It meant the Samhain Clan was more likely to catch my trail than anyone else. I had an ear to the ground in the Samhain Clan, so I’d know when they started catching on to me and could adjust course accordingly.

The same couldn’t be said of the Shadefall Clan. With them, I could go from minding my own business to being assassinated in the blink of an eye—not that they wouldn’t already be trying to assassinate me, given how I’d helped bring down their agent in the city.

I wasn’t sure how long I could keep Myrina and her family in the dark, but I was still wary of depending on them too much. After hearing what had happened to Cyra’s former

boyfriend, I worried about what the future might entail should I linger too long in Myrina's company without first establishing my own power base.

## CHAPTER

# SIXTEEN

After returning to the castle, I had a few hours to kill before our dungeon dive began. This was a perfect opportunity to practice my abilities. Thanks to Kyrina, I now had a skill book I'd been hoping to find since my session with the Theory Crafter the previous day.

"Arcane Blade..." I whispered aloud as I seated myself in the castle's study.

Nobody else was in the room that overlooked the garden; I had the whole place to myself. Myrina and Cyra were running around the city, hoping to pick up another lead on the Mana Bombs' maker.

I flipped open the first page of the Skill Book and was greeted by a prompt.

### **Would you like to learn Arcane Blade?**

I selected 'yes' with my mind, and my vision darkened. I realized, then, that this was the first time I'd actually used a skill book properly, instead of relying on the System prompts I'd gotten from Blessed of the System to learn a new skill.

The proper way was more tedious than I'd expected.

The moment I accepted the prompt, the page I was on flipped to the next of its own accord. The image atop it depicted a sword made of bright blue light. It enveloped a humble stick, making the ordinary piece of wood a deadly magical weapon.

The symbol had a meaning, though I wasn't quite sure how I knew what it meant.

*Learn.*

I groaned. Apparently, without the System's help, I would have to stuff this knowledge into my head the old-fashioned way. It was a good thing I'd set aside a few hours for this.

I beat my mind against the skill book before me with great determination. The text was as dense as a college textbook or whitepaper, and any ordinary human would have needed a break after the first dozen pages or so. But Earth's integration had been kind to me on this particular front. Staying focused for long hours came far easier to me than it ever had before.

As the minutes turned to hours, my concentration did not wane. Slowly but surely, I imprinted the concepts shown on the page in my own mind. The flick of my fingers had to be just right. I had to speak the invocation of the spell as well, though with my neutral mana and caster proficiencies, I figured I could likely bypass the requirement.

Reading the book turned out to be quite informative, though time-consuming. Before I'd even finished learning the spell, my head was full of ideas to try once I'd learned it, as well as variants to empower it further. Coupling it with the Power of Nature, for instance, would allow the ordinarily neutral blade to take on aspects of fire, water, ice, earth, or whatever else I might have on hand.

I could understand why the System had simply shoved the information directly into my mind during the early stages of the integration, though. Blessed of the System had lasted only three days, but those three days had been packed with more craziness than the entire decade before it. During an apocalypse, no one would have bothered reading something like a skill book.

And that would have been a lethal mistake for most who otherwise might have survived.

But my days of living beneath the System's blessing were over. I'd have to make it on my own from here on out. Still, I

was happy to puzzle my way through a skill book relatively early on, and with more experienced hands to lean on should I run into trouble.

**Your Focus proficiency has increased by 2 to Level 3!**

**Your Caster proficiency has increased by 2 to Level 27!**

Arcane Blade went smoothly enough, and soon I was entering the garden to practice what I had learned.

“Arcane Blade,” I called out, and my sword came to hand. The actual words to summon the weapon were a combination of tongue-twisting sounds with far too many vowels. Already, my proficiency bonuses allowed me to reduce the spell to no more than a name and a gesture.

Dropping either the name or the gesture would require me to revert to drawing esoteric symbols in the air or speak unintelligible words human mouths weren't meant to pronounce. Still, I had no doubt that given more time to practice and with more proficiency levels, I would soon be able to cast Arcane Blade without semantic and somatic requirements.

Learning Arcane Blade took my total number of Class abilities up to ten, putting me close to my limit. I planned to hold off on culling any excess abilities until I actually reached that limit. For now, I was focused on seeing what I could gain, based on our meeting with the Theory Crafter yesterday.

Reaching down, I picked up a dead, discarded twig that had fallen from one of the fruit trees in Myrina's family's garden. Focusing on it, I cast Arcane Blade again. Pale blue light in the outline of a tiny sword enveloped the twig. Due to the size of the twig, it was more of a knife than a sword, but that suited my purposes fine.

I cocked my arm back and threw it. The blade tumbled end over end before its enchanted shimmering edge nicked the bottom of a ripe fruit, sending it tumbling to the ground. As I scooped the fruit up off the ground, I heard a round of applause behind me.



“Nice new trick, Carter!” Myrina said.

I chuckled sheepishly. “I’d meant to stab the fruit through its center. Apparently, learning the spell didn’t do anything to improve my ability to throw knives.”

“It’s just a proficiency,” Cyra explained. “I’m sure you’ll pick it up soon enough if you practice it. Based on how fast you learn, it shouldn’t take too long.”

At Cyra’s prompting, I threw the knife again. Then, once more. When I finally landed a clean hit, the prompt appeared.

**You have learned the Knife Throwing proficiency!**

“I have a feeling that’s something I should practice...” I muttered, hefting another twig. Anything that could spread more Corrupting Marks was a good thing, in my book.

“Enough stabbing fruit. Let’s stab the bodies of our enemies! To the dungeon!” Myrina waved her arms, gesturing for me to follow her.

It seemed I’d finished learning Arcane Blade just in time. Now, I’d have the chance to put it to use.



The dungeon wasn’t far from the castle. While it wasn’t within the keep itself, we never had to actually leave the castle walls to reach it. And, much to my surprise, the dungeon itself was fortified, with those defenses facing both inside and out.

The multilayered and double-sided walls provided even firmer defenses than those surrounding the castle. I asked Myrina and Cyra about it.

“The dungeon isn’t part of the castle because we don’t want a dungeon outbreak to happen near right where we live. There are always monsters in a dungeon, though the ones in this one are particularly hard to fight, given they look much like we do. If left unguarded, they’d storm half the city before we even realized we were under attack,” Cyra explained.

“But the dungeon is a valuable resource. In fact, it’s what this whole city was built around. Without the dungeon,

Valkyrie's Watch is just a fortress on the top of a mountain," Myrina explained.

"I would have thought the location of the castle was for defense," I murmured, "or was here to guard the mines."

"While great for defense, it isn't exactly a great place to farm," Cyra said with a snort. "And you can't eat gold."

Myrina frowned at her sister. "Yes, there is gold and some other rare minerals in the mountains below us, but you wouldn't usually build your city on the top of the same mountain you're mining. Nope, we're here because of the dungeon, so we protect it accordingly," Myrina added.

"You protect the dungeon from invasions—both inside and out," I summarized.

The bulk of the guards I'd seen while chasing the Shadefall Clan spy through the city must have come from their posts here at the dungeon, because unlike the walls of the castle, these were fully manned. Going through those walls to get to the dungeon involved a lengthy process where all three of us were examined to confirm that we were who we said we were.

Two sets of huge iron doors were opened for us, one after another. Security on the outside was even tighter, I was told. I could only imagine what people who weren't members of the Samhain Clan had to go through with even more tightly regulated entrance procedures.

"You have four hours to complete the dungeon before the next group will enter," a guard explained. "As clan members, you will enter first, but three other D-Rank parties will follow until the dungeon reaches capacity."

"Understood, commander," Cyra replied.

The guards presented us with papers to sign, stipulating the rules of the dungeon and what the Samhain Clan would take from whatever we looted. Reading the normal contract over, a normal party of adventurers would have to yield ninety percent of their loot to the Samhain Clan.

Ouch. At that point, they were less adventurers and more freelance resource collectors for the clan that owned the dungeon.

Cyra had an explanation for this as well. “The real reward to a dungeon dive is the levels you gain along the way. There aren’t many other ways to level in a stable and civilized world like ours—not many legal ways, at any rate. Plenty of wealthy people compete for the opportunity to use our dungeon. As for the high rate... well... it’s better than the clan not letting them use the dungeon at all. Most established factions like ours do the same thing.”

Those with a mark on their shoulder, like mine, would only have to surrender fifty percent of their loot. It was a marked improvement, though only by comparison. Still, if the potential loot I saw listed for an average dungeon run were true, even just ten or twenty percent should have been more than enough to make a living dungeon diving for your average adventurer.

Not that your average citizen would ever get the chance to do the dungeon that often.

“It says here we’re supposed to list someone as party leader...” I pointed to a blank box on the forum we’d been given.

“I vote Carter!” Myrina said. “He has a nice leadership bonus.”

“Your leadership proficiency is quite high,” Cyra remarked. “Fine. But make it clear this is a Samhain dungeon party. Otherwise, we’ll be giving up most of our loot.”

“Got it!” Myrina grabbed the sheet of paper from my hands and filled out my name on my behalf, using her own last name following my first name. “Carter Samhain... it has a decent ring to it.”

“He hasn’t earned that right,” Cyra said sternly.

My mind flashed back to the image of her crushing her former boyfriend’s head between her thighs, and I felt a shiver run up my spine. But then her expression softened. “But I

suppose he can borrow it early for the sake of not losing loot. Just for today, though.”

“Just for today,” I promised, wiping a bit of sweat from my brow after I did so.

With agreements signed and the paperwork done, we entered the dungeon. The guards parted for us, and the final set of gates opened to a stairway leading down.

**You are entering the Siege of Shadefall dungeon.**

**Continue?**

I accepted the prompt and we entered the dungeon.

The stone steps turned rough and ragged as we transitioned from smooth carved stone made by the Samhain Clan to whatever the dungeon itself made naturally. The tunnel turned dark, but there was a bright light at the end. The exit to the cave didn't look like a stone, though.

“Will there be a fight?” I asked, preparing to cast Arcane Blade. I'd equipped Myrina's baby sword, though now that I could cast a spell over it, I was a lot more confident using it.

“Not at the entrance. The dungeon denizens will greet us as soon as we're through. Remember to stay in character, though—the dungeon doesn't like people breaking with its storyline,” Cyra explained.

The bright light at the end of the tunnel turned out to be sunlight pouring through an open tent flap. The stone around us abruptly turned into a tent's canvas sides, and then suddenly, we were in a war tent. Myrina and Cyra didn't pay the odd change in scenery any mind, so I didn't either. We walked straight through the tent and emerged into the light under a blue afternoon sky.

“Hope you got your beauty sleep, recruits, because we've got one hell of a battle for you coming up!” a gruff and commanding female voice shouted.

I turned to see a hulking, caramel-skinned woman of Amazonian proportions. She had a mace the size of my head

resting against one shoulder, though it looked normal-sized on her. She turned to the three of us and glowered.

“Well, soldier? Where’s your salute?” The large woman glowered at me.

I turned to find Myrina and Cyra both had their fists over their chests and were standing at attention. I mimicked their pose. “Sorry, Sir! Er... Ma’am!” I said as I straightened my back and brought my fist over my chest.

I’d never been in the military—certainly never in a medieval one—and I was positive I was doing it wrong. Apparently the dungeon overlooked small issues so long as you made an honest effort to play along.

Scanning the area out of the corners of my eye, it was clear we were in a siege camp. Row after row of tents lay behind a wall of trenches with sharpened stakes pointing outwards and siege equipment behind that. Even now, trebuchets bombarded the walls of a city in the distance.

The stones they threw exploded on impact as the magic and fire within them detonated. It didn’t do anything to the city, though. Whatever magic empowered the walls was even stronger than whatever the besieging force was using to destroy them. Rows of magical symbols sparked to life when needed on the walls before fading from view a moment later.

“Soldiers! We have several jobs that need doing around the camp. I expect you to complete at least one of them before noon!” the commander said.

Abruptly, a list of tasks appeared in my vision.

### **Siege of Shadefall Dungeon Quest Lines:**

**Choose your path in the Siege of Shadefall! The quest you undertake will test your mettle, and the rewards will reflect the risks. But heed this warning: the dungeon’s embrace is cold and unforgiving. Fail, and you may lose more than just pride.**

**Your equipment, memories, levels, and skills could become the dungeon’s spoils. Your soul will journey on to whatever afterlife awaits you.**

**1. Rearm the Trebuchets (Easy):** *Our siege engines hunger for ammunition to shatter the city's defenses. Fulfill their craving, and we'll breach those shields!*

**2. Clear Out the Monsters Plaguing the Army's Rear (Moderate):** *Creatures lurk in the shadows, preying on our forces. Hunt them down and secure our rear!*

**3. Sabotage the Enemy's Supply Line (Hard):** *Sneak into the city's belly, poison their food and water, and ensure a swift end to the siege. The city must fall, and this could be the key!*

**4. Rescue Our Captured Scouts (Hard):** *Our eyes and ears are behind enemy lines, captured and in chains. Find them, free them, and bring our brothers and sisters home!*

**5. Open the Gates from the Inside (Very Hard):** *A daring mission for the bravest of souls. Infiltrate the city, slay the gatekeepers, and throw open the gates. Victory could be ours, but only if you succeed!*

**Choose wisely, adventurer. The Siege of Shadefall awaits your courage, strength, and cunning. The battle horns are sounding. The time to act is now!**

I scanned the options. There were more quests to be had, but the rest were grayed out for lack of specific things like healing abilities in our group. The disclaimer the dungeon provided was rather scary. There were thousands of NPCs around us. How many of them had once been people?

I decided it would be best not to think about that. "Well?" I turned to my companions. "You two have run this dungeon before, what do you think we should do?"

Myrina shrugged. "Anything but rearming the trebuchets. Mother made me do that quest over and over when I was little. It teaches you good danger sense, but there are no real threats. And all you get at the end is a pouch of gold. If we want to get you a bag of holding, we'll need to do one of the hard quests."

“I could do the gates. But not the two of you. I’m over-leveled for this dungeon. Myrina is right about the hard quests, if you want a bag of holding. Normally I would say that you’re too low a level for ‘hard’ quests, though,” Cyra said.

“So we can do the hard quests, so long as I watch my back?” I asked.

Cyra nodded.

“Alright then. How about we rescue those captured scouts? That seems more my style,” I replied.

“Scouts it is... not a bad choice. That’s a noble mission.” Cyra nodded in approval. “There’s not as much fighting as trying to open the gates, but a bit more sneaking and talking. I don’t normally like it, but that’s because I don’t like the talking bits. That’ll be up to you as party leader, though.”

I made our selection, and the officer before us started talking again.

“Your mission, soldiers, is to rescue our captured scouts! We sent several scouts into the city with the last band of refugees we let them bring through. But it seems things haven’t gone well for them. Since we haven’t had word back from any of them, we have to assume they are now prisoners. Your job is to pull them out of whatever sticky situation they are in and bring them home safely, along with whatever information they’ve got.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Cyra saluted, and Myrina and I did the same.

“Good! Grab the spare armor we have in the tent. It matches the enemy’s colors. You’ll sneak into the city next time we allow them to collect their dead.”

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTEEN

The dungeon dive was nothing like what I'd expected. I'd thought we'd be clearing room after room of monsters—though apparently that was what some dungeons were like—just not this one. Those dungeons that developed around great historical events, like this one, were more akin to storylines, where adventurers could join in on a quest of days gone by, feeling like they were part of a grand conquest or tragic defeat.

In a way, it felt much like a game. I couldn't forget, however, that this game didn't give extra lives or come with save states or a reset. The dungeon's warning had made that clear enough.

We armed and equipped ourselves in the enemy's colors, though Myrina and Cyra both kept their normal swords. By the time we emerged, we saw several other groups of dungeon divers talking to the same commander the two of us had just spoken with as they selected their own quests. Most seemed to go for either the monsters or the easy siege engine reload quest.

Based on their equipment, most of them were around my level, so I wasn't surprised to hear them pick weaker-ranked quests. But one particularly bold group selected the mission to open the gates from the inside. Based on their equipment, they would have a tough time.

Cyra shook her head when she overheard the quest they'd selected. "More food for the dungeon," she said.



Our opportunity to enter the city came a few minutes later when everyone withdrew from the trebuchets. Flags of peace had been raised, and the siege engines stopped firing. The gates opened, and warriors of the besieged city filed out, eying the attacking camp warily.

The city's defenders looked downright puny compared to the strong, Amazonian-sized attackers. The defenders were merely human-sized, and few among them looked like warriors. What they lacked in demeanor or stature, however, they more than made up for in the quality of their equipment.

Each of them had enchantments on every piece of their armor, especially their weapons. Crossbows were also more common than swords. I considered them a wealthy but not particularly well-trained bunch. I examined one of them, hoping it would go unnoticed.

I felt the same tingle of an examination running up my spine, so I figured there were enough of them going around for me to take the risk.

### **Shadefall Militia (Armed Technician - Level 26)**

Level twenty-six seemed low, especially given how well the militia was equipped. It took me a while to realize what was going on. These people weren't fighters, they were crafting specialists. They'd probably focused on their jobs, gaining levels only through their race and leaving their nominal combat class far behind.

Examining them for their jobs, I saw what I was looking for.

### **Shadefall Militia (Enchanter - Level 62)**

That was more what I was looking for. These weren't fighters at all.

I noticed once more the name of the city and its defenders. Shadefall. It was the same clan the spy who'd nearly killed me had been from. Apparently, the Samhain clan had been at odds with these crafters all the way back whenever this siege had taken place in the real world.

While the Shadefall clan's forces definitely had their attackers beat in terms of wealth and the quality of their gear, they lacked the same desire to do battle that I sensed from the attacking Amazonian forces. I could see it in their both their eyes and their levels. These were civilians in armor, doing their best to fight real warriors. Without their walls to protect them, they would have long since lost. No wonder it had come to a siege.

I led the way to the gates. Sneaking in through the trenches and the confusion of battle, we met up with the city's forces. I worried about Cyra. I would fit in with the city's forces with no issues, and Myrina could pass for a particularly tall woman. But Cyra clearly belonged to the forces of the Amazonian attackers. How could anyone fail to spot her, armor or not?

But if it came to a fight, Cyra was prepared. She'd said herself that she was over-leveled for this dungeon; I trusted her to handle herself. Apparently, the dungeon wanted to keep its quests accessible to all, because when we were confronted by the enemy, all eyes turned to me and no one gave Cyra a second glance.

"You there... who are you?! I didn't see your group at muster," the enemy militia officer shouted.

He was a man, which was a bit of a surprise to me. The Amazonian forces outside were all female, whereas the defenders seemed to be mixed genders.

"We weren't at muster because we came straight here," I explained. "We were told you needed the extra hands."

He stared at me with narrowed eyes from behind his helmet. "What's your name, soldier?"

"Carter," I replied. "I'm in command of this unit."

He took his helmet off and studied me. "Pardon the rudeness if you're who you say you are, but you didn't follow protocol. You were supposed to check in with me before leaving the city. We've caught spies trying to sneak into the city during these excursions before, you see."

I grimaced. Those spies they'd caught were probably the scouts we were being sent in to rescue.

“Could a member of the forces outside do this?” I asked, pointing my finger in the air and casting a Mana Bolt directly overhead. It was a display of magical power, something the Amazonians were definitely lacking in.

The man's eyebrows crawled upwards. “A spell caster? I suppose that does make it more likely you're one of ours. Alright. Lend a hand with the dead, then. But I want you to stick close to me. I'm going to report you to the commander for disciplinary action when we're done.”

Cyra scooped up a few of the city's dead defenders, heaving them over either shoulder and then stacking another two corpses on top of each shoulder.

Myrina tried to do the same, though she looked ungainly attempting it with her smaller stature—well, small in comparison to her sister. Carrying just one dead body was enough for me. After getting tossed into a dumpster with a bunch of corpses, I'd gained a healthy aversion to handling the deceased.

“We should slip away as soon as we're inside,” I whispered to my companions. “We need to get rid of this guy. I'm betting that meeting their commander won't go well for us if we don't.”

Cyra and Myrina nodded as we slinked through the gates.

“Alright, you three! You're to stick close to—” The militiaman never finished what it was he was saying. The moment we were through the gates, Cyra lopped his head off with one clean blow.

Then, as swiftly as she'd scooped up her sword in the arena, Myrina picked up the new corpse up and added it to the pile she was carrying. We dumped him, along with the rest, onto the cart meant to collect the dead. In moments, we were on our way.

“That...” I hesitated.

When I'd said we were going to slip away as soon as we were in the city, I hadn't expected Cyra to murder the guy. Knowing how fast and ruthless my companions could be was a bit scary. Neither of them had shown the slightest hesitation.

But the important thing was that it had worked. And it was not like he'd been a real person—though he'd seemed real. He was just a manifestation of the dungeon, likely whatever was left over from some dungeon diver who had died who knew how many years ago.

“...was quick thinking, both of you. Good job.”

Myrina flashed me a thumbs-up and sent me a beaming smile. “It was what you ordered us to do, Carter. You were right to have us get rid of that pesky militia officer before he took us to his commander. It's all thanks to your decisive leadership!”

No sooner were the corpses in the cart, than we made our escape. The city streets were packed with homeless, though our arms and equipment gave us away.

I scowled at the crest on my surcoat, plucking at the cloth with my fingers. “We need to take this armor off and hide it,” I said. “Any suggestions?”

“There are quite a few shops in the city. Many of them sell bags of holding. We could break in, steal a few, and then stuff our things into them,” Cyra suggested.

Myrina nodded. “Yes! We should do that. Loot doesn't just spawn from nowhere, after all. If we want to leave with a bag of holding, we'll have to pick one up somewhere during the quest.”

“Okay, magic shop and disguises it is.” I eyed our surroundings. “If we're going to rob a place, it should be somewhere good. It looks like the northern end of the city is a lot nicer than this neighborhood. We'll find a shop, grab what we need, then start looking for the missing scouts dressed as civilians.”



We found our target at the edge of the city's wealthier district. It looked like a high-end store, with fashionable clothing and other items on display behind permanent force fields that covered the front half of the building in a sheer wall of magic. It struck me as an extravagant display of power, but the lack of good clear glass in this world probably meant this was their only option.

Perhaps they'd see stores with wide glass storefronts like we had back on Earth as extravagant displays of wealth. I realized that if Earth was ever to get its industries up and running again, we had a lot to offer the multiverse. I wasn't sure how many societies had industrialized following their integration, but that was an advantage we had that others might not.

Frowning at the wall of magic, I nodded to a nearby alley. "Let's see if the rear has an entrance a little less protected than the front."

Cyra led us through the alley around to the back. I stayed in the middle, while Myrina protected our rear. It was like I'd thought. Though there were no windows to break into the building here at the rear, there was a rear entrance that was only protected by a sturdy metal lock.

"Either of you know how to pick a lock?" I asked, turning hopefully to Myrina and Cyra.

They both shrugged. I frowned, studying the lock. I figured I might be able to improvise something with an Arcane Blast directed right at the pins inside the lock. "I think I can deal with this. It will take me a moment to aim my spell and..."

Before I even finished my thought, Cyra snapped the shaft of the lock in half between her fingers. Just like that, the lock's metal collar shattered, and the sturdy-looking lock fell to the ground.

"And... that works." I shrugged.

Cyra entered first, being the highest level and having the most Vitality. If there were any traps, even magical ones, she

would weather them the best. Thankfully, the shop was empty and the rear entrance wasn't trapped. Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief.

This mission would have been much easier if it only involved attacking monsters and taking their stuff. Something about robbing a store made this mission a lot harder than killing monsters would have been. Hell, even killing NPCs was easier than this.

I'd killed plenty of people since the integration, both human and non-human. It certainly seemed clear to me that I'd have to kill a lot more before the integration was over. But for all my foul deeds, my parents had taught me never to steal.

To be honest, my mother had driven that lesson home by dragging me back into the store I stole a candy bar from by the ear. Not only did she make me apologize to both the cashier and the store manager, she made me buy the candy bar with my woefully small allowance. That lesson stuck with me.

I reminded myself that this was only a dungeon, and this store had been placed here for dungeon delvers like me to rob. Even so, my ear twinged as I walked through the rear entrance. I was just thankful we didn't have to threaten a cashier while looting the place. If we had, I probably would have had to deal with a wrenching in my guts the entire time.

I had killed people and salvaged the belongings of the dead, but I was no thief.

As it was, I soon found myself flipping through a rack of clothes until I found something that was likely to fit me. It was hard to tell, though, since it looked like this world relied less on standardized sizes and more on custom tailoring than I was used to. All the items of clothing on display looked like they were made to be adjustable—either with a stitch or two here and there, a bit of knitting, or by tightening straps and some creative knot-tying.

I found robes that utilized the latter to ensure a good fit, and in moments I was dressed like a local for the first time since my arrival on this world.

“You look quite dashing in that, Carter,” Myrina said with a grin. “A fancy robe like that is just begging to be ripped off you...” She bounced her brows as she leered at me, stalking forward with a devilish light in her eyes.

“Uhh... Myrina... we’re on a mission...” I hissed as I backed up. A part of me wanted to see what that light in her eyes might lead to, while the rest of me reminded that part of me about what had happened to Cyra’s boyfriend. That part of me didn’t seem to care.

To be honest, Myrina was looking really good. She had let down her red hair and it hung loosely about her shoulders. She had a stiff jacket slung over her shoulders, though the arms flapped empty behind her. Beneath it, she looked damn good in a tight-fitting shirt, leather pants, and travel boots. It was something suitable for battle, but not overtly designed for that purpose.

I stumbled into the wall even as my hands rose up to hold Myrina around the waist. “We shouldn’t,” I mumbled as Myrina pressed me against the wall with her body. Given our difference in height, this meant that I got to inspect the quality of the cloth that stretched tight across her perky breasts up close. Between the valiant toggles that kept her shirt front closed, I could see that she no longer wore any breast wraps—what passed for a bra here.

I swallowed, mesmerized by the hard points that pressed into the base of my neck as Myrina leaned in close.

“Carter, I just want a ki... URK!” Myrina started to say before Cyra yanked her sister off of me by the collar.

“Fight the hysteria, sister!” Cyra hissed at Myrina, glaring down at my friend as she held her by the collar several inches off the ground. “Now is not the time... not until Carter gets A LOT stronger. And never on a mission!”

Myrina hung from her sister’s grip, a pout on her beautiful features. “I just wanted a kiss,” she muttered.

That had been close. As much as I feared to get involved with the Amazonian beauty, at least one part of my body was

all for it—regardless of the potential outcomes that might lead to. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, then another. I needed to keep my head on straight—my bigger head, that is.

I nodded my thanks to Myrina’s big sister. It seemed Cyra had selected a bigger version of the same outfit her younger sister wore—though I was sure she still wore her wraps. She dropped a still-scowling Myrina with a *thump*.

“I like it, Carter,” Cyra said, indicating my new robe. “A nice blend of daring flair and wizardly elegance.”

“It’s just what I found on the racks.”

I shrugged. I’d mostly picked it for comfort and maneuverability, the same as Myrina. It was more than just a robe, though. The outfit I chose included a midnight-blue tunic over light trousers under the robe. Looking at the tunic and robe closer, it seemed to have a slight pattern woven into it using mana which created a pattern of shifting colors that resembled a nebula. “Do you think it’s too much?”

“It just makes you look like a rich bastard, is all,” Myrina admitted with a laugh. “But this whole city is full of rich bastards, so you’ll fit right in. Also... catch!”

She tossed me a little brown leather pouch. It resembled a wallet, but it unfolded into a bag with a mouth wide enough to fit a breastplate of armor into it.

“Is this a bag of holding?” I asked.

“Got it in one!” Myrina said. “It’s middle grade, too. That means we’ll need to earn quite a few contribution points if we want to take it out of the dungeon with us after paying the tax, but it’ll be worth it.”

The moment I brushed my fingers against the bag, I received a system notification.

**You have received a dimensional storage item!**

**Hidden Quest revealed: Inventory System!**

**Inventory System: Explore an extra-dimensional space to unlock the Inventory System!**



**Quest Completed! As you are currently located in a dungeon, you have already satisfied the requirement of exploring an extra-dimensional space. The Inventory system is now unlocked. The capabilities of your inventory will depend on the quality of the dimensional storage item you carry.**

**Currently, you possess a basic, mid-grade bag of holding.**

A window appeared, revealing an array of slots. I picked up my discarded sword and old clothes and shoved them all through the mouth of the bag of holding. Soon, everything appeared in the inventory window.

“Neat,” I said.

Myrina was beaming at me all the while. “The dungeon is the best place to pick up a Dimensional Storage item for the first time. This is the same place I completed that quest when I was little!”

Myrina helped me fiddle with my System settings to segregate weapons and anything useful for combat towards the top of my inventory for easy retrieval, while leaving most of the miscellaneous junk I now had in my inventory several tabs down.

“Remember, there’s a reason people like me still wear scabbards to hold our swords,” Cyra instructed. “Pulling a weapon out of your dimensional storage item takes a few seconds, while it only takes a moment to draw a sword from your hip.”

“I understand,” I reply. “I’ll stay armed.” With that in mind, I clipped my small blade—Myrina’s baby sword—to my trousers. Thankfully, because of my magic, I was always armed. Once I was situated, we regrouped in the empty alley behind the store to plan our next move.

“I haven’t done this particular quest line in a long time, but you meet several informants in the city during some of the other quests. They might be able to tell us about the location of the imprisoned scouts,” Cyra said.

I stood, looking up from my inventory menu. “Sounds like a plan to me. Which informant will be safest to get to?”

Cyra pointed beyond the alley to a distant wall. Presumably, the spy we were looking for lay beyond it. I led the way, stopping in the shadows at the end of the alley and waiting until the coast was clear. When no one appeared to be in the area, the three of us walked out of the alley like we were supposed to be there. We turned left, leaving the neighborhood as discreetly as we could in our new garb.

Once we were out of that neighborhood, the worst was over. We soon vanished into the crowded streets in the less affluent part of town. Like the store we’d just visited, most of the shops here were closed. This was a city under siege, after all, so people weren’t exactly spending their coin for a night on the town. The market square, where people likely sold fresh fruits, vegetables, and other foodstuffs, was empty.

“She was around here somewhere... Ah, there! See the young woman by the fountain? She’s right over there.” Cyra pointed.

Looking over, I saw a woman dressed in a black cloak. Her eyes darted back and forth as she lurked in the shadows. Dressed as she was, she could hardly be anything but a spy. She might as well hold up a placard with ‘SPY’ written in capital letters on it. Apparently, the dungeon saw fit to make some things easier than they would have been in real life.

“Excuse me, I think you have information we’re sorely in need of,” I said as we approached the woman.

She glared at me from the shadows of her dark hood. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said as she turned to study the other side of the square.

“You need a passcode from one of the other quests. Drat,” Cyra cursed. “I forgot about that part.”

Cyra and Myrina seemed ready to turn away, but I had other ideas. The dungeon had been flexible and rather accommodating when it came to how we solved its problems

—as long as we remained in character, it seemed. Why not now?

I pulled the woman close to me, so that it looked like we were kissing. Instead, I pressed my lips to her ear and whispered, “I know you’re a spy for the army outside.”

She tried to jerk back from me, but I had a good grip on her cloak. “I told you,” she hissed, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. If you don’t want a knife in your belly, you’d best leave.”

She was so lifelike. It was hard to believe she was just some dungeon simulation of the dungeon. Surely, if the dungeon could create something as intelligent as the spy before us, she would be flexible enough for this. I pressed my case and myself into her. “I know you won’t risk drawing that kind of attention to yourself. Just tell me what I need to know, and we’ll be on our way. The army sent a group of scouts like you into the city recently. They’ve been taken prisoner, and we’re here to rescue them. Just tell me where they are”—my breath tickled her ear—“and we’ll be on our way.”

The woman melted against me. She certainly felt real. As far as a certain part of me was concerned, she *was* real. I mentally recited baseball stats until that part of me calmed down. Fortunately, while I was doing that, it seemed the dungeon was busy making a few calculations in the background. After pausing for a long moment, the cloaked woman hugged me as tightly as I held onto her, pressing her face into my neck.

“You promise you’ll rescue them?” she murmured in my ear.

“You have my word,” I promised.

“They’re being kept in the dungeon beneath the western barracks. You’ll have to sneak through heavy city militia forces to get to them, though. Now get out of here before you blow my cover!” the spy said, jerking back and then slapping me.

“I would never!” the woman shouted as she pushed herself away from me. “I may be out of money, but I’m not that desperate!” With that, she spun on her heel and stalked away in a huff.

The few people that had seen our interaction made their own assumptions. What those assumptions were was clear from the smirks two men sent my way, along with the scowl another woman wore. With a shrug and a grin, I jogged back to where Cyra and Myrina waited for me. The former looked impressed, while the latter had her arms folded over her chest and tapped one foot dangerously to the side.

I explained what the spy had revealed, and Cyra let out a low whistle. “We’ve had this dungeon for hundreds of years, and I don’t think anybody has ever thought to twist the spies like that. Most people just follow the quest guides written ages ago.” Cyra said. “Guess we better get a move on.”

“You’ll cozy up to some spy but I can’t even steal a kiss?” Myrina grumbled. “It just isn’t fair.”

“You heard the lady, let’s go!”

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTEEN

Soon, our goal was in sight. The western tower up ahead was well-manned and well-guarded. So far, we'd managed to avoid any fights, but I suspected that wouldn't be true for the final leg of this quest. I voiced my concerns to my companions.

"Don't worry. Big sis has this," Myrina said. "Besides, as clever as you've been, the dungeon rewards conflict. If we want to leave here with that bag of holding of yours, we will need to bust some heads."

I frowned. "Still, let's try to find those scouts before we pick a fight. If we have to fight our way out of here, then so be it, but I'd rather not. I don't like picking a fight right beneath the guard barracks. Those look like narrow corridors, and while that might be a nice chokepoint, there are too many ways someone could get around our flank. If that happens, it's a bad place to be outnumbered."

I could easily see us getting swarmed by guards and militia. While Cyra was higher level than needed for this dungeon, quantity had a quality all its own. Hundreds of guards attacking her at once would give even the big Amazon some trouble. It would take someone with her mother's speed to get out of the city after that, with its defenders helpless to retaliate.

"Let me talk to the guards and see if I can get some information, first," I suggested.

So far, I'd had the most luck on this adventure by talking to the dungeon's denizens, while Myrina and Cyra had been more inclined toward smashing and slaughtering their way to victory. I much preferred my way of doing things.

"Excuse me!" I waved to a guard, this one a woman of gruff bearing.

Upon approaching her, I saw a deep green hue to her skin and she had teeth sharper than any human's. This was an orc, most likely. She looked like the portal user who'd brought me to this world on Myrina's behalf.

The guard eyed me up and down, reaching for her weapon as she did so. I smiled and waved, doing my best to look friendly. Eventually, she let her itchy weapon hand relax.

"This is a restricted area, citizen," she growled. "You aren't allowed here unless you're in the guard or you're a militiaman in uniform. You appear to be neither, so I'll ask you to be on your way." The guard waved a hand, shooing me back into the rest of the city.

I didn't budge. I figured it would be tough to talk my way into the prison, but I'd spun up a lie, just in case. "I just wanted to go in and look at the prisoners! My sister's gone missing, you see. Recently, she fell in with the wrong crowd, and... and Mother thinks she might have gotten locked up. There was a rumor that one of her new friends was a spy for the army outside. Please, I just want to walk through and ask a few questions."

"The city's prisoners are not allowed guests," the guard snapped. "Besides, there are a bunch of Amazonian women in there, lad. You don't want to go in the same room where we've got a bunch of locked-up Amazonian warriors. A cute lad like you might cause an outbreak of hysteria!"

This wasn't the first time I'd heard that phrase. Neither Myrina nor Cyra had gone into great detail about what it was, though. I realized it must be something that afflicted all Amazonians—something that they were quite embarrassed about.

“What do you mean by hysteria?” I asked, playing the innocent fool.

The orc guard rolled her eyes. “I mean that if you walk in there, they’re going to go crazy on you! They might tear the cell bars right off. Amazonians are the horniest sluts in Arcadia, once you get them going. But they’ve built all sorts of rules and norms up about who they can love and who they can’t. It’s all sorts of bass-ackward if you ask me. But the point of the matter is that things won’t go smoothly for you if you enter the prison.”

“Is there any way I could get a chance to talk to any of them?” I asked. “Uh... maybe not in the prison?”

The orc shrugged. “We’ve got a big lot due for the gallows in an hour or so. Maybe you can join the crowd throwing rocks at them and try to get your question in there. Odds are they won’t answer, though.” She smirked. “Little point in answering hecklers when they’ll be hung not long after.”

“Will the suspected spies be in that group?” I asked hopefully.

“Convicted spies, now.” The orc snorted.

“The jury found the lot of them guilty not half an hour ago,” the guard added. “Best catch them before they’re hung! You won’t get the chance to ask them questions after.”

I bowed and thanked the guard. It looked like the best opportunity we’d have—the only opportunity, really—to grab the spies was right before their execution. We’d have to time it just right.



Myrina and Cyra once again congratulated me on my successful reconnaissance.

“Not needing to break into the prison will make things much easier,” Cyra noted. “Still, we should figure out exactly where we’re going to hit them—and more importantly, how we’ll make it out of here after that.”

I wholeheartedly approved of the need to have a solid exit planned, so we scouted the route from the prison to the gallows. The spies would be brought down a large main road to the gallows. But asking around a bit more soon revealed that the guards took a step back while the condemned were on the road, to allow civilians some time to throw stones at the convicted without being in danger of getting hit themselves.

That would be the perfect time to ambush the guards. We'd be in full view of the entire crowd, though, so I'd have to work to disperse them with a few flashy abilities. Dealing with the crowd would be my job, while Myrina and Cyra took care of the guards.

After that, we'd scale the walls and jump down to the other side. It would be quite a fall, but Cyra and Myrina seemed to think the magic shields wouldn't block anything trying to get out, just projectiles from the outside trying to get in.

I trusted their judgment, though I worried about the fall. I tried not to let my nerves show while we waited the remaining minutes in hiding until the moment to sprint into action came.

"Make way for the guard! Prisoners coming through! Clear the streets!" a guard shouted.

I recognized the guard as the same orc woman I spoke with before. She waved her hands at people, and the many carts and pedestrians spread out to the sides of the road as a contingent of guards and shackled prisoners trudged through.

The prisoners looked a rather miserable lot. They were bloody, barefoot, and wearing little more than rags. They were led through the streets by chains bound to their manacled hands and feet. Those might be trouble. Hopefully, Cyra could snap them as easily as she'd broken the store's lock. Otherwise, the prisoners would slow us down when it came time to exit stage left.

"Stoning time! Move aside!" someone in the crowd shouted at the guard.

Soon others picked the call, all eagerly hefting broken chunks of cobblestone. This was the closest thing to



excitement I'd seen from the besieged city's residents. Before now, they'd simply drifted around with the bleak, depressing stares of people who knew the end was near.

Maybe they saw this as their last chance for a little payback against the army that would eventually burst through their walls. Only a few of the prisoners were clearly Amazonian. They each had a far larger stature and significantly more muscles than would have been natural for any human woman. The others were mostly smaller, likely having compressed their size down to human proportions so they could pass as regular people while spying on the city.

"Alright. Alright, you lot!" the orc woman snapped as she held up her hands to hold back the barrage of rocks that were likely to be released at any second. "Save those throwing arms until my guards are out of the way!"

The guards made a hasty escape, getting clear of the row of hobbled prisoners while the city's residents prepared to vent their frustrations. Those who weren't already bleeding from whatever wounds they'd taken while being abducted or while in prison would be bloodied soon.

Amazonians were tough, though, and after taking the liberty of using Examine on them to discern their levels, I only saw a few who were weak enough to end up with a broken bone or two. We wanted to escape with as many of the scouts as possible. While the mission would technically be considered a success if we brought even one of them back to camp alive, Myrina and Cyra insisted our rewards would be greatest the more of them we brought out of the city with us.

I nodded to Cyra and Myrina once the guards gathered to watch the stoning. A few of the guards were digging at loose cobblestones in the street, likely wanting to join in, but most simply stood there with bored faces. This was just another day at the office for them.

The moment Myrina and Cyra leaped into action, I did the same. While their job was to deal with the guards, mine was to clear the people out of the way.

“Hey! Put the stones down!” I shouted. Nobody could hear me over their furious shouts as they pelted the prisoners with rocks.

I ran out in front to get their attention. “Put the stones down!” I yelled, cupping my hands to make myself heard.

“Shut your trap. These fuckers are trying to invade the city and deserve no mercy!” a man in the crowd shouted back at me. He twisted, and the rock that he’d previously aimed at the head of a bruised and unconscious Amazonian warrior was instead aimed at me.

I ducked to dodge the stony missile. Behind me, I heard a scream and the crunch of breaking bones. With a groan, I realized this was no time to pull my punches.

“Alright, that’s it!” I grimaced as I channeled a Mana Bolt.

I aimed for the head of the man who’d just thrown a rock at me. My spell struck him, and his head exploded in a fountain of gore. I hadn’t expected a single spell to be so effective, but Myrina had been right when she’d said the average peasant wasn’t particularly high leveled. My high proficiencies boosted even a humble Mana Bolt to the point that it became a one-shot-kill against the civilians.

Other people screamed, and a cascade of rocks came my way. Unfortunately, a few of them hit me. I fired Mana Bolts indiscriminately into the crowd, blasting through torsos and heads one after another. That soon got them running.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency increased by two to Level 8!**

“This is definitely a war crime...” I grimaced at the dozens of dead or dying civilians before me. I was once again happy that this was just a dungeon—though I would have been happier if these had been monsters, instead of people.

I grabbed the chain wrapped around the throat of the lead prisoner. She was down on one knee, and blood dripped from her brow. Given her level, it probably wasn’t the stones that had given her that wound. Most likely, it was whatever the guards had done to her while she was being interrogated.

“Come on, this is your rescue!” I urged. “Let’s move!”

Some of the women climbed to their feet, aware that they needed to act. Others were far slower. Days of torment awaiting execution hadn’t been kind to their psyches.

“On your feet!” I ordered, much louder and more demanding this time.

That got the attention of those who were otherwise too dazed to think for themselves. Being prisoners, they were used to obeying angrily shouted orders. I was only just able to get them moving when a bloody apparition that I eventually discerned was Cyra appeared. Blood soaked her hair and her clothing; she was covered in it, from head to toe.

“We don’t have much time before the militia arrives. We need to get out of here quickly,” Cyra said.

I nodded. “Can you break these bindings? Escape will be much easier if they can run.”

Cyra shook her head. “They just need to get back to camp alive. The quest said nothing about intact.”

She grabbed the chain of the lead Amazonian and pulled, hauling the woman to her feet.

Cyra shot me one last glare. “I’ll see you at the gates!”

Then, she took off running, reminding me much of a tank at full throttle. She wasn’t the speedy blur that her mother, Kyrina, was. Cyra at full tilt was more like something you could see and instantly realized you’d be a fool to step in front of it—like a train blasting forward at top speed.

That was exactly what happened to the last of the guards. They tried to get in Cyra’s way and were trampled underfoot. Behind her, the chain of prisoners trailed along. Some had managed to stay on their feet, and struggled to keep up. Others were dragged along, their flesh being scraped raw on the cobblestones beneath them.

Myrina shot ahead, clearing the way for her big sister as they ran. I used Warp Step to catch up as quickly as I could. I ran at full speed for the section of the wall we’d marked for

our escape. There was a staircase leading up to the ramparts off to one side. Once up onto the wall, Myrina and Cyra both seemed sure we'd survive the jump down.

But that was when I realized the first kink in our plan—there was already a huge contingent of guards lining the walls.

“Trouble ahead!” I shouted to my companions. “I’ll go take a look. We might need to find another route.”

“Make it quick, please!” Cyra skidded to a stop, bringing the chain of bruised and bloody prisoners to a halt behind her.

She tugged the length of chain with one hand and held her bloody sword in the other. Guards spilled out along the street, coming for us in twos and threes. She and Myrina stood back to back as they prepared to fight.

I vanished up the stairs, poking my head up just enough to see what was happening.

Damn it!

It was another squad of dungeon divers, causing trouble. This was the team that had taken the quest to open the gates from the inside—only they hadn’t been discreet about it. They were fighting over the winches and had even gotten one of the interior portcullises raised. The gate could be opened if they could make their way over to the other one and raise it, as well.

Unfortunately, the obvious way they’d gone about their infiltration had attracted almost all of the city’s militia to their position. Now, the five of them were completely surrounded on all sides by more than a hundred angry militia. There was no way they’d ever make it to the other winch. From the look of things, they were battered, drained, and already down a member.

My eyes lit on the other winch. There was a single person guarding it. Everyone else had abandoned their post to attack the other adventuring party.

I’d have to make this quick.

I activated Arcane Blade. I'd tested the spell a few times, but this would be my first time depending on it for a kill. A faint outline of blue light covered my sword, and it suddenly felt sturdier in my grasp. With the spell active, I fired Mania up all the way to Blood Frenzy.

The hazy blue outline grew brighter and more physical as dark shadows crept along the length of the magic blade. I suspected any weapon in my hands would have real heft to it, even if I'd cast the spell on a twig. By using Arcane Blade on a real sword, it was even more powerful.

Weapon ready, I used Warp Step to position myself behind the guard, then lined up my shot. I darted in before the guard could turn, bending my newly improved proficiencies to the task. In one swift motion, I jammed my sword through the tiny gap between the guard's helmet and his breastplate.

The amount of damage Arcane Blade did under those conditions was immense—far more than I could have managed with any of my other spells, besides perhaps my ultimate.

**You have dealt a Critical Blow!**

**You have killed a guard.**

**You have gained a level!**

At least one good thing had come from this not being a monster hunt. I needed every level I could get. Dealing with the guard had been surprisingly easy, but I feared my next task would be anything but.

"You!" I yelled to the other party of adventurers as I turned my winch. "Start opening the gates!"

The other adventurers saw me and yelped with joy. Two of them spun the wheel connected to their winch. We got the gate halfway up before more guards surged towards me. But I still had a trick up my sleeves. I'd been in a party with Myrina and Cyra the whole time, and all this fighting had charged my ultimate.

**You have activated your Ultimate, Secrets of the Unseen.**

A color I'd only ever seen when casting this spell blossomed in my hand. I'd forgotten what it looked like. Perhaps if I pushed myself to a higher level of Mania, I'd be able to remember it when this was over. I pushed that thought down.

That was my class talking, and I didn't need the distractions it was so fond of.

Time slowed to a crawl as my enormous Mana Bolt barreled right through the militia coming for me and on into the mass of a hundred enemy surrounding the other group of adventurers across from me on the other side of the gates.

My spell tore them to shreds by the dozens. I hadn't realized how useful my ultimate was as an area-of-effect spell—at least not when so many low-level targets were packed together in one place. The sudden rush of energy I received from my Lifesteal ability left me feeling like I was in tip-top shape.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency increased by three to Level 11!**

I quickly cranked the gate the rest of the way up before any more guards could interfere.

A horn sounded in the distance the moment the gates opened. I heard an order given from afar, "The gates are open! Charge!"

The attacking army set down their siege weapons and sprinted for the gate. Within moments, the first of them arrived.

"The city is lost! Flee for your lives!" a militiaman shouted.

"I claim this city in the name of the Samhain Clan!" a proud Amazonian voice called out as more and more Amazonian warriors piled through the open gates.

Without their walls to defend them, the defenders were completely outmatched. These were crafters holding weapons, not warriors able to stand up to those attacking them. I spotted a contingent of militia raising their hands and surrendering

their weapons. The Amazonians tore their armor off, took their weapons, and then started hauling the militia back to camp as their prisoners.

Considering how this world treated prisoners, I doubted they'd enjoy their stay.

## CHAPTER

# NINETEEN

With the assaulting army through the gates, finishing the quest was easy. Myrina and Cyra even tied the prisoners we'd rescued to a pole for safekeeping while they joined in on the looting and pillaging of the conquered city.

“Look, try this on, Carter! It would look perfect on you!” Myrina said as we stood in the smashed-in front door of what had been a jewelry shop.

She held up a wristband of glittering gemstones wrapped in gold. That one bangle held more gemstones than my mother had ever owned.

I grimaced at its gaudy appearance. “I’m not sure it’s my style...”

“Oh?” A grin teased the corner of her lips. “That’s a real shame, because it says here that it increases the accuracy of projectile spells on the hand it’s worn...”

I brightened. “On second thought, styles change over time. Who am I to say what’s fashionable and what’s not in fashion?”

I put the bangle on. Cyra ended up looting something else for me, as well—a new pair of boots. The Boots of Agility granted +10 to my Agility stat.

“I’m not sure you’ll want to keep them... but since we have free rein of the city this dungeon run, you might as well pick up the best stuff you can. Remember, though, we’ll only



be able to bring some of it out of the dungeon with us,” Cyra explained.

The three of us searched for another bag of holding, hoping for an even higher grade than what Myrina had stolen for me. Some of the local lords had such items, but the bags had either been looted by the invading Amazonian dungeon denizens or destroyed at some point during the fighting as the Amazonians took the rest of the city. In the end, we turned in the quest with what we had.

The same soldier who’d given us the quest greeted us back in the siege camp. “Well done, soldiers! I knew you could do it! Now, such excellent work shouldn’t go unrewarded. I’ll let you have your pick of the loot...”

**Quest Completed successfully!**

**You’ve been awarded 400 Dungeon Points for completing your quest.**

**You have been awarded an additional 50 points for each prisoner returned alive. You have earned another 500 Dungeon Points for saving ten convicted scouts.**

**You have been awarded experience directly as a dungeon dive reward!**

**You have gained one class level, one racial level, and one job level!**

**You have been awarded an additional 800 points for participating in the Open the Gates quest!**

**Your 1700 Dungeon Points, after taxes, leave you 850 Dungeon Points that you may redeem for loot.**

**You are currently carrying:**

**Fashionable Wizard’s Robes (200 dungeon points)**

**Boots of Agility (350 dungeon points)**

**Bag of Holding (500 dungeon points)**

**Spellsniper’s Bangle (400 dungeon points)**

The dungeon listed all the items I had on my person, as well as what Myrina and Cyra were carrying. The shop seemed to be fairly intuitive. Out of the items we brought with us, I could choose a few that would remain with me out in the real world. It looked like I could only afford the Bag of Holding and the Boots of Agility.

The rest would have to be returned to being whatever the dungeon used to make this simulated city when the entire dungeon was reset for the next wave of adventurers. With regret, I stared mournfully at the Spellsniper's Bangle I would have to give back. The robes were nice, but I didn't care nearly as much about them.

"I'll yield my points to you, Carter. We came here for you, after all," Myrina said.

Cyra nodded. "Same here. Spend them all."

This gave me more than enough Dungeon Points to exchange for everything we'd found—even after the 50% tax.

"I owe the both of you," I said. My robes, bangle, and boots didn't feel any different after accepting my rewards, but presumably they would remain as they were when we emerged from the Dungeon.

We still had an hour or so left on our dive, so Myrina and Cyra hastily accepted the monster-fighting quest. The three of us split up, intent on clearing out as many monsters as possible before our time limit was up. The monsters dropped cores, and using Disassemble I could take off any valuable body parts from them that I wanted.

I would have done just that if we weren't inside the dungeon, but stuck as we were, I did it more as a way to toy with my new bag of holding than anything else. It ended up having a surprisingly good compatibility with my Disassemble skill. Instead of laying out a monster into its component pieces before me, my skill sent all those component pieces right into my bag of holding.

"That's an impressive skill you've got there, Carter!" Myrina said when she saw it for the first time. "It's like a

looting skill, except that you don't have to wait until the monster dies. Remind me to bring you along next time I go on an adventure through the wilds!"

We returned just before our time was up and earned enough points from the monsters we'd slain for me to leave the dungeon with everything I had on me and everything that I'd stashed in my new bag of holding. The only downside was that my Death Curse considered these monsters the same as real monsters, meaning that unlike the dungeon denizens I'd killed, I received no experience points from them.

When we emerged from the dungeon, Myrina and Cyra's clothes vanished—as both of their outfits had been taken from the dungeon.

"Ah crap, I hate it when that happens," Myrina said, standing with her hands on her hips, completely naked.

I turned around while the two of them rummaged around the nearby crates.

"The dungeon moves lost gear to these boxes near the exit as it resets the world for the next dungeon dive..." Cyra explained as she fished a top out of a barrel.

Soon, both of them were dressed, and we returned to the surface victorious. On my way out, another dungeon diver stopped me. I recognized her as a member of the group that had nearly wiped in their attempt to complete the quest to open the gates.

"Thank you so much for your help! I think all of us would have been finished if not for you. We didn't realize dungeons would be this tough," the woman said. I pegged her as the party's archer.

"No need to thank me. The dungeon already rewarded me for it." I gestured to the new gear I was wearing.

The woman blushed. "Still, I really wish there was some way I could reward you. If you're ever in need of a party, I can—"

"Hey!" Myrina shouted, jumping between the woman and me and wrapping her arms around me possessively. "Get your

own best friend. This one's mine!" She actually hissed like a cat at the archer.

"Ah... so sorry to bother you..." The archer quickly made herself scarce.

I laughed. "Myrina, what was that all about? She just wanted to thank me."

"She wanted to steal you away, you mean," Myrina huffed. "I won't stand for it, at least not from anyone as weak as them. Her entire party would have wiped if not for you. They're a dozen levels too low to even think about even talking to you!"

I was sure that the archer's level had been higher than mine. I hadn't been rude enough to check, but it had to be for her group to hold off so many militia as long as they did. The only reason I could save them was because I'd been in the right place at the right time.

I sighed when I realized Myrina would fit in well with Bridget and Sakura. The two of them had turned quite possessive of me as of late. Not that things would ever come to that between me and Myrina. The two of us were just friends.

Best friends, to be sure, but nothing more than that. After all, I didn't plan on getting my head squished.



Things finally calmed down for me after the dungeon run. With my new items in hand, I settled in to train at the castle. I only had two more days here, and I planned to make the most of them. I practiced my knife throwing, picked up that Meditation proficiency, and worked on just about everything I could work on without engaging in actual combat.

Myrina showed me all the tips and tricks to using a bag of holding, answering my many questions as she taught me to use it in the same way she'd been taught. I had her teach me about dozens of different races, monster types, and the best ways to fight them. The years of generational knowledge she provided me about the System saved me—and likely most of Crownhill—years of fumbling and experimenting to figure out how things worked for ourselves.

“I just worry that my companions back home might have poor builds. I’d love to have them go through what I have with you,” I admitted.

Myrina shrugged. “Theory Crafters are expensive. As are skill books. Since I no longer lack my mother’s support, I *might* be able to bring those two lovers of yours over. Sakura and Bridget, wasn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Yes, I should be able to swing it for the two of them. But we’re your patrons, not the patrons for your entire city. You’ll have to do your own research while you’re here and bring it back to them, if you want them to benefit as you have. Perhaps, in the future, you can bring a Theory Crafter back to Earth with you, but that will have to wait until your shard has progressed and stabilized. The System will not allow outsiders any time soon, and for good reason, too. If Cyra or I were to appear, our power would be enough to conquer your entire shard.”

“But if you were a lower level, the System would let you through earlier?” I asked.

Myrina shrugged. “Yes, it would. Perhaps on a temporary basis, like how you can come here. But since I’ve already gained the levels, I can’t exactly ungain them.”

I chuckled. “Of course not...”

Cyra stopped by several times to help me train in the practice arena. We battled and fought, focusing more on my proficiencies than my levels. Myrina had stayed tight-lipped about my Death Curse, but with how quickly I’d been picking up new proficiency levels through training, Cyra had needed little convincing to see this was what I’d benefit from the most.

Though my level had only improved by one since I’d been here—though I knew I wasn’t far from reaching level 31—I felt completely transformed as a fighter. They’d shored up the weaknesses in my fighting style and helped me to better exploit my strengths.

“I’m jealous,” Cyra remarked on the final morning of my tutorial on Themyscira. “Less than a week, and you went from bumbling amateur who couldn’t even hold his sword properly to someone who looks like they’ve been training for at least a year. You might be good enough with a sword to match a professional... in another month or two. Don’t challenge any blade masters to a duel quite yet, but I imagine you’ll be able to hold your own against all but the best from any newly integrated worlds.”

Cyra and Myrina both suggested I’d eventually be up against civilizations with trained warrior castes and hereditary warriors—like knights and samurai. While the most common civilizations out in the wider universe might be stone-age tribesmen, the average civilization powerful enough to survive the first few stages of the integration was typically more advanced. That almost always meant a feudalistic society of landed lords and peasants who were slaves in all but name. Most civilizations tended to reach that point in their development, but then stalled out indefinitely.

“So that would be the great filter, then?” I asked. “Or one of them, at any rate.”

“The great what?” Myrina asked.

“My people always wondered why we never saw signs of more advanced civilizations everywhere we looked. We theorized there had to be some threshold that a civilization needed to pass to discover interstellar travel. Whether the great filter was ahead of us or behind us was a subject for great debate,” I explained.

Myrina shrugged. “I’ve never heard anything about a ‘great filter’ before... but sure. It makes sense. Your people seemed to think a lot about things other than where their next meal was coming from and who to mate with.” She bounced her brows at me at ‘mate’.

“Myrina...” I warned. “We’ve been over this—several times. I don’t want to drag Cyra into this and have to embarrass you about this ‘hysteria’—mmmph!”

The mere mention of the H-word caused Myrina's face to turn the color of her hair. She clapped both hands over my mouth and looked around guiltily to see who else might have heard me. The only one who could have was Cyra, and she just stood there chuckling at her little sister's antics.

Of course, Cyra had most definitely not been chuckling the three times she'd had to pull Myrina off of me. Fortunately, two of those times I'd been fully clothed—hell, one time had been here in the arena when she'd unexpectedly pulled me into a grapple. The one time she'd caught me in the bath, though, it was a good thing Cyra had been nearby. That was why I'd ended up sleeping in Cyra's room the last night of my tutorial.

Pulling her hands back slowly from my mouth, Myrina glared at me as if daring me to bring up the H-word again. "Now... what were we talking about? Oh, yes! Do you think your world will be known for its philosophers someday?"

It was my turn to shrug, though a grin still tugged at the corners of my mouth. "Unlikely."

My thoughts turned back to the relatively primitive pre-industrial technology I'd witnessed folks back home already developing. It was too early to say for sure, but I was almost certain we'd be better known for what we could make than what we thought. We talked about it as we headed back to the castle for dinner.

Eventually, I got the notification we'd all known was coming.

**You are approaching your Tutorial time limit and must return to your shard for a period of at least as long as your time away from it. Your transportation will begin shortly. Ensure you've gathered everything together you wish to return with.**

**If your patron would like to continue your training, they must pay the transportation costs to bring you back again.**

"Looks like this is it," I said over dinner as I received the notification. "It was nice spending time with you again after so

long, Myrina.” I nodded to Cyra, who was sitting next to us. “And it was nice to get to know you as well, Cyra.”

Myrina wrapped her arms around my shoulders, and Cyra gave me a smile.

“I do find myself curious about just how far you’ll go,” Cyra admitted.

I raised an eyebrow. “Curious enough that you’d give Myrina the funds to teleport me back here?”

“Hmm...” Cyra tapped her chin in thought.

“Big Sis!” Myrina pleaded. “Please? Though Mother won’t be opposed, she’d still need to use her personal funds instead of clan funds for it. And you know she’d want something from me for that.”

“Maybe I should take a tip from Mother’s playbook, then?” Cyra tapped her chin in thought, then sighed. “Only there’s nothing you have that I want.”

“But what could I offer you?” I asked, butting in. “There’s plenty of monsters on Earth; I’m sure I could bring rare components or parts back with me. Oh! And one of my companions has a baking profession—she’s quite good at it.”

Cyra’s eyes lit up. “Say no more, Carter. Bring me a thousand golds’ worth of the finest food your world has to offer, and we have a deal. But take this, too.”

She reached into her dimensional storage pouch and pulled out a fine wooden box. “Inside that box, you’ll find a teleportation destination array. It won’t let you teleport anywhere, but it will make it a lot cheaper to lock on to your location—making your return here much more affordable,” Cyra explained.

“Thanks, Sis!” Myrina shot her big sister a beaming smile.

Cyra laughed. “Don’t thank me, Myrina, Carter’s paying for this one! I’m willing to gamble on him providing me something good to eat.”

“Only the best for you, Cyra,” I promised.



Already, the tips of my fingers were turning translucent. Out of the corners of my eye, I could make out a grassy valley that looked a lot like home. The way the System transported me now was a lot different from what I'd experienced at the hands of the teleporter Myrina had hired.

"Carter!" Myrina seemed to sense me leaving, and she suddenly had the saddest look on her face as she teared up. "I... I feel like you just arrived here."

She pushed herself up against me. I accepted her embrace and returned it.

"I know, Myrina. But this isn't goodbye, at least not for long. The System says I have to spend at least as long as I've been here back home before I can return. That isn't too long. It'll pass before you know it."

"I already miss you..." Myrina held on to me for a few seconds longer as her world faded away.

I reappeared in my valley, like opening my eyes from a dream. Just before I reappeared, though, I could have sworn I felt a kiss on my cheek.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY

“Grab him!” I heard a familiar voice yell. It was Sakura.

“Hey Sakura. Hey Bridget. I’m back!” I yelled in reply. Bridget came rushing out of the house as I heard pounding footsteps behind me. I spun around as I said, “What’s got the two of you all—oof!”

I yelped when Sakura tackled me. Soon, Bridget was on top of me, too. I felt a tingle run up my spine as someone used Examine on me.

“I know what you’ve been up to, mister! I knew it the moment I saw the look in that vixen’s eyes!” Sakura growled as she stared deep into my eyes. “My jealousy burns like the sun! Soon it will—”

“Wait, Sakura. You were wrong. Look at his level.” Bridget gestured at me, and I felt the first tingle fade as a second one began. “It’s only two more than when he left.”

“Huh.” Sakura sat up. “Wait, you mean to say you didn’t fuck your hot best friend, the one you haven’t seen in years?”

I sat up. “No, I didn’t. Is that what this is about?”

Much to my confusion, Sakura got angry again. “What’s wrong with you? Did you not see her? She was gorgeous!”

I coughed and spluttered. “Excuse me?”

Sakura poked me in the chest. “She was all over you. What kind of red-blooded man could spend days alone with someone like her without getting busy?”

I furrowed my brows. “Sakura, Bridget, I swear that I did nothing with Myrina. Sure, she flirted with me much more than was probably appropriate, but we had a talk and we’re just friends. That’s how we want it to be, and that’s how it is.”

I wasn’t about to tell them how Myrina had pinned me against a wall—twice!—and tried to seduce me. Or how I was pretty sure she’d snuck into my bed several times at night. Or how her big sister had dragged her out of the bath where she was smothering me with her tits as she stroked me with her hand.

“Ugh. I can’t believe this.” Sakura shook her head. “We had an entire night planned where we were going to prove to you that we’re ten times better than any Amazon hussy you might have known when you were a kid!”

Bridget snickered. “Then Sakura planned to mix in some cold shoulders and hard tack for lunch. And only after you begged and pleaded a little, would we finally relent and let you talk to her into some more hot and sweaty sex.”

“That’s Sakura...” I poked the furiously blushing Oni. “What about you?”

Bridget shrugged. “So long as we set some ground rules about the relationship and had some private time to talk to her—just us girls—I was okay with it. We even got the candles and everything for when we finally made up and stopped being mad at you.”

I gave them both a sad face. “Now, it seems that all our preparations are wasted. And it’s too bad that you won’t get to talk to her any time soon, because I’m certain she knows a bunch of stuff that would help you with your classes.”

Bridget nodded glumly. “She would have been really useful—especially if we could hold this over her head and guilt her into helping us out.”

I blinked a few times in confusion. “Oh... well... I’m sorry I didn’t sleep around behind your backs?”

Sakura harrumphed. “You better be. Bridget! Change of plans. Swap out the cherry pie for a pecan pie tonight. Carter

only deserves his second-favorite dessert after putting us through this roller coaster.”

“You think I put *you* through a roller coaster?” I shook my head, then followed it up with a laugh. I couldn’t help it. What had my life come to ever since the apocalypse?



Sakura and Bridget caught me up on everything they’d done during my absence. Mostly, it was a lot of hunting, gathering supplies, and turning my farmhouse from a place I’d built to survive an apocalypse into a place where the three of us could actually live.

I hadn’t realized how barren the place had been, despite my renovations. The empty hallways were now lined with rugs, the walls held paintings and tapestries, and every room was packed with furniture. It made the place feel a lot smaller but also a lot cozier.

“We’ve been shopping,” Sakura said.

“By shopping, Sakura means we’ve been looting abandoned houses for stuff,” Bridget explained.

“Ah. Well, I suppose that’s a given during an apocalypse. So long as nobody was using it, the stuff’s just going to rot where it is.” I gave them both an approving nod.

“You have more space than you realize, you know,” Sakura said as she picked up her slice of pecan pie and started eating it like it was a slice of pizza. “The wall there leads to the messed-up copies of your house!”

Sakura went quiet for a moment as she ate, and Bridget finished explaining it to me. “We’ve been thinking about knocking down a few walls and expanding things. Sakura seems to think that all we have to do is move a couple of supports in the right places, and we could double the size of the house.”

I shrugged. “This place was plenty big for just me, but if the two of you want more space, then you’re welcome to it. I’ll take a more thorough look at the house later, though. I did

enough work on this place that I should be able to tell if knocking out a wall or putting in a new one is likely to bring the roof crashing down on our heads.”

“But enough about us!” Sakura set her empty plate down. “We did nothing interesting. Tell us about you! What happened while you were away? Did your childhood friend sneak into your bed at night when you weren’t looking, only for you to coldly and cruelly rebuff her?”

I rolled my eyes. “Nothing like that happened, Sakura.”

She was dangerously close to what had actually happened my first night on Themyscira and the conversation I’d had with Myrina the next morning.

“It was exactly what she said it would be,” I continued, “a tutorial mission where she taught me how to use the System, how to train, and took me on a dungeon dive.”

I explained some of what I’d learned from the Theory Crafter and my days of training, but Bridget and Sakura were much more interested in hearing about Myrina.

“It sounds like she wanted to kiss you.” Bridget nodded sagely.

“What? Myrina? No.” I frowned. “Well, alright, maybe. But it just wouldn’t work.” *Though it wasn’t for Myrina’s lack of trying to make it work*, I thought to myself.

“Why?” Sakura elbowed me curiously. “You have something against redheads? I’ll admit that, at least in movies and books these days, they always seem to be depicted as fiery and headstrong, but that’s mostly just for show. It also seems like the authors who write about books with strong-willed red-headed love interests always end up getting fat.”

“No way!” I scoffed.

“There’s that guy who wrote the book with the dragons and a civil war, the one about the guy who kills kings, the one about the thief and his acting troupe, the one with the knights with magic swords and armor...” Sakura trailed off as she counted off a worryingly large number of authors who, it

seemed, both wrote strong-willed red-headed love interests into their books and who must have ended up getting fat.

“It must be a curse or something. I’d be pretty scared if I was an author writing a book with a red-headed love interest,” Bridget admitted as she picked up our plates and then headed into the kitchen.

“I have nothing against redheads,” I insisted. “And there’s no such curse!”

“If you say so...” Sakura trailed off, clearly not believing me.

Bridget glanced back at both of us and threw us a coy shrug as she washed the dishes.

“Anyway...” I tried to steer the conversation back to my training and what I’d learned. “Myrina taught me a lot about how the System works. I got a neat bag of holding, too. I’ll show you both how it works. There are a lot of menus you wouldn’t even think to access. She told me I—”

“Post-pie dessert anyone?” Bridget asked, returning with a plate full of pastries.

“Ugh, Bridget! If we hadn’t spent the entire week hunting monsters, I’d have already put on ten pounds...” Sakura moaned as she bit into a pastry bursting with jam.

Bridget stifled a giggle as she passed the plate to me. “Sorry... not sorry! I want those chef job levels.”

“This is delicious. Thank you, Bridget. Now, as I was saying about the System menus—”

“Wait a second. You skipped the part about the kiss.” Bridget pouted as she curled up next to me. “Go back. I must have missed it while I was in the kitchen.”

“Yeah, Carter! Where’s the human intrigue in your story? All I’m hearing is a boring how-to on menu navigation,” Sakura groaned.

I sighed in defeat. Then I took another bite of Bridget’s pastry. At least defeat tasted good.

Bridget pressed her cheek against the side of my chest, looking up at me with doleful eyes. Not to be outdone, Sakura flipped herself around and rested her head in my lap. With a roll of my eyes, I returned to what the two of them seemed to care most about. Unfortunately, I was going to ruin the whole romance for them before it even got going.

“Myrina and I aren’t an item, you two. Don’t worry, she can help us plenty as just my friend. Our friend, if the two of you learn to play nice with her. And we’re not just friends because I don’t like redheads or something equally silly.”

I took a deep breath. “The truth is... Myrina or her family will squish my head if I get serious with her. It’s just not happening.”

“Uh... what?” Bridget asked.

“Like... smush your brains into paste type of squish your head?” Sakura furrowed her brows.

I nodded to both of them. “That’s right. Apparently, it’s an Amazonian tradition. An Amazonian will only take a man after he proves he can beat her in battle. Instead of an engagement ring, they have a fight to the death... well, death on the guy’s end. Presumably, it’s just until she surrenders for the Amazonian.”

“Wait. So you’re saying that Myrina can’t get with you because her culture will force her to fight you until either you are dead or she surrenders? And she can’t do that because her level is so much higher than yours that it wouldn’t be a fair fight?” Sakura let out a short bark of a laugh that quickly grew louder and continued for much longer.

Eventually, clutching her belly, she fell off the couch and onto the floor. That didn’t stop her from laughing, though.

“That’s tragic... and terribly romantic—in a messed-up way. Forbidden love...” Bridget sighed into my chest.

“It’s funny!” Sakura snorted, still laughing uncontrollably. “She clearly loves our Carter, but can’t get what she wants without a fight to the death! Wait, that means she’s probably never had a boyfriend before... Ha! That’s even better.”

“That tradition doesn’t sound very fair.” Bridget shook her head sadly, though she was hiding a smile beneath her hand.

“Oh my god, this is perfect! Thank you, Carter!” Sakura cackled. “I have so much ammunition to use against her, now. Next time she shows her smug face, she won’t dare tease us. I won’t have to destroy another chair, either...”

“I’m glad the two of you find it amusing.” I shook my head. “For your information, I spent every night there sweating my rear off for fear that she’d sneak into my bed and initiate something that would end with me fleeing from her family like my life depended on it—which it would have.”

After being fully briefed on the romantic front, Bridget and Sakura were at last ready to listen to what I’d learned about designing classes, builds, picking spells, and how best to train proficiencies. Having the two of them curled up next to me brought to mind something I’d missed since I’d run off with Myrina: these two women needed me.

We were partners. And while the two of them could hold their own against minor threats and were strong enough to keep the house free of monsters, against foes like the Alpha Wolfman, they needed my help. That was a stark contrast to what I had felt like with the Samhain Clan. There, I’d spent a tremendous amount of effort just to go from a burden that needed to be protected to someone worth treating as an equal partner.

There was something fulfilling, deep down, knowing there were people here who depended on me. It was quite the responsibility, to be sure, but it was one that put a little extra pep in my step and gave meaning to all my hard work. If I had been the kind of man who preferred a carefree life, I would never have brought Sakura back with me to my home.

Before that, I never would have joined the others in establishing the shelter back in Crownhill. And I never would have fought Craig. And yet I had done all those things and grown stronger for it.

Before the integration, I’d not been anyone special. But now, I was special. If not to the people of Crownhill, then at



least to the pair of women curled up with me.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-ONE

After a very welcome return home, I realized there was little time to waste and much work to be done. I set up the teleportation pad that Cyra had given me in one corner of the house out of the weather, following the instructions that were included in the small box.

It wasn't that dissimilar to a modern furniture kit. I switched the nails out for screws to hold the whole thing together, though, and added a few bolts underneath to ensure it stayed in place.

What I read from the instructions told me it was essential that it not move at all during activation. And after my experience with the previous teleportation, I wanted to make things as safe as possible. I used the heaviest bolts I had.

Bridget was done with breakfast just as I finished up, and Sakura milled around outside our home patrolling for monsters. With my return, my Death Curse was bringing critters out of the woods to harass us, and she was busy squishing them before they could make it to the front door.

"I need to grab some salvage. I really need more copper wire. You two ladies wouldn't happen to have seen any in the abandoned houses you looted our new furniture from?" I asked.

"We can take you," Sakura agreed. "We took off early last time because of a few monsters, but we've earned a few levels since then. And with you there, we might as well clear them out."

“Done,” I replied.

The two of them had done a good job picking up a few more levels while I’d been gone. They weren’t quite back to where they had been when I’d drained the two of them to prepare for my final battle with the Alpha Wolfman, but they would get there with just a day or two of diligent training. And they’d do so with far higher proficiency levels with most of their abilities, meaning they’d be a notch stronger than others at their level.

We packed our things as soon as we were finished eating. Sakura hopped in the passenger side seat of my truck and I fired it up. The driver’s seat was pushed forward, so I could tell Sakura and Bridget had used it to pick up the new furniture in the house.

“Bridget, make sure the siphon is in back. We’ll need to top off the truck, and I’d rather take whatever’s in the tanks of the abandoned cars along the road than raid our jerry cans.”

Bridget flashed me a thumbs up, and soon we were off.

The drive was uneventful. There were a few monsters, but nothing that even had me stop the truck. I killed most of them with a finger gun and a mana bolt. There was one enormous squirrel that I drove by, but Sakura leaned her head out the window and smashed it to paste using her baseball bat like a golf club.

“Hole in one!” Sakura proclaimed as the remains of the squirrel monster landed in a pit.

“You weren’t aiming for that,” I snorted.

“You can’t prove a thing!” Sakura tilted her chin up in pride and crossed her arms under her breasts.

Eventually, we came to an abandoned neighborhood. There were clear signs of a struggle. The integration had happened in the middle of the workday, so most people had been in town. But apparently enough folks had been home that there had still been a sizable population of humans around—for a while, at least.

There were enough bodies and smashed-open doors that I was pretty sure none of the homeowners were still around.

“Did you figure out who did this?” I asked, eyeing the body of an older retiree lying face down in the street.

He was surrounded by a large, dried bloodstain. Not all of it was his own either—he had a bent and bloody crowbar in his limp grasp. The locals hadn’t gone down without a fight.

“We knocked on all the doors, but only found one woman and her baby. She said raiders came through here. Mostly ex-convicts from the prison back near the city. It sounds like they killed most of the people who could fight while scavenging for guns,” Bridget replied. “Then the monsters came. We found her hiding in a hidden compartment under her stairs as we were digging through her stuff. I only barely managed to hear her. We ended up driving her to Crownhill for shelter.”

“And in return, she gave us her finest chair! It’s even better than the one I broke,” Sakura added.

“Raiders, huh?” I grimaced.

I would have preferred fighting monsters. Though there was one advantage to hunting my fellow humans. Unlike monsters, my curse was perfectly happy to let me get experience points from them.

“I imagine they’re long gone.” Bridget shrugged.

“Still, you two should stick close... and let me know if you see any signs of the idiots. Until then, let’s see if we can’t salvage some goodies.” I handed Sakura a sledgehammer to replace her trusty baseball bat.

With her doing the smashing, we made short work of a few power boxes. We soon found a whole drawer full of charger cables for cellphones and tablets as well. We took all of those, too.

“How many more Mana Bombs do you plan on making?” Bridget asked.

“Lots,” I promised. “As many as I can, really.” After all, I had found the perfect market for them.

Carrying everything back to the truck would have been terribly tedious, but I let Bridget and Sakura do it twice before showing off my new item.

“Oh, Bridget,” I said as I stopped her from picking up a large bundle of wires, “I’ve got that.” I scooped it up in one hand and shoved the messy bundle of wires she’d been about to pick up into my bag of holding—one handful at a time.

“Woah! Is that what I think it is?” Bridget’s eyes widened.

Sakura dropped the refrigerator she’d been carrying over her shoulder. “Wait! You can just shove stuff in a magic bag instead of hauling it around? No fair! Also, why don’t I have one of those?”

I chuckled. “Myrina helped me get it as a quest reward. When I’m able to bring the two of you over to her world, I’m sure she’ll help you two get one of your own—assuming you’re both nice to her.”

Bridget nodded.

Sakura looked torn. “But I’ve already come up with so many witty jibes to use against her...”

With my bag of holding, the process went a lot faster and we soon stripped the house of anything of value. Unfortunately the bag’s contents weren’t infinite, so we had to put the refrigerator Sakura wanted in the back of the truck. We were just finishing up strapping it down, when trouble came calling.

“Did you two hear something?” Bridget asked suddenly.

I stopped what I was doing. I heard the sound of an engine running in the distance, and it was getting closer.

“Seems like we have visitors,” I said.

Sakura reached through the open window of my truck for her baseball bat. She hefted it over her shoulder while I prepared my spells and Bridget’s fingernails lengthened. They’d always been a little too sharp to be strictly human, but the faint glow of mana at their tips made me think they were more like knives now.

To me, that seemed like a power that should come more from cats than from wolves. But then again, the wolfmen weren't exactly from Earth. Perhaps whatever wolf they'd been before their transformation had claws as sharp as any cat's.

The sound of engines in the distance grew louder, and with it, loud whooping and yelling.

"I don't think these are survivors looking for their lost belongings," I muttered to my companions.

"Good!" Sakura hefted her bat over her shoulder. "Because I want this fridge. I've already got a place picked out for it and everything."

A minute later, we saw them as they streamed down the street. There were six cars in total. The state of them made it look like the apocalypse had happened a decade ago instead of just a few days. The windows on them had been smashed and a dozen men in slapdash armor rode with guns and machetes on full display.

I took the opportunity to use examine on them.

**Raider Scavenger — Level 10**

**Raider Thug — Level 12**

**Raider Swashbuckler — Level 14**

**Raider Gunner — Level 15**

I made sure I had Deflect up and running. Thanks to my training with Myrina and Cyra, I now had substantial bonuses to it through my proficiencies, something that I'd lacked before. It hadn't been all that useful against their swords and spears, but I found I was almost eager to test it against guns once more.

My days of practice had decreased its cooldown to the point that it would be useful for more than just at the start of a fight.

"Well well well... look who we have here? More survivors, I take it?" asked the Raider Gunner.

He had the sleazy voice of someone confident they were in complete control of the situation. Which they weren't. I waited for the familiar tingle to run up my spine and change their attitudes.

Their levels may have looked impressive back in Crownhill, but not by much. Bridget and Sakura could both match them, thanks to all the leveling they'd been doing while I was gone. And I was more than twice the level of their strongest member.

Unfortunately, I didn't get the satisfaction of seeing that realization dawn on their brutish faces. It looked like word hadn't spread to them about the value of the Examine skill. Nobody in their band had it, so they didn't even realize how badly outmatched they were.

"Lookie here, boys, we've got two cuties! What are the pair of you doing out here all alone? I know, how about the two of you climb in back with us. We'll protect you. Meanwhile, you can... entertain us."

Bridget growled. The sound didn't seem quite human. Sakura's reaction, on the other hand, was quite human. She showed the raiders her middle finger.

"I take it you fellows are here to scavenge for supplies as well?" I raised an eyebrow.

A spell tickled the tips of my fingers. They had about ten seconds to change my opinion of them. Otherwise they were about to turn into experience points. I planned on rebuilding Crownhill and surviving the apocalypse. The System had even entrusted me with lordship over the city and its people by granting me ownership of the settlement. And assholes like these didn't deserve a place in my settlement.

While I was an advocate for my fellow humans and those who could work alongside us like the goblins Chief Wubwub had abandoned to my care, I had no intention of allowing wild criminal elements to run rampant through the countryside. When we finally met other races on the level of Myrina's people, I swore their first impression of the humans of

Crownhill would be of an organized and stable society—not mad hooligans raiding and pillaging as they pleased.

“Hey! Wipe that smirk off your face! Don’t get all cocky on us,” the Raider Gunner sneered at me.

For a brief moment, I even thought he might call me a nerd and threaten to give me a wedgie. “Are you finished?” I asked.

“Nope!” The Raider Gunner grinned at me, showing off a surprising number of teeth, considering his profession. “So, punk, it just so happens we have some friends who could use some fresh meat. And I mean that literally. If you beg us to let you join our crew, maybe we’ll let you live. If not, then you’re going into the stew pot! You’ve got ten seconds to—”

My patience ran out midway through his speech and I sent a Mana Bolt through his skull.

“Boss!”

“He killed Gunner!”

“Get him!”

Sweaty leather-bound men piled out of the nearby cars. My senses locked on each of them, processing them and their threat levels and preparing for battle in ways I hadn’t even known I should before my training with Cyra.

I ducked behind the rear wheel well of my truck, shielding myself from half their number while I channeled Mana Bolt and Eldritch Blast. I kicked Mania up to the first level—Dissonance. Any squeamishness I might have still had left on taking a life vanished the moment I activated my class’s otherworldly power.

“Good riddance,” I muttered as I fired an Eldritch Blast with one hand.

Instead of just knocking the man back and singeing his skin, though, the level difference between the two of us was such that my spell blew a hole straight through his stomach. It dealt even more damage than the Mana Bolt I’d just killed the other asshole with.



My spells hadn't changed as I'd gained levels, but the proficiency levels associated with them had. Those had undergone a fundamental change, and now my abilities took less mana to cast, had shorter cooldowns, and did more damage than ever before. Even though they were the same basic combat spells, they felt like they'd been completely transformed. I hadn't thought they'd reach this point until I upgraded them.

Then again, there was a lot I hadn't thought about before my tutorial with Myrina.

One of the men with a machete rushed me. I couldn't help but note that his grip was wrong—just as mine had been. He let loose a reckless slash, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes as he closed with me. At the last moment, I sidestepped his lunge and fired a Mana Bolt before swapping to Eldritch Augmentation.

I overpowered him with my raw stats, knocked his weapon from his hands and, before I knew it, was drawing his own blade across his throat as I shoved him to the ground. He clutched the bleeding ruin that was his throat with a wide-eyed expression of surprise and incomprehension.

With the machete in hand, I cast Arcane Blade over it. Blue light coated the weapon, creating a longer and slender outline over it. The image Arcane Blade created wasn't of a tool for chopping vegetation, but a weapon of war. Cocking my arm back, I threw it.

It was time to see how much I could stretch that new Knife Throwing proficiency. The sword spun end over end to slam hilt-deep into the chest of a startled raider. He clutched at the handle a few times before falling to his knees and coughing up blood.

Sakura and Bridget hadn't been idle. They took out one foe each. Bridget drew her fingers across a man's chest. She didn't look like she'd even touched him, yet his heavy leather jacket had four slashes down much of its length in the shape of claws.

She pulled a dagger from her belt with her other hand and then knocked him off his feet. With a snarl, Bridget leaned over the fallen Raider. When she stood, the dagger that had been in her hand was plunged hilt-deep in the man's eye.

Sakura had been far less delicate than either of us in her ruthless brutality. She'd held her club aloft, crimson light coating its length. And when she swung her club, she didn't hold back in the slightest. As she swung it, her club made a *crack* as it split the air.

The head she smashed evaporated in a spray of crimson blood, and the rest of his corpse was knocked back with such force that it snapped the spine of the man behind him when that unlucky fellow crashed into their car. He left a human-shaped dent in the side of their vehicle.

"Hyaaaa!" Sakura let out a wordless battle cry, charging forward with her weapon raised once more. The horn jutting out of her forehead glowed the same crimson shade as the bat in her hands.

With six dead in the blink of an eye, some of the raiders realized things weren't going so well for them. The furthest group from us stopped in their tracks and turned their ferocious charge into a retreat, piling back in their van as quickly as they'd piled out of it.

Their driver slammed on the gas with such haste that he plowed right into the curb, popping one of his tires in the process. That didn't stop them, though. The driver and the raiders aboard the van sped off as their popped tire batted against the body of the van, making a racket that would attract every monster within earshot.

I glared at the men that remained. Perhaps after today some of these raiders would reconsider their choice in profession. For most of them, those who had yet to hear of Crownhill, they probably thought what they were doing was the only way to survive the apocalypse. We disabused them of that notion.

The three of us dealt with the remaining raiders too slow to escape in short order. I got several new notifications in the

process, though in accordance with Myrina's advice, I'd reorganized my notification priority list to only show critical information during battle. Things like level-ups and proficiency upgrades could wait until the fighting was over.

"Die!" Sakura growled from the depths of her Oni berserker battle rage.

I realized there was something odd about her opponent—mostly due to the fact that Sakura had smashed his head in once already. That wasn't the sort of thing any human should have been able to survive. And yet this man's head was folding back together fast enough that I could see it happening. He hobbled around on his hands and knees, deaf and blind, but he was healing.

"Wait a mo—" I held up my hand, but I was too slow to stop Sakura's club from coming down a second time.

The man collapsed to the ground, twitching in a heap. But, much to my surprise, he was still alive.

"Die for real this time!" Sakura bellowed again, raising her club to smash what was left of the man to paste.

"Wait!" I held up both hands this time, and Sakura stopped herself from following through with her swing. "Something's off about that guy."

I looked him over. He seemed normal enough—at least as far as apocalypse raiders could be considered normal. He had almond skin, a smooth-shaven head, and wore a shirt made of leather straps that belonged in a fetish shop rather than as apocalyptic survival gear. He'd probably been someone who watched Mad Max one too many times and took it a little too seriously.

He started twitching again, and I used Examine.

### **Raider Thug — Level 12.**

I frowned, not learning anything new. How was he regenerating?

This would take more thought. And more abilities. With that thought, I tried something new.

Instead of Examine, I switched to using Study—the rare class skill that also contained all the features of the Analyze ability. Normally it was for figuring out what items and raw materials were good for. Now, I looked at the man before me like he was artificer material. That gave me the first clue about what I was looking for.

“Human flesh. Shirt. Pants. Oh... hello? What’s this?” Eyeing the man somewhere around his chest, I sensed the presence of something inside of him that wasn’t supposed to be there. It was a little blue orb somewhere just beneath the surface of his chest. It was glowing too, which was the only reason I could make it out from beneath his skin.

I stared at it hard until my Study skill revealed its identity to me.

### **Blessed Second Heart of the Troll (Rare)**

“Now how did that get in there?” I muttered as the man’s head finished regenerating.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-TWO

While it didn't take long for a fleshy lump roughly in the shape of a head to regenerate, it took considerably longer for the man to come to his senses. I checked my notifications while I was at it.

**Congratulations!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has advanced to level 28!**

It had been some time since my last level-up, so this was a welcome message. The proficiency numbers were what I had really been looking forward to, though. I checked some of the detailed System menus Myrina had shown me. There had been huge arrays of information available that I'd never known were there—you just had to know where to look.

I could spend hours analyzing every spell I cast, if I wanted to see every modifier that affected the attack.

**You cast Mana Bolt!**

**Your Caster Proficiency increased the damage of your attack by 70%!**

**Your Neutral Mana Proficiency decreased the mana cost of your attack by 50%!**

**Your wand, bracelet, and robes increased the damage and accuracy of your spell.**

**Your Spellsniper Proficiency allowed you to land a critical hit!**

Those three proficiencies in particular had done a lot of work helping me cut through the raiders. Without them I would have needed to land a lot more spells. The effects were even more dramatic when I used Arcane Blade.

Getting an entire sword lodged in a target was already enough to deal a lot of damage. And with the increased base damage, my proficiency bonuses turned a crippling attack into a one-shot kill. I doubted I'd be dropping something like an ogre with a thrown machete, even with a critical hit, but it was a trick I'd have to remember.

By the time I finished reviewing the results of the battle, Bridget had already taken any good weapons she'd spotted off the dead raiders and our captive was waking up.

“Do you remember anything?” Sakura asked.

The way she smacked her bloody bat against her open palm made me suspect that she intended to beat the memories into him if he didn't answer correctly.

“W-who? What?” the man mumbled.

His eyes caught on Sakura's horn. “D-demon!” He scrambled backward as he struggled to climb to his feet.

Sakura put a stop to that right away. She took one step forward and planted her boot on the man's chest, pinning him to the ground as firmly as if he had a truck parked on top of him.

“I'm not a demon, I'm an Oni!” Sakura spat in reply. Then she hesitated. “Well... I guess some people might consider Oni a type of demon. So, maybe a little bit of a demon?”

The man trembled beneath her boot.

I strode up behind him. “I've got a few questions for you,” I said as the man craned his neck up at me. “Starting with that thing in your chest. Where did it come from?”

I tore the machete from where it remained buried hilt-deep in the chest of another raider and used it to point at the pulsing blue orb under his skin.

“Uh... that... uh...” Sweat visibly beaded down the man’s forehead. “Shit. It’s foggy. I got it at... uh...” He trailed off with a furrowed brow, desperately trying to remember.

I’ll admit I was impressed he could even remember how to speak. Sakura had reduced his entire head to a bloody smear several times in a row. How could he still remember anything at all?

The only explanation I could think of, was that whatever power allowed him to regenerate his head also stored some of his memories... elsewhere. It clearly wasn’t perfect, though, seeing as how he could barely think straight.

“There was this funky-looking guy... and then they made me eat something. Yeah, I think that was it. It was like a rock. The boss got it in exchange for... uh... for... something.” The Raider Thug stared up at me with wide and confused eyes. “Please, that’s all I can remember...”

I ran my hand through my hair. “How much of your former life do you remember? Your name? Your career?”

“I was... uh... I think I was called Chuck. And I sold metal boxes. Cars! Then some old friends of the boss broke out of prison. They gutted the boss one night and told us they wanted to introduce us to some new friends. Some funky-looking guys...”

He screwed his face up in concentration so hard his eyes crossed. “Trolls! I think. They made us eat the boss...” The man shivered.

“Oh god. I’m going to die here. You’re here to take me to hell for all I’ve done, aren’t you? I’m sorry, Momma... I should have been good.” He sobbed to himself, crying softly as Sakura hovered over him, her bloody club in hand.

I tried asking him a few more questions, but it was apparent that we’d get nothing more out of the man. It looked like he didn’t expect to survive this encounter, and if his sobbing cries were anything to go by, he probably didn’t deserve to. What was that I’d heard about eating him people?

“I think we’ve gotten all we can out of you,” I said.

I activated Arcane Blade once more, severing his head at the neck. Blood spouted out of the stump—first in a rush of crimson, but then that rapidly turned a blue-ish black. The blood clotted with phenomenal speed, forming a bubble over the severed stub.

“Batter’s up,” I said as I flicked the severed head in the air with the tip of my boot.

Sakura swung her bat, smashing it to a dozen and sending those remaining bits flying.

“What was that for?” Sakura asked curiously.

“He’ll be better off without those memories. Maybe he can turn his life around.” I gave Sakura a shrug.

I looked around for a piece of paper and eventually settled on just drawing on a car door. Chuck here would see it when he woke up. I didn’t leave him anything fancy—just his name, a few supplies, a map to the shelter in Crownhill, and a reminder that he’d promised his mother that he’d be a better man from now on. Perhaps he’d mistake the note as something drawn by his past self.

I dropped the bloody machete onto the ground next to him. He’d need a weapon if he was going to make it all the way to the shelter. And if he made it all the way there, Doctor Roswell would be able to study that strange glowing blue organ in more detail. He was already studying the wolf pups—like the one bound to Bridget—so studying one more inhuman oddity ought to fit right in his wheelhouse.

“Let’s get out of here before he wakes up. I don’t want to attract any monsters.” I frowned at the odd growth forming around the stump of his neck. “Hopefully his raiding days are behind him.”

We left Chuck to his fate and departed. One thing in particular nibbled at my mind. What was it that Chuck had said about trolls? It was time to do a little more investigating.





The ogre and troll situation had gotten worse since the last time I checked in on them. Both groups had expanded their territory dramatically, wiping out all nearby monsters.

This time, I was able to get closer and circle the camp completely. There were about a hundred of them total, which wasn't too bad considering I had several thousand humans just back at the Shelter. They were fewer than even the wolfmen in number.

Add in the other settlements and humanity held a sizable advantage. Too bad we weren't making use of it. A good third of the humans were part of Crownhill County Prison and wouldn't fight with me if their lives depended on it. Another third were either looting and pillaging the broken city or hiding out in basements or smaller shelters still hoping the world would go back to normal.

No, I only had a fraction of Crownhill's former population at my disposal to deal with this threat. We'd have to deal with this on our own.

It was important to remember that, though the ogres were few in number, every one of them was a combatant. Looking around, I didn't spot a single child. The females among them must have been just as bulky and brutish as the males, because I couldn't tell them apart.

I picked off one of the ogres near the edge to Examine and take the measure of our foes.

### **Ogre Bruiser — Level 22**

While not as high leveled as I was, it was higher leveled than the elite Chaosborn Lycans had been. I would have to check in with Crownhill again to see how the people Marcus and Frank had trained were doing. Hopefully their levels were slowly going up as well.

By my measure, I'd want to build a semi-professional militia force of levels comparable to these ogres before we took them on. That would be our only chance at taking them down without massive casualties. While the human wave tactic would be technically feasible, it was unlikely to work

with the population of Crownhill. And even if I'd been willing to try it, weakening us that much would just leave us vulnerable to raiders from Crownhill County Prison.

But hopefully I would count for at least a few trolls. I still had a substantial lead on everybody else. And if need be, I could drain Sakura and Bridget again for another burst of power. But I didn't want Earth and the people of Crownhill to become completely dependent on me. There was a world beyond this one, and if I wanted to have the chance to explore it, I needed to make sure my home wouldn't burn down the moment I turned my back.

I got a good look at a troll as well.

### **Troll Scout — Level 21**

Its level was slightly lower, but this troll looked quite a bit faster. Where the ogres had been huge barrel-chested creatures who wielded tree trunks for clubs, the trolls were just as tall but much leaner. Their skin was a deep swamp green, and their fingers smoothly transitioned to claws as long as my hand.

"Crap, I think it spotted us," Bridget said as the troll we were observing turned our way.

Not long after she spoke, the troll started running in our direction in a slow ungainly lurch. I reached into my pocket, withdrawing the wand Myrina had purchased for me. While my hands were sufficient in most circumstances, I needed the extra accuracy for a Mana Bolt from this far away.

My spell flew, striking the troll in the chest. The explosive spell tore away a chunk of the Troll Scout's shoulder, but instead of roaring in pain or even stopping, the troll just kept charging. Even worse, the wound healed right before my eyes—even faster than Chuck had healed when Sakura had smashed his head in.

"These guys are going to be tough to deal with," I grimaced.

They might not have as many hit points as the ogres, but their regeneration was even faster than my own.

"Looks pretty tough. Should we help?" Bridget asked.

I shook my head. “No. I’m counting the Mana Bolts. Drive just fast enough to keep us out of range. I want to see how many hits it takes to bring a troll down.”

We hopped in with me riding in the back, firing off a spell at every opportunity. The troll was fast, but not as fast as a truck, so we kept steady pace with it.

After a minute of hitting it with Mana Bolts, the troll was covered with burned spots all over its body. Its healing was starting to slow down, but I couldn’t give my Mana Bolts credit for that. I’d stacked up so many Corrupting Marks that the passive damage was starting to encroach on its healing factor.

“Damn tough…” I repeated, shaking my head in wonder. I was going to fire a few more Mana Bolts when my companions slammed on the brakes.

“Road’s out up ahead!” Bridget yelled. “I’m going to have to turn. If I take the turn at full speed we’ll lose the stuff in back. Hold on tight, Carter!”

“Got it.” I pulled on the straps holding Sakura’s fridge in place. They came undone with a swift tug. We’d been keeping good pace with the troll, but if Bridget slowed down it would be on top of us. I needed to finish it off fast.

“Sorry about this, Sakura!” I yelled.

“What?” Sakura called. “Wait, what are you doing to my new fridge?!”

It was too late. I gave the fridge a kick just as the troll jumped for us. The fridge tumbled out and slammed into the troll.

My Mana Bolts packed a punch, but the fridge was a whole lot heavier. It landed on top of the troll, driving the gaunt creature’s face into the ground with all the speed and force of the truck whose bed I’d just kicked it off of.

“So it takes about eighty-one Mana Bolts and one fridge to kill a troll!” I called back. “Bridget, you can stop now.”

“Nooo! My new fridge!” Sakura groaned.

“It was already a used fridge. Now, it’s just slightly more used.”

“Pretty sure using it to kill trolls voids the warranty...” Sakura muttered.

Bridget threw the truck into park and we all gathered around the dead troll as Sakura reclaimed her fridge.

“See, it’s in fine shape! We can buff out those scratches and wipe off that troll blood. It’ll be good as new,” I promised Sakura.

“Wait, is that thing still alive?” Bridget asked as she gave the troll a light kick.

I leaned close. “You’re right. I think I saw it twitch. Did you girls get any experience points from it?”

Sakura and Bridget shook their heads. I hadn’t gotten any notifications either. Nor had I gotten the kill.

Sakura had some frustrations to take out though, so she pulled out her bat and put the troll out of its misery. Three big swings with her bat and it was gone. I cast Disassemble after just to make sure. There was some faint blue dust somewhere near where the troll’s midsection, but it was thoroughly pulverized. Conducting any anatomical analysis of troll biology was going to be hard if they were this difficult to kill. I’d likely have to leave a dissection to a professional like Doctor Roswell.

We hauled Sakura’s new fridge back into place and latched it in before driving home. Then, we returned to the farmhouse and dropped off our new supplies. There was a lot to do, though fortunately I had plenty of helpers with nimble fingers to make the work a little easier.

“Chief Humie returns!” Gobgob said, approaching me cautiously as I neared their village. She was the leader of my small, adopted tribe of goblins. They’d been the other faction whose shard had spawned near humanity, though thankfully they’d been a lot easier to take care of than the Wolfmen. What remained of their tribe had surrendered to me and agreed to work for me in exchange for remaining in my safe valley.

“Hello again, Gobgob. It’s been a while.”

“We serve well, yes? You not mad?” Gobgob wrung her fingers together. She held a stick of skewered bugs in her hand.

“I have returned. I take it you’ve all been keeping up with the gardening?” I asked.

“We crush the bad-bads. No bugs or mean plants.” Gobgob nodded sagely. “Food for the master?”

She offered the stick to me. Looking closer, I saw there were about a dozen enormous beetles stuck through their middle and roasted over a fire. It looked edible, but not exactly appetizing.

I waved her off. “That’s alright. You go ahead. I just came here to let you know that I got more wire. I’ll need you and the tribe to bend it all into position just like I showed you before.”

“Gobgob understands. Will relay to the others,” Gobgob said. She darted back toward the circle of huts she and the other goblins called home.

After that, Sakura, Bridget, and I patrolled the area around our camp a few times, searching for anything that could potentially cause a problem for us.

“Bridget and I walked this route just yesterday and there was nothing here! Now there are like three different monsters over level ten,” Sakura remarked as we walked the trail.

I chuckled sheepishly. “That’s probably my fault. Death Curse and all.”

“It’s all for the best, though. I’m on the verge of finally getting over level twenty. I can almost taste it...” Bridget said.

I shrugged. “The experience points are yours.”

We were all in a party, and it wasn’t like the System was going to give any of the XP for killing monsters to me. We ended up hunting down several strange creatures. One looked like a massive spider with boney legs as wide around as my arms. There were human-like fingers on the tips of each bony

limb, which made it seem far creepier than it would have otherwise.

Fortunately, it was just level sixteen and we made quick work of it. The other two intruders in the valley were even weaker, though they still would have been nasty for Gobgob or any of the goblins to encounter. We cleared them out and the valley was safe once more.

“Monster hunting done,” I said, glancing between my two women. “See anything you’d like for dinner?” I gestured to our final kill, a fire-breathing hedgehog the size of a dog.

The scent of singed fur lingered in the air.

Bridget waved her hand over her nose. “No thanks. I’d rather find something to eat from the barn.”

I glanced at Sakura. She shook her head. “That hide is trashed. My Job level isn’t anywhere near high enough to do anything with that.”

“Fine, fine... I have an alternative proposal to the two of you then. How about we eat out? It’s been a while since we’ve been to Crownhill, and I want to check in with everyone again.”

Mostly, I wanted to drop off the armor I’d purchased on Myrina’s world with the blacksmith. Then, I wanted to check in with Frank, Marcus, and Margaret. It had been a week since they’d last seen me, and I them.

I probably had the most up-to-date information on the status of the ogres and the trolls, and it looked like those were the two remaining factions to watch. Neither race seemed particularly adept at exploration, but I had good reason to suspect that at least one group of humans had already contacted the trolls.

It was only a matter of time before conflict broke out. And when it did, I intended humanity to be much better prepared than we’d been when the wolfmen attacked.

“Only one problem with that...” Sakura tapped her chin. “I’m pretty sure every restaurant in Crownhill is closed. It is the apocalypse and all.”

“Yeah, I was thinking more along the lines of bringing the food we planned to eat to them. We have enough to share with people, too.” I grinned at Sakura and winked at Bridget. “It’s selfish of us to hoard Bridget’s cooking all to ourselves.”

Bridget blushed, and Sakura’s eyes widened. “What? No. She’s our personal chef!”

“While cooking is useful,” Bridget admitted, “some of my experience comes from when my food is actually consumed. Taking goods into town would help me level.”

Bridget shrugged. “Besides. There were a lot of hungry people there, last I checked. It’s been a while since they had something cooked in a proper oven. And I noticed Carter’s new magic bag keeps food warm and fresh. It would be a shame not to use it...”

“Carter! Bridget is going to give away all our snacks,” Sakura protested.

I combed my fingers through Sakura’s hair and laughed. “Don’t worry, there’s plenty to share.”

I turned to the pretty blonde. “We’ll help if you need any extra hands in the kitchen, Bridget.”

Bridget shook her head. “No, you two go keep yourselves busy. My job is at its best if I work alone.”

Sakura’s eyes brightened. “That means I get to keep Carter busy while we wait?”

Her eyes sparkled and she leaned in close, curling an arm around my shoulders as she gazed into my eyes with a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “However shall we keep ourselves entertained?”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-THREE

Sakura wanted to show me her leatherwork before we did anything more entertaining—or what I at least thought would be more entertaining than admiring animal and monster hides.

“Look, Carter!” Sakura showed me a large hide on one of my spare workbenches. Looking at the tools laid out across it, it would probably be more accurate to call it Sakura’s workbench from now on.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s a cloak for you! It matches those robes Myrina must have given you. Since you’re wearing something she got you, you have to wear something I made, too!” Before I could protest, Sakura had draped the hide around my shoulders.

It was actually rather comfortable. The inside of the hide was rather fluffy, and the outside was covered in a soft fur that obscured my appearance.

“It’s from that fox we killed,” Sakura explained in answer. “It’s supposed to make you harder to notice!”

### **Moonshade Fox Cloak (Rare):**

**Conceals the wearer in twisting shadows. While not quite granting its wearer invisibility, the Moonshade Fox Cloak is the next best thing to it. The skill of the leatherworker who crafted this item has allowed it to retain 85% of the Moonshade Fox’s natural affinity for darkness.**



“Impressive!” I remarked, genuinely surprised.

Ever since my meeting with Marol the Theory Crafter, I’d planned to incorporate more stealth abilities into my arsenal. The Moonshade Fox cloak did just that without the need to hunt down another skill book. Based on my experience with Arcane Blade, I was pretty sure even the lowliest spell books were going to be expensive and hard to obtain, now that the System was no longer handing them out left and right.

“You like it?” Sakura beamed. “Here, let me show you the hat I was working on! Oh, and I’m going to try to make boots next, look!”

Sakura ended up getting so engrossed in showing off what she could do that Bridget was finished before we could get to what I’d originally had in mind when the two of us ran off together. Sakura’s excited expression turned into a pout when she realized she’d missed out on time alone with me, but I thought it was well spent.

“I’m all done!” Bridget declared.

She handed me back my bag of holding, now filled with pastries and tasty treats. I’d already emptied it and given all the wire over to Gobgob and her fellow goblins to work on to get Mana Bombs started for me. The only other thing I wanted to bring to Crownhill was that old orichalcum armor to melt down.

I hoped I could work with the same guy who I’d worked with before, but figured there should be more than one smith at the settlement. The jobs list had been around for long enough that more people had probably picked up the Blacksmith job. All I needed to do was find somebody who could melt the scrap armor down into something I could use for artificing.

The road trip to Crownhill was relatively uneventful. We ran over a few monsters. Sakura smashed some stuff with her bat. A giant squirrel tried to shoot a fireball at us. Just a normal day after the integration.

Fortunately my Deflect skill had grown powerful enough with the help of my defensive proficiencies that it now enveloped the entire car. One fireball wouldn't bring us down, and it also gave away the giant squirrel's position. I took it out with some retaliatory magical fire and we were soon on our way again.

We arrived in Crownhill to find the guards posted all the way at the entrance to the city. Among them was a young man I recognized from my last visit.

“Kyle! You've leveled well. I'm impressed.”

### **Kyle Clark (Human — Level 19)**

Kyle stood a little straighter. “Thank you, Sir! I figure it's best to get to as high a level as I can. Nobody knows what's out there.”

I grimaced. “As it happens, I do. Trolls and ogres mostly. The ones I spotted were over level twenty. If what we saw with the wolfmen is anything to go by, their elites are probably stronger.”

Kyle paled. “Well... crap.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Just keep doing what you're doing. They're solo fighters. If you stick with the other militia and watch each other's backs, I'm sure you could take one on.”

“I'll do that, Sir.”

“Donut?” Bridget asked, reaching into my pocket to withdraw one of the tasty treats she'd brought for everyone.

“Oh, no I couldn't... well...” Kyle held up his hand to refuse, but then he got a whiff of the donut.

It smelled divine, and if I hadn't already stolen three or four for myself, I might have been tempted to swipe this one, as well.

“I suppose if you're offering...” His eyes grew even wider after his first bite, and he wolfed the rest down moments later.

The other guard who greeted us did the same with his. After that, Kyle waved me through. We passed through another checkpoint, and this time we had to park the truck before being allowed into the shelter itself.

“Carter, you’re back?” A familiar voice came to greet me.

Looking up, I saw Frank. He looked surprisingly good. I’d come to know him as a hunched-back code monkey, perpetually exhausted as he typed away while sipping at his coffee. He always looked five minutes away from passing out—at least whenever Sakura had been the one who was looking.

Now, though, he stood with a straight back. His glasses were gone too. The free points to perception granted by Blessed of the System had fixed that, along with all the daily aches and pains that might have plagued any other survivors who’d lived long enough to enjoy the free stats.

Frank even had some muscle tone, but his new body meant that he had to try to dress poorly to look worse than he had when we’d been fellow office drones. His clothes were clean but looked ragged and did not match.

“Want a donut?” Bridget asked.

“Oh? I’ve heard rumors that you’d picked up the Chef Job. I won’t be shy then...” Frank snatched the doughnut, scarfing it down even faster than Kyle and the other guard had after his first testing bite.

“Mmmf! These are damn good!” Frank said around the last of his doughnut.

“I brought enough for everyone,” Bridget replied.

She truly had packed an enormous amount of food in my bag of holding. I had no idea how she’d managed to cook as much as she had in as little time as she did. All on her own, she’d done more work than I would have expected out of ten chefs.

“Everybody will love them...” Frank was staring intently at the pouch at my waist the food had come from.

“Like it?” I asked Frank. “Turns out there’s a lot we don’t know about the System. And there are quite a few items to have your eye open for when they finally start appearing here on Earth. This one here is called a bag of holding. I don’t know if you know what that means.”

“Oh, I know...” Frank stroked his chin in interest.

I grinned. “Go get Marcus and Margaret. We all need to get together for a chat.”

“I’ll be distributing food,” Bridget said.

I followed her for long enough to pull over a table and to help set out all the food she’d brought. There were still lots of people sleeping in the open air, forsaking the safety of the buildings up and down the street for the security of the well-patrolled area here in the heart of the shelter.

The moment the wonderful scent of her food and pastries appeared, heads rose from their blankets or peeked out of ramshackle tents to see what smelled so divine. These were starving people used to living off scraps. If they weren’t able to earn contribution points for the obelisk, there wasn’t much for them to eat or do.

These people were still finding themselves after the fall. Some still wore the torn remains of fine suits and dresses. Others wore ragged oversized sweatshirts that said they might have been homeless before the System and not much had changed now that it was here. One and all, though, they gaped at the table of food Bridget was giving away and rushed to grab some of it.

“There’s plenty to go around! No need to push.” Bridget held up her hands to keep people calm.

Looking around, I found a few militia. I’d have a hell of a time helping Bridget keep order—despite my level, I didn’t look all that intimidating. Nor were these people used to taking orders from me. A pair of uniformed militia would do much better.

“Hey, you two!” I shouted. “Mind giving us a hand?”

“Sorry, we were ordered to guard the—” one militia man began to say before his companion elbowed him in the side.

“Dude, that’s Carter. If he wants us guarding the snacks instead of the walls, then we guard the snacks.” The other militiaman started walking over.

“I’ll have Frank or Marcus send somebody to replace you shortly.”

I waved them down from the wall, jumping to the top of it in one big leap with Power Jump. From that vantage point, I scanned for any incoming monsters. One big beetle that I swiftly killed with a Mana Bolt was all I could see.

I turned and looked over the crowd, eventually catching sight of Marcus. The young militiaman had his back to a wall as a pair of beautiful women bracketed him, pelting him with question after question. He ran his hand through his hair with a flush on his cheeks.

“Well, that’ll be awkward to break up...”

Sakura saw where I was looking after jumping up onto the wall just like I had, though she’d done so with her raw strength stats instead of a skill. “I’ll get him.” She jumped down to rescue Marcus.

I found Frank again a little while later. He’d vanished to put on a hooded sweatshirt and sneak back into the line for a second doughnut. Chuckling, I gave him a few minutes before waving him over. He embarrassingly wiped sugar from his cheeks before calling over some other militia to watch the walls from where I stood.

Sakura returned with Marcus a little while later, and I had Frank with me. “Anybody know where Margaret is?” I asked.

“She’s got a small office on one of the upper floors of the intact buildings.” Frank pointed to one of the nearby buildings. “She’s become something of an apocalyptic career advisor. Lots of people in the shelter need something to do and don’t know how to get started. Seems weird to be holding jobs programs for blacksmiths, but here we are.”

“Perfect. We can have our meeting there. I’ve got a lot to tell you about.” I patted the pouch at my waist. “And don’t worry, I saved some of Bridget’s snacks for us.”



Margaret’s new office was likely a substantial step down from her old one. Previously she’d been co-owner of a law firm with her husband, Ben. Unfortunately, our old security guard Craig ended up killing Ben in his bid to take over the settlement.

Margaret had been inconsolable for a while. But after my death and return, I brought back knowledge that Ben was still around waiting to reincarnate. It was a bit eerie to think that the System wouldn’t be done with us even after our deaths. It had stepped between us and whatever was supposed to come in the hereafter and snatched our souls for its own purposes—whether that was reincarnation as a new human or to manufacture monsters.

We made our way up to Margaret’s office and Frank rapped on the door. “Carter has a magic bag filled with magic food!” Frank announced.

Margaret opened the door. She looked much better than the last time I’d seen her. And much, much better than how she’d looked after her husband died.

“The bag of holding is mine,” I explained as I gestured to it. “The magic food was made by Bridget. She picked up the Chef job.”

Margaret invited us in.

The room wasn’t really big enough for five people, but we made it work. Sakura and Margaret seated themselves off to one side while Frank, Marcus, and I all lined up on the other. I pulled out the food Bridget had made and set some of it out on the table.

“That really is a magic bag,” Margaret said, nodding toward the little pouch that somehow contained items far larger than it was.

“There’s a lot we don’t know about the System, but I’ve spent the last few days off-world trying to learn what I could.” I grinned as they puzzled that over a moment.

I watched as realization washed over their faces, one by one.

“Off world?” Marcus finally asked.

I nodded. “Yep. I’ve been on a world called Themyscira, populated by various races of Amazonian warriors. The way I got my ticket there involves a long story that I won’t get into, but suffice it to say that I went there and learned a lot we didn’t know about the System.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, I explained everything I’d learned from Myrina. I skipped over the personal details, but shared all the tips I’d learned. I helped my companions gathered around me rework their settings the way Myrina had told me to do, and soon they were set up the same way I was.

“You know, you could probably charge for this information,” Margaret suggested. “A lot of people would pay good money for this. Or points for the obelisk, I guess.”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. I’m not going to conceal these tricks for my own personal benefit when they could be used to help so many others. With the threats out there, we’ll need every advantage we can get. Sakura, Bridget and I returned recently from scouting. The ogres and trolls have been leveling faster than I’d hoped. We need to be ready for conflict.”

Marcus sucked in a sharp breath. “As bad as with the Wolfmen?”

“Hopefully not that that bad,” I admitted. “I intend to handle these foes a little better. But for that to happen, we need to close the level gap.”

Frank straightened. “I can see you have a plan.”

I nodded. “I do. I need all the militia you can spare, plus any more you can recruit. You all know I can’t stay long in the shelter with my Death Curse, but perhaps we can use that curse to our advantage. Weak monsters are tough to hunt down

under normal circumstances, but they come to attack me readily.”

Marcus nodded. “That’s right! Soon as we knew you were back, we swapped out the guards on the shelter walls with the lowest-level guards we had. We didn’t realize what a boon those Scavenger Cockroaches were until we’d wiped them all out. They’re perfect for gaining those early levels.”

“Exactly. I want us to take a more proactive approach to training up the low-leveled. I want to build a core unit of warriors to protect Crownhill. They need to be community-minded folks who are willing to protect others and are psychologically stable. I don’t want anybody who seems like they’d turn on us—nor anyone who seems inclined to break off so they can be leader of their own group.”

Margaret dabbed the last bit of sugar off her lips. “Those requirements are much the same as what we have already for joining the militia. We’ll just bolster recruitment... though that does mean we’ll have fewer people scavenging the city for food. We might have supply problems in a week or two, once the obelisk starts running low.”

I drummed my fingers against the table a moment before coming to a decision. “Don’t worry about that. There are plenty of big monsters to hunt. I’ll make sure some of the higher-leveled teams do some big game hunting. If we don’t bring anything down, I’ll take care of it myself.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Frank shrugged.

There were nods all around.

“Good. Have a group ready for me at the crack of dawn. Training starts early and will take most of the day,” I said.

Margaret jotted down a note, recording the events of this council meeting for posterity. One by one, we trickled out of the room.



## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FOUR

I came back outside to find nothing but crumbs left on the table from the food Bridget and I had laid out. “I guess the people here really were hungry!” I said with a laugh.

“They liked it. I’m glad.” A soft smile lingered on Bridget’s face as she looked over the camp.

“I take it you gained some good job levels?”

“That, too,” she admitted with a blush.

I wrapped my arm around her waist, giving her a quick peck on the cheek. “I’m sure they’re all very grateful. Just don’t let them talk you into staying. I’ve gotten awfully attached to your food, too.”

“Others are saving up for jobs from the obelisk. They’re getting more expensive every day, but I heard someone else picked up the Chef job recently, just like me. I’m sure they’re a few levels behind me, but it won’t be long until the people here can get food like mine without me.”

I shook my head. “The flavor is nice, but I don’t only love your food because it tastes good. You put your passion into every bite.”

Bridget turned to me and raised an eyebrow. “You can taste that, can you?”

“I can,” I replied seriously.

Her cheeks flushed and she turned away in embarrassment. “Don’t be so sappy in front of everybody else. You’re making

me blush.” Bridget pushed me away, and I laughed.

“Come on. We should check in with Doctor Roswell while we’re here. He has those wolf pups, including the one that’s connected to you. It’s past time we figured out whether or not he’s figured out how to sever the connection safely and cure you.”

I turned, and Bridget looped her arm through mine.

“I’m going to see if the militia the others have trained are up to snuff.” Sakura waved the two of us off. “I wouldn’t want them wasting your time tomorrow if their levels are too low. It’s time to go cockroach smashing!”

“Have fun!” Bridget waved Sakura off, and my tough Oni berserker went to join the militia.

We stopped by the Blacksmith in the shelter—or Blacksmiths, now that there were more of them. I found someone with a high level in the job who didn’t seem to be too busy and delivered my armor to them.

“Melt this down if you can. I want you to try and make wire out of it. I’ll pay you in points if you’d like, or you can take half the material that’s left over for yourself. It’s orichalcum.”

The smith’s eyes lit up. “My job told me about this stuff! I’ll see what I can do.”

We shook hands, deal made. I’d pick up the final product in a few hours. In the meantime, Bridget and I had someone else to visit. We made our way over to Doctor Roswell’s clinic.

“Ah, my favorite patient! Well, my favorite living patient...” Doctor Roswell rubbed his hands together.

I blinked in surprise. Since when did he get his missing hand back? He’d lost one of his arms during the wolfmen attacks. The same one that led to Bridget taking on distinctly canine features.

Doc saw me looking and grinned.

“Like the new arm?” he asked.

He pulled off his glove. The skin of this arm was a much darker skin tone than the rest of him. It was also about twice as thick as his other limb. Whoever had owned that arm previously had been far more muscular than the doctor. Perhaps it would even out in time, but for now he looked rather lopsided.

“I found a fresh body, and the arm was still good, so I figured I’d use my new class and do a little flesh welding. It worked far better than I ever imagined!” The doctor let out a slightly maniacal cackle. “With my new power, replacing lost limbs is a snap... as long as I have the spare body parts, that is. I’m still working on a way to keep detached limbs viable for more than a few hours.”

“That’s... reassuring, I suppose?” I frowned. “Actually, that’s really disturbing, but it’s good to know you’re already pushing the frontiers of medical science so soon after the integration.”

I shrugged. Having an arm stolen off a corpse was disturbing. But between that and having to live with just one arm, I was confident most people would choose to have a corpse’s arm flesh welded to their shoulder.

“Yes, it’s quite marvelous. I wonder what else I can replace. Can I mend a severed head if I attach it to a new body quick enough? I’m positively dying to try. Let me know if you plan to behead someone so I can test that theory. Anyway... unless you’re missing a body part I can’t see, it doesn’t look like you’re here for replacement limb surgery.”

I laughed and shook my head.

“Let me think... ah, the wolf pups, correct?” Doctor Roswell’s eyes lit up as he strode toward the back room.

We followed him into the back room. This place had previously been a veterinarian’s office, so they had a large fenced-in area for recovering dogs to sit and wait. Now, though, it was filled with the remaining pups of the wolfmen.

One of them turned to regard Bridget as we approached. I got the vague sense that it recognized me through Bridget’s

memories. I couldn't help but notice the color of its fur had brightened until it was the same golden yellow as Bridget's hair. Its upturned ears resembled the two tufts of hair that always seemed to be sticking up on the top of Bridget's head these days.

The wolf pup stared us down, a dull growl in its throat.

"Watch out, it may try to bite you," Doctor Roswell warned. "I suspect it has the instinctual knowledge that if it kills you and devours your body, it will gain your power and soul for its own, becoming a true wolfman! Truly remarkable creatures, these things. Unfortunately, after nearly losing some of my new fingers I had to put mine down."

Doctor Roswell pointed across the room where a pile of fur lay. It looked like a pelt sized just large enough for one of the cubs in the cage.

"So that's it?" I asked. "Put down the pup and Bridget goes back to normal?"

"Well... yes and no..." Doctor Roswell trailed off. "I've had some lingering side effects. A heightened sense of smell. Sharper hearing. Moments of hyper awareness. A taste for human flesh. All useful new abilities according to the descriptions prepared by the System. But they will remain even though the connection has been severed. However during my postmortem dissection, I discovered another path. One I missed for myself."

"And that is?"

"To do unto the wolf as the wolf would do unto you." Doctor Roswell rubbed his hands together again.

I could tell he was excited. I sucked in a breath. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Indeed it does! If Bridget here consumes the wolf, as it wishes to do to her, she will gain its soul and its powers."

I grimaced. "I don't think Bridget wants to be anything like the Wolfmen. Or the Chaosborn Lycans that they became."

Doctor Roswell waved me off. “Nothing of the sort. That dagger you gave me? The one that created the wolfmen in the first place? That was not created with making the wolfmen in mind. It was created to make men with the power of wolves!”

“Huh,” I grunted.

“After my studies, I have determined that the Alpha Wolfman was not lying to you when he claimed that he and his pack had been experimented on. A society of humanoid tool-users crafted this dagger to do exactly what I am talking about. In a way, the wolfmen were merely a twisted perversion of their original intent. Bridget could become whatever they were trying to make!”

I turned and glanced at Bridget, who was frowning at the still-growling pup. “Doctor, I appreciate it, but Bridget isn’t your experiment.”

The doctor’s excitement drooped. “I suppose you’re right. She can refuse if she likes, and we’ll simply put the wolf pup down the way I did mine. But I can’t help but feel like I missed out on an incredible opportunity. Consider it, okay?” he all but begged her.

Bridget’s eyes darted to the wolf. “I’ll... think about it.”

Doctor Roswell smiled. Like Bridget’s, his teeth were a bit sharper than natural for a human. “Just know that if you wait too long, your decision will be made for you. Should you and the wolf pup grow too closely in sync, your souls will merge. Who knows which of you will end up in control, then?”

With those dark words, we left Doctor Roswell’s clinic. Bridget was looking at me the whole time. I rested a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s your life and your decision,” I explained. “You could play it safe, or—”

“—Or take the risk in search of more power,” Bridget finished. “What do you think I should do?”

I shook my head. “I can’t make a decision like this on your behalf. Just know that I’ll support you, no matter what you decide to do.”

Bridget nodded, going silent as she wrestled with her own thoughts.

I was busy thinking of how to comfort her when I spotted someone heading our way.

“Is that...” Bridget began, staring hard at the bloody man coming down the street.

He was dressed in the raider’s attire we’d left him in, though it was looking more ragged than it had the last time I’d seen him. He stumbled along, clutching a wound in one arm and a bent machete in the other.

“Hey!” He waved to us, and silently I readied myself for a fight. But he didn’t raise his machete. “The guys in uniform back there said this was the clinic? I’ve got a nasty neck wound I need someone to have a look at. I’m not sure what it was from.”

“You don’t remember?” I asked, curious.

Chuck shook his head. “Don’t remember much of anything, anymore. Not sure how bad I hit my head, but everything from before this morning is a blank. I’m lucky I remember how to talk.”

“That sounds... difficult. But yeah, this is the clinic. Doctor Roswell is right inside.” I jerked a thumb over my shoulder.

“Thanks, man.” Chuck limped past me and opened the door, vanishing inside.

He didn’t pay me so much as a second glance.



Chuck seemed to recall nothing of his encounter with me and Sakura, and I decided it was best to leave things that way. I expected him to be gone from Crownhill by morning, and paid him no more mind when Sakura, Bridget, and I returned to my farmhouse for the evening.

Which was why I was surprised to find him waiting for me with the new militia recruits the following morning. “You’re

all here for special training?" I asked, making sure I had the right group.

"Yes, Sir!" Kyle said.

He, I had expected. I looked around, silently counting. Besides Kyle and Chuck, there were around thirty others. Some were already over level ten, but a few others were still around level two. I even spotted a boy who couldn't be older than fourteen still at level one.

"Alright." I clapped my hands together to get started. "Let's group everybody up based on their level. If you're under level five, stick with Bridget. You guys will be hunting bugs. Between levels five and ten, go with Sakura. You'll be looking for more of those fire-breathing squirrels. The rest of you are with me. We're going to be hunting big game."

"How big are we talking here?" Chuck asked, worry in his eyes.

"If you need ammo, don't bother with anything that won't take down a bear."

There were a few murmurs from the group, but nobody left. Good. I'd need fighters with resolve. The previous night I'd come up with some plans, but every one of them required a skilled group of warriors at my back.

If push came to shove, I might have been able to pull things off with just Frank, Marcus, Margaret, Bridget, and Sakura. They'd all be able to fit in my party, then. But it would be a risk—with such a small strike force, I wouldn't be able to confront either the trolls or the ogres directly if things went to shit.

And when in combat, it was best to plan for things to go wrong. All you could do was prepare your team by training them up and then stay flexible. A friend of my dad's who'd been a marine used to joke that the motto of the US Marine Corps wasn't *Semper Fidelis*, ever faithful, but *Semper Gumby*—always flexible.

So, training it was. We broke off into three groups, all staying relatively close to one another. I'd taken Bridget and

Sakura into combat enough times that they both knew how to position themselves safely. They could do the same for larger groups. Besides, I wanted to give both of them time to build their own leadership proficiencies.

Bridget's group engaged in combat first. There were always plenty of bugs and bug-like monsters anywhere I was, especially in the city. We'd cleared the place out several times, but the bugs just kept coming back.

"Everybody else stay back. Let Bridget's group have the experience points."

I held up my hand and we waited for the lowest-level group to clear out the small monsters. They ranged in level from one to five. Even the boy at level one was able to take care of them, though. If he'd only had his base stats, he might have had trouble, but the System had been generous and given away all those early stat points.

In a way, his fight was like the reverse of how a fight with a monster usually went. The monster tried to wear him down with its ability to spit acid, while he simply overpowered the bugs. I suspected most of these creatures we were fighting were loosely based around some sort of ant. But the kid was faster and stronger than the bug could keep up with, so he eventually squished it underfoot.

"Well done, everyone!" I shouted to Bridget's group before turning to the higher-leveled militia that I led. "I promised you big game, but we're going to have to go find it."

"Hell yeah!" Kyle cheered.

We spent the next few hours patrolling the area immediately surrounding the city and then eventually the wilderness beyond. If anyone had been traveling alone, they probably wouldn't have encountered a third of the monsters we did. Some of that was because being a larger group we made more noise, but most of it was due to my death curse.

If there was one true advantage to having my death curse, it was that my companions never needed to search too long for something to fight.



Sakura's team took the vanguard for a bit as we encountered mid-level foes, with my group reinforcing them. They took the kills and the experience points for now, but the moment we encountered something over level ten, my group would take over.

### **Fire Squirrel (Level 6)**

We encountered quite a few giant squirrels, each with ember-red fur and eyes like burning coals. They hurled fireballs at us, and Sakura's group returned fire while Bridget pulled everyone too low for this fight back to safety. I positioned my team between the two groups, in case there were any surprises.

I had to use my Deflect spell to block a fireball aimed at the kid who'd started this morning at level one. He was now level three, so a fireball wouldn't have taken him out—but it would have been pretty painful, if it had landed.

With the squirrels taken care of, we headed further into the outskirts of Crownhill. There were more low-leveled beasts and monsters, and we took care of them quite readily. We spread out further once we got beyond the city limits, with my group switching out to lead.

The atmosphere grew tense and anxious as we left the city.

"I haven't been outside the city since we tried to take out the Wolfmen..." Kyle whispered, his eyes darting around the forest.

"I haven't been outside the city since the System arrived," a woman added. "Were the woods always this scary? I don't remember the trees being so tall. Or the shadows so sinister."

"It's certainly a lot more dangerous than it used to be," I admitted. "But get a few more levels and you won't have to worry. The city will need people with high enough levels to move freely throughout the area. That'll be you, if I have anything to say about it." I waved to the empty woods, showing confidence where the others were frightened. They seemed at least to be somewhat inspired by my words.

“That’s right. You go out here all the time, don’t you?” Kyle replied.

Eventually, we found something worthy of my team. I spotted it before the others and fired a Mana Bolt to startle it out of its ambush.

### **Frostbite Chimera (Level 18)**

“Look alive! That thing’s got teeth and claws. Melee weapons up front!” I ordered.

My group quickly assembled. A few bore shields and spears, and others merely swords. They formed a line while those with ranged weapons stood behind them. We had an odd assortment of weapons at our disposal. Our weapons ranged from something out of the Dark Ages to modern pistols and shotguns. A wave of bullets was the first to land.

Little bloody welts lit up all along the monster’s body, and I finally got a good look at it. Towering at a staggering ten feet, its main bulk resembled a massive mountain lion, though instead of golden, its fur was a sleek coat of icy blue. It glistened with frost like it had just rolled in a pile of snow, though there was no snow nearby. A pair of antlers stuck from his head like gnarled tree branches, while behind its back a serpent’s tail flickered with scales as blue as its fur.

It was fast, too. The monster crossed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. I thought I was going to have to stop it, when one member of my group leaped forward to intercept it and protect the others.

“Eat this!” Chuck lunged forward, turning his machete in his hand and twisting it sideways. The chimera’s finger-length teeth locked along the steel length, and Chuck wrestled with the massive monster a moment. “I got it!”

“Now’s your chance! Strike!” I yelled.

The others rushed forward as Chuck contended with their foe. They hacked and battered at its sides, digging grooves along the Chimera’s flesh.

The monster roared, and ice flew from its body all over Chuck. I expected him to falter, but he grit his teeth and

shrugged off the attack. His skin turned blue, but that same blue orb I'd spotted in his chest when I'd fought him lit up even brighter than before. His frostbitten flesh regenerated more and more by the moment, and he struggled on as he shrugged off the Chimera's desperate attacks.

I was impressed.

"Hyyaaa!" Kyle yelled as he vaulted onto the Chimera's back.

It lunged at him with its tail, but someone else grabbed the tail before it could bite Kyle. Kyle flipped his sword around and with one more battle cry he plunged his blade straight through the back of the Chimera's neck. That finally did the trick and the beast collapsed, dead at last.

I gave everyone a brief round of applause. "Well done. Well done, everyone!"

I waved my hand over the Chimera and cast Disassemble on it. The creature vanished like it was sucked into a vacuum hose, vanishing into my bag of holding. Margaret had warned me they had food concerns. I hoped they wouldn't mind eating Chimera.

"We did it!" Kyle grinned as he stood.

"You put it down well." I grinned. "Check your System notifications. That was a critical hit if I've ever seen one."

Kyle shook his head. "All I did was stab it. This guy here wrestled with it while the rest of us got free hits in!" Kyle gestured to Chuck.

Chuck rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Shucks. I was just doing my part."

I smiled wider. "If that was just doing your part, then any party would be blessed to have you on their team. I hope you all saw that! Keep it in mind when you're assembling parties of your own."

The others congratulated Kyle and Chuck as the heroes of the day.

Eventually, I broke up their celebrations early. “Alright, don’t throw a party quite yet. There’s more where that thing came from.” I pointed into the distance, where I sensed another monster headed our way.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FIVE

I spent the next few days putting in a good chunk of the day patrolling the area around Crownhill and helping various teams who'd joined up with the militia gain some levels. Though I couldn't gain any levels from the fighting, Bridget and Sakura picked up plenty—which was all the same to me. I honed my proficiency levels quite a bit, too. My leadership bonus climbed faster than anything else.

The faces in my group changed from day to day, but the two I never failed to find in my group were Kyle and Chuck. Kyle was leveling in such a way that his attacks packed a serious punch. He cloaked his spear in black and red energy, a dark mirror to my own new Arcane Blade spell.

Chuck's regeneration increased as he gained more levels. Others seemed not to notice it, but I suspected that was because my magical senses were far keener than the average person. I didn't pry.

The Chuck I'd met among the raiders might have just been another time he woke up without his memories, but with the wrong friends to guide him. Here among my people, he seemed perfectly normal with no trace of ill-intent. His class was still that of a Raider Thug, which got him a few odd looks, but no one could doubt his contributions to the group.

Sakura's group progressed faster, since there were more foes under level ten for them to fight—especially with me around. More and more of her people graduated to join my squad. Meanwhile, she replaced her lost numbers with graduates from Bridget's group.

Bridget's group was the largest of all, though. There were a lot of people who'd sought out the refuge of the shelter and lacked the levels to defend the walls during the wolfman attack. Now that our new reality was finally settling in, they were starting to realize they'd need those early levels if they wanted to protect themselves.

While I'd been busy training new people, Frank, Marcus, and Margaret hadn't been idle. They were strong enough that they could lead their own groups, and that was exactly what they did. Soon, Crownhill had a substantial force strong enough to be more proactive about our defense of the city.

I wasn't about to let what happened with the wolfmen repeat itself.

**New Proficiencies:**

**Caster: +15 to Level 42**

**Sword: +5 to Level 44**

**Regeneration: +3 to Level 31**

**Dodge: +14 to Level 45**

**Dual-Wielding: +3 to Level 14**

**Taunt: +2 to Level 13**

**Spell Sniper: +3 to Level 4**

**Shield: +4 to Level 5**

**Spear: +1 to Level 2**

**Combat Tactics: +4 to Level 5**

**Poison Resistance: +7 to Level 13**

**Focus: +2 to Level 5**

Though I hadn't gained so much as a single level, I'd picked up so many new proficiencies that I felt as much of a new man as I had after three days of training with Cyra and Myrina. Between me and the heightened abilities of my trainees, I felt like something had changed.

We were ready for what came next.

Just in time, too, because I had a plan in mind that should cull the ranks of our enemies and leave us in a good position to dominate this shard without having to deal with something like the wolfman attack. But this would take volunteers and I hoped I'd have some.

After a long day of hunting, I had everyone over level fifteen gather around me. This was not just in my group, but Margaret's, Frank's, Marcus', and Sakura's groups, as well. There were quite a few higher-leveled groups, along with a handful of people over level twenty—including Sakura and Bridget.

It was only a matter of time before people started surpassing my own level, though I still had a few advantages. The past few days had seen me add at least as many more proficiency points as others had gained levels. I was pretty sure I was getting closer to what Mabel the Theory Crafter would have considered an elite.

Out of everybody, Frank was closest to catching up to me. He was just about ready to break into the D-Ranks. It would be a great boon to have somebody else who could fight at my level when I announced what I had in mind.

“Everybody, gather up. I have something to tell you all.”

Everyone gathered around the old statue of our town's founder. It was the same place I'd gathered Sheriff Drayton and the others not long ago. And like before, I had a plan.

“What'd you call us here for, Carter?” Frank asked. He wore leather armor that hung loose over his lean frame, though he was filling out more and more, day by day.

“I've told some of you about the threats we face—the ogres and trolls. These two factions vie for control of this shard, and the System has pitted us against them. The wolfmen were only the beginning.”

There were a few murmurs of agreement all around.

“What you don't know is that I've been keeping an eye on both factions. The territory each of them has laid claim to is expanding dramatically. I've visited both camps and was

attacked on sight before I could speak to either group. It's clear that they mean trouble for us."

I let my words settle over the crowd.

They knew what I meant. Most of them had lived through the wolfman attack on the shelter. Most had stood on the walls as their comrades bled and died all around them in our desperate attempt to hold on through the night.

"I don't know about you, but I don't want them to attack us. If we hide behind our walls, that is the last line of defense between them and our loved ones. If anyone's going to cower behind their defenses, it should be them, not us!"

A ragged cheer went up.

"Many of you have asked over the last few days what all this training is leading up to. Well? This is it. I'm building strike teams to take out our remaining enemies before they can do the same to us!"

The crowd quieted. Moments passed and, for a second, I wondered if I'd asked too much.

Kyle stepped forward from the crowd, voice low and catching in his throat. "T-this fighting... it'll be like the Wolfmen, won't it? That time we attacked them in their camp and were sent running?" he asked.

Others nodded their heads slowly, though they came to a stop whenever my gaze came around to them.

Kyle was right, of course. This very well could turn out just like our strike against the Wolfmen. In essence, it was the same plan. We saw a threat, and I planned to lead a team to deal with them before they became a problem too big to deal with.

This wouldn't be easy, or safe. After spending days on end training these people, I couldn't lie to them or lead them into a slaughter unwittingly. So once again I told the truth.

"You're right, Kyle. There's always a chance that things could go bad. Which is why this plan is going to be a little more conservative than what we tried before. I won't spoil the



details except to those who need to know, but suffice it to say that we won't be taking on either the trolls or the ogres directly. Hell, I don't plan to deal with them here and now at all. But I do plan on saving us a lot of bloodshed by taking action now."

I met the nervous gazes all around me.

"I can't promise this won't be dangerous. I can't promise that all of us will come back alive. But I can promise that everyone depending on us will be better off for having tried. There's only one thing I'm certain of—the System has pitted us against these foes. We can either fight them on their terms or on ours. I choose ours! Who's with me?!"

Silence echoed in the square.

Eventually, Frank clapped and cheered. "Yeah, let's do it!"

I grinned, glad he had my back. At his prompting, others stepped forward.

Marcus stepped forward, raising his hand. "I'm in!"

Sakura and Bridget were quick to leap to my side as well.

Next were Michael and Margaret. They were followed by Kyle and Chuck and countless others, including everyone I'd trained up over the last few days. All told, we had a squad of fighters twice as large as the one that had confronted the Wolfmen. And our average level was much higher than before.

If this had been the strike force I'd led to clear out the Wolfmen, we would have won handily. This time, though, I had no intention of winning through brute force alone. I let the few who didn't care to join us trickle off.

When they were gone, I launched into my plan. "I've had some experiences lately off-world. I've told most of you about them already during our hunting trips, but the fact of the matter is that battling monsters has gotten us thinking of the other races all wrong. Monsters and beasts we can run down and exterminate, but our fights against these trolls and ogres isn't an extermination mission. It's a war.

"And wars require strategy. Here's what I have in mind..."

I explained the idea I'd been mulling over these past few days. When I did, I saw appreciative nods all around. I'd already talked it over back at home with Sakura and Bridget, and over lunch with Marcus, Margaret, and Frank. We'd worked out most of the kinks in the plan already. All that was left was to get the manpower we needed, divide up into teams, and make it happen.

"We play this right," I told everyone, "and the ogres and trolls will take care of each other before the fighting gets serious. That'll leave us with plenty of time to keep leveling up until we can overwhelm both of them. Now, you all know your parts. Form up and get moving!"



With our new levels, many of us could travel faster through dense forest than we could taking the winding roads. Still, not all of us had movement skills. And of those who did, not many were as energy efficient as my Warp Step.

We ended up gathering several cars, vans, and trucks to ride in and taking the back roads. We headed out the same way we had last time Sakura and I had encountered the edge of the shard, swerving wide to avoid dealing with that massive elemental again.

The day would come where I'd bring that thing down—just not quite yet.

"Form up in your teams and split up!" I shouted to everyone. "You know what to do!" After that, I whispered to myself, "And so do I..."

I glanced down at my screen. A new message had appeared sometime during my second speech.

**As the esteemed City Owner of Crownhill and a recognized lord of this shard, your mission has been elevated to a *System Quest*!**

**Embarking on a System Quest can bring both potential peril and promise.**

**Success: Attain honor and renown, propelling you closer to your next prestigious title. All participants will be duly rewarded by the System, and your standing will further be amplified if you enhance this quest with personal rewards.**

**Failure: Suffer a decline in honor, renown, and witness a dip in your subjects' loyalty. Consistent quest failures could jeopardize your revered title of *Baron*.**

This must have been the same screen Kyrina Samhain had gotten when she'd started a city-wide manhunt for the traitor in Valkyrie's Watch. And now, it was my turn here on the outskirts of Crownhill. I took a deep breath to steady myself. The battle to come would determine the fate of our fledgling city.

I turned to my personal team. Bridget and Sakura were with me, of course, along with a pair of militiamen. They were both level eighteen—which was high, though not quite elite status. We formed a party, and across from me Chuck and Kyle did the same in another group.

Margaret, Marcus, Frank, and all the other elites were breaking off to confront the trolls with parties of their own. I only had two teams to work with for our part of the plan, but planned to make up for any shortage of manpower with my own personal abilities.

I nodded to the other team. Chuck was in command, having earned the respect of his peers that first day of training. The amnesiac hardly looked ready, considering that even baby-faced Kyle had more experience than he did. But his comrades trusted him. Often, that was enough.

“Alright, let's bag us a few ogres!” I shouted.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-SIX

Chuck's team guarded our rear, waiting to reinforce us. I carried on ahead with Bridget and Sakura at my sides with the other two militia behind us. The woman, Kerrie, held a bow, and the man, Rick, an axe. Both weapons were held in white-knuckled grips. They weren't exactly being silent, but I was reasonably sure these ogres didn't have perception-based builds.

If they did, the only one who was getting close to their camp would be Bridget. In contrast to the rest of us, she was graceful and silent as she slid over the uneven terrain. Perhaps she'd gained some instinctual understanding of stealth, thanks to the wolf soul she was connected to? I still didn't know what she'd decided to do with the pup after her meeting with Doctor Roswell. Had she taken its soul for herself or severed the connection completely?

She looked no different from before, but every now and again I sensed a certain predatory glint in her eyes.

Sakura gripped her club tightly. Leaning low as she was, with her horn jutting forward, she reminded me of a rhinoceros attempting an ambush. It just wasn't something that should work. As one might expect, with every misstep leaves crunched and twigs snapped under her feet.

I was better than Sakura, but not by much. The proper way for a spell caster such as myself to take on a spying or espionage role would be through some sort of disguise spell. Unfortunately, I had no such ability in my arsenal, so was

restricted to simply using Warp Step to jump from one clear patch of ground to another.

My clothes weren't exactly built for stealth either, though I was wearing Sakura's cloak to help me remain unobserved. Beneath it I had the blue robes I'd won in the dungeon with Myrina and Cyra, along with the amulet, wand, and bracelet I'd gotten there.

Each of those items gave a small but appreciable bonus to my mana pool or spell accuracy. Thanks to them, I was better outfitted than anybody else on this mission. I had my survival sword in my hand as well. It was roughly the same length as the baby's first weapon blade Myrina had loaned me, but I found I preferred the short length.

With my fighting style, closing with an enemy was easy. With my ranged spells, I always did so on my own terms. Besides, now that I had my Arcane Blade spell, I could lengthen the weapon whenever I pleased. Plus, my tests told me this was about as long as my weapon could be and still qualify for my knife throwing proficiency bonus.

I heard voices ahead.

Bridget cocked her head to one side, and that wolf-like tuft of hair on the top of her head moved like the wolf ear it resembled. A few steps closer and I heard it as well. There were voices ahead—each was low and gravelly. They sounded like rocks grinding together.

At first, it sounded like nothing but odd noises, much like the goblin voices had when I'd first seen them. Then my Forerunner title kicked in. It granted me the ability to understand all humanoid languages, and ogres counted.

I waited, listening in the hopes of learning what our enemies were up to by eavesdropping on this conversation. I held up a hand to halt our advance and then Warp Stepped up into a tree branch to get a better view. From my hiding spot, I observed the three ogres around their campfire.

The first one, with speckled green spots covering his thick, grayish skin, picked at a bone, grunting discontentedly. "Me

no like last few humans. Too skinny.”

The second ogre, noticeably taller than the other two with a mane of wild, matted hair, threw another log onto the fire. “Yeah, too much run. Need fat ones. Fat ones tasty. Houses have fat ones. Soft and tasty fat ones.”

The third, with a broad, flat nose and tusks jutting out from his lower lip, nodded in agreement. “Skinny ones tough. Me like chew, but they too much chew.”

The speckled one’s small eyes gleamed with a hint of reminiscence. “Last time, me find house with tiny humans. Good munch!”

The tall one’s belly rumbled loudly, drawing chuckles from the other two. “I see houses while walking today to find new club,” he said. “These houses big, probably full of many fat ones. We go tomorrow?”

The tusked one, looking excited, smacked his lips together. “After moon hides, we go eat more!”

It seemed like things had progressed even faster than I’d feared. If these ogres had already set their sights on the suburbs surrounding Crownhill, it was only a matter of time before they started eating people en masse. From the sound of things, they’d already snatched a few survivors for their meal.

Now that I’d heard them speak, the meat the tall one was holding over the fire like a marshmallow on a stick looked a lot like a human leg. With renewed resolve, I waved the others forward. These three ogres didn’t know it, but their deaths would save far more human lives than they’d taken.

This part of the plan was always the most delicate. It was going to take some flexibility. We’d picked these three because they were isolated from the rest of the camp, but not so isolated that they wouldn’t be found.

We wanted to pick them off from the group, sowing a little discord in the process. Their deaths shouldn’t go unnoticed by the other ogres. It was imperative that we remained unseen.

In the end, I settled with just firing a few spells at them from as far a distance as I could manage—which turned out to

be pretty far with the wand Myrina had purchased for me. I channeled Eldritch Blast through the device.

Normally that attack dissipated to nothing within a few yards, but with the wand to direct and focus it, I could get almost as much range with the spell as I could with my Mana Bolts. I needed to catch their attention.

**Ogre Bruiser (Level 24)**

**Ogre Smasher (Level 23)**

**Ogre Goliath (Level 26)**

I pointed my wand, raising myself to the first layer of Mania. I wanted the extra damage, but I needed a clear head for this and couldn't risk the battle-hungry mental state of Blood Frenzy. As I entered Dissonance, the world grew distant and I detached myself from my emotions. It felt like I was looking at the world over my shoulder, almost like third-person view in a video game, instead of through my own eyes. It was a cold way of looking at the world.

More than once, I was tempted to leave Mania on all the time. There was something useful in the distant and indifferent state. Any Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge who embarked on such a path would be a terrifying being of unflinching logic, thinking only of optimizing their personal gains and nothing of the human emotions their actions entailed. It would allow them to be quite cruel and ruthless.

I'd opted against that path, though. Keeping a firm hold on my humanity seemed to be growing harder and harder as the levels piled up, but I was determined to make the most of them without losing it.

My Eldritch Blast struck the tusked ogre, and he flinched. "Ow! Bug bite me!" he said. The others laughed and made no move to see what it had actually been.

I grimaced. These ogres had tougher hides than I thought. A single Eldritch Blast wasn't even enough to get their attention. I tried a Mana Bolt. The tusked ogre yelped again and swatted at his back. The other two chortled with laughter.

I tried hitting the green spotted one.

“Bugs be everywhere!” The green spotted ogre stood and whirled left and right.

I hit the tall one, too, and he tossed his spit with a human leg on it to the ground near the fire as his eyes darted to the side of the fire I’d struck him from.

“Bad bugs! Nork eat bad bugs!” the tall ogre—apparently Nork—bellowed to the empty surroundings.

He was the Ogre Goliath. Besides just being taller than the others, he was noticeably stronger. But that was to be expected. Like me, he’d crossed the threshold into the D-Ranks and upgraded his body. He would be much tougher than the other two.

I glanced at the other ogre fire pits further away. We were starting to catch their attention, and that wasn’t ideal. We wanted to take out a few ogres, not a small army of them. I needed to deal more damage to lure them away.

I glanced at my sword, then at the tree I was standing in. It was time to put my knife throwing ability to the test. I hacked at the nearby branch, carving several lengths of wood roughly the size of my hand from it. Then, I sheathed my sword, took a breath, and cocked back my arm. I activated Arcane Blade, covering the twig in my hand with a shell of blue light resembling a tiny sword, right before throwing it.

My first attack landed, burying the twig in Nork’s back. The light faded as I dispelled Arcane Blade, but the twig remained buried in the wound.

**Your Knife Throwing Proficiency has increased to Level 2!**

I cast the spell again and followed it up with a second impromptu wooden dagger, layering in the occasional Mana Bolt or Eldritch Blast with my wand in my other hand. I landed a half dozen more hits on each of them. The damage my Corrupting Marks dealt was slowly ticking up over time. With some luck, I’d be able to turn these ogres into walking corpses before we had to engage them.



That would certainly make the coming fight easier. Their immense Vitality seemed to come at the drawback of decreased senses. They likely had very low Perception, and sooner or later my Corrupting Marks would deal more damage than the spells that carried them. By then, their fates would be sealed.

With damage being dealt and health points coming in, I felt more comfortable interspersing the occasional Blood Sacrifice with my other spells. I cast it on Nork, wounding myself, but also wounding him in the process. Unlike him, I was rapidly healing—thanks to my lifesteal ability. If needed, I always had Mind Over Flesh as backup, though I would hold off on that to conserve mana for now.

“Where are you, bugs?!” Nork bellowed.

The others shouted similarly. In the distance, some of the other ogres started setting their food aside to see what the commotion was about. I was running out of time. I needed to lure them out of sight of the rest of the camp for the ambush.

I needed to be bold. I glanced at the sword in my hand again. It was a lot bigger than the twigs I’d been throwing, and if I was willing to get up close and personal with these Ogres, I could do a lot more than I could throwing knives.

I settled in on a shadowy patch of ground, then cast Warp Step. I vanished into the shadows, reappearing a moment later and slashing the heel of the tusked ogre. His skin was far tougher than leather.

It was like trying to hack through a sheet of copper. It barely had any give at all. I felt it sap away the mana from Arcane Blade when I struck, and my spell fizzled out. Fortunately, there was real steel behind my blade this time—which meant my slice carried real weight beyond just the spell.

I vanished into the shadows before the tusked ogre or any of the others spotted me. I didn’t have time to survey the damage I’d done, but I could see the ogre I’d attacked was now hopping on one foot.

“Giant bug! Evil bug!” the tusked ogre yelled, this time more in pain than in anger.

Nork, the tall ogre glanced at the shadows with narrowed eyes. “These no bugs... we under attack!” Nork shouted.

He reached into the fire with his bare hands, tearing free a smoldering tree trunk and raised it high overhead. The burning log illuminated the shadows. In those shadows, he spotted me perched in a tree, shining sword in hand.

“There! Get him!” Nork cocked back his arm and threw the burning log at me.

Fear gripped my heart. I’d been spotted. Was the plan ruined? It would be if we had to flee an entire tribe’s worth of angry ogres. On the other hand, this could work even better than what I’d planned—but that would only be true if we worked fast.

I was lucky I was wearing the Moonshade Fox Cloak Sakura made for me. If Nork had been able to tell I was human, then the plan would have been ruined. I lowered my voice, not quite sure how the trolls sounded but doing my best approximation of one. I made sure to speak words in the manner I’d heard from the ogres to make sure they’d understand.

“Stupid ogres! This troll territory!” Then I turned and darted into the shadows behind me.

“Pesky trolls attack! Hunt and smash!” Nork roared, reaching for where his club leaned against a tree. Behind him, other ogres roared their battle cries.

Perfect. I had worried about being too obvious, but the ogres seemed to buy it. They also understood me just fine, proving my theory that they had access to the same unique title that granted me understanding of all humanoid languages.

I darted into the forest and Nork chased after me like a bulldozer. He was slow to get moving, but once he picked up speed, he was remarkably fast. We’d learned that much when ogres had nearly toppled my truck during our initial encounter with them.

I tried to place a few trees between me and him to help me gain some distance, but he barreled right through anything smaller than my leg in diameter. Only the trees too wide to wrap my arms around were thick enough to make the ogre swerve. Behind him, I could hear his two comrades giving chase as well. The tusked one limped along at the rear, the one with green spots following a little closer.

I found the spot where my allies lay in ambush and let Nork run straight through them. Over Nork's bellowing and smashing, I could just barely hear the twang of a bow, followed by a yelp of pain from the tusked ogre. My allies were peeling off the injured one first.

As soon as I was able to put enough distance between me and Nork to risk a turn, I did so. Spinning around, I activated Mana Bolt and Eldritch Blast, layering on more Corrupting Marks. The spells didn't do much damage, but my health pool was nearly back to full, and I was building the charge for my ultimate.

I kept running, using Warp Step and Power Jump in combination to keep a step ahead of the massive brute. Nork picked up rocks the size of my head and hurled them at me. To him, they were no larger than baseballs, but to me any one of them would have been enough to cave in my skull.

One of them came remarkably close to doing just that. Deflect showed its worth once more. Normally, the spell was mostly without kickback, even when getting shot at. But deflecting one of those enormous stones was enough to nearly knock me off my feet as the momentum absorbed by the spell was distributed across my body. At the last moment, I used the force to direct myself into a jump onto the next tree branch.

"You no troll!" Nork spat accusatorily. "Trolls fast, but not nimble like squirrel."

I laughed. "You're smarter than the others, aren't you, Nork?"

Nork's leathery eyebrows rose. "A human? Much interesting. Your people just snacks. Why can you fight back?"

“Oh, I’ll do more than just fight back,” I promised.

I let myself slip deeper into Mania. I’d done all I could with a clear head. Now, it was time to fight. I slipped past Furor and straight to Blood Frenzy.

The emotions my class had been suppressing came back in full force, but darker and with sadistic undertones. My mouth salivated with the psychological need to tear my enemy limb from limb with the might of my arms and the strength of my magic. I whirled and charged Nork.

After all my running, my charge surprised him. But he was not so surprised that he didn’t react in time to sweep his club out in front of him.

I used Warp Step, eyeing the patch of ground behind him by looking between his legs. I vanished and skidded to a stop. Arcane Blade in hand, I swept my sword through Nork’s heel. This time, I’d been expecting how tough the skin there was and had put my full might behind the blow, leaning heavily on Eldritch Augmentation and the third level of Mania.

Between the two of them, I crippled the ogre with my first blow.

I had no issue with enemies that had a lot of health points, so long as I could outmaneuver them. Without the ability to run, it was only a matter of time before I stacked up enough Corrupting Marks to put Nork down.

With the amount of damage he’d already taken, Nork wouldn’t be a threat for much longer. But he would be an excellent opportunity to give Arcane Blade a thorough test.

The ogre stumbled to one knee, turning and sweeping his club at me—sickly green energy coating his weapon.

I wasn’t sure what kind of ability he was using, but whatever it was would likely hurt. I made the effort to avoid it. Though I had a level advantage on Nork, and I planned to toy with him, I wasn’t about to just hand him an opportunity to turn the fight around. That would be entirely against the prospect of testing my new weapon.

Much to my surprise, Nork climbed back to his feet. The wound I'd just made on his heel was cloaked in a mass of dried blood in the shape of a lump as large as my fist. I couldn't tell beneath the enormous scab, but I was pretty sure the wound had already healed.

"Take more than that to put Nork down, snack!" the massive ogre bellowed.

"Looks like we're doing this the painful way, then." With Blood Frenzy raging through my veins, I couldn't help the smile that formed on my face.

He charged at me, his club raised overhead. It would have been a terrifying sight before my training with Myrina and Cyra. Now, though, all I saw was the dozens of openings this presented. He'd left himself wide open.

I pointed at his face with my free hand. Up this close and personal, I didn't need the wand. I blasted him in the face with an Eldritch Blast. He closed his eyes for just a moment as his thick hide turned the spell into nothing more than a brief distraction—but a brief distraction was all I needed. I cast the spell, then activated Eldritch Augmentation the moment it left my hands.

Thrusting my sword into his side, I yanked it violently across him, slicing his belly open from one side to the other. Blood and intestines spilled from the wound.

"Graaaaagr!" Nork bellowed in rage. He swept his club through the area I'd been a moment ago.

I was already gone.

This ogre was strong, but he was no Alpha Wolfman. He was much too slow to be able to deal with me. And stupid—very stupid. For all his might, all he was to me was a couple more experience points. Thankfully, the system counted ogres and trolls as sapient and not monsters.

From behind him, I cut his arm to the bone with one slash of Arcane Blade. He dropped his club with a howl, sweeping his good hand wide to grab me. I dodged beneath it, putting out one of his eyes with a Mana Bolt.

“Nork eat you!” Nork panted ragged breaths. “Grind your bones between teeth. Turn your flesh to poop!”

“No, you won’t,” I hissed.

I gauged Nork’s health bar against my Corrupting Marks. A little nudge was all I needed before detonating the marks would be enough to do him in. I was full to the brim with health from Life Steal. Nork’s health pool had been prodigious, so there’d been plenty to take.

“Blood Sacrifice.” I spat out a mouthful of blood as Nork collapsed to his knees. A moment later, I detonated my marks and the ogre exploded in a fountain of gore as he collapsed to the ground.

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level to Level 29!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level to Level 36!**

**Your ultimate, Secrets of the Unseen, is at 100% charge!**

Dismissing the prompts, I turned back to where my allies were still fighting. I could hear them now, my senses enhanced by Blood Frenzy. I wiped the blood from my mouth with the back of my fist, eager for the next fight.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-SEVEN

I joined the battle to find the fighting well underway. Chuck was bruised and battered, but with his regeneration, he'd be alright. He must have taken a club to the side of the head. I needed to get that man a helmet.

Kyle was the one I was worried about, slumped against a tree as he was. He was moving though, which was a good sign.

Rick, the axe-wielding militiaman, stood over him in a protective stance. I was proud. He'd been a promising trainee and looked to be holding his own despite fighting bigger and stronger melee opponents just like him. He'd probably picked up more levels, and after tonight he'd have caught up to the peak of Earth's power curve.

Kerrie, the archer, stood back and used her bow to land what clean shots she could. She'd found her mark more than once, as evident by the arrows studding the surviving ogres, particularly the one Bridget was up against.

Bridget fought the tusked ogre. She had a pair of daggers in her hands, each with their edges glowing with crimson light. Light on her feet, she ducked between and around the ogre's clumsy sweeps. She was dealing damage with each blow, though given the ogre's massive health pool, it would take her a while to whittle him down.

I turned my attention to the other ogre, the green spotted one. Sakura fought him, and her method was a lot more direct.

"Smash!" The green spotted ogre brought his club down. The chunk of gnarled wood was as thick as a tree trunk.

Sakura raised her own club to block. In its former life, it had been a baseball bat. With the difference in size between the clubs and their wielders, the ogre should have snapped Sakura's weapon like a twig.

If her club didn't break, her arms certainly would have. But Sakura had reinforced her club with her own powers, and another ability kept her legs steady. And point for point, Sakura had the ogre beat in strength.

"Bigger smash!" Sakura shouted back at the ogre.

I watched as she blocked the ogre's overhand smash, shoved him to the side, and then struck him in the side with her much smaller club. Because of their respective sizes, it shouldn't have been possible, and yet Sakura did it anyway.

The ogre lashed out to retaliate, only for Sakura to stick out an arm and grab hold of the ogre's club herself. The ogre's look of fury transformed to one of shocked surprise when he realized he couldn't wrench his weapon free of Sakura's grasp.

I activated my ultimate and ran at Bridget's foe. I activated Arcane Blade, empowering it with Secrets of the Unseen. The blue light lining my blade shifted and shone with that strange color I could only remember when using the ability. With one slice, my sword cut straight through the ogre, dividing him from the top of his head to his hip. He slid apart in two big chunks.

"T-that works," Bridget said, suddenly coming to a stop as her intense fight came to an abrupt and bloody end.

"Help Sakura!" I shouted.

With Bridget free to gang up on the last ogre, the battle was as good as won. I focused on calming myself down and letting go of Blood Frenzy. It always took me a minute, and for what came next, I needed a clear head. I slowly pulled myself back from the third level of Mania to the second, and then to the first.

By then, Bridget and Sakura—with the help of Kerrie—had worn down the ogre's health pool enough that all they



needed from me was a few Mana Bolts and to detonate my Corrupting Marks. That final kill restored me back to full health.

And just in time, too, because I heard more ogres coming our way. The fight might have felt like it lasted an hour but, in truth, no more than a minute had passed.

“Ow... fuck... what happened?” Chuck said, slowly lurching to his feet. His regeneration ability had finally healed him from whatever had knocked him out.

“We won. Time to get out of here!” I shouted in reply.

I ran to the nearby tree, scooped up Kyle, and threw him over my shoulder. Rick leaned on his axe, but other than being tired and with a few little scrapes seemed no worse for wear.

I found another member of Kyle and Chuck’s team who was still breathing and lifted him onto my other shoulder. We had a few wounded but had done surprisingly well. A few injuries and no casualties seemed like a successful secret military operation to me.

I grabbed one of the dead ogres by the ankle and pulled him into my bag of holding. Rick bent down and started shoving to help.

Nork had been beyond salvaging, but this was what I’d come here for.

Sakura carried two more of our wounded, one slung over either shoulder. Someone had taken an ogre club to the leg and broken it. It would have been a brutal wound before the System, but now it didn’t seem so bad.

The walking wounded, including Chuck, did their best to keep up with us as we made ourselves scarce. We were still in ogre territory, and I didn’t want to fight the entire tribe of ogres if I could help it. Humanity might have outnumbered them by quite a bit overall, but right now there were a lot more ogres than there were of us. And unlike us, every one of them was a heavy hitter.

The ogres’ poor perception was a boon to us, yet again. Not one among them was anything that could be considered a

tracker. I imagined any game they hunted regularly was as big as they were—and just as prone to snapping whole trees in half as it fled. They wouldn't need to be able to spot broken twigs and sparse prints in the mud.

While we no doubt left a trail, we were as circumspect as could be under the conditions. That must have been good enough to fool the ogres, because we soon left the howling ogres shouting to one another in frustration far behind us.

“Did... did we really do it?” Chuck asked.

“Yes, we did,” I said while easing Kyle and the other wounded man I carried into the back of my truck.

“Chuck”—I turned to the man as Sakura and Bridget deposited their burdens in the back of the truck—“I hope you remember how to drive.”

“Uh... it might come back to me when I'm behind the wheel?” Chuck shrugged.

“Take Kyle and the others to Doctor Roswell's clinic. Be quick about it. They don't have much time.” I handed Chuck my keys.

He nodded, his face resolute as he hopped in the driver's seat and sped off.

With the wounded taken care of, Bridget, Sakura and I returned to the task at hand. Our mission today wasn't complete just yet. We jogged to the rendezvous point and then waited for the other groups to return.

I hadn't realized until now how big a problem the ogres had become. From what Nork and his friends had been chatting about over dinner, I was pretty sure they'd taken to eating people. Maybe the System hadn't left enough of their regular prey for them, or maybe they just liked people. But whatever was happening couldn't be allowed to continue.

Margaret, Marcus, and Frank's teams hadn't done quite as well as we had against the trolls, despite their superior numbers. Instead of the excitement of a clean victory like my people wore, they had only the grim determination of a job they were determined to see through to the end.

“Here they are.” Marcus presented the dead trolls to me. “We had to move some wounded out of the way. Those trolls were damn hard to put down. The tricky bastards just keep regenerating.”

“Send them back to that hill back there. That’s where we’ll be sending our wounded,” I replied as I pulled the remains of two ogres from my bag of holding. “And here are your ogres. You know what to do with them.”

Marcus grimaced. “And here I was just starting to enjoy the frying pan. Back into the fire for us.”

“You don’t need to fight,” I told him. “Just drop off the corpses somewhere the trolls will find them. Use bait if you have to, but don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

“Agreed. We shouldn’t lose anyone we don’t have to,” Margaret added.

We separated again, and Sakura, Bridget, and I returned to where I’d slain Nork. Perhaps the other ogres would think he’d made a bloody last stand surrounded by trolls. That would be our best-case scenario.

“How do we get their attention?” Sakura asked.

“I suspect an ogre battle would involve a lot of bellowing. Probably some knocking over of trees, too.” I turned to Sakura expectantly.

She hefted her club, started shouting, and did her best to pulverize the local plant life into submission.

I glanced at Bridget. “Those trolls had pretty long claws.”

Bridget nodded, extending her own nails into claws. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She inspected the fingers on the dead trolls for a moment, then splayed her fingers wide and made deep grooves on the knocked-over tree trunks. We were big and obvious about planting evidence of a battle. We had to be, because I was pretty sure the ogres wouldn’t grasp subtlety.

Eventually, Sakura’s yelling and smashing started attracting the ogres’ attention. When we heard them crashing

through the forest, we made our escape once more. I lingered a few steps behind, hoping to catch a glance of the ogres.

I wanted to ensure they found the clearing where I'd killed Nork. Sure enough, the massive giants stumbled into the clearing one at a time. They cried in rage, hefted their clubs in the air, and pointed to the dead trolls each in turn.

“Trolls attack us! We go smashing!”

“Smashing! Smashing! Smashing!”

The ogres' voices became a chant loud enough to carry all the way to Crownhill. Which meant they'd easily carry far enough to reach the trolls' encampment.

*Perfect.*

We regrouped with the other team. Unfortunately, their escape hadn't been nearly as clean as ours.

“One's on Marcus!” Margaret shouted as soon as she saw us. “Those things just won't go down! The only one who has been able to reliably kill them is Michael, and he took a nasty hit.”

Poison was a natural counter to regeneration, so I wasn't surprised Michael had been most effective against the trolls. It was why I'd included him. But if he was out of the picture, I'd have to fill his role with my Corrupting Marks.

Nearby, Michael lay dazed over Frank's shoulder. Frank had his pistol in one hand raised and aimed back the way they'd come. He pulled the trigger, but then swore when all he heard was the click of an empty chamber.

“Did any trolls see you and return to tell the others?” I asked anxiously.

“One did,” Margaret replied.

I cursed. “Bridget, Sakura, you two keep those trolls off Marcus. I'm going to hunt down the one who fled to report to the others. We can't let the trolls know we were behind this.”

I rushed ahead using Warp Step, covering ground in the blink of an eye. I ran straight past Marcus and the three trolls

chasing him. I needed to get the runner.

I eventually found him racing along in that odd loping gait I'd seen from the previous troll scout we'd encountered. He crouched low on all fours, fingers curled inward, bounding along like a gorilla. They stood upright like large hunch-backed humanoids most of the time, but their bodies weren't designed for running. They couldn't lock their knees to walk fully upright and were forever stuck in a wide, ambling gait.

The dense forest that had characterized the ogres' encampment quickly turned to swamp where the trolls lived. I suspected this was their natural environment. Fortunately, the trees here were tall enough that I could hop from limb to limb without falling into the muck.

Eventually, I spotted the runner. He was anxious to get back to the heart of the tribe. Unlike the ogres and their collections of firepits, I had yet to see the heart of the trolls' domain.

Like giant birds, they lived inside the hollows of enormous trees. I wasn't sure if they'd carved the holes out themselves or if they just waited for a tree to rot and lay claim to it. But it didn't seem too sophisticated. They'd added to their homes with reeds and mud, but nothing that might require the use of stone tools. I was starting to suspect that the goblins were the best thinkers of any of the races humanity had integrated with.

I targeted the troll immediately. I hit it first with an Eldritch Blast, and then again with a Mana Bolt.

The troll shrugged off both blows, its flesh healing as fast as Chuck's. Looking closer, I saw a blue spherical organ under its skin—much like the one inside of Chuck. I was more confident now than ever that Chuck and his fellow raiders had encountered the trolls before now, since he had their power.

The troll glanced up at me. It bared its teeth in my direction, letting out a wordless shriek. The sound pounded against my eardrums like a physical force, and blood leaked from my ears.

Gritting my teeth, I drew my sword. Then, casting Arcane Blade on it, I threw it.

It tumbled end over end before embedding itself in the troll's throat, severing its spine and angling up to catch in its jaw. I'd seen Chuck's regeneration enough by now to know this wouldn't be enough to put the troll down.

I closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. Pulling my sword free, I tried to cast Disassemble. Unfortunately, there was enough life left in the troll to resist my spell. So I cast Arcane Blade again on my sword and carved into the troll's skin, layering on Corrupting Marks so that its regeneration had something else to deal with.

When I tried to cast Disassemble again, it worked. The troll exploded into pieces, all of which flew into my bag of holding. There was only one item of interest, really—a smooth blue sphere with a faint glow. I saw it in my bag and pulled it out.

It was hard to the touch and looked almost like a large pearl, roughly half the size of my fist. I couldn't tell if it was an organ or something the trolls inserted into themselves. Whatever it was, though, it was the source of their regenerative powers.

I used Study to find out a little more.

### **Azure Lifesource Orb Fragment (Epic):**

**This shimmering blue fragment is a remnant of the Divine-ranked original Azure Lifesource Orb. Each subsequent orb has been chiseled from its predecessor, creating a lineage of fragments tracing back to the original orb. Crafted by a mysterious entity who once visited the troll realm, these orbs have since disseminated throughout the troll population.**

**While the whereabouts of the original orb remain a mystery, every fragment retains a portion of its remarkable power. When embedded into a being, this fragment bestows incredible regenerative**

**capabilities, amplified vitality, and the potential for complete restoration.**

**This particular Azure Lifesource Orb Fragment can be empowered either by assimilating additional fragments or by nurturing it within a compatible host, allowing it to grow and intensify its effects.**

**Note: This orb is a valuable crafting material for your Artificer job.**

The description was enlightening. Like the Wolfmen, the trolls had once been greeted by a mysterious visitor better traveled than they were. I suspected the trolls were compatible hosts for the orb. Whoever created the original orb did so to nurture the orb's power over time. Unfortunately—for them, at least—the system decided to take the troll world for itself.

My mind went back to Myrina and her time as a mysterious stranger on Earth. Perhaps visitors from other worlds spending time among the unintegrated wasn't so uncommon, after all. I tucked the orb back into my bag of holding. I was curious what exactly my job would let me make with it.

I returned to the others in time to watch the tail end of their fight against the trolls that had been chasing Marcus. From the look of things, they mostly just needed help putting the trolls down. Sakura had bashed one troll's head in and was busy pulverizing the rest of its body in the hopes that she could damage the thing beyond what its regeneration allowed. She looked to be succeeding, too. Other than a few twitches, the troll she'd downed was healing far slower than the others.

Two trolls were still on their feet and fighting—one confronted by Bridget and Frank, while Margaret and Marcus dealt with the other.

I hit both trolls in the back with a barrage of spells before darting in with Arcane Blade. I finished off one troll with a combination of Blood Sacrifice and detonating my Corrupting Marks. I didn't have many of them on the troll, so it didn't completely explode.

Its healing could have saved it, but I cast Disassemble in the brief moment that its heart stopped and before its regeneration kicked in to resuscitate it. The troll wasn't going to be regenerating from being separated into its component pieces and finding a new home in my bag of holding.

I quickly took apart the last troll just as I had the first, and soon our entire group was heading back to the settlement. I looked around for Michael. Frank had been carrying him, the last I knew. There had been other wounded, as well, though now they were nowhere to be seen.

"All the wounded took off like you ordered," Frank explained. "They took the last of the cars though."

"At our levels, we'll probably make it through these woods faster on foot." I gestured around us, and then we all took off at a run.

Humans, as it turned out, were quite good at running. A bunch of office workers like us wouldn't have been able to put on a good showing before the integration, but a few life-and-death battles did wonders for the waistline. Once we got going, we had the persistence that trolls and ogres lacked.

Perhaps the wolfmen might have been able to keep up with us after their transformation to Chaosborn Lycans, but the other races stood little chance. We were well clear of the battlefield long before things grew truly dire. And it really was a battlefield.

Once we were certain we were out of the crossfire, we found a nearby cliff face and scaled it. It was one of those sheer chunks of rocks that had come with our shard's integration of the Wolfman's home world.

"I think that was an ogre battle cry." I pointed in the distance.

"It sounded like a rock slide... you guys really fought those things?" Margaret raised an eyebrow.

Sakura nodded. "We kicked their asses!"

"I wouldn't want to fight a whole tribe of them," Bridget added.



I waved them all to silence. It was time to watch the show.

The forest surrounding the ogre tribe came alive with commotion. The huge hulking figures made no attempts to hide themselves, nor any attempt to get into something resembling a formation. They simply stormed across the divide between their forest and the troll swamp.

The towering trees the ogres were familiar with were soon replaced by willows and muddy ground. ogres in scattered ranks barreled right through both. The ogres burst forth from the woods, charging through the muddy water with ferocious roars.

The trolls hadn't been caught completely off guard, though. They'd heard the ogres coming, and were expecting them. They'd had an incident of their own in the last hour and had recovered a few ogre bodies, suggesting who'd murdered some of their own.

"The ogres are stronger, but it looks like they're struggling in the swamp," Margaret reported, then she pointed.

"Agreed. They aren't particularly maneuverable in the first place. The swamp takes away what little maneuverability they have left." I stroked my chin, forcing the smile off my face. It seemed wrong to be smug about starting a war between separate factions, because that was exactly what we'd done.

We'd planted evidence in both factions, proving to each that they were irreconcilable foes. I'd expected that they would kill and murder one another as a result. From here on out, the conflict would be self-sustaining. The kin of the fallen would see the work of their enemies with their own eyes. I wasn't sure if any ogres and trolls had fought one another before today, but by the time the sun set they certainly would have.

Already, the dead were piling up on both sides, thinning their ranks. Good. Perhaps it was amoral of me to take pride in such bloody work, but by all accounts, both ogres and trolls were hungry for human flesh. Every one of them that died now would be one more that wouldn't be hunting down humans for lunch tomorrow.

And, in a way, I was simply encouraging the natural course of events. If trolls and ogres both ate humans, they would eventually come into conflict over their favorite food. It was either eat us or eat monsters, and I had little doubt that ogres and trolls would choose us instead of something with fangs and claws.

No, it was up to us, the strongest members of humanity, to protect the weak who supported us from the rear. Civilization was what made us different from the ogres, the trolls, and the wolfmen.

It was a bit ironic that the only alien race anything like us were the goblins, and they were the smallest and weakest of all the factions. I remembered Gobgob and her tribe screaming in terror. That's what had nearly happened to us. It's what *would* have happened to us if we'd failed to organize after the Wolfman attack. Our wits and cooperation were our greatest strengths, and I planned to use that for all it was worth.

So no, I didn't feel bad about tricking the ogres and the trolls into fighting. Not in the least.

I was just bringing this battle to the fore long before it came to that end. Instead of waging a war of extermination when humanity had been bled dry and fended off their incursions again and again, I'd ensured that the war would happen today—long before humanity had to face trolls and ogres on the field.

I turned to my companions. "This won't solve the ogre and troll problem—not forever. But it will delay it. And it will buy time for the rest of you to gain more levels. When that war winds down"—I flipped my thumb over my shoulder at the bloody swamp—"I want Crownhill's militia to be ten times the size it is today."

"That would be wise," Margaret agreed.

There were more nods of agreement all around. I stood, watching the ogres and trolls and their bloody conflict. Despite the gory scene before us, everyone knew we'd just saved the lives of hundreds of people back in Crownhill. And unlike our attack on the Wolfmen, this time my plan had worked.

We may not have pulled it off flawlessly, but it had worked. Margaret, Marcus, and Frank seemed much the same as before. But in the others gathered with us on top of that cliff, there was a certain something in their eyes.

I thought it was respect, but it had a hint of something more. Admiration? Loyalty? I wasn't sure what it was, but it made the weight on my shoulders feel that much heavier.

“Should we have a celebratory feast back in Crownhill? God knows we've hunted enough monster meat to have one,” Frank said.

I shook my head. “No. This was a secret mission, remember? Those ogres and trolls may not be smart, but it'd be better not to lay our cards on the table if we can help it. As far as anybody back in Crownhill is concerned, this was just a special hunt.”

“But we'll know!” Kerrie, the archer who'd traveled with my group said. Her gaze had been locked on me all the while, not interested in the trolls or ogres in the slightest.

“That we will,” I promised.

I grunted, thinking that now was about time for me to depart before the archer woman and the others bore a hole in the back of my head with their stares. “Tell everyone to keep up the hunts and their training. Keep an eye on the ogres and trolls, too, if you can. We need to know how their war is going, so we can step in to keep it going, if need be.”

I nodded to Sakura and Bridget, turning to leave. “As for me, I've got some more training of my own to do. I'm going off-world again soon. I'll check in with you all upon my return.”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-EIGHT

The first thing I did when Bridget, Sakura, and I returned to my farmhouse was check on my stats. I'd gained a few levels and had points to allocate. I quickly spent them, bolstering my Intelligence stat once again. Both my class and race were coming along, albeit slower than before.

My level might have been much higher without my death curse forbidding me from getting experience points from monsters, but most of that missing experience had gone to Bridget and Sakura. If I wanted to, I could get it back any time I wanted.

In fact, Bridget and Sakura both seemed quite eager to give it back to me.

The two of them clung to my sides while I checked my status window. I wasn't against a little fun, and I shared a few kisses with them. But they needed their levels; I wanted them to hit the D-ranks like me sometime soon.

The last time I'd let the two of them have their way with me, I'd lost an entire day and they'd each lost more than a dozen levels. I couldn't let that happen right now. There was simply too much to do—starting with checking in with Gobgob.

She and the rest of my goblin assistants had finished making the Mana Bomb templates I'd requested. All that was left now, was for me to put the finishing touches on to make the final product and to reap my job's level-up rewards.

I didn't forget to ask Bridget to cook up a big batch of treats. It didn't really matter what they were, but I wanted to pack as much food as I could into my bag of holding. I had a promise to keep to Cyra. She'd be the one paying for my return, after all.

I had no doubts that Myrina would soon be contacting me, now that the minimum amount of time back on Earth had passed for the System to allow my return.

"How are those Mana Bombs coming, Gobgob?" I asked upon entering one of my spare barns.

I'd had to look around for the goblins, but after a bit of searching I found them in here. The integration had copied both my house and my barn, along with most of the things inside them. The trouble was that the System hadn't been all that logical about how it had done so. Which meant that each of the barns was a little messed up.

This particular barn's ceiling was about two feet lower than it should have been. I nearly bumped my head on the doorway walking into it. The roof inside was tall enough once I was past it, though the shelves I'd purchased weren't all that useful. Maybe the last few feet of the barn and its shelves were buried underground, but I suspected whatever lay underneath this barn was likely some mishmash of the wood and the dirt it had been overlaid with.

Fortunately, the goblins didn't mind the missing height. In fact, they seemed to prefer these workbenches to the full-size ones in my original barn. My original workbenches were too tall for them, but these benches that barely reached my shins seemed just the right height for the short, green women.

Looking over the rows of goblins stooped over the low tables, I felt bad. The tiny workers looked a bit too much like child laborers lined up in a sweat shop churning out little widgets one after another. But it wasn't a sweatshop. Besides, instead of making toys or trinkets, these goblins were building handmade explosives to sell to merchants in a foreign land for a steep profit.

Yeah, who was I kidding? That just made it worse. Thankfully, Gobgob saved me before I could fall victim to excessive introspection.

“Chief Humie! Gobgob have your copper boom boom balls,” Gobgob announced.

She reached up to grab my finger and led me through the shortened warehouse to a crate in the center of the room filled to the brim with Mana Bombs. I picked one of them up. The wires were bent remarkably well. The goblins had managed to make the bundles even smaller than I had for the example I’d left them. It took nimble hands to make such neat bends.

By making the balls smaller, the goblins had saved quite a bit of extra wire, allowing them to create more Mana Bombs than I’d expected. They’d gone from something roughly the size of my fist to about half that size.

“Impressively done,” I told her. “But now for the real test.”

I focused on my job. With a thought, I activated it. My mana filled the bomb to bursting, and soon it was ready to explode with energy.

**Your Artificer level has increased to Level 11!**

**New blueprints are available.**

“Well done, Gobgob. Well done all of you!” I called out with a big grin.

I opened up my bag of holding and started pouring Mana Bombs in, much to the interest of the goblins. I didn’t bother explaining about the bag. I figured they already took me for something of a powerful, if enigmatic, figure. Having a magic bag that could fit far more than its size indicated was perfectly in line with their perception of me.

I dropped off some new copper with the goblins to work on, as well as some of the orichalcum wire I’d commissioned back in town. Thankfully, there had been some old nail-making machinery back in town so the blacksmith there had been able to kludge something together to extrude wire.

It wasn't nearly as fine as the modern stuff, but this orichalcum metal took to the shape fairly well. I suspected it was some sort of copper alloy with a magical additive. Whatever the case, it seemed to conduct mana even better than copper did. I hoped that meant it would make even better Mana Bombs.

After all, these things were my big money maker on Myrina's world. And if my last visit had made one thing clear, it was that establishing any sort of influence on Myrina's world was going to take a massive amount of funds. Fortunately, my Artificer job had provided a pathway to those funds. And ultimately a pathway to visiting Myrina while standing on my own merit.

After leaving the goblins to their work, I sat down and worked on finishing off their Mana Bombs until I ran out of mana. Then, I stretched and spent some time with Bridget and Sakura before returning to my workshop to do it all over again.

**Your Artificer level has increased to Level 12!**

**Your Artificer level has increased to Level 13!**

**Your Artificer level has increased to Level 14!**

You have achieved mastery over the blueprint 'Mana Bomb'!

All future Mana Bombs will require less mana to create, have a lower failure rate, and take less time.

Achieving mastery over the blueprint was a welcome boon, and with it I completed the first batch of Mana Bombs even faster. Gobgob and the other goblins were nearly finished with the second batch when I came out to get them. I brought them a tray of baked goods, and the goblins stopped working the moment they smelled them.

"Back for more," I called out. "And this time, I brought you some food."

Gobgob was the first to step forward. Though the mouths of the other goblins salivated, they were still too wary of me to meet my eye, let alone approach. Gobgob grabbed a chocolate

chip cookie and gingerly took a bite. Her eyes lit up the moment she chewed it and she swallowed quickly before wolfing down the rest of the cookie before grabbing another one.

“Chief Humie brings bestest hunt ever!” Gobgob shouted.

The others rushed forward to grab a bite themselves as soon as I set the cookies down. I didn't have the heart to tell them that these were Bridget's cast-offs. While perfectly edible, each was a little too lumpy or misshapen to send to Cyra. They were perfectly fine to eat, though.

Not that I think Gobgob and the other goblins would have noticed—not at the rate they were scarfing them down. They practically inhaled the things. I left them to their work and collected the newly made balls of wire. This time, a few of them were orichalcum instead of just copper.

I wondered what I could do with them. For a while, I just played around with them. Then I started fiddling with the new blueprints I'd gotten upon leveling up.

What was Kyrina Samhain's chief complaint about my Mana Bombs? Mostly that they were too low-leveled. They didn't pack enough of a punch, given the caliber of monsters she was hunting.

They'd worked fine for me, but presumably I'd run into the same problem as my level went up. It was a problem that I'd need to solve, sooner or later. The only question was how to go about it? How did I make a bigger, more powerful Mana Bomb?

It had to be possible. I had plenty of higher-level items at my disposal. I'd come up with the Mana Bombs when I was far weaker than I was now, after all. Since then, I'd achieved both mastery over the Mana Bomb and improved my job level dramatically.

All I needed to do was figure out how to expand on my current design. I looked through my other blueprints for examples and ideas on what might work, comparing and contrasting what I'd learned about my craft.



What were the Mana Bombs, really? They were a way to store my mana and then release it all at once. Logically, if I stuffed more mana into a Mana Bomb, the explosion would be bigger.

I tried experimenting with that. The first one I tried that with blew up in my face. Then, I remembered the orichalcum bombs. Those were sturdier. And being a magical copper alloy, they stored magic easier.

“A definite improvement!” I muttered to myself. The explosion was about twenty percent larger. I wasn’t satisfied, though.

A minor twenty percent improvement wouldn’t impress anyone at the auction house, let alone the Samhain Clan. I needed something powerful. Something that was exactly what they needed and then a little more. The secrets had to be buried somewhere in my other blueprints.

In one diagram, I came across a way to store energy more efficiently. “An energy coil! Far better than a well. Why didn’t I think of that?”

And in another, I spotted a way to use the mana more efficiently. “Instead of a simple gust of wind, the mana should sweep out in a wave. Perhaps even like a blade...”

I tested several new strategies. The blade was too difficult for my current skill level, but the wave was well within reach. It would be more like a circular pulse that would rip phantasmal creatures apart as it passed.

It would sweep outward like a ring from the epicenter of the explosion, concentrating the energy the bomb contained and doing more damage without increasing the overall energy requirements. It was perfect.

I finished my first prototype. “I declare you an Ultra Mana Bomb!” I proclaimed.

Nearby, where she leaned against the door to my workshop, Sakura rolled her eyes.

“What?” I asked. “Lame? Okay, how about... Mega Mana Bomb!”

“Better,” she snorted, “but not by much. Come on, your dinner’s getting cold. You’ve been working all day.” Sakura waved me in.

Following her out through the doorway of my workshop, I looked up at the sky. Had it gotten dark already? And still no call from Myrina.

I was surprised. Today should have been the first day I’d be allowed back. I’d been prepared all afternoon to run for my bag of holding in the kitchen with all of the food Bridget had been making.

I went inside, ate dinner, and fiddled with my Mega Mana Bomb a little more before passing the new design on to Gobgob and the other goblins to work on. They went about the laborious process of converting many of the Mana Bombs they’d already made into the new pattern. But since I hadn’t yet charged any Mega Mana Bombs, there was no lost material.

The new and improved design was a bit more labor-intensive with its extra features. Thankfully, Gobgob caught on quick. And once I showed her how to make one, she taught the others. Come morning, I’d have plenty more Mega Mana Bombs to make.

“Here’s dinner, Carter.” Bridget set a plate of beef wellington down before me. That was quite the difficult dish, but Bridget had done a great job. It looked flawless.

“I guess you should call this Monster Wellington, though, because we don’t exactly have access to beef anymore,” Bridget said with a laugh.

“Mhm. Well, I’d say it’s even better than beef, but that might just be because of your lovely cooking,” I said after chewing and swallowing my first bite.

Bridget laughed and slid her chair back as Sakura smiled as she dug in as well.

The three of us were sitting around the small table in the dining room just off the kitchen. It was all rather cozy. I’d never dreamed my house would feel so full of life. If I’d

known I'd have someone as skilled as Bridget cooking for me, I would have enlarged the kitchen.

I glanced over at Bridget again with a smile to find her chair empty. It was like she'd vanished between bites. I shrugged, figuring she'd gone into the kitchen. Sakura and I ate and joked a bit while we waited for Bridget to come back and join us.

But then I felt a tug on my pantleg.

The feeling was familiar, and soon a pair of hands were working at my zipper. From the darkness under the table between my legs, Bridget held a finger over her lips as she gave me a wink.

I kept my mouth shut, continuing to chat with Sakura as we finished our delicious meal.

“So... how's your leatherworking been going?” I asked Sakura.

“Wonderful!” Sakura shot me a beaming smile. “I was afraid I'd be limited to just clothes and textiles, but it turns out the hides of magical beings can be used for a lot more than you'd think. Some of their hides are tough enough that Bridget could cook out of them, if we ever run out of pots and pans.”

“I'm sure such treated hides have good resale value at the obelisk.”

Sakura nodded vigorously as she tilted her plate up and let the rest of her monster wellington slide right into her mouth. It shouldn't have fit, but she gobbled it all down in one bite.

“I'd be bringing home the bacon, if it wasn't for you cheating with your ability to charge taxes on every transaction. What a scam!”

I laughed. “This is certainly the first time I've ever been on this side of things. Normally it's me trying to avoid the tax man.”

Truthfully, I felt a bit bad spending so much of the taxes the obelisk had gathered for me on copper wire to send to Myrina. But apparently, the city council's cut of the taxes

easily paid for the militia. All remaining tax income was pocket change for the city's owner.

My mind went back to Valkyrie's Watch and the good-sized town I'd seen around it. Did Kyrina have an obelisk? Probably not. Otherwise, people would have been using that instead of the auction house.

I was pretty sure I remembered seeing a large black pillar in the market square of Shadefall City. Cyra, Myrina, and I hadn't had time to look around while we were in the dungeon, but I was pretty sure I remembered seeing one there.

How much would the owner of such a city have made from their cut of all transactions that took place? That city had to have tens of thousands of residents. I wasn't done following that train of thought, but it suddenly became really hard to think about taxes. Bridget's lips brushed against my cock a second time.

"I bet I could be your tax collector. I'll bring my big stick and wave it threateningly. Hand over the protection money if you value your kneecaps!" Sakura shouted, then stifled a giggle.

I chuckled. "I'm a legitimate operation, Sakura, not some low-level... ah!... some low-level gangster." My voice caught as I felt Bridget slip my full length into her mouth.

"You okay, Carter?" Sakura asked, arching an eyebrow. "I'm all done and you've barely touched your food. It's really good, I promise."

"Mhmm..." I groaned through clenched teeth.

Beneath the table Bridget worked my pants down. She had one hand working up and down the length of my shaft as she kissed and fluttered her tongue under my tip.

"Well if you guys aren't going to eat, then I will!" Sakura helped herself to Bridget's plate. "Seriously, what is Bridget up to in the kitchen? Do you think she's prepping dessert? I bet she's prepping dessert. I saw her whipping something up earlier."

"Yeah... ah... maybe..." I grunted.

“You sure you’re alright, Carter? You’re suddenly a bit less articulate than usual.” Sakura stared at me with narrowed eyes.

“Fine. Good. Great,” I grunted.

“You don’t look fine, good, or great.” Sakura stood, then pushed her plate aside as she leaned across the table. “Maybe you have a fever or something.”

Sakura crawled across the table until she was sitting on the edge. She flipped her legs on either side of my waist and draped her arms over my shoulders while she pulled herself close. All the while, she was completely oblivious to Bridget sucking away underneath her.

“Your face is red! I knew something was wrong.” Sakura poked me in the cheek.

“Maybe it’s just because a beautiful woman like you is so close?” I suggested.

Sakura’s eyes lit up, and she looked down at her cleavage. It was just about pushed up right into my face.

“Oh! I get it...” She giggled to herself. “You just like what you see. Too bad Bridget’s not here. She’s going to miss out.”

“Yeah...” I chuckled, but not for the reason Sakura thought.

Below me, I felt Bridget stifle a laugh of her own by gagging herself on my hard shaft, taking it into her throat.

“Mhm... well, what if I do this?” Sakura reached to the hem of her shirt and with one quick motion tore it off and tossed it back over her head.

The act revealed her bare breasts to me. Both perky mounds pressed against my chin.

“Better,” I allowed.

Sakura gave me a lewd smile as she reached for her cup of water. “You look awfully thirsty, Carter. How about a drink?”

With one hand, she pushed her breasts together. With the other, she poured water down her breasts. Beads of water

trickled down her smooth and toned skin. She dipped her finger between her boobs and licked the water off.

“We’ve got to stay hydrated with all the exercise we’ve been doing,” Sakura whispered.

Then, leaning close, she breathed huskily in my ear, “And with all the exercise I’m going to put you through tonight. What do you say the two of us get out of here and take this to the bedroom?”

“Oh... fuck!” I yelped as I felt myself reaching my climax in Bridget’s mouth beneath the table. I bucked my hips, my knees thumping into the bottom of the table.

Sakura grinned. “Yeah, that’s what I had planned, too. Hey... wait a minute. What’s going on under the—Bridget? You rotten cheater!”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-NINE

I got quite a bit more work done on my Mana Bombs before I finally heard from Myrina. It wasn't until late the next morning when the token I still wore around my neck began glowing.

**Your Patron wishes to contact you.**

**Do you want to allow communication?**

“Gobgob, you have things from here,” I said to the goblin. I jogged out of the goblins' workshop, putting my little Mana Bomb factory behind me and ran into the house.

Bridget was cooking and Sakura was out front working on her hides. I waved to Bridget as I passed and mouthed Myrina's name as I ran to our bedroom and activated the token. I ruffled a few pages on my desk to make it look like I'd been in the middle of writing something. Then, I sat down and accepted the prompt.

Myrina appeared in a burst of light, and I stood as soon as she appeared.

“Myrina! I was wondering when you'd call me,” I said.

Myrina glanced behind her. She waved to someone I couldn't see before turning back to me. I didn't like the expression on her face. Her usual smile was gone. In its place was something cold and serious. Her expression was like a naked blade, ready to lash out at a moment's notice.

“Sorry for the delay, Carter. I was in the field. We needed all hands-on-deck, including Cyra. I'm going back to

Valkyrie's Watch, but this was the first chance I had to meet up with Cyra, and I needed funds from her to pay for the teleport."

"I understand. If you don't have time for me, I won't butt in. There's plenty to take care of here on Earth, after all." I waved to the room behind me.

Myrina shook her head. "No. I only have so many opportunities to train you up during this early stage of the integration. I'd be failing in my duties as your patron if I didn't take advantage of them. Our training is just going to be a bit... unconventional. I hope you like hunting bandits, because that's what I'm scheduled to do for the next few days."

I shrugged. "That would probably be better for me than another dungeon run or more arena sparring. Don't get me wrong, the extra proficiency levels are nice. But I like having real levels too."

Myrina cracked a smile for the first time since she'd appeared to me. "Right, your... little problem."

I crossed my arms. "Please don't say it like that. And it's not little. It's a big problem."

Myrina giggled. "I'm sure that's what you say to all the girls. Where are those two you had with you before? I think I need to get their opinions on this."

"You don't need their help."

Myrina giggled harder. "Alright, alright. I'll just be patient and judge the size of your *problem* when the time comes."

I rolled my eyes.

Not thirty seconds in and Myrina had the two of us acting like the little kids we used to be. "I set up that teleportation platform Cyra gave me. Let me just gather my things. I promised her some treats from my home world."

Myrina's eyes lit up. "Those will be welcome. The current conflict has cut off a lot of our food supplies. There's enough in storage to go around for the troops, but rations aren't



exactly tasty, you know? Will you be ready in fifteen minutes? I'll be off getting things arranged. Don't miss your teleport! I only got enough funds from Cyra to do this once."

"I won't miss it. Talk to you in person soon." I spent the next few minutes gathering up everything I'd planned to bring with me.

Mostly, that meant packing my bag of holding to the brim. The trouble was, I'd made so many Mana Bombs over the last few days that I could have filled my entire bag of holding with them and still not had enough space to store everything. I couldn't have the Mana Bombs out in the open just sitting on the array, either, since then they'd be all around me when I arrived.

I drummed my fingers against my leg in thought. Eventually, I rushed to find Bridget. "Bridget, hang on to these for me. I'll need them. Try to bring them with you when I contact you to bring you over," I said.

Bridget frowned at the massive pile of Mana Bombs pouring out of my bag of holding and filling the floor of the kitchen.

"You really think Myrina will let us come? If it were me, I'd want the time with you to myself..."

I shook my head. "It probably won't be Myrina bringing you over. It'll be me. I've got a few plans for Myrina's world, and I can't do them all myself. These Mana Bombs are quite valuable there and I think that if I can sell a few of them off, I'll be able to afford the teleportation fee on my own."

Bridget's eyebrows crawled towards her hairline.

"When that time comes," I continued, "I'll teleport you and Sakura over to bring more. With your help and an awful lot of gold, doors will open for us that otherwise would not."

Bridget planted a kiss on my forehead. "Go see your friend, Carter. If you can bring us along to join you, I'll be happy to support you in person. I know Sakura will be, too."

I ducked back into the teleportation array with just the bare essentials, cheating a bit by bringing my spare gym bag again

for some extra regular storage space beyond what my bag of holding allowed. I'd forgotten the original in Myrina's room, along with the clothes I'd brought during my first visit.

Between the two bags, I had Bridget's sweets and about two hundred Mana Bombs—along with about half of the Mega Mana Bombs I'd made. If I gauged things right, I should have more than enough to bring either Bridget or Sakura over with another load of Mana Bombs. That would, in turn, allow me to bring over whoever we'd left behind with the next batch of products.

It turned out Myrina had been faster than I'd estimated and the teleportation began moments after I stepped onto the teleportation array. It was also a lot faster, thanks to the pad I was standing on. I saw why this thing made the process much more efficient.

Instead of scooping out a chunk of my lawn around me, the magic of the teleportation interacted directly with the symbols in the pad. All in all, the pad I was standing on was nothing more than a marker that drew a small box around me and channeled the energy appropriately on my end.

That meant the person doing the teleport didn't need to do the heavy lifting.

I suspected a blind teleport like the one I'd experienced was like performing surgery with your eyes closed. The person making it happen had to work with their magic far beyond their sight or senses—making the process much more difficult than it needed to be without the aid of a device like the one I was standing. With such a device to automate my side of the process, the magic required wasn't nearly as much.

The pad wasn't all that complicated, and I was pretty sure that with a bit of effort and maybe a few more levels in my Artificer job, I'd be able to build something better than the pad Cyra had gifted me. That would be a project for a later date. Maybe when I was selling enough Mana Bombs that I'd need to teleport over to Myrina's world for more than just training and hanging out.

I was greeted by the same stern orc woman who'd teleported me over the first time just as a system notification appeared.

Since this is not the first time your patron has brought you to Themyscira, your permissible stay is extended to seven days.

A few extra days here should come in handy.

“Doing much better than last time, apparently. It seems you've been civilizing your newly integrated world. Well done,” the orc woman said.

She turned to Myrina. “That'll only cost you a third of what it did before.”

“Here!” Myrina handed over a pouch full of gold. This was just an ordinary pouch instead of the bag of holding she'd handed over before.

It looked no bigger than my head, but I could tell Myrina was straining to lift it, which meant whatever was in there was a lot heavier than gold. The orc woman took the bag, her shoulders straining until she got it into the bag of holding at her waist—the same one she'd gotten as a bribe for her silence from Myrina before.

Wiping the sweat from her brow, the orc woman flipped her inventory menu up and whistled. “The Samhain Clan is generous once again. I hope the war is going well for you.”

“We'll see.” Myrina gave her a tight-lipped smile, wrapped her arm around me, and then waved goodbye. “Come on, Carter.”

She nodded to the orc woman. “Back to Valkyrie's Watch! And remember, keep quiet about Carter here!”

“You have my word,” the orc woman agreed.

I watched her carefully. Sooner or later, I'd need a teleporter who could keep her word, too.

We arrived to find Valkyrie's Watch a lot emptier than it had been the first time I was here.

“Where are all the people?” I asked Myrina curiously.

“They’re... around...” Myrina shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. “Okay, maybe not around. A lot of people left to stay with family in the countryside or went off to other cities. After you left, the Shadefall Clan started sending monsters to harass us and, try as we might, we can’t track down whoever made those Mana Bombs. Without them, we lost a potent weapon for dealing with those things.”

I grimaced. “Is that so?”

By all rights, I should have been happy that the Samhain Clan was desperate for my Mana Bombs. A man of lower morals would have seen it as an opportunity to fleece them for everything they had. It would have been easy to simply deliver all my Mana Bombs to the auction house and make a tidy profit. Myrina would never know of it.

But while I intended to build my own powerbase here that would let me stand on my own, I wasn’t about to screw Myrina’s family over. I would have to make sure I had enough Mana Bombs to sell to bring Bridget and Sakura over. And if that went well, I could discreetly gift the rest to Myrina’s family.

With luck, I could do it in such a way that it would encourage them to stop looking into me.

I wasn’t foolish enough to suspect my cheap attempt at bribery would secure Misa’s and the town wizard’s silence forever—not if the Samhain Clan really wanted to know. And I figured if I sold these Mega Mana Bombs on the open market, they might just decide they really wanted to know.

My decision was made by the time we returned to the castle.

I couldn’t help but notice there was only one guard at the gates this time, instead of two. I didn’t recognize her, and she looked to be on the shorter end of the Amazonian scale. I was pretty sure I’d be a head taller than her, if she wasn’t standing on the walls.

“Lady Myrina! And... guest?” the guard asked. Her voice was on the younger side, too. Probably over eighteen, but not much over eighteen.

“Yep!” Myrina said.

I rolled up my sleeve and fiddled with my menus until my Lesser Mark of the Samhain Clan appeared on my shoulder. As soon as she saw it, the guard opened the gates, with no further questions needed.

“The guest quarters are open to you,” the guard explained. “Just check in with whoever’s on duty there.”

Myrina waved the guard off. “That’s alright. Carter’s staying with me!”

We returned to Myrina’s room. It was messier than it had been on my first visit, but the walls Myrina had the servants build to divide off a chunk of her room for me were still up. My old gym bag wasn’t where I’d left it, though.

The bag in question lay open in the middle of the floor, and my clothes were on Myrina’s bed. She’d stuffed my jeans and my t-shirt over a large, human-shaped pillow, which was lying on its side in the middle of her bed.

Myrina’s eyes widened when she caught me looking and she quickly stepped between me and her bed. “That’s... uh... that’s nothing! If it looks like the clothes you left behind, you’re wrong! The servants accidentally threw those out.” Myrina waved her hands in front of me.

I laughed. “They weren’t that expensive, Myrina. It’s fine. Heck, those wizard robes you helped me loot in the dungeon were way more valuable.”

“Good! Uh... I mean, that’s what I would say if those were yours... which they aren’t!”

I eyed the section of the room that had been walled off to give me some privacy. “Mind if I put my things down?”

Myrina nodded vigorously, staying between me and her bed.

I found a safe place to tuck away the Mana Bombs. By the time I returned, the pillow, my old clothes, and my old gym bag had all disappeared. Myrina stood with her arms behind her back, balancing on her toes as she looked up at the ceiling as innocently as possible.

“I’ve got a bag of holding filled to the brim with food from my home world that I promised to Cyra. Where should I put them?” I asked Myrina.

“She isn’t due back home for a few days, but I’m sure she’d prefer to have the treats she paid an exorbitant amount of money for out in the field. Let’s go drop them off for the next supply run. They’ll go straight from your bag of holding to the couriers, so they stay nice and fresh—though I’m sure Big Sis won’t mind us snagging one or two before they’re sent off.”

“I made sure to bring a little extra, since I figured you’d say something like that.” I chuckled.

“Gimme! It’s been years since I had any Earth food!” Myrina pawed at my bag of holding.

I snatched it out of reach, since I didn’t want her reaching her hand in and coming out with it half full of Mana Bombs.

“Alright... just one, though.” I poked through my inventory before finding something Myrina would like. I settled on something simple.

“This is a croissant,” I said, withdrawing a neatly wrapped bundle of fluffy, buttered bread.

I shook my head, glancing at my inventory. Bridget must have been a bit of a masochist when it came to working in the kitchen. The croissant I held was one of the least complex dishes she’d made.

I’d picked it mostly because it was one of the few things I could name. To think she’d churned out hundreds of each of these over the last few days... There had been even more she had made that I hadn’t been able to fit into my bag of holding.

“Gimme!” Myrina snatched it and bit into the fluffy roll like it was a hunk of meat.

Her eyes lit up. “Mhm! Ohhhh! That’s sooooo good!” She wolfed down the entire thing in the blink of an eye, then stared at me with empty crumb-filled hands and puppy-dog eyes.

“Fine. One more,” I muttered as I pulled out a plate of macaroons and moon cakes.

She wolfed them down nearly as fast as she had the croissant. Bridget had estimated the Amazonian appetite more accurately than I’d realized.

When she stared at me with wide eyes and frosting-covered cheeks, I pulled my bag away from her. “Didn’t you say your sister was on the front lines, eager to enjoy the food she massively overpaid for?” I asked.

Myrina pouted. “That was before I realized they’d taste so good! If I’d known, I would have just told you I’d hang onto them for her...”

I chuckled. “Myrina, I’ll make sure you get all the sweets and snacks you can eat when you’re finally able to join me on Earth.”

“Really?” Myrina asked.

“Really,” I promised.

She hugged me. “Thank you, Carter!” I felt her face press against my shirt and she took a big whiff. “I know it’s only been a week, but I really missed you.”

I returned her hug with a warm embrace of my own. “I missed you too, Myrina...”

Inwardly, a little voice kept trying to remind me that we were just friends. I ignored it.

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY

We dropped off Cyra's food with the courier, much to Myrina's disappointment. After that, Myrina went to check in with her mother.

"To get you the best rewards for clearing out a few bandits, we need Mom to make it an official quest. Just wait here a second, okay?" Myrina asked.

I nodded. "Done."

Myrina departed, but the moment she did I rummaged around her things for a pen and paper. Looking around her room, it was quite clear that on the spectrum of jock to nerd, Myrina would have been the one giving the wedgies and swirlies had she attended high school on Earth.

I rummaged around, checking beneath discarded sweaty training gear, sharpening stones, and dozens of bladed weapons before I finally found something to write with. It was a stick of charcoal, which was rather crude by my standards.

Did they not have pens here? Perhaps that was a product I could also introduce to Myrina's world... for a small profit. I wasn't sure how big a market there would be if everyone was like Myrina.

After digging around some more, I eventually found a scrap of parchment. From the feel of it, it was quite clearly made from animal-skin, rather than anything made from paper pulp. A small piece at the corner was already tearing free, so I pulled it off the rest of the way with the help of one of the many blades Myrina had scattered around the desk.



I stared at the blank sheet of parchment for a good long while. This part was tricky. Normally my Forerunner of the System title let me understand any humanoid language without conscious effort. But this was harder.

Accidentally writing my note in English would have been a sure way to give myself away. I tried to concentrate on the language of the Amazonians. Fortunately, Myrina had a few examples of Amazonian writing for me to study.

I stared at it a good long while, concentrating until it made sense to me. The process was slow and tedious, but looking over the page, the meaning slowly jumped out at me. It probably took so long because Myrina's handwriting was a mess.

It looked like some tutor had forced her to write out the same couple of sentences over and over as some sort of punishment. The very repetitive, 'I have been a bad girl because...' made me feel a bit bad for Myrina at whatever age she'd been when forced to make these. From the dust on her desk, it had probably been sitting there for a long time.

I searched until I found the words I was looking for. I rummaged through the desk's drawers, eventually finding what turned out to be a pretty spicy novel about orcs rampaging and capturing elves that they forced to submit. Leafing through page after page, it felt like assembling my note was like some sort of serial killer taking clippings from a magazine.

I tried to keep things brief, since I didn't know how much time I had before Myrina and her mother were done.

*This is a gift. Don't come looking for me.*

That was all I really needed to say. I folded the note up and stuffed it in my bag of holding. Then I went searching through the castle. It was a good thing Myrina had given me a tour when I'd arrived last time, otherwise I would have gotten lost long before finding a good place to leave my pile of gifts.

Where could I leave it to make the best impression?

An idea struck me. Why not in Kyrina Samhain's personal playroom? She'd be the only one to find them, there. She'd put the Mana Bombs to good use before, so no doubt these would end up directly in her hands.

And besides, I had the perfect excuse if someone caught me snooping. I was just looking for Myrina. She'd gone to talk with her mother, so it wouldn't be a surprise if someone found me looking for her.

I went straight to Kyrina Samhain's special dungeon beneath the west tower. It looked like there was supposed to be a guard stationed here, but the interior of the castle was even shorter staffed than the outer gates. I slipped into Kyrina's playroom with those inside the castle none the wiser.

There, on top of the leather-clad table in the center of the room, I left a heaping pile of Mana Bombs. There were more than a hundred regular Mana Bombs. I also left ten of the Mega Mana Bombs.

With how many Mana Bombs the Samhain Clan likely needed to wage their war, this gift would hardly do a thing to lessen their Clan's overall demand for Mana Bombs. I only hoped it would do enough to ease any hard feelings when they eventually discovered I was the one making the Mana Bombs. At least with this generous gift, I wouldn't be scalping them for everything they had.

I'd only be taking their money if they wanted extra.

I departed swiftly and silently. Nobody came to check on me, and my trip back to Myrina's room went uninterrupted. I spent the last few minutes before Myrina returned trying to put her messy desk back the way I'd found it. This was harder than I thought, though, because the moment I touched one thing, a dozen others clattered to the floor.

When Myrina returned, she looked at me and the mess I was vainly trying to clean up with a hand on her hip. "Cleaning up for me, Carter? You'll spoil me."

"I touched one thing, I swear, and the rest all came crashing down." I shrugged sheepishly.

Myrina waved my concerned frown off. “It doesn’t matter. The servants will clean it up. I’ve got something much more important to show you.”

She waved her hand again and a quest appeared before me.

### **New Quest Available!**

**Road Cleanup: You have been tasked with clearing the roads of bandits and monsters by the Samhain Clan.**

**This is a scaling quest. The more enemies of the Samhain Clan you slay, the greater your rewards will be. Your rewards will include but are not limited to: gold, reputation increase, special combat lessons, unique weapons from the Samhain Family Armory, and more!**

I accepted the quest and invited Myrina to join my party. “Well then, those roads won’t clear themselves. Let’s go.”



I glanced back at the impressive silhouette of Valkyrie’s Watch as we began our descent from the mountain. “This is the main road?” I asked.

It was fairly narrow, at least by my standards. At best, it was a two-lane road—if cars were really careful when they passed one another. It was also far steeper than a car could drive up, and in more than a few places it transitioned from a road to a staircase.

Nobody was taking a wagon up this thing. No wonder people had fled the city. Getting food in bulk up these roads would be difficult under normal circumstances—let alone under a siege. Without bags of holding and the like, I doubted Valkyrie’s Watch would be able to support much of a population at all, even at the best of times.

“Yep! This is the Serpent’s Ascent. It was built during my Great-Grandmother’s day! We Samhains weren’t known for our engineering before this. But between this and Great-

Grandma's bridges, that all started to change!" Myrina grinned at me.

"It is a nice cobblestone road. I'm sure building it was tedious."

Myrina nodded. "Sure was. We had to find the best craftsmen clans around, then attack them until they agreed to accept the road-building job! Heavens know we had the damndest time making it happen ourselves."

She pointed off to the side at what I'd previously thought was a natural rock formation. I looked at where she'd pointed a bit closer... it was a cobblestone road, just like the one we were walking down. Except instead of rocks the size of my hand, it had been made from enormous boulders the size of buildings.

"Great-Grandma tried to do it herself at first, but the damn rocks kept sliding loose and rolling down the mountain. She figured this sort of thing called for an expert. And a good thing, too. If she had this much trouble building a road, imagine how hard it would have been to build those bridges down below!" Myrina pointed up ahead to a row of stone bridges supported by columns.

They were simple yet rugged structures.

"I can imagine..." I chuckled.

Myrina wasn't doing much to change the current impression I had of her clan. Stereotypes often failed me, but when I'd pegged Myrina's family as a bunch of muscle-headed barbarian warriors, I'd been right on the mark.

"We'll find what we're looking for just past those bridges. No bandits or monsters would dare roam in sight of the city walls itself." Myrina pointed back the way we'd come. "Once upon a time, we had a bunch of these giant wings. We could leap off the top of the castle and soar all the way to the ground at the mountain's base!

"Soaring so far almost felt like flying... or at least that's what I've heard. It made patrolling the area surrounding the

mountain much easier. Unfortunately, they burned when the Shadefall Clan took out all our other enchanted equipment.”

“Sounds like a job for a hang glider to me. Or maybe just a parachute. The mountain is pretty steep, and there is a cliff on the side of the mountain.”

Myrina and I chatted for a while, with the beautiful redhead flashing a brilliant smile here and there as I told her more about how things were on Earth and she told me more about Themyscira. As we ventured deeper into the woods past the bridge, a guttural growl echoed through the trees. Moments later, a hulking creature burst through the thick brush off to the side of the road.

### **Mirefang Behemoth (Level 42)**

The creature that emerged was roughly twice my height, but hunched over on all fours as if it were ten times my weight. It had mottled scales that shifted as it moved. They reminded me a bit of ogre hide, and I suspected those scales would be next to impossible to break through with my spells. Razor-sharp fangs dripped bright purple fluid from its maw.

Probably poison, I decided. I did not want to get bitten by that thing.

Its eerie red eyes scanned us with predatory intent. I cast Mana Bolt, hoping to put out one of those eyes. It simply blinked one of its two eyelids. Similar to a reptile, this thing had a glossy semi-transparent covering for its eyes that protected it from my spell.

But that was just the beginning of our troubles.

“Stay behind me!” Myrina yelled as she charged forward with her sword.

She let out a ferocious battle cry. “Take this, you ugly rodent!”

Myrina slashed at the creature, which was quite clearly some kind of lizard, not a rodent. Her sword cut a deep groove in its hide. When she moved out of the way to attack its head, I realized that was likely the best place to target.

Exploit Weakness confirmed my theory, as well as highlighting the underside of its chin.

Its bare flesh was much easier to pierce with my spells than its tough hide, and I targeted both weaknesses. With the bracelet and the wand in my possession, sniping those vulnerabilities was easy. Between the two of us, we wore the Mirefang Behemoth down before it turned to run. Not that it bothered. It kept coming straight for us, right up until the time I cast Disassemble on it and took the thing apart.

“Whew! That big bastard just wouldn’t stop! Normally monsters run away if they encounter someone higher leveled than they are,” Myrina said.

“It’s probably my Death Curse; it attracts monsters. And here on your world, that’s probably a lot more dangerous than it is back home. At least for now. I have no doubt that the caliber of monsters back on Earth will continue to increase.” I gave Myrina a shrug.

“Well, we’ll just have to keep you one step ahead of those nasty monsters! But that skill of yours sure is handy. I hate skinning these things. They’re valuable, but not valuable enough for me to reach elbow-deep into a corpse.”

Myrina’s dimensional storage pouch had a far greater capacity than my bag of holding, so she took the monster corpse in to sell, along with the next half dozen similar monsters we encountered.

“You know, Carter, we make a really good team,” Myrina said. “Me up front distracting the enemy while you load it up with your spells. It’s really nice having you as backup. And that Disassemble ability of yours makes looting after the fight a breeze. I do feel a little bad that I’m effectively swiping your experience, though. That Death Curse of yours is handy for me, but rough on you...”

I shrugged. “I’ve been learning to live with it. Eventually I’ll find a way to remove it. You said the System always leaves a way.”

Myrina nodded. “That it does. Still, I wish I could give you some of the experience back. I gained another level, thanks to you. You know, it’s been months since I picked up my last level—well, before your arrival that is. And now that you’re here, I’ve gained three levels in just a few weeks! You’re a good luck charm when it comes to leveling, you know that?”

I laughed. “Kind of you to offer, Myrina. But the only way for me to gain levels from you would be one your family wouldn’t exactly approve of.”

“Yeah...” Myrina moped. “But... wait... hear that?”

Myrina’s head cocked to the side, and I turned to listen. I didn’t hear anything, but Myrina’s Perception was probably a lot higher than mine.

“Sounds like swords clashing. There’s a fight up ahead!” Myrina took off running, and I did my best to follow close behind her.

As we sprinted along the road, the unmistakable clash of steel on steel grew louder. Eventually, I could hear it as clearly as Myrina could. We came upon a wagon that lay on its side, toppled by a rolling log from a tree nearly as wide around as the wagon had been tall. The wagon’s wheels had snapped like twigs, and the wagon’s cargo had been thrown everywhere.

“Halt! In the name of the Samhain Clan, what’s going on here?” Myrina demanded.

“Help!” a thin Amazonian woman called.

She had a sword in one hand, but looked like she barely knew how to use it as three much larger and more impressive specimens of Amazonian might crowded around her.

“I’m delivering packages to Valkyrie’s Watch. I ran into this trap in the road and these thieves demanded I give them my cargo!” the thin woman shouted.

“We’ll take more than your cargo now, merchant!” one of the bandit women spat.

She was nearly as large as Cyra, though unlike Cyra, this bandit’s muscles bulged like they’d been inflated with air. It

made her seem more than a little grotesque.

“We’ll be selling you off as either a slave or a corpse. Now’s your last chance to choose between them!”

“Bold of you bandits to set up shop just outside of Valkyrie’s Watch,” Myrina yelled. “The Samhain Clan does not tolerate thieves. Surrender and I’ll make sure you receive a swift execution!”

Clearly, the Samhain Clan weren’t exactly your slap-on-the-wrist kind of peacekeepers. I wasn’t exactly sure how the law worked around these parts, but I was pretty sure it generally went somewhere along the lines of members of Myrina and her family come up with their own form of justice on the spot. Especially whenever they found someone who needed executing—it was street justice rather than court room justice.

“Shit, it’s a Samhain?!” One of the large Amazonian bandit women turned to Myrina.

“This one isn’t too strong. Only level 72. We can take her, if we attack together!”

I leaped into a nearby tree. With ranged attacks, it paid to have the high ground. It was a tactic Myrina and I had already used to great effect on several monsters.

I scanned the bandits, since they would probably think Myrina was doing it.

### **Amazonian Thug (Level 55)**

### **Amazonian Bruiser (Level 62)**

### **Amazonian Skullsmasher (Level 65)**

I held back a smirk. Levels weren’t everything. My training with Sakura and Myrina had made that clear. There were plenty of people who were strong for their level, and lots of folks who were weak for it. True power came from a combination of raw stats, proficiencies, equipment, abilities, titles, and raw skill.

And in all those fields, Myrina had the best the Samhain family could afford. Even if these bandits had been the same



level as her, they probably wouldn't have stood much of a chance. And that was without my help.

This would be my first chance at experience points during our little quest. I planned to make the most of it. While the bandits squared up against Myrina, I lined up my opening attacks, boosting myself to the second level of Mania.

I hadn't needed it in any of the monster fights, but against these Amazonian bandits, I figured I could use the boost to my class skills. I also prepared an Eldritch Blast. The moment one of the bandits rushed in to finish off the frightened merchant, she got a spell to the face that knocked her on her ass.

"Now, stab her!" I yelled to the merchant from my position in a tree.

The nervous merchant woman made a clumsy thrust for the downed bandit with her sword, but the attack was neither quick nor skilled. The bandit moved quickly, rolling to the side. She was fast, but not fast enough to avoid my Mana Bolt.

I rained down one spell after another, striking the bandit several times in quick succession. The spells weren't enough to take the bandit down, but they were enough to drive her back several paces and to keep her from slaying the terrified merchant.

The merchant quite clearly wasn't fit for battle. It would be up to me to keep her alive, if she was to survive this fight. I jumped from the tree and drew my sword. I wielded my short blade in one hand and my wand in the other.

"Watch out, she's got a friend!" the bandit yelped as soon as I appeared.

When she charged at me, I held my sword up to block her attack. Meanwhile, my other hand cast a barrage of spells. Normally, I would fall back into the trees against a foe like this. But since I had someone to guard, I had to stand my ground. This Amazonian Thug was the weakest of her companions, though still quite a few levels higher than me.

But I wasn't afraid. I'd promised Myrina that I planned to become a true elite of the Arcadia Multiverse. Someone who

planned to fight by Myrina's side didn't blink at foes like these.

She rushed in to cross blades with me. The thug had clearly not had any training, nor was she prepared to fight a foe smaller than herself. She swung her blade wide and high, and I darted in low, scoring a long cut to her side.

"You little shit!" she growled.

She swung her blade at me again and might have made contact, if not for an Eldritch Blast to the face. I attacked and she just barely managed to block with my sword a hand's breadth from her throat.

"Ha! You'll have to—"

I cut off her taunt a moment later when I cast Arcane Blade, extending the length of my weapon by a foot and skewering her right through the neck.

The bandit gasped, spitting up blood and staggering back. A blow like that would have put someone like me down for good, but this Amazonian Thug had a much larger health pool than the foes I was used to fighting.

She snarled at me and tried to say something, but all that came from her lips was blood and spit.

We clashed twice more, and each time I layered on more Corrupting Marks. The bandit's eyes grew wide when she realized she was losing the fight. She suddenly eyed the merchant I'd been protecting. During the fighting, we'd switched positions and now she was closer to the merchant than I was.

She jumped back, grabbing the merchant by the hem of her shirt and holding her sword against the merchant's throat. The thug gave me a bloody grin. Though she couldn't talk, her intention was clear.

She had a hostage, and she expected me to spare her life in exchange for not slitting the merchant's throat. That might have been enough to save her life, but I had one last trick up my sleeve.

When I detonated my Corrupting Marks, the Amazonian Thug exploded in a heap of gore.

“Stay out of sight!” I told the horrified and now gore-splattered merchant.

With my foe dealt with, I turned to help Myrina. She’d been dueling both of the remaining bandits at once. And even more impressive, she had both of them on the back foot.

Myrina had drawn a second sword from her dimensional storage and was lashing out at her foes with reckless abandon. There were a few faint lines trailing up her arms and across one cheek where she’d taken hits of her own, but each of these minor wounds was healing before my eyes. She moved so fast, that even working together the two bandits she was fighting could barely hold their own.

It was only a matter of time before one of them left an opening wide enough for Myrina to score a lethal blow. Far scarier than Myrina’s ferocious speed or the way she ignored her wounds was the manic grin on her face. I’d known Myrina enjoyed fighting, but seeing that blood-splattered smile terrified me—and I was on her side.

For the bandits, it had to be many times worse.

I decided to help put the bandits out of their misery. With all the monsters we’d fought, I’d been charging my ultimate. I’d been saving it for something special, and this looked like it.

Secrets of the Unseen activated, filling the sword in my hand with a mysterious unknowable color. I used Warp Step to appear behind the stronger bandit. A moment later, I drove the tip of my blade straight through her back and out her shoulder. The bandit let out one last gasp before Myrina twisted her sword around and severed her head.

The other bandit didn’t even have time to react before the both of us were on her. She’d barely been able to hold her own fighting two-on-one against Myrina. Now that she was the one who was outnumbered, she didn’t stand a chance.

Myrina stabbed her in the thigh and I sank my blade into her chest when she stumbled back.

“Ha! Well done, Carter! Justice delivered once again. We’re a great team.” Myrina smiled, and I found myself pleased as well.

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level to Level 37!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level to Level 30!**

The merchant slid away from the two smiling, blood-splattered figures looming nearby. “I-I’ll j-just take my cargo and go n-now...” she stuttered.

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-ONE

The truly wonderful thing about unlocking the Charisma stat was how easy it made clean-up after a battle. A bandit had exploded, and the merchant we saved was covered in gore. And yet Myrina cleaned herself up to near-perfect condition by simply pouring a flask of water over her own head.

The blood and viscera flowed out of her hair and onto the ground as if it didn't dare spoil her flawless features. She passed the flask to me and I discovered it did the same for me, though not quite to the same degree.

Cleaning up the merchant we'd saved was a lot harder. One flask of water wasn't going to do it. Heck, ten flasks of water wasn't going to do it.

In the end, Myrina stuffed her broken wagon, complete with all its packages, into her dimensional storage item. Then, the two of us tossed the merchant off the bridge and into the river. After sputtering and floundering in the deep pool under the bridge, she was clean enough that she could enter Valkyrie's Watch without offending everyone in the city.

"I'm still not sure whether I've been captured by bandits or not..." the merchant groaned.

Myrina laughed a little more manically than was probably normal. "Don't worry, valued citizen, you're safe with me!"

I shook my head. Merchants talked, and if Myrina didn't already have an eccentric reputation, she would soon.

“Let’s get you back in the city and into an inn,” Myrina continued. “Then you’ll be feeling better, right?”

The merchant brightened after that. I wasn’t sure if it was at the thought of an inn, or getting away from Myrina. Our return to the city was peaceful, and we were let through the gates without hesitation or fee as soon as Myrina showed her face.

We led the merchant to a nearby inn. “Put it on the Samhain Clan’s tab!” Myrina announced.

“Of course, lady Myrina.” The innkeeper bowed.

Myrina and I made our escape and Myrina waggled her eyebrows at me. “Pretty neat, huh? Ever since I went broke, I figured out that I can get Mom to pay for things by just telling everyone to go to the castle for payment.”

I shook my head. “That seems like the sort of thing that could get a lot of people mad at you sooner or later. We should hurry up and head to the auction house to sell off our loot so you can get some money in your pouch.”

Myrina brightened. “Splendid idea, Carter! My trick already failed at the alehouse once, so I really do need a bit of gold in my pouch again.”

Together, we made our way to the auction house. Once again, the auctioneer from before pulled Myrina away for special treatment the moment we poked our heads through the doors. I didn’t mind. I needed to see Misa, the assistant I’d made a deal with to keep my Mana Bombs a secret.

“You’re back!” Misa said when I tapped on her shoulder.

She quickly combed a hand through her brown hair, undoing the ponytail she’d had it in and letting it fall over her shoulders before standing a little straighter. “I was wondering when—”

I held my finger to my lips to shush her.

“Right,” she said, and then nodded. “Right. Let’s go back to one of the private booths.”

Misa led me around the corner and into a curtain-covered alcove. I took a seat in a private cubical just large enough for the two of us, a table between us.

“So... have you brought something for me?” Misa rubbed her hands together.

“I did indeed. More Mana Bombs. I want to sell them for maximum profit. You remember our deal?” I asked.

Misa licked her lips as I filled the table with Mana Bombs. “Oh, I remember. And sure, I can fence these for you. I’ll make sure they’re entered into the next auction anonymously. There looks to be a bit over a hundred? I’ll space them out across multiple lots. That’ll help us get the maximum price.”

I shrugged. “You’re the expert on how these auctions work, not me. But, of course, try and get the best price you can. But don’t let anyone know where you got them. If I’m found out, odds are this deal comes to an immediate end.”

Misa nodded vigorously. “Your secret is safe with me! This auction alone will probably double the size of my coin chest. I’d be a fool to do anything that would jeopardize our deal.”

We quickly hashed out the details. With Misa working with me, I was confident I was getting a good price—assuming she was splitting the money fairly, that is. I would have to convince Myrina to stick around for the auction so I could see what they finally went for.

Last time, my Mana Bombs had fetched a few hundred gold each. But now that people had seen them in action, they’d probably be worth a whole lot more. Fortunately, Myrina was keen on the idea.

“That’s funny,” she said, “I was going to ask you the same thing. Of course we’ll stay for the auction. After all, I’ve got money burning a hole in my pouch!” Myrina slapped her pouch full of gold.

“I would brag that I’m the one with the big, hard bundle of gold this time, but half of this is yours. We’re splitting the loot off those bandits and monsters, after all.”

“Let’s get to your family’s auction booth,” I said. “We can divvy up the loot when we’re seated.”

Myrina must have been feeling rich, because she ordered us drinks while we watched the auction. And she had been about to order a massage, too, though I managed to stop her.

“Why does the auction house offer massages?” I asked.

“They contract it out to one of the shops in the city.” Myrina shrugged. “I can’t believe you didn’t want a massage. Who skips their daily massage after a hard day of fighting?”

“Daily massage?” I choked back a snort. “I’ll tell you who skips their daily massage... someone who hasn’t ever paid for a massage, let alone received one daily.”

Myrina sighed. “Our loss... though I suppose it will mean I’ll have enough coin left over to actually buy something.”

Several items came up for auction, but I only paid partial attention to them. Armor, weapons, none of it really mattered. I was waiting for my Mana Bombs to make an appearance.

Myrina bought a few things—mostly a new sword and helmet, a stylish red cape, and a few other odds and ends. I was already comfortably outfitted. While I had spare fingers for magic rings, belts, and other items, this wasn’t the best world to acquire magical equipment.

Perhaps when my horizons expanded a little further, I’d travel to a world that sold such items.

In the meantime, I realized Sakura’s leatherwork would likely be quite well received here. These Amazonians seemed rather fond of their magical leathers. Well-treated furs and hides from monsters and beasts were a way to gain magical effects without the need for specialized enchanters or runesmiths.

While such crafters could certainly make a fair living on Themyscira, I’d gotten the distinct impression that few families who could afford the kind of training that took wanted to dedicate their children’s potential to jobs—not when that same potential could be spent learning to be a great warrior.



Eventually, my Mana Bombs came up for auction and I sat up straighter in my seat.

“Last but certainly not least, we are pleased to announce that we have acquired another shipment of Mana Bombs! We’ll be selling them in lots of ten this time,” the auctioneer announced. She smiled to the crowd as she stepped back to reveal ten neatly organized piles, along with one final pile strategically positioned in the center.

I recognized those immediately. Those were my Mega Mana Bombs. Apparently they were going to be a surprise, and likely saved for last.

“Carter! Carter!” Myrina tugged at my sleeve. “Those are the things my Mom wants!”

“I see them,” I acknowledged.

“You think they were in the packages we just saved from bandits? I bet they were. A lot of those packages went to the shops around here, including the auction house. If I’d known these things were in there, I would have stolen them myself!”

“I thought you said the Samhain Clan doesn’t tolerate thieves?” I asked, eyebrow raised.

“Shh, Carter. When you make the rules, you get to break them.” Myrina’s tone took on the cadence of her quoting something that had been drilled into her head as a child. “When we Samhain steal stuff, it’s not stealing. It’s confiscating.”

“Starting bids at one hundred go—” The auctioneer didn’t even get to finish her sentence when someone in the crowd shouted out their bid.

“Eight hundred!”

Bids flew in after that, some of which came from Myrina sitting right next to me.

“One thousand!” Myrina shouted.

The auction house exploded in a flurry of activity. Almost immediately, a tall woman at the opposite end of the hall countered Myrina’s bid.

“Two thousand!”

Another woman shouted from one of the booths near ours, “Three thousand!”

“Damn it!” Myrina pounded her fist into her armrest and grumbled. “How dare they bid against me...”

I patted Myrina on the arm. “There are more Mana Bomb lots to be had. Besides, last time your guards ended up buying most of the lots.”

“You don’t understand, Carter,” Myrina protested. “These things are perfect for fighting the Shadefall Clan’s specters! It’s like they were designed to turn the tide of battle for us. We desperately need them. No matter the price.”

I let my arm linger on Myrina’s arm. “I have a feeling your clan will get a bunch of these, one way or another...”

I did my best to keep my smile off my face. My first set of Mana Bombs had gone for several years’ worth of wages in gold back on Earth. But that had been before anybody understood their true value.

Here? Now? Most of Valkyrie’s Watch had seen the Samhain Clan use them in battle. And those in the know knew that the matriarch of the Samhain Clan was looking for more of them. I couldn’t be sure what the exact motives of everyone present were, but Myrina seemed to think that most of the people bidding were doing so in the hopes of gifting them directly to her mother and thereby acquiring favor with the Samhain Clan.

Too bad I’d already beaten them to the punch on that front.

Myrina rapidly ran out of funds in the bidding wars that followed, but that didn’t stop her from trying. Midway through the auction of my Mana Bombs, we were joined by Cyra in the Samhain Clan’s private booth.

“I’m here! They said there were more Mana Bombs?” Cyra panted.

At her level, it took an awful lot of running for her to look so exhausted. Just how far had she run?

“Big sis!” Myrina cheered. “You’re back in the city already? I thought you weren’t due back until tonight.”

Cyra shook her head, still struggling to catch her breath. “I wasn’t. I was at the base of the mountain when I heard about the Mana Bombs. I got here as fast as I could.”

That would do it, I supposed. Even with supernatural speed and endurance, climbing the mountain Myrina and I had just spent the entire morning hiking up in only a few minutes put Cyra roughly on par with a helicopter for ascent speed.

With Cyra’s arrival, the bidding grew even fiercer. She’d missed the first four lots of Mana Bombs, but that just meant that she could bid more on the next several lots.

I would have thought that people would start running out of money by now, but knowledge of the Mana Bombs’ presence had rapidly spread through the city. Suddenly, I realized why the Mana Bombs had been placed at the end of the auction, and why the Mega Mana Bombs had been saved for last.

The auctioneer knew that word would spread.

The hall was already twice as full as it had been when I’d arrived, and each new lot of Mana Bombs was selling for even more than the previous one. It was like the Auction House was full of starving sharks, and my precious Mana Bombs were the cause of their feeding frenzy.

“One hundred thousand gold!” Cyra shouted from the booth, instantly silencing the crowd.

“Once, twice, and sold! Sold for one hundred thousand gold to Lady Cyra Samhain.” The auctioneer gestured to Cyra as the crowd gawked in awe and fear at the amount of money she’d just spent on a single lot of items.

Myrina folded her hands behind her head and basked in the attention. “Ahhh, now this is what an auction is supposed to feel like.”

I shook my head. “I’m starting to understand why you don’t have access to clan funds.”

Cyra bid just as high on the next few lots of Mana Bombs. The exuberance of the crowd faded, knowing that a Samhain Clanswoman with a full purse had arrived and was claiming every Mana Bomb available. This remained true right up until the Mega Mana Bombs made their appearance.

“Last, but certainly not least, we have something new to show off for you!”

The auctioneer’s words hushed the crowd, playing into their excitement and wonder. They’d all seen the stand in the center of the room stacked with Mana Bombs that looked slightly different from the rest.

“The maker of these Mana Bombs included something fresh and exciting. This is a new type of Mana Bomb, far more powerful than those you’ve seen before! These Mega Mana Bombs are capable of causing three times the damage to spectral entities as the normal variety. With a handful of these, you can make short work of D-Grade specters, and even deal damage to powerful C-Grade specters!”

“One hundred thousand!” Cyra bid again, instantly bringing the lot of Mega Mana Bombs up to the final value most of the other lots had gone for.

But this time, the crowd wasn’t intimidated. Bids flew one after another, and soon the final lot of Mega Mana Bombs hit two hundred thousand. Then three hundred.

“Uh, Cyra... do you have that much on you?” Myrina asked nervously.

Cyra turned to Myrina. “Not all of us blow their entire fortune bringing their friends over from newly integrated worlds. Besides, Mother will reimburse me for these.”

Cyra was not dissuaded by the high bidding. Eventually, she won the Mega Mana Bombs for half a million gold. I let out a low whistle, fighting to keep a smile off my face. With this kind of gold, buying something like the Arcane Blade skill book wouldn’t be a problem for me at all.

Hell, I’d be able to start picking up skill books for Sakura and Bridget. Maybe I’d even get skill books for the rest of my

companions on Earth, as well.

“Wanna watch Cyra hand over enough gold to fill a room?” Myrina elbowed me in the side.

I shook my head. “You two go on ahead. I want to look at what other items will be coming up for auction these next few days. Maybe I can get something else like Arcane Blade?”

Cyra and Myrina went right up to the auctioneer. Meanwhile, I ducked into a side room with Misa.

“I’ll be receiving your physical gold soon enough, but let me just say that it is going to be a truly enormous amount. A normal bag of holding isn’t going to hold it,” Misa explained.

“What do people normally do in this situation?” I asked.

Cyra had a much better bag of holding than I did. Surely it couldn’t be that much bigger? She was still D-Grade, like me—though much closer to level 100 than I was.

“Normally, someone with a great deal of money simply opens an account with us. This auction house is not our only one, so your gold is directly redeemable at any obelisk in several of the nearby cities, and your funds are guaranteed by the System. You won’t be cheated, and you can swap the points for local currency wherever you travel on Themyscira,” Misa explained.

“I’ll do that with half of my earnings, then. Could I ask you a favor?”

Misa raised her brows.

“There are a few skill books or items I’m looking for, and I may be out of the city when they come up for auction. If any of them do come up for auction, can you as my agent use my funds to acquire them?”

She nodded.

“Don’t overpay... by much... but these are things I really want and I’d appreciate you getting them for me.”

Misa smiled. “Of course. That’s what an agent is for. Name your items of interest and I’ll do my best to acquire them for

you should they come up for auction here or at our neighboring branches.”

I quickly listed off all the skill books Marol had suggested I pick up, as well as any magical items that would be useful for my class or my race. When I realized I probably wanted new crafting materials for my job, too, I asked Misa to pick those up for me, as well.

“Oh! And bags of holding... two of them, please. These things are useful.”

Bridget and Sakura each needed one of their own.

“All noted and recorded,” Misa replied, a wide smile on her face as she held out her hand. “I hope we have many more days like this one.”

I grinned as we shook. “Plan on it.”

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-TWO

“The pile was huge! You should have seen it!” Myrina gestured wide, miming hugging a pile the size of a table. “And that wasn’t even all of it. Cyra transferred her entire balance with the Auction House first.”

“I had to give them a few items as collateral, too.” Cyra sighed. “Hopefully Mother reimburses me. The rest can go, but I really liked that shield.”

“I’m sure she will. Unlike me, Mom trusts you with the family purse.” Myrina elbowed her sister.

“I’m sorry I missed it.” I chuckled. “I was talking to the staff. Did you know you can appoint an agent to keep an eye out for items you might be interested in? If your balance with the auction house is big enough, they can even bid for you on your behalf.”

“Really?” Myrina perked up, brows furrowed.

“Yes, really,” Cyra replied. “I’ve got an agent who does just that for me. You’ve never saved up enough to make it worth their while.”

“I saved up a lot to bring Carter over!” Myrina pouted. “I had to win a tournament and pooled a year’s worth of allowance for that.”

“If you’d been smart, you would have given him a teleportation destination array that time you visited him instead of just giving him the Patronage token. Then you wouldn’t have had to pay so much.”

Myrina sagged. “I didn’t think that far ahead.”

I patted Myrina’s slumping shoulder. “I’ll pay you back for it someday, Myrina. With interest.”

I turned to Cyra. “Speaking of debts... How’d you like your treats from Earth? I brought them, as promised.”

Cyra frowned. “Oh yeah, I forgot about those. Where are they?”

“You mean you didn’t get them?” I stroked my chin in confusion. And as I did, I sensed Myrina doing a very poor job of trying not to look guilty.

“Snacks? What do you mean by snacks? I don’t remember any snacks...” Myrina glanced at the sky. She couldn’t have looked guiltier if she had started whistling tunelessly.

Cyra loomed over her little sister. “Wait a minute. What was it you were eating earlier while I was picking up the Mana Bombs? You pulled out some sort of pastry from your pouch.”

“No I didn’t.”

I poked Myrina’s cheek. “There’s still some crumbs on your face.”

“Uh... that’s... uh... the blood and bones of my enemies. From those bandits we killed. Yep.” Myrina smiled innocently.

“She’s definitely got your snacks, Cyra.” I shook my head.

Cyra reached for Myrina’s waist and snatched Myrina’s dimensional storage item from her belt.

“By the System... your Inventory is full of nothing but snacks. My snacks! Give me those!” Cyra immediately started transferring the baked goods over into her own storage item.

“No! I stole those fair and square!” Myrina tried to snatch her bag back, but Cyra held it high overhead and kept pouring baked goods from one pouch to the next.

I shook my head, chuckling to myself. Soon enough, we’d returned to the castle and were let straight through the gates.



“I’m going to see Mother and deliver these Mana Bombs. And I’ll be sure to tell her about your thievery,” Cyra said with a harumph.

“Well I’m coming along to plead my case. Carter! You’re my witness, so you’re coming too,” Myrina declared.

Cyra smirked. “You think Mother won’t give you a spanking for your thievery if you bring him along?”

“Carter will profess my innocence. You’ll see!”

I held up my hands. “I shall tell the truth and only the truth.”

Our jovial banter continued right up until we entered Kyrina Samhain’s office. I’d never been to her office before, but it looked surprisingly modern to my sensibilities, despite the lack of a computer.

The woman herself sat in a large chair behind a desk right in the center of the room. Sunlight streamed in through the windows behind her. A stack of papers sat on either side of the desk, but the middle was stacked high with a pile of Mana Bombs.

Before the matriarch sat a note. A very familiar note. One that I’d written myself.

Cyra and Myrina both went quiet when they saw their mother’s pensive mood. While the siblings seemed happy, they could tell their mother was anything but.

The Samhain Matriarch rested her head on her chin as she stared at my note and its accompanying pile of Mana Bombs. She wore her worried frown openly and hadn’t looked up when we entered.

Myrina and Cyra rushed right in, but I lingered at the doorway.

“What’s wrong, Mom? Is there trouble?” Myrina asked.

Cyra’s eyes went to the pile of Mana Bombs on the desk. “Mother, I acquired more Mana Bombs for the clan. They went up for auction again. But... I see you already have some. Did some of the other auction winners bring them to you?”

Kyrina finally looked up from my note. “No. I didn’t have any of my agents there, and these were a gift. But I received them before the auction even began. They were waiting for me in the dungeon.”

“In the dungeon? The one under the western tower?” Cyra asked, a look of surprise on her face.

Kyrina nodded. “Exactly so.”

“Someone broke into your sex dungeon?!” Myrina exclaimed.

Kyrina sighed. “More like they waltzed right into our castle past all our defenses. The gates are enchanted to let us know if anyone unaccounted for enters the premises. Except the gates didn’t log any visitors.”

“Whoever left them for you was a skilled enough enchanter to fool our defensive enchantments. I suppose they would have to be, if they could create something like these Mana Bombs.” Cyra crossed her arms and tapped her foot as she thought. “Have you checked in with the guards?”

Kyrina nodded. “I have. They saw no one enter, either. Our guards are understaffed, but not to the extent that people can just walk right into the castle... let alone to the dungeon under the western tower. That’s one of the deepest regions of the castle.”

“What does this mean?” Myrina asked, worry in her tone.

Kyrina flipped the note on her desk around.

“See this? It says ‘This is a gift. Don’t come looking for me.’ It’s a gift, an order, and a threat all rolled into one.” Kyrina spread her arms out. “It means that these things mean nothing to them since they gave away so many—despite the incredible quality of the raw materials and the complex enchantment.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “It also means that whoever this was could bypass our castle’s defenses and go wherever they please. If they wanted to plant a magical bomb that did physical damage and take down the walls of our castle, it would be a trivial task.”

“I don’t get it. Do we have a new enemy or a new ally?” Myrina asked.

Kyrina sighed. “That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out. Who gave these to us, and what are their motives? The only thing I can think of, is that they represent a faction that would benefit from seeing us and the Shadefall Clan continue fighting. They’re skilled and have access to incredible resources, so if they wanted to give us weapons to end the war right away, they probably could. At the same time, they gave us all this as a gift.”

She drummed her nails against her desk in thought.

I stood awkwardly in the doorway, fighting to keep my face as neutral as possible.

I’d left the Mana Bombs for Myrina’s family as a gift. I hadn’t meant anything by leaving them where I had. I certainly hadn’t intended to send a message—other than to kindly asked the Samhain Clan to stop looking for me. Instead, Myrina’s mother now pegged me as some mysterious third player in their war with the Shadefall Clan, with an agenda of my own.

This was starting to get a lot more complicated than I’d signed up for. I bit my lip. Maybe I could nudge Kyrina in the right direction?

“Does he have to be someone plotting against you?” I asked. “Maybe he just wanted to help.”

Kyrina’s eyes locked onto mine, and she combed her fingers through her long red hair. “Maybe... maybe... It’s also possible that this is one of the Ancestors taking action.”

She sighed. “Many of them live with their husbands on worlds filled to the brim with magic and enchanters. It would be a trivial thing for them to acquire items of the caliber of these Mana Bombs and to send them over in our time of need. But in that case, why the secrecy? If one of the Ancestors asked me not to pry into the details, neither me nor the elders would dare disobey them. There’s no need for tricks for women as mighty as the Ancestors.”

I'd been hearing more and more about these ancestors and the Samhain Clan's elders. While I'd seen neither, it was becoming increasingly clear that each had a lot of influence within the Samhain Clan. Maybe more influence than the matriarch herself.

"I..." I struggled to come up with an explanation that might be believable. "Maybe it was an acquaintance of yours? Someone just trying to help out without getting involved personally?"

Kyrina shook her head. "I can't think of anyone who'd expend this kind of effort... not without gaining something from it. And right now, whatever it is they are gaining isn't obvious to me. That is what troubles me."

I let out a long breath, going silent. There really wasn't anything else I could say. Not without giving myself away.

Cyra presented her Mana Bombs, though seeing the pile already on her mother's desk, they were received with less fanfare than she'd hoped for on the way over.

"Thank you, Cyra. I'll see that the clan compensates you for these. Take this lot back with you to the front lines. I heard Elder Yema is only barely holding her city together, with specters running wild through the streets. Take these and a squadron of guards to reinforce them," Kyrina ordered.

"And when you return, consider the mission to investigate the origin of the Mana Bombs suspended. Whatever their intentions are, they're providing items of great value to us during this time of war. We can't risk losing that."

Cyra nodded. "As you command, Mother."

Cyra departed, leaving just Myrina and I in the room with Kyrina. She set my note aside and the burden on her shoulders seemed to grow a bit lighter.

"As for you two," Kyrina said, "I hear you took care of a dozen monsters and a few bandits. Congratulations. It seems rewards are in order."

She opened a drawer to her desk. From it, she pulled out a bag of holding. "I understand that Myrina has racked up quite

a bill in the local alehouses under our Clan's name. For your next quest, please pay off all of Myrina's debts. Whatever is left in this will be your reward for clearing the roads."

Myrina held her hands out for the bag of holding, but her mother ignored her and passed the bag to me, instead. "Myrina, I'm trusting Carter with the money."

"Aww..." Myrina grumbled.

"Don't aww me, young lady. We're at war! The least you could do is not send angry merchants our way thinking we'd opened a credit line with them!" Kyrina's brow drew together. "If it weren't for Carter being here, I'd take you over my knee like I did when you were a little girl! Keep acting up and I might just do it anyway!"

"I get it..." Myrina grumbled.

### **New Quest Available!**

**Pay back Myrina's Debts: Myrina has racked up an impressive debt with nearly every merchant in town. Protect the Samhain Clan's reputation by paying off her debts and explaining that Myrina isn't allowed to open lines of credit in her clan's name.**

I accepted the quest, and we left the castle as quickly as we'd arrived. I felt the weight of Kyrina's gaze on my back as we departed. I wondered just how long could I keep my secret.

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-THREE

Our next quest from the Samhain Clan proved easier than the first, but I personally would have preferred fighting more monsters and bandits. I had to lug Myrina around town and slowly pry from her which ale houses she'd visited and which dress shops she'd placed orders with. It took the rest of the day before we got them all.

By the end of the day, Myrina looked more wrung out than she did after an entire day's training. "Finally done!" Myrina yawned. "What do you say we wind down with a quick visit to the alehouse? We could try some of the brews in town and—"

I shook my head. "Myrina, we just spent the whole day going from alehouse to alehouse and paying off your tabs. How on earth did you drink this much while I was gone? I wasn't even away for a whole week and you racked up bigger tabs than I have in an entire lifetime."

Myrina shrugged her shoulders and batted her eyelashes at me. "Well... I missed you."

I rolled my eyes. "If you're trying to sweet talk me into buying you drinks, it's not going to work."

"It's my family's money..." Myrina groaned as she reached for the second bag of holding I was carrying, containing the reward from our previous quest.

"But your mother trusted me with it," I replied.

"But she said we could have the rest!" the tall redhead protested.

“And we’ll spend it responsibly.” I wagged my finger at Myrina.

“Come on, Carter!” Myrina pleaded. “Remember when we were kids? You always listened to my great ideas...”

“Looking back, not a single one of those ideas was great... or safe.... or even sane.” I sighed. “Remember that time you had me roll you down a hill inside of a truck tire? If you hadn’t had such high stats, one of us would have died.”

“That was different. Back then we were kids. I’m now a responsible adult!” Myrina jabbed a thumb at her chest and grinned.

Sometimes it was hard to remember that Myrina was well into her twenties, just like me. I supposed life under the System meant people could take their time growing up. There was no rush to move out and get a career—not when someone like Myrina could fight for and serve her family perfectly well while still living in her childhood bedroom.

Perhaps humanity would be like that one day—many years from now. By then, I’d have upgraded our racial perks several times and forged a way forward for Earth after the integration. Maybe Earth’s future generations would be more like Myrina than me.

Myrina stared at me with eager, pleading, puppy dog eyes. “Please?”

“Not going to happen, Myrina.” I shook my head.

Myrina’s eyes darted left and right. “Okay, fine. I wasn’t going to reveal this, but I want to share a little secret with you.”

“A secret?” I raised an eyebrow.

Myrina reached into her pocket and withdrew a bag of holding. “Turns out you can use a line of credit to buy goods. Then you can sell those goods to the merchant next door for coin. Pretty neat, huh?”

“That’s got to be illegal somehow,” I said as I hefted Myrina’s pilfered gains.

“Only if somebody else does it! Here, my family makes the laws. Besides, how else am I going to be your patron if you’re going to be all stingy? Now we can finally afford some real equipment and training supplies. And booze. As your patron, I say a good night of drinking is part of your training, so this one’s on me! Barkeep, fetch us some ale!”

Myrina threw some coins down on the table with a wide smirk on her face.

I shook my head as the coins vanished into a barmaid’s apron and two massive tankards appeared before us.



An hour later, Myrina lay passed out face-first on the table of a restaurant after drinking six horns of their finest ale in quick succession.

I swirled my cup of water a few times. That was all I’d allowed myself. After all, I still had a lot to do. And letting Myrina catch up on her sleep actually gave me the perfect opportunity to do them.

I paid for our food and Myrina’s ale. It had been a good dinner, too. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d sat down at a table with a woman and just talked—not since long before the integration, that was for certain. And it had never been with someone I’d connected with as well as I had with Myrina.

It almost felt like a date.

I’d paid for our food, as well as a ride home for Myrina. The restaurant was owned by the sister of one of the Samhain Clan’s guards, so I had no doubt that Myrina would be tucked into her bed, safe and sound.

But not me. I would make my way back to the castle sometime after dark. I glanced at the setting sun. I had a few hours, at least—I figured Myrina would probably sleep through most, if not all of the night. That should give me plenty of time. I pulled the hood of my cloak up over my head.

Valkyrie’s Watch felt like a different city when I didn’t have Cyra or Myrina at my side. The two women of the



Samhain Clan could clear the streets with a glare. Of course, they got respectful nods and bows in the city's nicer districts.

I'd barely made it ten paces before I felt my spine tingle. Someone had used Examine on me. It seemed like being rude was more tolerated than I'd been taught. Without the Samhain Clan standing next to me, people were more than willing to be a little nosy.

"Well well well... what do we have here?" a rough woman's voice asked.

I could tell just by the sound that she was trouble.

"What's a lad like you doing wandering the street, hmmm?"

"My business is my own. Kindly step aside," I said.

She did the exact opposite. Instead of stepping aside, she moved to block my path. Two others who'd been lounging outside a shop soon joined her. These two had the look of day laborers. Their clothes were little more than rags and they were barefoot and dirty—though each of them stood a head taller than me. They were there to be the muscle in whatever criminal enterprise this was.

The one in the center seemed to be a higher caliber of thug. She was outfitted in the overly gaudy clothes of the newly rich. Her hair was held back by a clasp of solid gold, and her fingers were studded with gemstone rings. She grinned malevolently, showing gaps where missing teeth had been replaced by gold replicas.

She might have looked like the other two, once, but some opportunity had granted her newfound wealth. And I had a feeling that opportunity had something to do with innocent people wandering the streets—just like I was. I used Examine.

### **Amazonian Ranch Hand (Level 36)**

### **Amazonian Ranch Hand (Level 38)**

### **Amazonian Kidnapper (Level 42)**

The kidnapper had the highest level of the bunch. I wasn't sure if Kidnapper was her class or her job, but it didn't really

matter. Whichever it was, it painted a pretty clear picture of how she'd gotten her wealth.

“A young man like you shouldn't be wandering the streets alone. Let me guess, you're a visitor from another world? Let me guess...” She tapped one calloused finger against her chin. “Are you Atlantean?” The Amazonian Kidnapper flashed another gold-toothed smile.

“Cousin, you... you sure nobody will miss him?” one of the Ranch Hands asked. “He looks well outfitted. We could get in trouble if his family has the right connections.”

“Have you fenced a street urchin before? No? Then shut up,” the Kidnapper hissed.

She turned back to me. “Listen, kid. Why don't you come with us quietly? You'll have a free place to sleep, guaranteed.”

“Not interested,” I replied, turning to circumvent the trio.

The Kidnapper dropped her fake smile. “I wasn't asking. Grab him, girls!”

The leader of the trio lunged forward, but the moment she did I activated Warp Step. In the blink of an eye I was behind her.

“Where'd he go?!”

“Shit, he's getting away!”

“That's your payday escaping!” shouted the leader of the three Amazonian criminals.

I had hoped to get away clean, or at least to make my way back to a crowded area. There were some bystanders about, and I might have gotten help from some of them if not for what the Amazonian kidnapper said next.

“Stop him! He stole my bag of holding! Someone pin him to the ground for me!” shouted the Kidnapper.

I felt a growl rising in my chest. Trying to kidnap and sell me into slavery was one thing, but I'd have been happy just to slip away and ignore them. I would have, too. It wasn't my job to clear the streets of criminals, after all.

But then this woman had to go and make it personal.

Whether some of the bystanders knew the Amazonian Kidnapper and leaped to her aid when she gave her excuse, or they were just fools who fell for the woman's obvious ploy, my path was soon blocked. I had no intention of allowing myself to get stopped or pinned, though.

My bag of holding had close to half-a-million gold in it. No one would believe I'd come across such a fortune legitimately. I had no option but to fight.

Fortunately, the source of my frustrations was right there for me to take my anger out on. Raising myself to the third level of Mania made my eagerness for battle grow that much greater. By the time I turned to fight, I knew I had no plans to take any prisoners.

My wand found its way to my hand and an Eldritch Blast staggered one of the Ranch Hands, while two Mana Bolts struck the other in quick succession. Then, quick as a flash, I was behind them and lashing out with Arcane Blade.

Between my titles, my proficiency with neutral mana, fighting multiple foes, and the third level of Mania, my attack struck with more than four times its base damage.

**You have dealt a critical hit!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level to Level 38!**

The Amazonian Ranch Hand's severed head rolled to the side of the street. A level-up notification appeared as my base stats grew a little more. I shoved the notification aside and let the points be assigned automatically, based on my prior instructions.

That was another of the tricks Myrina had showed me. In a prolonged fight, I might not have time to stop and fiddle with my menus to claim stat points that might otherwise give me a life-saving edge. She'd showed me how to auto-configure my free points.

Now, at point-blank range, I stuffed my wand back into my bag of holding and launched two spells in quick succession.

The Amazonian Kidnapper lunged for me with a net. Where it had come and how she had brought it out so fast probably related to one of her skills from her kidnapper class.

I used Warp Step to dodge the descending net, firing off another two spells before engaging the second Ranch Hand. I activated Exploit Weakness, targeting her vitals with my spells before preparing to rush in to deal more extensive damage with Arcane Blade.

“Cut him off!” the Kidnapper yelled to her surviving compatriot.

The remaining Ranch Hand rushed to block my escape while the Kidnapper held her hands wide. Though she was leaving herself wide open for attack, her vulnerabilities as seen through Exploit Weakness suddenly vanished. She was using some manner of defensive skill, and I had a feeling challenging it head-on would go badly for me.

Instead, I took on the remaining Ranch Hand.

“Blood Sacrifice,” I whispered.

Blood oozed from my ears and mouth, but it poured out of the Amazonian Ranch Hand’s ears, too. That brought her health low enough that I activated my Corrupting Marks. My foe staggered in place, stunned by the sudden rush of damage from two sources.

In that brief instant, she let her guard down. It was the last mistake she ever made as my short sword plunged through her eye. Lifesteal flooded me with new vitality, and I wiped the blood from my chin as I was restored nearly to full health—despite having used Blood Sacrifice to offer up half my health just a moment ago.

Fighting someone who wasn’t Myrina or Cyra was an odd experience for me. After sparring with the two of them for so long, my sense of how strong someone should be at my own level had been massively distorted.

Those two Ranch Hands should have been roughly my match, based on their level alone. But it was clear that neither of them had a combat-focused class. Nor did they have

particularly good proficiencies or any titles. I was superior to them on all accounts. What might have been a fair fight was instead a slaughter.

All that was left, was for me to deal with the Kidnapper.

“Shit,” she cursed when she saw her remaining ally die. She glared at me through narrowed eyes. “You’re no ordinary kid! Why’d you have to go and make yourself look like an easy mark, huh?”

She balled her hands into fists. Crimson energy cloaked them, much like the power that surrounded Sakura’s club when she wielded it in battle. She rushed forward, and I prepared to meet her with my sword.

I launched an Eldritch Blast, but before it landed, the Kidnapper twisted to dodge it. Instead of charging at me, she dodged right past.

“Help, help! Murderer! Guards! Get the guards!” the Kidnapper yelled.

I rolled my shoulders, cocked back my arm, and threw my sword. It spun end over end to embed itself in the Kidnapper’s back. She staggered and fell to the ground, dying only when I detonated my Corrupting Marks.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency increased by one to Level 12!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level to Level 31!**

I closed my System notifications, collected my sword, looted the Kidnapper’s bag of holding and her gaudy rings, and quickly made myself scarce. Our fight had not gone unnoticed. It should have only been a matter of minutes before the city guard showed up. Only, they never did.

Minutes passed and the hustle of booted feet never came. Someone did collect the corpses, but they weren’t a guard. I suspected it was just someone who planned to sell the bodies to a necromancer, just like that thief’s body Myrina had sold to the wizard the last time I was here.

It was rather disappointing for my fight to have such an anticlimactic end, but that was probably just the Mania talking. I waited in the shadows until I calmed down. When I was finally myself again, I checked myself over. I was okay, but the cloak Sakura had made me was a mess.

With a sigh, I shoved my cloak inside my bag of holding. It was covered in blood. Being a cloaked stranger was suspicious enough. Being a blood-splattered, cloaked stranger made me look even more suspicious.

Without a hood to cover my features, even more people eyed me. My annoyance was building at the looks I kept getting and I was soon preparing myself for another fight. As my frustration grew, a new proficiency appeared before me.

**You have gained the Examine Resistance proficiency!**

**Your identity will be harder to ascertain by those with lower proficiency at examining others than your resistance.**

**Entities above your level will have an advantage when discerning your level. Enemies below your level will have a disadvantage.**

Immediately the buzzing stopped. I hadn't known there even was an Examine Resistance proficiency. And if there was, I hadn't figured out how to gain it.

I couldn't be too mad, though, since the increasing number of people failing to Examine me meant that most people here didn't know about this proficiency, either. I was quite pleased with the number of proficiency levels I quickly gained.

**Your Examine Resistance proficiency has increased to Level 2!**

**Your Examine Resistance proficiency has increased by 2 to Level 4!**

**Your Examine Resistance proficiency has increased by 3 to Level 7!**

Each time, the threshold needed to perceive my level grew higher and the number of people who could see my real level

decreased. When the tingles stopped completely, people started avoiding me even more than they had when I'd been walking around with Myrina and Cyra.

What was it that Myrina had told me? The men who could walk openly on Themyscira were exceptional powerhouses in their own right—men of unyielding might who could make anyone think twice before harassing them. Perhaps I was now being mistaken for such a person.

Eventually, I made it to the teleportation array. “Can you take me directly to the Themyscira main teleportation center?” I asked. “Send me to the one in the capital city with the strongest teleporters.”

The person standing guard over the teleportation array looked me up and down, then shrugged. “That'll be eight thousand gold,” she said.

I handed over the gold quickly. That sum was twenty times more than Myrina and I had spent at dinner. It was nearly as much as we'd earned selling monster hides and the bandits' equipment we'd gotten when clearing the roads.

I stepped onto the teleportation pad, and a flash of light later I was in the capital.

Outside of Valkyrie's Watch, the average level increased dramatically. I remembered how wary Myrina had been each time she'd escorted me through this place. I wasn't shy about using Warp Step to quickly make my way to the main teleportation center. This was the only place I knew of that could teleport someone all the way from Earth.

And I had two ladies I was eager to bring over. Now, I just needed to find the discreet orc woman Myrina always used.

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-FOUR

It took me a few minutes to find the orc woman Myrina favored. I worried that she might be off-duty and that I'd need to use someone else, but after a bit of scouting around, I found her.

I hadn't realized it before, but the teleportation center was less a business or organization and more a place where a lot of people with teleportation jobs gathered together to work, setting up shop in the same location. It seemed a bit odd to me that people who specialized in getting people from place to place would gather together, but Myrina had once told me that most people who came to Themyscira from off-world only did their business in the capital.

It made sense that everyone capable of making an off-world teleportation would gather here.

"Hey, are you doing teleports?" I asked.

The orc woman was midway through a sandwich, leaning against a wall with a cup of something in her hand.

"You're that off-worlder... what are you doing here? Where's the Samhain girl?" the orc woman asked.

"She's not with me, right now. But I know you're discreet and have a good history with the Samhain Clan. I need to hire you for a job of my own."

The orc woman frowned. "What kind of job?"

"Nothing nefarious. I just want to bring two women over from my home world so they can visit Themyscira, too." I



flashed her a smile and held out my hand. “I’ll pay you well for it.”

The orc rolled her eyes. “Let me guess, you’ve got a few side chicks and don’t want Miss Heart-eyes to know about them? No, don’t answer that. The less I know, the better. Fine, my usual fee is two hundred thousand gold. And that’s taking into account the fact that you’ve got a destination array.”

I gulped at the high number but steadied myself. Sakura and Bridget would each bring more than enough goods with them to pay for my bringing them over. And if they could benefit even half as much as I had done on my last visit, then the expense would be little more than pocket change in the long run.

I held out my hand. “Deal. I didn’t catch your name before.”

The orc woman laughed. “Ha! You know what? Most clients never bother to ask for my name. Maybe I should give you a discount. It’s Thulga.”



Thulga and I went back to the rooftop where she’d brought me over the first time. She pulled out a stick of chalk and started adding a series of runes to a bronze circle embedded into the ground.

I watched carefully, having never seen this end of a teleportation.

“The bronze ring and symbols do a lot of the heavy lifting for me,” Thulga explained when she saw me watching her. “Without them, a teleportation specialist at my level would only be able to bring someone over from the nearest world. With them, I can reach all the way to your newly integrated planet.”

She stood, groaning. “I do have to charge it up between uses, though. This thing eats power, and my mana pool isn’t that big.”

She sighed. “That’s the downside of a physical class. But I wouldn’t have made it as far as I have here on Themyscira without it. I’d been hoping to get a quest that would let me pick up a second class. I figured I’d go to one of those wizard worlds and see if I could buy an apprenticeship for a bit. But the System has yet to smile on me. I figure it wants to see more action from me than just stacking coins.”

“It just so happens that I have a decent mana pool. I’d be happy to help fill your ring, if you’ll throw in a third teleportation,” I negotiated.

Thulga looked skeptical. “This requires a craftsman’s touch. You sure you have the eye for that?”

“It’s not too dissimilar from my own job,” I admitted.

“Oh? Are you an enchanter or a runesmith?” Thulga asked.

I gave her an enigmatic smile. “Something like that.”

Charging Thulga’s circle wasn’t all that different from charging a Mana Bomb. And in just a few minutes, I had it ready for action. I was happy to have negotiated the use of the array three times for the price of two. Though it would leave me with less than a hundred thousand gold in my bag of holding, it was within what I’d budgeted.

And it was a bit of luck I sorely needed, as three uses of the array were what I’d agreed upon with Sakura and Bridget. The first use would let them know I was getting ready to teleport them, but it wouldn’t be a wasted teleport.

After I departed, they had instructions to pile the teleportation array high with as many bundles of Mana Bombs as they could stack on the teleportation array. When the light faded from Thulga’s teleport, I was greeted by grocery bags stacked as tall as me filled to the brim with Mana Bombs. I emptied the paper bags one by one into my bag of holding.

“Important items, I take it?” Thulga asked.

“Yes, but this is also something I’d like you to be discreet about.”

Thulga nodded, looking away as I finished filling my bag of holding. “Understood,” she said. “Just tell me when you’re ready.”

Soon, the array was clear. I recharged it and Thulga activated it again. Suddenly, Bridget stood in the circle, blinking in the light of a new world. She glanced at the horizon for a moment, taking in the strange sights. But after no more than a pair of heartbeats, those eyes turned towards me.

“Carter! You did it!” She rushed forward for an embrace.

More Mana Bombs tumbled off the array from where they’d been gathered at her feet. She dropped the two bags she’d been holding, each of which were also filled with Mana Bombs, to glom onto me.

I chuckled as I returned the warm hug. “I can’t take credit for it. The teleportation was all Thulga here.”

“Hello.” Bridget waved to the orc woman, who waved back.

Bridget turned back to me. “Sakura will need a minute to load up the array with more Mana Bombs.”

We spent the next few minutes gathering up what Bridget had brought over with her. When added to all the gold I was carrying, that filled up my bag of holding. Fortunately, I now had the Kidnapper’s bag of holding, as well as the bag of holding Myrina’s mother had lent me. I filled the loaned bag up with Mana Bombs, too.

With every Mana Bomb safely stashed in a bag of holding, I recharged the teleportation array. Not long after that, Thulga teleported Sakura over.

“I knew it!” Sakura yelled, holding her club overhead with a shout. “Ha! You’re trying to steal our man!” She pointed her club at Thulga.

“Enough, Sakura. Thulga’s not trying to steal me. She’s a valued and discreet business partner.” I pushed Sakura’s bat down so that it wasn’t pointing threateningly at Thulga.

Sakura lowered her bat but narrowed her eyes. “I know you stupid Amazonians can’t date without indulging in your weird head-crushing fetish!” Sakura jabbed a finger at Thulga. “Well, I’ll have you know that we like Carter’s head just where it is!”

Bridget cleared her throat and took a step in front of me. “Yeah!”

“But I’m not an Amazonian. I’m an orc...” Thulga ran her fingers through her thick hair as she frowned at Sakura and Bridget.

Slapping my face into my palm, I sighed. “I will point out a real Amazonian to you two if you promise to be normal about it, okay?”

I paid Thulga, and she agreed to teleport us back to Valkyrie’s Watch.

“You could save some coin by going to one of the weaker teleporters down the street,” Thulga offered.

I shook my head. “Getting to you involved dodging a few unsavory types as it was. I don’t think I want to risk running into more of them.”

“Ha! Yeah?” Thulga laughed. “I hope you kicked their asses. I’ll give you the coordinates to my personal teleportation array, that way you don’t have to run past the scum and villainy that plagues the underbellies of all big cities like this one.” She scribbled something down on a scrap of parchment that I stuffed into the new pouch of holding at my waist.

I arrived to find Valkyrie’s Watch much as I’d left it.

“Welcome to Valkyrie’s Watch. Entrance fee is ten gold,” the guard at the teleportation array grumbled.

There had been nothing about an entrance fee before, when I’d been with Myrina. Either she and her companions got in for free, or the guards had decided to start charging a fee while the Samhain Clan was understaffed and not keeping a proper eye on things.

Whether it was bribe or a fee, I paid it happily for each of my girls.

“Carter, I have to ask... are those real gold coins?” Bridget asked.

I grinned. “Neat, huh? They’re real. Bite one if you want.”

I retrieved a gold coin from my bag of holding and tossed it to Bridget. She caught it and held it with reverence, like she felt guilty for sullyng it with her fingers. Her jaw hung open as she studied the coin.

I tossed one to Sakura as well, since she seemed curious, too. She was a bit rougher with it. She’d been born into a rich family, so a gold coin was just another trinket to her. While Bridget was still admiring her coin’s shine, Sakura took me up on my offer and bit into it.

“Mmmf. Yep, real gold!” Sakura said as she showed off the bite mark. The coin now bore a print in the shape of her molars.

“Sakura! What if the merchants won’t take it now?” Bridget scowled. “You know how much gold coins are worth? This one coin alone is likely worth a month’s salary!”

I chuckled. “Don’t worry, Bridget. There are more where that came from—a hell of a lot more. Gold is valuable around here, but not as valuable as you and I are used to. Or maybe it is to the average farmer, but we’re not average farmers.”

“We’re not?” Bridget asked curiously.

I nodded, leaning in close. “Not so long as we have these Mana Bombs to sell,” I whispered. “Come on. I want to introduce you to my contact at the Auction House. We should get all that stuff you brought with you listed. Then, we’ll find somewhere for the two of you to stay and figure out what you’re going to be doing while you’re here.”

Sakura and Bridget were a little lower than the average level walking around Valkyrie’s Watch, since the two of them were right on the verge of D-Grade. But there was something to be said for safety in numbers.

On another world, I might have worried about the two of them catching the eye of some unsavory men who could cause them some trouble, but not here. From what I'd seen, that was my burden to bear on this world, not theirs.

“Who is this Misa you're introducing us to?” Sakura asked suspiciously.

I shrugged. “She's a local woman. Her family owns the auction house in Valkyrie's Watch.”

“A 'local' Amazonian woman?” Bridget asked. The two of them stared hard at me.

I shrugged sheepishly. “I suppose so. She doesn't seem too focused on combat, though, so she's not as tall or as strong as most of the Amazonian women you see here on the street.” I nodded to the few passersby that we saw. “She's more... normal sized.”

“Is she pretty?” Sakura asked, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and leaning close.

I rolled my eyes. “You can see for yourself when I introduce her to you.”

“We'll keep an eye on her,” Bridget assured me. “So she doesn't try to squish your head.”

I groaned. “Not every woman in this world wants to squish my head!”

Sakura shook her long black hair before looking up and down the street with a sneer of contempt. “Amazonians only want one thing, and it's disgusting.”

“Please promise me that the two of you won't act weird in front of my business partner? I won't be able to fence the Mana Bombs anonymously without her.”

We eventually made it to the auction house. Bridget and Sakura clung to either side of me. It looked like the auction house was closing down for the evening, and I was fortunate to catch Misa sweeping the floor.

“Hi, Misa.” I waved. “I want to introduce you to some people. This is Bridget, and this is Sakura.”

My companions stepped forward, each with a laser-like glare fixed on Misa.

“It’s a pleasure to meet the both of you.” Misa smiled. “Business partners, I assume?”

“And more.” Sakura stepped forward, holding out her hand.

Misa accepted the handshake, wincing a little at Sakura’s grip.

“So, Carter tells me you’ve been selling his Mana Bombs for him. It just so happens that the two of us brought more of them to him,” Sakura began.

“Yes, our partnership has been very lucrative.” Misa beamed.

Sakura’s smile widened. “And you wouldn’t want to lose this partnership, right?”

Misa suddenly looked worried. “Uh... no?”

Sakura inspected her nails for a moment. “Well, it’s nothing important. We were just thinking about diversifying the sellers we use.”

“W-what? No!” Misa’s eyes went wide. “I haven’t done anything wrong, have I? I thought things were working splendidly.”

Sakura wagged her finger. “Really? Because from where I’m standing, it seems like you’re taking half the profit while Carter does almost all the work creating and supplying the product. He has production expenses, you know. All you’re doing is flipping the goods.”

Misa bit her lip. “Okay. Maybe my fee was a little high. What if—”

“A flat fee per batch and five percent of the net profits!”

“That’s absurd!” Misa’s cheeks turned red.

At first I thought I was going to have to step in, especially when Sakura started squeezing Misa’s hand. But I’d been wrong. Awakening her Oni bloodline had made Sakura more

assertive and aggressive—two things she'd always lacked in her previous life.

But even as a human, she'd been a skilled negotiator and clever business owner. She had to be, considering her father had raised her to run the family business, starting from the time she first learned to talk.

Sakura knew exactly how to get the best deal possible out of someone. I hadn't realized how much coin I'd been missing out on until Sakura renegotiated our deal. Even Bridget looked impressed.

"Wow. I thought you were going to shout about how she was trying to steal our man, then whack her over the head with your bat," Bridget commented after the second round of negotiations was done and Misa had the next batch of Mana Bombs safely secured in the auction house.

I ran my hand through my hair. "I also forgot how smart you are, Sakura. That was amazing."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sakura placed a hand on her hip.

"Nothing. Nothing..." I placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her in for a hug. After mollifying my Oni with praise and a few kisses, I brought Sakura and Bridget to the nearby inn.

I gave them my original bag of holding, complete with a hefty sum of gold coins. Tomorrow, they were to meet with Misa after the auction finished. Then, they were to use the earnings from that auction to visit Marol the Theory Crafter to see if they could get their classes straightened out.

I would stick with Myrina the whole time. If anyone in the Samhain Clan was suspicious of me, they wouldn't be when they saw more Mana Bombs being sold and me not leaving Myrina's side.



## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-FIVE

The first thing we did after squaring things up with Misa, was to get Sakura and Bridget a room in a local inn. I'd picked one of the nicer ones, since we had more money than we knew what to do with, and would have even more when the next batch of Mana Bombs sold.

Nicer turned out to mean more spacious and in a better neighborhood... and not much else. The two of them accepted the room without hesitating. While it lacked some of the modern conveniences they were used to, both of them had lived through the apocalypse. They were no strangers to roughing it.

"I was just starting to get used to running water again back at the farmhouse," Bridget grumbled with a sigh.

"Just as long as I don't have to use an outhouse," Sakura replied. "That other inn we visited was a solid nope."

I chuckled. "The level of technology around here is decidedly more medieval than we're used to. I'm afraid that compared to most of the Arcadia Multiverse, we're spoiled."

"Perhaps when the System lets us travel freely, we can roam the Arcadia Multiverse spreading Earth food and plumbing," Sakura suggested.

"Maybe someday. For now, I just want us to survive the integration. Well, us and the rest of Crownhill. Our farmhouse won't be a very nice place to live if all our friends in town get eaten by ogres and trolls."

I bid the two of them goodbye and let them settle in. Though I would have liked to give them more of a tour of the city, showing them Marol's Theory Crafting shop was the most I could do for them at this time.

The two of them had instructions to manage the sale of the Mana Bombs with Misa, and to collect our cut of the profits. They were then to use those profits to get each of them a Theory Crafting session.

I'd regroup with them when I could get away, but just in case I couldn't, they had instructions to spend whatever they needed to buy items from the auction house. That meant whatever abilities or items Marol told them they needed for their respective classes.

The plan was that by the time the two of them returned to Crownhill, they'd both be outfitted like Myrina and I were. Instead of members of a newly integrated world just fumbling through their status sheets, they'd be armed with the proper knowledge, abilities, and items to make the most of their powers.

If we played our cards right, when we returned to Earth my little team would be a notch above everybody else on the Shard—which was exactly what we'd need to be to deal with the ogres and Trolls.

Measuring both forces against humanity, they had us beat when it came to strength and durability or regeneration, respectively. Those ogres and trolls would be hard for anyone except my elites to put down—even that was a challenge for anyone besides myself.

The only real advantage we had over the ogres and trolls was numbers. There were several thousand residents of Crownhill crowded around the main shelter, and there were several other shelters scattered throughout the area. I wasn't sure how powerful the people at these other shelters were, though.

But compared to a few hundred ogres and trolls, we likely had them solidly beat. At least when it came to numbers. It

should be possible to mob whoever survived the war between the ogres and trolls and beat them in a war of attrition.

That would still be a heavy price to pay, and I wasn't willing to sacrifice that many human lives to win. If I could build an elite strike force even more powerful than the one I'd trained up for the last operation—centered around myself, Sakura, and Bridget—we might be able to take care of whoever won between the ogres and trolls without involving all the low-levelled people just trying to eke out a living after the integration.

Humanity could win against the ogres and trolls, but I didn't want us to win by throwing superior numbers at the problem as cannon fodder.

With Sakura and Bridget taken care of, I returned to the castle. I arrived to find Myrina in the bathtub nursing a hangover.

She lay face-down in the water, and for a moment, I worried that she'd drowned. I pulled her head out of the water by a mass of red locks to check on her, and she moaned like she was dying.

“Ugh. Carter, why did you let me drink that much?” Myrina groaned. “I didn't tell you anything embarrassing, did I?”

I chuckled. “I told you to take it easy several times, if you recall.”

She cracked one eye open and glared at me. “Why are you fine?”

“I only had water, remember? As for what you told me... well... it's better not to repeat it.” I shook my head as though I'd heard all of Myrina's dark and terrible secrets.

“That's cheating, Carter. Drinking water is cheating...” Myrina grumbled.

D-Grade had significantly improved my body, and I hadn't thought it was possible to get hangovers anymore. But whatever Myrina had been drinking had managed it. I'd gotten

a whiff of it from her cup and figured it was strong enough to kill a normal man outright.

“I’m sure you’ll feel better in the morning.” I patted Myrina on the head. “I’m going to practice my Meditation proficiency.”

**You have gained 7 Meditation Proficiency levels.**

**Your Meditation proficiency has reached level 10!**

**You now regenerate all resources 300% faster while meditating.**

**While pondering the secrets that underpin reality as most beings understand them, you will passively gain experience toward your Scholar class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge!**

My eyebrows rose at the new notification. I’d mostly been practicing meditation based on my trusting Myrina, and that Marol knew what she was doing. But this was the first time I’d seen real results.

Meditation really did synchronize with my class. I could gain passive experience just by sitting down and concentrating! That was a pretty big boon for someone in my position, given that I couldn’t earn experience points from killing monsters.

My exuberance was quenched after a few tests. The passive trickle of experience was pitifully small. I counted off the seconds between experience points, taking careful measure of how fast the bar to my next level filled up.

At its current rate, it would take me a week of constant, non-stop meditation to gain a level. That wasn’t impossible to achieve, but it did feel terribly slow. If I gave it my all, I could probably manage a level in about ten days by cutting back on sleep and spending as little time as possible on daily necessities.

If I had a hundred years to kill, which I likely did after reaching D-Grade, it might be a safe way to gain a bunch of levels before adventuring for real. But with such a small

trickle of experience points, I'd quickly fall behind the leveling curve on my shard.

The ogres, trolls, and wolfmen had already been pretty strong. Who knew what we'd face after them?

Still, I could hold out hope that at a higher proficiency level, this rate of passive experience gain would increase. And Myrina had told me she'd gone months between new levels before my arrival. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to keep this in my back pocket and work on it regularly.

I'd continue leveling it in the hopes that it would become more efficient over time. It wasn't like it took all that much time out of my day. And the enhancement to resource regeneration had certainly proven valuable when doing mana-intensive Artificer crafting.

I'm sure I would be singing its praises the next time I took a mortal wound and needed to keep myself alive through sheer force of will and continuously using Mind over Flesh. That had only happened twice, but I was very worried about it becoming a trend.

I spent the next few days completing quests with Myrina on behalf of her Clan. Most of them were little things, like clearing the roads or taking care of bandits just as we had done that first day. We didn't always get the quests straight from the matriarch herself. When we did, though, the rewards were pretty good.

I had enough gold from her that when I went to the auction house with Myrina, I didn't have to be shy about placing high bids when I spotted an item I wanted.

"I want to shout the bid. Can I shout the bid, Carter?" Myrina pleaded.

I rolled my eyes. "Go ahead and shout then."

"Eighty thousand gold!" Myrina yelled at the top of her lungs.

She folded her arms and tilted her nose up in smug pride at all the gawking from people in the gallery at the quantity of gold Myrina had just bid.

“Sold for eighty thousand gold!” the auctioneer said after Myrina’s bid was followed by a lengthy silence.

“That’s right! You could never hope to match the might of my family’s limitless coffers!” Myrina tossed her hair back over her shoulders and cackled.

“Okay, Myrina, that’s enough of that.” I patted her on the shoulder and urged her to sit back down.

“That was actually my bid, and I’ll be the one paying for it,” I told the staring auctioneer.

I felt quite a few other eyes on me. I’d actually spent more in that one auction than Myrina’s mother had given us as quest rewards—even adding in everything we’d earned from fighting monsters. If not for the Mana Bombs, I’d never have been able to afford the purchase I’d just made.

Thankfully, Myrina seemed to have little to no concept of money. Whether an ale cost one gold or one hundred gold, Myrina didn’t know or care. I might have chalked it up to her growing up rich, but Sakura had grown up rich as well and was quite business minded.

In the end, I had to chalk it up to Myrina being Myrina. It worked to my advantage, though. I could be bold about spending coin at the auction house with her right beside me, remaining none the wiser at my large bids.

“So... what did we win?” Myrina asked me.

“It’s supposed to be a special drink that boosts the luck stat,” I explained. “There’s no point in me expending valuable stat points doing what I can just pay money for.”

“Oh, I get it. Good thinking, Carter!” Myrina grinned.

I’d obtained one other thing at the auction, which ended up costing me nearly as much as the luck-enhancing drink.

“Now presenting a valuable spell enhancement item taken from the body of a spell caster slain by one of our adventurers traveling abroad. It was likely a quest reward at some point and would have netted the wizard a tidy profit if he’d made it

back to his home world to sell it. Unfortunately for him, he never got the chance!”

The auctioneer pulled back a cloth to reveal a book. “Behold! The famous Magic Missile spell! It fires a barrage of three basic magical attacks at targets, dealing small but noticeable damage.”

There were a few groans from the crowd, indicating that most of the people present had been on the receiving end of a Magic Missile before.

The moment I heard about the spell, I was intrigued. Magic Missile was indeed famous. So famous, in fact, that I’d heard of it before the arrival of the System itself. It was available through various tabletop and computer games and was always one of the first spells most magic users learned.

My skill slots for spells were nearly full, but perhaps I could squeeze in Magic Missile. Worst case, I would sacrifice something unneeded to pick it up, as Marol had suggested I do. I bid on the item, eventually receiving it for a mere fifty thousand gold, much to Myrina’s delight.

“They fear and respect the limitless might of your wallet. They know whatever we bid on, we get, so there’s no point bidding against us!” Myrina laughed.

“Yes, of course, Myrina.”

We returned to Myrina’s room with our prizes in tow. I tackled the luck-enhancing drink first.

“You want a clean palate to make the most of these, but sometimes they taste really bad. Shall I get some ale for you to wash it down with after?” Myrina asked.

I shook my head. “I’ve tried your ale and drank all I ever plan to drink. But some water and a biscuit or something similar would be appreciated.”

The servants brought water and a few biscuits for the two of us. Myrina snacked on the biscuits while I centered myself and prepared to consume the expensive potion. I felt a little bad consuming the whole potion myself, and offered her half the glass.

“No need, Carter. My family helped me hit my luck cap long ago. While I might be able to gain one or two more points thanks to the levels I’ve gained since then, my family will no doubt provide more drinks like that one after we put down the Shadefall rebellion. Go ahead and drink up!”

So that was just what I did. I swallowed the luck-enhancing drink in one big gulp. Its taste was somewhere between orange juice and cough syrup. It wasn’t nearly as bad as Myrina had led me to fear, though it tasted more like medicine than something that actually tasted good.

**You have gained 5 Luck stat points!**

“Well? What’d you get! Tell me!” Myrina practically bounced in her seat in eager anticipation.

“Five points in Luck,” I replied.

Her eyes went wide. “What?! Five whole points! No way! I’ve never had anything that gave me more than two points. Didn’t the auctioneer say the drink would give you one or two points? How’d you get five?”

I smiled. “I guess I’m just... lucky.”

Myrina laughed way too hard for such a lame joke. So hard, that I laughed at how hard she was laughing. Eventually, the two of us stopped giggling like giddy school children and I brought out my second auction house purchase.

“Alright... now I’ve got to figure out what I’m going to do with this baby,” I muttered as I scanned the skill book for Magic Missile.

I desperately wanted to learn it. Since it struck three times, it would be much more useful than Mana Bolt in laying on Corrupting Marks. Having this spell would increase my power significantly.

I read through the first few pages. Sure enough, it was similar to Mana Bolt. In fact, the individual bolts were nearly identical to Mana Bolt, if a bit smaller and slightly weaker. But the fact that there were three of them more than made up for that.



The only question was whether or not I would need to ditch another existing ability to gain it. It was a shame that I couldn't merge the two to create three Mana Bolt-sized Magic Missiles.

A notification lit up before my eyes a moment after that thought crossed my mind.

**Compatible Spell detected!**

**Due to your high Caster proficiency, you have grasped a connection between Mana Bolt (common) and Magic Missile (common)!**

**You may expend Caster proficiency levels to create a new custom spell of your own design! The more proficiency levels you expend to create your new spell, the higher probability you have of creating a higher-rarity spell.**

Surprised and intrigued, I shared the prompt with Myrina.

Her eyebrows rose. "Wow, already?" She glanced up at me in surprise. "I've only had this happen with a single ability of mine. It's actually how I got my Legendary skill, Tempo of Battle. I gave up like a year's worth of proficiency levels to turn two epic skills into a legendary one."

"You're thinking I should do it?" I asked.

Myrina nodded vigorously. "For you? It's a no-brainer. I've seen how fast you pick up those proficiency levels. Sacrificing a few or even a bunch of them for a new skill is a great move. If it's a unique ability, you might even get a title for it."

At Myrina's suggestion, I directed fifteen of my hard-won Caster proficiency points to the task. For those without my unique racial bonus, it would have been a lot more painful. I knew I could gain back the bonuses to my spells in no time, so I happily gave them up now.

**You have expended 15 Caster Proficiency points!**

**Caster Proficiency reduced to Level 27.**

**You have combined Mana Bolt (Common) with Magic Missile (Common).**

**By pouring countless hours of spellcasting experience into the creation of this new spell, you have created... Mana Barrage (Epic).**

**You have been awarded the title: Spell Architect — Mana Barrage (Epic)**

**By creating a unique spell never before seen in the Arcadia Multiverse, you have shared the fruits of your labor with future generations. You shall receive a small tribute in the form of bonus damage for every new user who learns and masters your spell!**

**Current bonus damage: 0%.**

**Because this spell was crafted by your own hands, it shall deal twice as much damage when cast by you.**

I shared my prompts with Myrina.

This time she jumped out of her seat. “Come on, Carter! Back to the sparring ring! We’re trying that thing out right this instant!”

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-SIX

Myrina and I stood across from each other in the Samhain Clan's arena once again. This time, the stands weren't empty. Someone must have noticed the two of us squaring up to one another and gone in to ring the bell.

"An official challenge? Is someone challenging Myrina?" I heard one of the servants call out.

"Not an official challenge," Myrina was quick to reply. "Just a friendly sparring match. Don't make a bigger deal of it than it is. And please stop ringing that bell!"

Reluctantly, the woman who'd eagerly been hammering away on the bell dropped her hammer and stopped drawing people to watch the match. On hearing it was just a sparring match, many turned to leave—though a few stuck around and took a seat anyway. I felt the pressure building.

"I'll be reducing my level to match yours again. I can do that because this isn't anything formal!" Myrina spoke loud enough for the people in the stands to hear us. She put the amulet around her neck again and her level lowered to match mine.

Then, with a leap and a skip she jumped to the far side of the arena and held a practice sword high overhead. "So... Carter, tell me. Do you think your fancy new spell is enough to put an end to my two-time undefeated sparring record?" Myrina shot me a smirk.

I shook my head. "Keep talking like that and I'll win for sure."

“Begin!” someone shouted from the crowd.

We didn’t have a referee, and it was certainly not whoever had shouted, but muscle memory sent Myrina rocketing toward me with sword drawn the moment someone shouted for the sparring match to start.

I wasn’t caught off guard, though. While I didn’t respond with a burst of instant action like Myrina, I’d lived in a dangerous newly integrated world long enough that my nerves were always on edge. The moment I sensed Myrina coming for me, I used Warp Step to keep some extra distance between me and her and flared Mania to the second level.

It must have qualified as a dodge because my Dodge proficiency boosted the distance Warp Step took me to nearly double. I crossed the entire arena in one space-bending step. With a distance between the two of us once again, I focused on channeling a Mana Bolt.

I knew instinctively how Mana Barrage was supposed to work, and it started very similar to Mana Bolt. After all, that’s what each individual projectile was. But instead of firing the bolt off, I held onto it. The bolt left my hand and orbited my head instead like a crown.

Meanwhile, I threw out an Eldritch Blast to slow Myrina’s follow-up charge down. She charged me again, dashing headlong towards me. A thought occurred to me, then. She’d fought in this arena hundreds, if not thousands of times. It gave her a hefty advantage.

My experience in such a setting was limited; most of my combat experience was in a variety of environments—often in dense forests with poor visibility. I’d learned to adapt to those unusual environments. Had Myrina?

I fired a Mana Bolt into the ground, kicking up a wave of sand. Myrina spat out a mouthful of dirt and slowed her charge. I cast another Mana Bolt, adding it to the bundle of magic circling my head.

“Trying to turn this into a game of hide-and-seek?” Myrina called after me. “You know you’re already on a time limit!”

Myrina was likely referring to her legendary Tempo of Battle skill. And she was right. The longer this fight went on, the higher her stats would grow, and the greater her chance of overwhelming me through sheer stats.

But I wasn't fighting to win this bout. I was fighting to test out my new Mana Barrage spell. Two more Mana Bolts formed overhead, each loaded like bullets in a gun waiting to be unleashed.

Drawing my practice sword, I engaged Myrina. The last time I'd crossed blades with her, she'd completely outmatched me. I'd been too slow and clumsy even to hold onto my blade when fighting her. But this time, things were different.

I'd been training with Cyra and knew how to hold my own against a more powerful opponent. Myrina was still stronger and faster than me—even with her level reduced to match mine. Eldritch Augmentation did much to help me close that gap, though. Otherwise, I'd have no chance in a melee as a spellcaster against someone who had a melee class.

"You'll... have to do... better than that!" Myrina said between the clashing of our practice swords.

I used Eldritch Blast to even the odds whenever it seemed like she was gaining the upper hand and the two of us were roughly evenly matched. I cast yet another Mana Bolt, bringing the total circling my head to nearly twenty.

Myrina watched the swirling balls of light warily.

The two of us exchanged several quick series of blows, alternating between fighting up close with our swords and with me putting some distance between the two of us and peppering her with long-ranged spells.

Ever since our last fight, I'd been mulling how this one might go. I'd run different scenarios over and over again in my mind. Her abilities had played forward in my dreams, and over time I'd learned how to mitigate them.

Wind Walker was always a problem. It made her fast and strong, and she could even change directions in mid-air. Celestial Agility only made that even harder, as she moved

with speeds even the nimblest cat would be unable to replicate. Her Titan's Strike shook the arena, and I had to dodge it each time lest I be too wounded to continue fighting.

Her Starlight Blade was even worse. If she landed a direct hit with that, the battle would be over then and there. I'd be waking up with a healer tending to me, if I even woke up at all. Training weapon or not, Myrina wasn't pulling her punches.

And all the while, Tempo of Battle continued to build in the background, Myrina's power growing to ever-greater heights. If I was to have any chance at victory, I had to end this before she grew too powerful.

"Take this!" Myrina yelled, leaping forward. At the same time, she fixed me with that piercing lethal Killing Intent ability that locked me in place.

Scanning her for weaknesses, I realized this was my moment. One of the biggest differences between Mana Barrage and Mana Bolt was that I didn't have to plink away at my enemies. When I found a weakness, all that damage would come all at once.

I sensed my moment when Myrina overextended. I took Mania up to the third level just for a moment. The effects of Blood Frenzy struck me, making me far more willing to do what I was about to attempt.

I sacrificed three quarters of my health to Blood Sacrifice. Myrina had much more health than I did, and in a real fight I never would have taken such a risk. Blood gushed from my mouth, ears, and the corners of my eyes. I felt like something had grabbed me by the spine and yanked me around.

Myrina was hurt just as bad. The direct damage from Blood Sacrifice was something I hadn't ever seen someone block. But more than that, she'd left herself open for just a moment.

And it was the moment I'd been waiting for.

With Exploit Weakness active, I targeted her vulnerabilities with every Mana Bolt orbiting my head.

Twenty of them sought her out all at once, pummeling her exposed flesh and striking from every direction at once at every opening my ability revealed.

Myrina couldn't block them all, especially since she'd chosen a two-handed sword for this fight and no shield. Spell after spell struck her, leaving welts all over her skin like burns. The damage quickly brought our health bars down to parity, and then took me back to full health as Lifesteal went into effect. Power filled my veins, and my wounds healed one after another. What Myrina had lost, I had gained.

She staggered, and I stood straighter. Then, I detonated my Corrupting Marks. Each Mana Bolt from Mana Barrage had left one, and all at once they took another chunk of Myrina's health. That one moment had shifted the fight in my favor.

Myrina was battered and wounded, but I was still mostly fresh.

I attacked again with my sword, and this time I was the one who was faster and stronger. Myrina struggled to keep up with my attacks and soon shifted into a desperate offensive just to keep me from getting to her with my practice sword.

Then I started casting Mana Bolt again. First one floating light orbited my head. Then a second. And then a third.

Myrina's eyes widened as she realized what was happening. I was going to do it all again, and there was nothing she could do to stop me.

She glared at me and then, after a moment of hesitation, threw down her sword. "I yield."

Defenseless, she dropped to her knees. Seeing her like that, other thoughts took root in my head. Things that had nothing at all to do with Blood Frenzy. If nothing else, such thoughts made it much easier to calm myself down after the fight.

By the time I stabilized myself, the pointy-eared healer was nearly done patching Myrina up. The worst of her wounds were gone, but Myrina remained on her knees, blinking and a little dazed.

The healer glanced to me, but I shook my head. “I’m fine, keep tending to her.”

The healer patched Myrina up a bit more. The redheaded Amazonian didn’t respond until I crouched down on one knee beside her, though. I reached for the pendant around her neck restricting her level and removed it. She didn’t look up at me until it was gone.

“You... you actually beat me?” Myrina asked in surprise.

I wiped some blood off her cheek. “You probably should have chosen a shield. I fire projectile spells, you know. It’s much easier to block those with a shield.”

“...Yeah. I just... I didn’t think you’d come so far this fast.” She shook her head and the shell-shocked look on her face was soon replaced by a smile. “You’ve gotten really strong, Carter! And it’s only up from here.”

I helped her to her feet. “I can’t take full credit for that. If not for you bringing me here, I’d probably still be stumbling along back on Earth, barely understanding my own abilities.”

Instead of wrapping her arm around me, Myrina sagged into my side and pulled my arm around her. I felt her cheek rest against my shoulder. It was a different experience, having Myrina leaning on me like she was doing. There was something inspiring about it.

I realized that I liked being strong enough that she could lean on me. I needed to work hard on my spells, so I could do it more often.

The crowd reacted more intensely than I’d expected. Myrina’s surrender sent a wave of whispers coursing through their number.

“Wait, did he really just defeat Myrina? Didn’t she just win a tournament in the Capital?”

“Who is this man? What’s his background?”

“He’s a guest of Myrina’s from off-world—a guest that wasn’t sanctioned by the Elders. To think he was strong enough to best her, though...”



“That doesn’t count! Myrina’s level was restricted. And the fight ended before she could really get going. You know how Myrina takes time to really show what she’s capable of!”

The voices continued arguing in the benches as they debated the validity of the fight. But I could care less. After all, what did any of their thoughts matter compared to the warmth of the woman besides me?

But apparently even the System had to weigh in on our little sparring match.

**You have earned a new title!**

**Amazonian Conqueror (Epic)**

**Congratulations. You have bested an Amazonian warrior in battle, and she has willingly surrendered to you. Few men accomplish this feat, though many try. You have been awarded several boons related to Amazonian culture.**

- **Husband Material: By besting an Amazonian warrior of high breeding and social status, you are now marked as a prime candidate for Amazonian courtship rituals. But be warned, not all Amazonians will recognize your current victory and may expect you to prove yourself worthy again!**
- **Honor in Defeat: Your victory has cemented your status as a true warrior. Amazonians of lower social status than the highest-ranked Amazonian you have defeated will feel less shame in surrendering to you and will be much less likely to fight you to the death.**
- **Enhanced Stamina: Amazonians are a hardy and rowdy crowd, but you’ve proven you are man enough to contend with them. Enhances the effects of your Stamina stat by +20%, increasing your Vitality stat by +10%.**

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-SEVEN

Myrina stayed cuddled up to me all the way back to her room. The healer followed us, tending to the two of us until we were both as close to fully healed as we could be without time to rest.

“So... did you have any plans today, Myrina?” I asked when it was apparent she had no intentions of climbing out of my arms. “More training? More quests to complete?”

“Not anymore.” Myrina rubbed the top of her head against my chin and her cheek against my chest.

“Any reason why?” I asked.

“We don’t need them anymore. You’re strong, Carter! Maybe not high leveled, but that can be fixed. Quite easily, from what I heard during our visit with Marol.”

Her hand went for the hem of my shirt. Her hand slipped beneath it and she pressed her palms against my bare skin. She held them there a moment, fingers stroking the hard muscles of my stomach and chest.

“I... I know what you said before. But I think today changed this. You got the title... I know you did. I received a notification, saying so. I could hardly believe it when I saw it myself,” Myrina gushed, cheeks red and eyes as wide as saucers.

“Myrina...” I held up a hand to cup her cheek.

“I never stopped thinking about you,” Myrina continued. “You were my best friend. My only real friend. When I came

back here to Themyscira, I was all alone doing nothing but training and practicing. All the other kids got to have fun, but I was stuck in the castle. And everyone told me I'd never see my only friend again..."

"Myrina, stop."

"You're the one for me, Carter. I knew that years ago. I won't be like my mother, watching over the family fief for years on end. Nor like Cyra who wants to stay true to the Amazonian ways. Right from the start, I was ready to run away with you back to Earth. You've gained everything you can here. Let's just run away together..."

I reached down and pulled her hands from under my shirt. I took her wrists in my grip and pushed them back down to her side.

She froze like a deer in headlights, eyes wide and on the verge of tears. I'd never seen her so vulnerable before. It scared me, seeing the brash and confident smile she normally wore gone—even for a moment. Without it, she almost felt like a different person.

"I...Is this another rejection?" Myrina sounded like her heart was already sinking, and a pair of tears started rolling from either eye.

"No, Myrina. It isn't a rejection. I care about you... more than you care about yourself, it seems." I cupped her chin and tilted her head up so she could look me in the eyes despite the wetness in them. "Just listen to yourself. Running away from your family? Cutting ties with your mother? With your big sister? You shouldn't do that. It's not like you don't get along with both of them just fine."

"I... but... you... us..." Myrina choked out.

"We just need to take our time," I replied. "I won't allow you to choose between me and your family. You'll have both. That'll be good for me, and good for you as well."

Myrina wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "System above, look at me. One defeat in the arena and I'm tearing up like some sort of human woman..." Myrina let out a sad laugh.

I ran my fingers through her hair. “It’s not so bad. It just means that beneath my tough best friend there’s a sweet girl who needs to be taken care of sometimes.”

Myrina poked me in the stomach. “You’re going to drive me crazy one of these days, Carter. I’ve been fending off a Hysteria debuff ever since I saw you again through your patronage token!”

“Hysteria... I keep hearing that word. What does it mean?” I asked curiously.

Myrina’s cheeks flushed and she looked to the side, still dabbing at her cheeks. “Well... it’s... uh... it’s an affliction that plagues Amazonians. It’s characterized by a quickened pulse, even when sitting still. Blood rushes to the lips, as well as... other places. And we... um...”

“And what?” I prodded.

“I guess you could say we get really, really horny.” Myrina’s eyes shied away from mine, too embarrassed to meet my gaze.

I let out a short incredulous laugh. “You mean that’s what this hysteria thing every Amazonian has been telling me about is? They’re all just too horny for their own good? Wow...”

“It’s a serious debuff!” Myrina insisted. “It lowers the effectiveness of our Intelligence stat by twenty percent. Many a proud warrior woman has fallen victim to Hysteria and done something stupid and reckless. We work very hard to suppress it.”

I waved her off, still chuckling. “You know, there was a wand from Earth before the System. Hitachi Magic Wands, they’re called. I suspect they’d do a damn fine job of treating Hysteria among you Amazonians.”

Myrina frowned. “I didn’t think there were any wizards on Earth before the System. Not real ones, at any rate.”

“Hitachi isn’t a wizard,” I snickered, “but that doesn’t mean they can’t make magic wands.”

Myrina looked confused by this, which was a definite improvement from crying.

I shifted her closer to me, one arm around her waist holding her close. I hesitated for a moment. I'd been hiding things from Myrina nearly since the time I'd first arrived. That was because I'd always considered her and the Samhain Clan one and the same.

But just now she'd offered to run away from home and return to Earth with me. She'd been willing to cast her family away just to stay at my side. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a tempting thought. With someone like her, clearing out the ogres and the trolls would be a breeze.

It was time to see if I could trust my old friend with all my secrets. If this went wrong, I'd have to cut ties with this world completely and lose access to all the unique resources Sakura, Bridget, and I were gathering through the Mana Bomb trade.

But if it went right? We'd gain one Myrina.

"Myrina, do you trust me?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied without hesitation.

"What if I told you I was keeping secrets from your family?" I asked.

"You wouldn't be the first. While I'd like to think of my family as virtuous, there's a lot of politics involved. And during a war like this one, some members of my family are willing to do things they wouldn't in other circumstances. The elders especially, now that the Clan is divided," Myrina replied.

I looked at her pointedly. "And what if I was keeping secrets from you?"

She frowned, dabbing at her cheeks one last time before sitting up to regard me. "What are you getting at, Carter?"

I let out a long breath. "I've been keeping some things close to my vest. I wasn't going to tell you until I was ready, but I'll share them with you now. Only if you can promise to keep a secret, though."

Myrina's eyes widened. "You're actually a vampire!"

I blinked. "What? No!"

"A werewolf?"

"I'm not a werewolf, either."

"The descendant of an ancient clan of powerful cultivators from before the System!" Myrina guessed.

I chuckled. "I'm none of those things. I'm an Artificer."

I waited for Myrina's shocked expression, only to be greeted by one of confusion.

"A what?" Myrina asked.

"I can make things... magic items, mostly. Honestly, I picked up the job on your advice."

"Oh? That's pretty neat. I remember recommending you pick up Enchanter. It was just an off-chance that you'd get it, though, but Enchanters are always handy to know. Is an Artificer some sort of variant of that?" Myrina asked, eyes glittering with hope.

I shrugged. "Maybe? Enchanter was actually one of two jobs I picked up. The other one was Runesmith. When I had them both, the System combined the two of them into the Artificer Job and increased the job's rarity to Epic."

Myrina punched me in the shoulder. "An epic class and an epic job? You really are a forerunner. I don't see why you'd keep it secret, though. It sounds pretty nice. And with my mother's support, it might just maybe—"

I pulled a Mana Bomb into my palm and held it out to her.

"That's a Mana Bomb! Those things are worth a fortune. Where'd you get it?" Myrina asked.

I took a deep breath and stared into her eyes. "I made it."

Myrina's eyes narrowed as she took the Mana Bomb in her hand, then they slowly widened as she realized the implications of what I'd just admitted to her. "You're the one who's been making the Mana Bombs?! To think Cyra and I ran

all over the city searching for you. All the while you were standing right there next to us!”

I chuckled. “You know, when you put it like that, it is kind of funny. I even remember giving the two of you advice on where to look.”

“We greatly underestimated the craftiness of our quarry, it seems...” Myrina smiled as she wrapped her fingers around mine. “But if you’ve been making and selling the Mana Bombs, how...?”

“I’ll show you everything, Myrina. But only if you promise to keep it a secret. This is important. You can’t tell anyone unless I explicitly say otherwise. Understood?” I stared intently at her, and her blush deepened.

“...understood.”

“Come on, let’s go for a walk.” I pulled Myrina to her feet, and she followed me out the door.

We left the confines of the Samhain castle, though for the first time I was leading her instead of the other way around. The guards paid us no mind either way, and soon we were out on the city streets.

We walked all the way to the inn where Bridget and Sakura were staying, and I went straight up to the second floor to their room. I briefly worried that the two of them would be out exploring the city, but I heard voices behind the door. It was the two of them, talking quietly.

I knocked twice. “Bridget! Sakura! It’s me.”

The door swung open immediately, and two pairs of hands dragged me inside, only stopping for a moment when they realized I was holding hands with Myrina. In the process, dragged her along with me.

Bridget shut the door behind us, and soon it was just the four of us alone in one bedroom.

Sakura was the first to react. “Well well well... going to stick your tongue at me again?”

“It’s you two!” Myrina’s eyebrows rose. “Carter’s concubines! How’d you get to Themyscira? Oh! I get it, you’ve been selling the Mana Bombs for Carter.”

“You’re smarter than you look,” Bridget said from behind her.

Sakura grinned from ear to ear. “You know what? I’m not even mad that you called us concubines. Because I know what you are, Miss little Amazonian virgin! Have you even had a kiss before?”

Myrina’s look of surprise turned into a blushing scowl. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sakura tilted her chin up in the air and scoffed. “Ha! I knew it! Maybe if you get down on your knees and beg me, I’ll teach you a few tricks so you aren’t a disappointment when Carter takes your first kiss.”

“I’ll have you know I’ve already stolen a kiss from Carter!” Myrina insisted.

“What, a peck on the cheek?” Bridget raised an eyebrow, arms crossed.

I held up my hands. “Ladies, I didn’t bring Myrina here for you to taunt and tease her. I want to bring Myrina into the fold. She’s been a good friend, and I hope that someday we’ll be something more than friends.”

Myrina beamed at me.

“But for that someday to ever come to pass,” I continued, “we need to make the most of what we have. God knows it’ll be a hell of a lot easier to do what we’re trying to do with Myrina working with us rather than against us.”

“And what exactly is it that you’re trying to do?” Myrina asked, suddenly skeptical.

“Empower ourselves, first and foremost,” I replied. “And then afterwards, empower the entire settlement of Crownhill. We’re going to do that by selling Mana Bombs. And later, by selling raw materials.”



Myrina fiddled with her hair, nodding slowly. “I get it. If you’d come right out and told my family that you were the ones who made these Mana Bombs, they probably would have locked you away in the dungeon and had you waste your entire tutorial making them. And they certainly wouldn’t have paid you full market value for your work.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I replied. “Your Clan is at war, and by your own admission they will do whatever it takes to win. I’m not in a position to negotiate with them—not in the slightest—and partnering with them fully would lose me any bargaining power I could gain by operating independently. So, that’s exactly what I’ve been doing. And what I plan to continue doing going forward. I’d like you to be a part of it, too, Myrina. If you’re willing.”

Myrina nodded slowly as she understood what I was getting at. “You want me to help you funnel resources back to Earth. Really, that’s what a proper Patron should do.”

“Exactly.” I grinned. “You’re the only one of us who gets to stay on this world full time. The rest of us have to return to Earth after a few days. But you can remain here, buying what we need to buy. Meanwhile, we’ll make sure to ship over a constant supply of goods you can sell to earn the funds to buy what we need.”

“Okay.” Myrina gave me another slow nod that turned more vigorous at my stare. “Okay! Yeah. I’d love to be able to help you like that, Carter. I’m good at buying things!”

“Good. Now, there’s one more business partner of mine I want you to meet. Her name is Misa. She’s the one responsible for making the Mana Bomb sales anonymous at the Auction House. Let’s go meet up with her now, so that she knows you’re in on this, too.”

We met up with Misa a short time later.

“Oh, I know you! You’re... uh... the auction house girl.” Myrina shifted awkwardly. She clearly recognized Misa’s face, but hadn’t bothered to remember her name.

“I’m Misa. You’ve probably seen my cousins; their family owns the auction house. I’m just a distant relative. It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Myrina.”

“Misa. Right. Okay. Hi, I’m Myrina!” Myrina held out her hand to shake.

Misa did so delicately and politely, grasping little more than the tips of Myrina’s fingers. She had a deep flush to her cheeks, clearly overwhelmed by the fact that she was in the presence of the Samhain Clan Matriarch’s daughter.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. The Samhain Clan were both powerful and respected here in Valkyrie’s Watch. No wonder Misa was overwhelmed. The Samhain Clan probably seemed larger than life.

I had no doubt that Myrina would disabuse Misa of any odd notions she might have picked up living on Valkyrie’s Watch. It was sometimes hard to remember that Myrina came from a powerful and respected family when in her presence.

Myrina grabbed the rest of Misa’s hand and gave it a good, firm shake with both hands, much to the mousier woman’s growing embarrassment.

“The two of you will be working together quite a bit.” I laid my hands on either women’s shoulders. “Misa, you’ll be in charge of selling, and inventory... same as usual, really. And Myrina, you’ll oversee... uh...”

Truth be told, the whole system was working rather well already. Myrina wasn’t here because she’d improve the efficiency of our operations. She was here because I didn’t want to exclude her. Suddenly I realized it would be awkward if I didn’t have anything for her to do.

“I’ll be in charge of buying stuff!” Myrina suggested. “I’m good at buying stuff.”

I shrugged. “Okay, Myrina, you’ll be in charge of buying stuff. Misa already has a list of everything I need based on my visit with Marol. What about you two?” I turned to the two women behind me. “Bridget? Sakura?”

“I’ve got a list, too.” Sakura reached into her pocket and withdrew a folded sheet of parchment.

“We did as you suggested and consulted with Marol. She wants me to become a really top-of-the-line brawler, focusing on charging into battle, shrugging off damage, and making myself as big a threat as possible. She said that’s usually the best role for an Oni Berserker like me—though if I get lucky with titles and work hard with proficiencies, I might be able to increase my damage output, too. I need items and skills related to strength, survivability, and increasing my general threat level!”

That fit largely with the direction Sakura had been going already. I was glad our fumbling in the dark hadn’t steered her build too far off track.

“And I’m supposed to be a high-damage, nimble but strong fighter,” Bridget added. “I’ll deal a lot of damage up close and personal, but stay maneuverable enough to keep out of danger. I need to add stealth and agility to my arsenal, with a hefty dose of strength to help my damage scale.”

My eyebrows rose. “Like a rogue?”

Bridget blushed. “Well, I do use a pair of daggers.”

I chuckled. I couldn’t help it. Bridget was one of the nicest, most wholesome girls I’d ever met. The fact that Marol classified her as a rogue was almost funny. I tried to imagine her dressed in black trying to pick someone’s pocket—but all I could picture was the blonde clad in tight black leathers walking up to someone and handing them a donut.

Bridget shrugged her shoulders. “Actually, Marol called me something more along the lines of a huntress. It’s similar to a rogue class, but with more of a focus on wilderness than urban environments. Less breaking and entering, and more stalking and tracking.”

“Did you do much hunting before the integration?” I asked.

“My dad took me out once or twice to get a deer,” Bridget replied, a touch of defensiveness in her voice.

I ran my hand along her shoulders. “I’m sure you’ll make an admirable hunter-type fighter.” She pulled out her list and handed it to Myrina.

Misa looked both lists over and quickly jotted down a copy. The girls’ lists were just like mine—filled with the items and skills Marol had recommended.

“Don’t you worry, all three of you! The moment any of these things show up on the auction house, I’ll bid so fast and so hard everyone else will weep with envy!” Myrina grinned.

“We’ll be counting on you, Myrina,” Sakura replied with surprising sincerity. Perhaps the three women in my life would get along, after all.

Myrina seemed pleased as well, as she clapped her hands together. “I know! How about the three of us go monster hunting! The two of you could use some levels. Carter and I have done it, but it’s a bit disappointing when he can’t gain levels from it.”

Bridget shrugged. “Okay. Let’s see what kind of monsters you’ve got here on Themyscira.”

“We’ll take on whatever you’ve got.” Sakura stood proud, hands on her hips. “The two of us are more powerful than our levels would suggest.”

Despite sacrificing their levels to me, Sakura and Bridget had retained their proficiencies, as well as all the combat experience they’d gained. I would pit the two of them up against anyone at their same level with confidence.

“Great! Bye, Misa. We’re going monster hunting!”

Myrina and I took a brief detour back to the castle to fetch an official quest from Myrina’s mother. This time, we didn’t need to see her in person. Myrina found a quest tacked to a board outside her mother’s office—and not a bulletin board, but an actual board.

Kyryna probably figured the two of us would come by, hoping for another new quest. We’d been doing it often enough, after all. As soon as we pulled the paper free from the

board, we received a quest to slay some monsters in the wilderness just over the bridge.

“Looks like big spider things, this time. They’re not particularly high-level, but they should be good experience for Bridget and Sakura. Let’s head out!”



We didn’t head out until Myrina secured some camping supplies. She’d stopped dead in her tracks when I’d wondered out loud about logistics. The tall redhead had just blinked at me when I’d asked about a tent, and a cast-iron skillet, and a firestarter set. I rolled my eyes and sent her to talk to one of the servants.

It wouldn’t be strange for us to camp out overnight on a monster hunting quest like this. Which worked out, because it would be the only way the two of us could stay with Bridget and Sakura without drawing suspicion. We couldn’t bring them into the castle to train in the arena, and someone was going to get suspicious if Myrina and I visited the inn too often. The last thing I wanted was to face Myrina in the arena again for real—this time with all her levels.

We ended up camping in the woods that night. Bridget, Sakura, and I shared a tent while Myrina took first watch by the fire. Camping with me was a bit tedious because I was such a monster magnet. There was no end to the monsters coming for me thanks to my Death Curse.

It made what would have otherwise been a relatively empty night a tedious process of fending off whatever monster had caught my scent over the past hour. Whoever was on guard duty got a steady supply of experience points. And from the sound of her hacking at whatever it was, it seemed Myrina had some aggression to work out.

“Mhm... can’t sleep?” Sakura whispered in my ear. “I know a way to put you right under...”

I stroked my finger against the side of her red horn. “Let’s not distract Myrina any more than you promised.”

I felt a hand reach down my trousers, as Bridget whispered in my other ear, "I didn't promise her anything."

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-EIGHT

Myrina, Sakura, and Bridget got along much better than I'd worried they would. I feared that was partially because I'd asked them to save whatever the female equivalent of dick measuring was for later. At least the three of them were talking just fine. And they had a lot to talk about—though the only thing the three of them had in common was me.

“Does Carter still make that weird squeak when you pinch him?” Myrina asked.

“Everyone makes a weird noise if you pinch them unexpectedly, Myrina,” I replied.

“Oh yes,” Sakura said.

“Definitely,” Bridget added.

I felt three people all trying to pinch me. I caught a wrist with either hand, but Bridget was faster than the other two and got a good pinch in, right on the ass. I bit back a squeak.

“Eeep! Ahem... come on, you three... that's not fair.”

I reached around to give Bridget a retaliatory pinch. She only smiled at me, without making a sound.

When we spoke with Misa, she seemed both nervous and relieved that Myrina was in on our business affairs. On the one hand, it meant she wouldn't need to hide from the Samhain Clan anymore. On the other hand, it could mean that Myrina might be scooping a share of her lucrative Mana Bomb contract and bartering with other sellers.

I didn't think she had anything to worry about, though. I didn't exactly plan on letting Myrina handle my purse here in Themyscira. That would be Misa's responsibility.

"This is really great, Carter! You have a fantastic thing going here," Myrina said as she smiled at me. "I'm glad you brought me into it. And I'm more than a little impressed that you managed to do so much on the sly. I thought you were at my side the whole time you were here!"

I chuckled. "I figured out how to slip away now and again. You really shouldn't drink so much."

"So that's what you were doing! I wondered why you weren't in the castle when I came to. I looked everywhere for you." Myrina looked more than a little relieved at that realization.

I only had so much time left on Themyscira, and there was somebody else I needed to set up operations with besides Misa. I hadn't forgotten that I wasn't just bringing Mana Bombs to sell through Misa. I'd promised the town wizard copper wire.

Initially, I'd only promised to do it to buy his silence—so he wouldn't tell the Samhain Clan who'd sold him the Mana Bomb. I thought it was just something he was mildly interested in, which was why I was surprised when he rose to his feet the moment Sakura, Bridget, Myrina, and I stepped into his shop.

"Well well well, if it isn't... erm... the fellow who sold me that nifty little metal ball..." The wizard scratched his head, clearly wondering if he was supposed to remember my name or not.

"Carter," I replied.

"Ah, yes, young wizard Carter. What an odd name. Certainly not a local one. I am Galbatorix of the Dragon Lodge of Wizards. And you, my young friend, hopefully have something some of my colleagues have been hounding me for since I sent them that last sample."



“You want Mana Bombs, too?” Myrina asked, brows scrunching together.

“No no no.” Galbatorix waved her off.

I could have sworn I’d heard his name before, but couldn’t remember where.

“We have spells and enchanted items aplenty that can do much the same. Though most such items use natural gemstones instead of wasting such a precious material!”

“What? The copper wire Carter uses to make those things is precious?” Bridget asked.

“Precisely!” Galbatorix pointed at Bridget. “My lodge has assayed the purity of the metallic components, and it’s unlike anything we’ve ever seen. No mine or forge in the entire Arcadia Multiverse could produce pure metal of such incredible quality! Not to mention how flawlessly it was drawn into fine wire.”

The man talked with his hands, and he started waving them all about.

“That Mana Bomb you delivered to me has already been disassembled and used to make an assortment of wands and rings suitable for wizards well over level one hundred. The only tragedy is that the wire was not made of silver, otherwise it would have been even more valuable. You must tell me how your people do it!”

I ran my fingers through my hair sheepishly. “Well, there’s this big box...” I gesticulated, holding my arms out wide. I mean, I was pretty sure some sort of enormous machine was involved in the process. “...and it makes the wire.”

“Mhm... I see. An ancient artifact of some sort, I presume? That would make sense. Indeed. Well, if you can continue to supply us with this wire, or any other metals of similar purity, the Dragon Lodge will pay you handsomely. Gold and silver would be especially valuable to us.”

“Noted.” I shook hands with Galbatorix.

While I was in his shop, I cleared his shelves of a bunch of low-level magical gear and equipment. I'd sort through it all later to figure out if any of it was useful to me. If not for me, I was sure someone back home could use it.

It would pay to have a full armory, and what I couldn't use personally would still be valuable. After all, somebody in Crownhill was bound to get a spell caster class... eventually.



The four of us spent the next two days much as my previous days with Myrina had been spent, only now Sakura happily joined Myrina on the front lines and Bridget surged in with sneak attacks to deal critical strikes like the DPS she was.

Myrina's level was still head and shoulders above the rest of ours, but that just meant she had more to teach us. The three women competed with one another, both on the battlefield and off it, for my attention. But aside from a few reminders to keep things friendly on my part, they did an admirable job working together.

“More monsters dead ahead!” Myrina shouted.

“Got a level on them?” I called.

Myrina squinted into the distance. “Twenty-eight.”

“Then pull back. Bridget and Sakura need this last push if they're to make it into the D-Ranks.”

Myrina pulled back. She stood a few paces behind Sakura and Bridget while I jumped up into a nearby tree. Sakura and Bridget were in for a tough fight, since the two of them were both still E-Ranks. While the pair of giant spiders they were fighting were only a few levels higher than them, that simple rank-up was a big deal.

Still, they had a secret weapon up their sleeves. Me.

Thanks to my Death Curse, I could participate in their fights without taking their experience points. That was in stark contrast to Myrina. If she participated in the fight, then she'd deal the lion's share of the damage and earn most of the experience points. But for me, all the damage I did merely

earned more experience points for Sakura and Bridget, since my Death Curse redirected whatever I earned to them.

When the two spiders seemed like they were about to overtake Sakura and Bridget, I unleashed Mana Barrage. A dozen Mana Bolts flew forth to strike each spider. The rapid flurry of attacks scored multiple critical hits, driving the two spiders back. If not for my Death Curse drawing them to me, they probably would have retreated after that.

With the two spiders battered and wounded, Sakura and Bridget quickly finished them off. As soon as they did so, they both cheered with delight.

“I crossed level 25!” Sakura thrust her club high overhead.

“Me too!” Bridget clapped her hands together with a grin.

“Well done, both of you!” I cheered. “If what happened to me is going to happen to the two of you, you’ll both need to choose your race now. Let’s stop for lunch and Myrina and I can help you.”

We made camp quickly. Myrina felled a tree with a single swift swing of her sword and then carved the top third of it off to make a seat. The rest of the tree went into a pile, which Bridget lit with remarkable speed. We briefly debated trying to cook the spiders, but even with my Disassemble skill to make the butcher’s work a breeze, none of us were keen on trying spider meat.

Thankfully, Bridget had prepared more than enough travel rations for everyone. Apparently the inn they were staying in had a kitchen, and she’d talked the staff into letting her use it to practice her chef job.

“Cooking over an open flame is a lot more tedious,” Bridget explained. “I didn’t know fire management was a skill a chef needed to know. But apparently if you live in a civilization that hasn’t invented electricity, it’s a must-have skill.”

“So that’s how you lit the campfire with a snap of your fingers. It was an ability from your job.” I raised my cup in appreciation.

Bridget blushed with pride. Especially when Myrina saw what Bridget was handing out.

“You were the one who made those amazing snacks Carter gave my sister!” Myrina gushed.

She flopped herself down on the seat next to Bridget and pulled her close. “I knew there was a reason I liked you best out of all of Carter’s lovers. You and me, we’re going to get along great...”

“Ha ha ha...” Sakura rolled her eyes. “You can have Bridget, Myrina. I’ll take Carter.” Our Oni stood and then came over to me, snuggling herself right up into my side.

“Here’s what the System is offering me, Carter,” Sakura continued. “I can evolve my race from homo hornus to homo hornus humongus...” Her voice trailed off as she spoke.

She clearly wasn’t too happy with the options the System was giving her.

“And for me, it’s just like Doctor Roswell said. I can choose to revert and become fully human again. Or I can walk further down the path of the Lycan...” Bridget drummed her fingers against the log she was sitting on while Myrina reached for the bag of holding at Myrina’s waist.

Misa had done a remarkable job getting a bag of holding for each of them, which meant we no longer had to hang on to the one they’d gotten from Myrina’s mother. That might have looked suspicious if Cyra or someone had seen it. Now, the two of them had nondescript generic bags of holding, and I had both a bag and the Kidnapper’s pouch of holding—which I used to store my money in.

Bridget batted Myrina’s probing fingers aside while Sakura and I looked through her options. She only had the one option, which made the decision obvious.

“Well, I guess that’s what you have to pick.” I shrugged.

Sakura rubbed the horn jutting out of her forehead. “But everyone already looks at me weird because of the horn... what happens if it gets even bigger?”

“It might not get bigger.”

“The evolved race name is Hornus Humongus...” Sakura pouted.

Myrina shrugged. “So what? There are plenty of healers who can do body mods. But why are you so self-conscious in the first place? You’re an Oni; why not look the part? Oni are a strong and proud race. They’d be furious to hear you talk badly about your horn. They are quite proud of how their horns instantly distinguish them from the other humanoid races.”

Sakura looked up. “Really?”

Myrina nodded. “Really. There are even some Oni like yourself on Themyscira—though they rarely come to our world. Their lust for battle is legendary, so you’re more likely to find them as mercenaries garrisoned along some border than patrolling farmland. I know Mother has one or two in her employ, but they would not be content to become castle guards. They always demand a more active role in conflicts. Perhaps I could introduce you sometime.”

“That... would be nice...” Sakura trailed off.

“I’m not sure how an Oni bloodline ended up on Earth, though. I thought it was a place filled with only humans. I’m sure there’s an interesting story somewhere in your family line.” Myrina broke off the bottom half of the biscuit Bridget was eating—while the front half of it was at Bridget’s lips.

She quickly wolfed down what she’d stolen before Bridget could so much as protest. Myrina flashed an innocent smile even as Bridget glared at her. The blonde stood and moved to my other side, away from Myrina. This helped her guard her next biscuit a little better from the thieving Amazonian.

“You’re not half bad, Myrina,” Sakura said, her confidence renewed as she made her racial selection. “As a reward, Bridget and I will only kiss Carter... while you sit there and watch.”

“That doesn’t sound very fun for me.” Myrina crossed her arms.

“It will be compared to what we were going to do with him! Bridget and I have been away from our handsome man for a few days. And a few days is a few days too many.”

Sakura laughed as she tilted her head up and planted a kiss on my cheek.

## CHAPTER

# THIRTY-NINE

We wasted an entire morning the seventh day I was here in town, training behind the inn. I say wasted, but any time you can get an expert warrior nearly three times your level to train you, it can hardly be called a waste.

Myrina was helping Sakura up from the ground for the umpteenth time as she explained what the Oni had done wrong when the message I'd been waiting finally appeared... sort of.

**Your stay on your patron's world of Themyscira has been extended to ten days.**

I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, though I did wonder if something had happened back home to make this possible. Had Earth's integration taken some leap forward? I shunted such thoughts aside—that was something for future Carter to worry about.

We'd been given three more days and the girls and I planned to make the most of them. We spent the remainder of our time in Themyscira training and adventuring together. Misa stayed back in town, so the wheels of our enterprise only ground to a halt when she ran out of Mana Bombs and other items to sell. She wouldn't be getting any more of those, though, until the next time Myrina teleported us back over with plenty more goods to sell.

But while we'd run out of things to sell, we hadn't run out of things to buy. There were always odds and ends we could pick up. And between the two of them, Myrina and Misa came up with lots of things a fledgling settlement might need.

Crafting tools had been first and foremost on their list. While stuff like hammers and anvils for blacksmiths were easy to come by back on Earth, we were quite lacking in the tools for the more magical trades.

They'd sourced parchment from exotic beasts, quills from monster feathers, ink made from vampire blood, an inscription wand with a tip enchanted so that it could carve lines into the sides of tiny gemstones, and a thousand other things. More than a few of these items went right into my own toolbox. I hadn't realized how hampered I'd been as an artificer, being constrained to only mundane tools.

With the help of a few more magical odds and ends, the number of blueprints I could craft would grow. I had my eyes on a few I'd picked up, in particular. But I would wait to craft them for when I returned to Earth.

We made sure to keep all the items we wanted to bring with us back to Earth on us at all times, in our bags of holding. I left most of the gold we'd made selling items with Misa, since back on Earth it would only be worth its metal value. Still, its metal value was nothing to scoff at, and I imagined that if I put some up for sale on the obelisk back in town, there were plenty of metalworking classes that would love to melt them down and experiment with them.

I'd noted plenty of Artificer Blueprints that called for solid gold somewhere in the crafting process. Even with four bags of holding—two for me and one each for Bridget and Sakura—we had trouble taking everything back home with us. We'd ended up having to buy Myrina an extra bag of holding, just so the various monster parts we hunted didn't go to waste.

Myrina kept all the meat, claws, scales, and such, while Sakura kept all the pelts into her bag of holding. They made excellent crafting materials for her leatherworker profession and she wouldn't have access to such high-level hides back on Earth.

Soon enough, our time to return to Earth came. We felt the familiar tingle of the System calling us home, and I bid Myrina goodbye.



“It feels like you just got here,” Myrina whined as she clung to my arm.

“We did just get here!” Sakura said with crossed arms.

She and Bridget would probably have one more day to train and adventure with Myrina, since I brought them over several days after my arrival.

“Don’t get too lonely without us!” Bridget waved goodbye to me. “Don’t mind us. Some girl time would be nice.”

“Yeah! It’s time to assert my dominance. I found Carter first!” The last thing I heard was Myrina’s maniacal laughter as Themyscira faded away.

When the world coalesced around me once more, I found I was back inside my farmhouse. Without the sounds of Bridget and Sakura nearby, the place felt empty.

A whole bunch of System notifications popped up to greet me, automatically minimized because of my settings. I took a seat in my lounge, hand already grasping for the cup of coffee. Bridget normally handed me as soon as she saw me going through System notifications.

They’d moved in with me less than a month ago, but now that I was here alone for just a few moments, I was already missing them. I used to enjoy the peace and quiet of my little farm, but now the emptiness just made me lonely.

I scrolled through my notifications, one by one. Myrina had warned me never to dismiss them without reading them first, since more than one powerful adventurer had kicked the bucket not realizing they’d been afflicted with an unnoticeable debuff or poison.

Fortunately there was none of that amongst my many battle notifications. The fighting had been rewarding for Sakura and Bridget, and they were now firmly back among the elites of Earth’s shard. I just hoped the D-Rank upgrade would stay with them, even if I took a few levels off each of them when they returned.

That was how things seemed to work at E-Rank.

They had been stuck at E-rank long enough to make them a lot stronger than their levels suggested, which was always a good thing.

“Nothing... nothing... nothing...” I muttered to myself as I flipped through notification after notification. “Oh? What’s this?”

**Your race, Humanity of Earth, has accepted the surrender of the Trolls!**

**The trolls are now enslaved.**

**Be warned! The human faction that has conquered the trolls are not members of your faction, and the trolls will continue to be hostile to you and yours!**

“Well, shit. Somebody conquered the trolls.” I ran my fingers through my hair.

That was an unexpected turn of events. I had thought I was going to need to rally my forces once more for a final push. Or, barring that, take some levels from Bridget and Sakura so I could wipe them all out myself.

That’s what I’d been mentally preparing myself for, so finding half the job already done was something of a relief, though learning that someone else had done it and that they would continue to be hostiles was a cause for more than a little trepidation.

What exactly had happened while I was gone?

Crownhill was a modest-sized American town, though spread out over a far larger distance than similar towns would have been elsewhere in the world. The rows of buildings downtown where I’d worked and where we’d established the shelter from the remains of several old office buildings was in the most tightly packed part of the city.

Nearby were several major stores and apartment complexes, along with a massive prison. Scattered throughout the area, though, plenty of people were left after the integration took its toll. Even with the abandoned houses I’d seen and the bodies I’d found in the streets, I didn’t think we

had more than a tenth of the city's surviving population living in the shelter.

Most of our numbers came from picking up strays or small groups that had taken heavy casualties. Most of the remaining groups of survivors were isolated, with little in the way of communication, unless they had a ham radio. Not to mention the fact that Crownhill supported a healthy prepper community.

I would have been very surprised to find that I was the only person with a barn full of food, guns, and supplies.

How many other groups were out there? And who among them had taken it upon themselves to take the trolls out of the picture? And just as important, how had they done it?

Even my elites had struggled with the trolls. Who took them down and how many losses had they incurred to do it?

The answers to these questions weren't to be found sitting in my living room all alone. It was time to get moving. The first thing I did was check in with Gobgob and the goblins. My little goblin sweatshop was still cranking out Mana Bomb template at full speed.

When I looked at them closely, the goblins seemed to be working much faster than before. I asked Gobgob about it.

"Gobgob gets job!" Gobgob explained. She shared the description of her job with me.

**Magitech Apprentice (Rare): Gain a shadow of the abilities of whoever is instructing you, allowing you to mimic some of their abilities once they have demonstrated them to you. While you will never invent new items or procedures, you may grow quite versed in their creation under the right master.**

My eyebrows rose. How in the world had Gobgob managed to acquire a Rare-grade job? I only had an Epic job, and I'd had to fight a life-and-death shelter establishment quest to get it.

"How'd you get this?" I asked with wonder.

“Gobgob copies you! Also magic box in the air give Gobgob a quest. Protect tribe from the scary humie and Gobgob gets job!” Gobgob proudly poked herself in her modest chest with her thumb.

Ah, so she had gotten a quest to defend herself and her people from a terrifying monster, as well. It just so happened that the terrifying monster was me—but instead of fighting me, she’d kept her tribe alive by bending wire into Mana Bombs for me.

No wonder she and the others had been working so hard. The System had probably turned it into a quest for them.

I checked on a few of the other goblins. Sadly, none of the others had earned the Magitech Apprentice Job. Most were some variety of common-grade Goblin Crafter, or Uncommon Goblin Technician. All were impressive in their own right, though, and definitely useful.

They were also almost out of raw materials. I would have to stop by the obelisk in Crownhill to pick up some more. That was a second reason I needed to visit the shelter.

There was no time like the present, I supposed. Thanking Gobgob for a job well done, I thought about grabbing the keys to my truck, but decided it would be quicker to travel on foot.



I decided to head to Crownhill right away. Without Bridget and Sakura patrolling my farmhouse, the little monsters drawn in by my Death Curse would come sniffing around if I lingered for long.

While Bridget and Sakura would have had no problem dealing with them, Gobgob and the goblins were considerably weaker. If I stayed at the farmhouse, I’d have to spend most of the day running around killing bugs and critters just to keep them safe.

I did one quick tour around the area to wipe out anything that had showed up while I was reading through my notifications. This meant I ended up fighting a dragonfly the size of a kite and something that looked like a tiny crocodile

with wings. I'd only been here long enough for the fastest of monsters to arrive, though the giant dragonfly did drop a core, so it had most likely once been a regular dragonfly before gaining some levels.

I took what was left of it and added it to the pile of my barn, along with most of the stuff I'd brought back from Myrina's world that I intended to use for crafting. Cores were useful for crafting just about anything in artificing. After that, I ran to Crownhill on foot.

I'd never been much of a runner before the integration, but with my current skillset it just seemed less tedious than firing up my truck. The only reason I'd still been using the thing was to haul things that were too bulky to carry. But now with my bags of holding, I no longer had a need for it.

I ran onward, the wind in my hair and my cloak streaming behind me. I took the short road this time, deciding it was time to be a little daring. The fissure in the ground was still there, with magma burbling beneath it. I jumped right up to it, curious to see if the elemental was still there. My footsteps were far quieter than my truck, so I went unnoticed.

Still, I was pretty sure Sakura hadn't forgotten about her car.

"Best get out of here while you can. Your days are numbered," I said to the hole in the ground.

The elemental didn't respond.

Deciding to save that particular foe for when Sakura could get full satisfaction from the fight, I arrived in Crownhill and was welcomed through the gates with open arms. There was a crowd standing around the obelisk, but that was nothing unusual. All you had to do to use it was look at it, which meant anyone from any of the nearby buildings could do so. But a lot of people still wanted to stand right in front of the thing and pretend they were using a computer.

I was pleased to note that nearly everyone seemed to be better dressed than before, and there were far fewer people sleeping out in the streets. It seemed that in my absence,

another wave of people had adjusted to our new reality and were ready to find their new places in society.

That was a good thing. I wanted Crownhill as strong as possible—because there was no telling what the System would throw at us once we were done with the ogres and the Trolls.

I focused on the obelisk myself and, one by one, made selections on what I was buying and selling. The System was perfectly capable of taking items directly from my inventory, which made this a lot easier than it used to be. It also allowed me to trade anonymously. Normally, it was obvious when someone was buying or selling a huge load of goods—but that wasn't the case when you had a bag of holding.

I clicked through my sell list. Gold. A few magic wands. Some spare tools for magical trades. A couple of skill books for melee attacks that Bridget and Sakura had both rejected, along with a few other odds and ends.

I replaced it all with an equal volume of scrap wire and other metals, along with some basic necessities like flour and sugar. I had twenty years' worth of flour in storage for my survival needs, but when I'd packed all that away, I hadn't expected to have someone like Bridget baking like she was feeding an army. I needed to restock the pantry while she was gone.

Even at the default System-recommended prices, I'd earn a huge number of contribution points—more than ten thousand—which was more than I'd been awarded through taxes until now... and then some. I wouldn't get those points until the items I'd listed sold.

I probably could have priced exotic off-world materials considerably higher, but the people on Earth only had so much time to accumulate wealth. It wouldn't be fair to charge them the same prices I'd got the items for on Myrina's world. Besides, I considered giving away tools for cheap investing in the future of Crownhill. The tools would allow for more skilled craftsmen, which would create more trade, which would in turn create more taxes for me.

So I let the items go for cheap. That would have been all I thought on the matter, if not for the gasps of surprise that came from the gathered crowd the moment I made my purchases and my items went up for sale.

“The market’s gone crazy, what happened?” someone shouted.

“The magical commodities index rose six hundred points!”

“I’m rich! My scrap copper wire contract options are worth a fortune!”

I shook my head. No wonder people had started adapting to the new world quicker as soon as I opened the obelisk. In many ways, the new world was just like the old one. How people had already figured out how to create a derivatives market within our tiny shelter economy, I didn’t really understand.

But it didn’t seem to be hurting anyone, so I let them have their fun. Still, I might have to be careful about dumping too much stuff like that all at once in the future.

With my buying and selling done, I turned and made my escape from the crowd before people figured out I was the one who’d just shifted prices across our entire local economy. I headed up to Margaret’s office. Marcus and Frank seemed to be away for the time being, so if I wanted to find out what happened with the trolls, I needed to talk to Margaret.

## CHAPTER

# FORTY

Margaret was busy, but when she found out who had come to visit, she flung her door wide.

“Carter! Sorry for the wait. I’ve been trying to get a radio broadcast up and running. Someone looted a long-range broadcaster from the city and I thought we might start an official radio channel for the settlement.” Margaret waved her hand at an assortment of wires and knobs that had likely been built sometime back in the 90’s.

Her enthusiasm was infectious. “It would certainly help us get the word out that the area around the obelisk is safe to visit and open for visitors,” I agreed.

“Have you been in contact with anyone else over the radio?” I asked.

“We don’t have any real radio stations here in Crownhill—none that survived the integration, at any rate. I’m hoping I can make the first one. There’s quite a few people using hand-held and short-range radios, though.” Margaret held up a walkie-talkie.

It looked like it had come from a children’s toy set, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t fully functional.

“We’re in communication with several smaller shelters,” she explained. “I’m trying to see how well they’re doing and helping Frank with his own project to build a new map of the area following the integration.”



“Both noble goals.” I nodded. “And I hope you are able to get the radio station up and running. I’m afraid I can’t help much with either, but I came here hoping for information. I’m guessing you got the same prompt I did. The one about the trolls being defeated and enslaved by a faction of humanity?” I asked.

“Ah, I should have guessed that’d be what you were here for.” Margaret tapped her nails against the desk. “Frank and Marcus were both interested in the same question. It happened late yesterday, and the two of them decided to use today’s training expedition to look for some answers. You’ll have to wait with me until their return.”

She shrugged and indicated the radio set. “This is what I’ve been doing while waiting for them to come back.”

Nobody at the shelter knew what happened either, meaning it hadn’t been any of the militia teams getting overzealous during what was supposed to be expeditions to level and keep the surrounding area safe. It seemed another group completely unaffiliated with us had done the deed.

What other group of humans could muster the power to take on the trolls head-on?

My mind went back to Chuck. He’d gotten one of those troll orbs implanted in him somehow. When I’d picked him up, he’d been with a group of bandits. We also knew for sure that there had been some sort of conflict at the Crownhill County Prison.

Chuck’s group wasn’t the first time we’d run into bandits while exploring the city—and I wouldn’t have been terribly surprised to discover that the largest group of them had turned their old prison into their new headquarters. Could they have been the ones to take out the trolls?

Crownhill County Prison wasn’t meant for the insane or psychotic. It had never been a maximum-security installation, but it wasn’t the kind of prison that treated its inmates with kid gloves, either. There were a lot of people comfortable with violence in there.

The arrival of the System and the idea that killing things made them stronger would have been very appealing to that sort. And similar to the Wolfmen, it wouldn't have taken them much time at all to level. That lay in sharp contrast to the office workers I'd rescued and the isolated family shelters scattered throughout the ruins of the city.

The natural human reaction to disaster was to hunker down and to wait it out. Those were instincts that we had to fight against every day just to convince people to sign up for the militia. It was an instinct Margaret would have to fight against if she got her radio broadcast up and running.

There was no point speculating if I'd have the answer as soon as Marcus and Frank returned. The safest thing would be to wait for Marcus and Frank. I nodded and pulled up a chair.

“In that case, maybe I can help you set your radio up. I'm not sure I know exactly how these things work, but I'm decently handy and have nimble fingers.”

Puzzling through how to put the radio back together took more work than either of us were used to. I couldn't remember the last time I had to assemble something without being able to use the internet to look up how to do it. And it wasn't like we had instructions readily printed up and available. Truth be told, if not for my enhanced intelligence I probably would have given up in frustration. But between that and the fact that my Artificer Job made my fingers nimble, we soon had one working radio broadcaster.

“Testing... testing...” Margaret spoke into the microphone while I fiddled with a hand-cranked survival radio. When I found her channel, I flashed her a big thumbs up. “This is the official Council-sanctioned Crownhill Radio Station broadcasting from downtown Crownhill. We're coming to you on the air for the first time! This is a call to all survivors out there. Order has been restored downtown. We have food and maintain a semblance of order here. Head to the massive black obelisk; there's plenty of food and work to be had.”

She turned off the microphone and smiled. “With this, we can send our messages out to the entire shard! We could help a

lot of people like this.”

“Congratulations. You could be our first post-integration radio star.” I grinned.

Margaret laughed. “Careful. If you keep teasing me, Crownhill’s first post-integration radio star will start asking for regular messages from our sponsor. Since you’re the settlement owner, that would be you.”

I held my hands up. “I’d prefer we provide commercial-free public service.”

Margaret and I played around with the radio a bit more and she eventually convinced me to say hello. Presumably, somebody out there was listening. Radio had fallen out of fashion, by and large, after the advent of internet streaming services, but most people could rummage up something if they dug through a basement or two.

She had me explain about the obelisk and what we had to offer—in addition to law and order. Mainly, we just wanted to encourage people to stop by with a car full of loot to buy and sell at the obelisk. Even if people didn’t join the shelter or sign up for the militia, just boosting the flow of goods through the obelisk would increase the quality of life and opportunities here for everyone else.

The two of us would probably have kept at it for a while longer, if not for another knock on Margaret’s door. I turned to her as she flipped off the microphone.

“That’s probably Frank and Marcus!” She stood and went to open the door.

She was half right. Standing in the doorway was a bloody and bruised Frank. He didn’t look too good. His face was pale, and there was dried blood stuck to his brow. His eyes were wide and he had a sheen of sweat on him that told me he’d been running for a while.

“Margaret, they... got... Marcus!” Frank said, his words coming out between panting gasps.

I stood, catching Frank’s eye for the first time. “Frank, tell me everything.”

Margaret guided Frank inside and to a seat beside her desk. She poured him a cup of water from a pitcher on her shelf. Frank downed it in one quick gulp as he began his story.

“Marcus and I combined our parties to make scouting the ogre and troll encampments a bit safer. One team could serve as backup, while the other forged ahead. Fighting from our operation started slowing down the day before yesterday, though. It looked like the ogres had lost about half of their number, with most of the rest bearing heavy wounds.”

That sounded good. I motioned for him to continue.

“The trolls had home field advantage for most of the fighting and were able to drown quite a few ogres in their swamp with cleverly set pit traps,” Frank explained. “We figured it was time we tipped the fighting back to even by taking out a few troll stragglers and marking a safe path through the swamp for the ogres to attack them.”

He shook his head. “Apparently somebody else had an even bolder idea. We were spotted, but instead of attacking us, the trolls welcomed us into their encampment. I wanted to refuse, but Marcus couldn’t pass up the opportunity. He accepted the offer while I stayed back.”

I leaned forward, chin resting on my nested fingers, with my elbows on my knees. “And then?”

“Then the real humans they were expecting showed up.” Frank shook his head. “Apparently, the trolls didn’t come up with the pit traps that were giving the ogres so much trouble on their own. That idea came from a group of humans who’d stopped by to help them in exchange for some special, glowing blue orbs that the trolls had. Apparently, every troll has such an orb, and they can be harvested from the dead.”

“Shit,” I cursed. A group of humans was already working with the trolls. “Do you have any idea who it was?” I asked.

Frank nodded. “Orange jumpsuits are hard to miss.”

I leaned back. “The Crownhill County Prison... and they’ve started trading with the trolls for those regeneration orbs.”

Frank's eyebrows rose. "You already knew that part?"

I nodded. "There's a militiaman on duty named Chuck. He's got one of those orbs in him—though he doesn't have any memories of who he used to be. He... ahh... he received a rather bad head injury at one point. His brain regenerated, but the memories in it did not."

"Then you'll probably know how the fight went for us. Man to man, we outleveled the former convicts. But they could take every punch we dished out and came back for more."

"So, they attacked you? And the trolls did, too?"

"What was left of them did." Frank shrugged. "From what I've gathered, the former convicts have the trolls well and truly under their thumb. We've been finding charred troll corpses here and there, and wondered what was causing them."

He blew out his breath, running a hand through his hair. "Well, now we know. Apparently being burned alive is something even trolls can't regenerate from. Living in a swamp, that probably didn't matter. It's not like they'd encounter fire frequently—under natural circumstances at least."

"Why do you think it was the convicts who did this?"

"We found a few Jerry cans of diesel fuel in the swamp, which makes me think they've been doing this there for a while."

"I'm surprised the trolls surrendered if they were being burned alive." I shook my head in wonder.

"You'll have to ask Marcus about that. He's the one stuck in their camp. They aren't treating him as badly as the trolls, but if he could have left by now, he certainly would have done so," Frank explained.

"Is he a prisoner? Are they torturing him?" I pressed.

"A prisoner, yes. Being tortured? No. At least, not the last I saw. We're keeping tabs on him from a position on a nearby

hill. We got a telescope set from one of the toy stores in town and have it set up behind some bushes. We've got a few camera drones up and running, too, and have put them to good use counting the wounded ogres."

I congratulated Frank on their ingenuity.

"Thanks, but the trolls are a bit more nimble and we've lost a few drones taking them over their swamp, so we don't know nearly as much about the trolls' numbers. All we can do is watch from afar."

I frowned, my brows furrowed in thought. "So, what you want is a show of force. Enough people that you can walk into the troll swamp and take Marcus back, whether they like it or not. You'll want enough backing to give you a strong bargaining position."

"Exactly. I was hoping I could rally Kyle, Margaret, Michael, and everybody else who's near level 25. I know for a fact that the convict's leader has crossed over to D-Grade, though. We'll need strong people if we have to contend with him." Frank stared at me hopefully.

"Let Margaret, Kyle, and the others stay here. We don't want to leave the shelter defenseless. Instead, I'll go myself. I want to take the measure of whoever wiped out the trolls in my absence."

Frank stood and, after strapping my sword back on, I followed him back outside.

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-ONE

We ran through the woods back to the position Frank and his men had taken on a hill overlooking the swamp. I had to stop a few times for him to catch up, but after the third time, I tossed him on my back and started carrying him. Between my proficiencies and my movement abilities, I could move a whole lot faster than he could.

“This is humiliating...” Frank grumbled to his men as I gave him a piggyback ride. “There they are, up ahead. Put me down! Put me down!”

When I set Frank on the ground, he splashed some water from his canteen on his forehead to make it look like he’d run the whole way alongside me. Only then did we rejoin his men.

Marcus and Frank had brought four men each, which made a full party for each of them. With Marcus’ four plus Frank’s party as well, there were eight people waiting for us. They’d been watching the troll encampment and Frank asked them to brief us on what they’d seen.

“Captain Marcus is in one of the tents... there.” The militiaman pointed.

“Lieutenant Marcus. He’s too young to be a captain,” another militiaman said.

“I heard someone else call him a captain,” the first man argued. “We call Frank a captain.”

“Enough!” Frank barked. “Just tell us what you saw.”

I was pretty sure we didn't have any formal ranks in the militia. A few of the survivors who had joined Crownhill's forces were veterans, though, and from that point on, ranks just started appearing.

In general, Crownhill hadn't been a particularly militant town. If we'd had a national guard center or higher concentration of military veterans in our city, we probably would have fared a lot better during the integration. I was certain a fifty-caliber machine gun could drop an entire tribe of trolls, thick hide or not. Unfortunately we hadn't been lucky in that regard. Instead, Crownhill was mostly filled with office workers and their families.

Sooner or later we'd differentiate between those who were part of Crownhill's police force, those who were part of Crownhill's military, and those who just wanted to clear out monsters. But for now, there weren't enough people to do all three things at once—not as if the primary duties of any of those roles differed by much.

But when that day came, perhaps rank would matter more. When that happened, I'd need to standardize things. Rather than weigh in on the topic now, I joined Frank in a steely-eyed gaze as we urged the two militiamen to tell us what happened.

“R-right...” The militia dropped their argument over Marcus' title and quickly ran us through what they'd seen.

The first guy began again. “They talked to Marcus for a bit, though somebody pointed a gun at him once. A big guy yelled at the guy who drew the gun, though, and he put it away.”

“You think that was the person who is in charge?” I asked.

The militia shrugged. “He's either in charge or works for whoever is running things. He looks like he's close to seven feet tall and built like he bench-presses trucks. You can't miss him. He's also got a slight blue tinge to his skin that doesn't look natural. He had a darker skin tone, so now he looks a bit purple by firelight. We think he has one of those troll orbs.”



I stroked my chin. It sounded similar to Chuck's condition to me, but perhaps a little further advanced. His height probably wasn't natural, either. It could have something to do with his class, or maybe he'd just been dumping all of his free points into Vitality and Strength.

Myrina had told me that your stat ratios generally defined your appearance. Vitality and Strength together usually made someone large and muscular—like Cyra. That meant this guy was probably a physical combat class. Those were tough to deal with, but if he'd inserted a troll orb into himself and given himself superhuman regeneration, he'd be even tougher.

My mind went to the troll orbs I'd taken. They were sitting on a shelf in my Artificer's Workshop. I was extremely wary about inserting one into myself, since anything that useful couldn't possibly come without side effects. As soon as the right Blueprint came up for the thing, though, I was going to have to give working with it a serious try.

"Alright, I think I've heard enough. I'm going in to get Marcus out." I stood and turned toward the camp.

"I'm coming with you!" Frank said.

"Fine, but I want everybody else to stay outside the woods. Only break cover if you hear us yelling for you. I want to keep your presence a bit of a surprise if negotiations go south and we have to break Marcus out the hard way."

"Yes, Supreme Commander!" one militiaman said.

At the same time, another said, "Yes, your lordship!"

I spun on my heel so they couldn't see me roll my eyes.

Frank and I made our way down the hill and into the swamp. Overhead, the sun was just starting to set. Dark usually meant more monsters. The way back to town might be rough going if we had to get home under cover of darkness—especially if I had to run with Marcus tossed over my shoulder.

That was the other reason I'd only taken Frank. He'd been slower than me, but he'd probably be a hell-of-a-lot faster than anybody else I could have brought. That speed might be necessary if we had to make a hasty escape.

We made no attempt to hide our approach. After all, we were coming to them to negotiate. The group we were going to meet might be former convicts, but they were fellow humans. Unlike trolls, they wouldn't attack us on sight.

But at the same time, I couldn't help but feel that I'd rather fight trolls. I was confident in my levels, but humans were tricky.

"Hail the camp!" I yelled.

They had spotted me already, so yelling just served to catch their attention. Unlike the trolls or ogres, the humans occupying the former site of the troll village had been smart enough to post sentries.

"That's far enough!" the sentry shouted.

His voice was rough, and he held a machete loosely in his grip. The black paint along its side had been stained the bright blue of troll blood, and the notches lining its length showed the man who wielded the weapon was no stranger to swinging it.

"Who the hell are you and what do you want?" he called out.

I smiled and continued waving, despite the obvious hostility in his tone. "I'm here to congratulate you, of course. I got the notification that you took down the trolls. If you can do the same to the ogres, then humanity will have fully claimed this Shard."

"The boss will get to it when we're good and ready." The sentry spat a wad of spittle on the ground. "Why... you wanna join us?"

"If I said yes, would I get to meet this boss of yours?" I asked.

"If you proved your worth, sure. You ain't from the prison, are you?" He frowned at me. "One of the townies, then? I'm surprised you fuckers are still alive. Aren't most of you desk jockeys?" the sentry asked.

As he talked, I slowly approached him, my hands held loosely and calmly at my sides. Now, just a few feet away from him.

I shrugged. "We've gotten by so far."

"Mhmm. You lot probably spat on us convicts when we crossed the street. Probably mocked us from your cars while we picked up your trash on the side of the road," he sneered. "Now that times have gotten rough, you're here begging for our help because we're tough and you're soft."

The sentry spit on the ground again, right at my feet. I shook my head. I had a good idea what he'd meant by proving my worth. Too bad this little test of his was going to go poorly... for him.

"I'm tougher than I look. I've been through some harsh things these past few weeks," I admitted.

"And your friend?" He jerked his head at Frank behind me.

"He's with me."

"You've killed?" the sentry asked.

"Yes."

"Not just the big ogre fellas, or the trolls. Those things ain't people." The sentry looked at his blue-blood splattered machete, two fingers wiping off some of the blood and running it between them.

"They're only one step above the damn fire-breathing squirrels. I meant to ask if you've killed a man... flesh and blood like you and me. Have you looked into his eyes as you took his life and left his cold corpse in the street?"

"Also yes," I replied.

The sentry looked up, surprised at that. "Hmm. Well... damn. Maybe you townies aren't so soft after all. Are they all like you?"

"Some, but not all. Enough to hold the line, at least." I shrugged and glanced behind the sentry. "Look, we're not

trying to sneak into your camp, but we do need to get in and talk to whoever's in charge. Can you let us in?"

"Hmm. Let me think about it..." The man fingered something in his pocket, and his hands came away covered in traces of faint blue dust. He licked his lips as he saw it, then stuck his fingers into his mouth and licked them clean.

As he did so, I watched his pupils go wide and the whites of his eyes turn bloodshot. I wasn't sure what kind of drug that blue stuff was, but whatever it hadn't been, it probably wasn't healthy.

"On second thought..." the sentry said, voice suddenly taking on a crazed edge. "I don't like the shape of your nose. Maybe I'd better not introduce you to the boss after all."

He picked up his machete and swung it straight for my neck as he let out a mad cackle.

But I was faster. My fingers curled into a finger gun at my waist and I fired an Eldritch Blast from my hip. The sudden burst of energy knocked the wind right out of the man and he doubled over, gasping.

Then, while one hand darted out to grab his machete, my other hand curled into a fist and delivered a right hook that blasted him straight across the jaw. With Eldritch Augmentation, I was more than strong enough to knock the sentry on his ass. A second after disarming him, I was holding his own machete to his throat.

"Shit, fucker. I was just messin' with ya. I wouldn't have cut your head off," the sentry cackled, despite the danger he was in. He'd suddenly gone crazy right after sucking down that blue dust.

I couldn't be sure if he was telling the truth, or not. But it didn't matter.

"You wouldn't have been able to, either way." I activated Mana Barrage, channeled a single Mana Bolt, and fired it into the ground beside the sentry's head. "Pull something like that again, though, and you'll get one of those right between the eyes."

“Damn...” The sentry shook his head in wonder as he stared at my hands. “Finger guns that kill. You would have been a scary man in the cells.”

Oddly enough, threatening the sentry’s life had been enough to win his favor, and he agreed to take me to see his boss. He turned to lead us through the camp. So far, things had gone remarkably well.

Along the way, I spotted several smoldering piles of ashes. They somewhat resembled what might once have been a troll. There were also a few bloodstains around the burned-out husks. Though these men had taken out the trolls, it didn’t look like it had been a bloodless battle.

Still, there were a lot of dead trolls. And looking at the sentry and his compatriots, they didn’t appear to have particularly high levels. Most were somewhere between levels 6 and 20. That made them stronger than the average resident of the shelter, but not higher than the average level in our militia.

I was surprised they’d been so effective against the trolls, even after discovering they were vulnerable to fire. I imagined the trolls had put up a good fight here in their swamp. There had to be more to the story.

The sentry led me to what had formerly been a troll’s hut. Most of them were at least partially submerged in swamp water, but this one was completely on dry land. It looked like it had been abandoned long ago—the trolls probably liked their homes damp and humid.

But humans weren’t trolls, and the abandoned troll hut was much more pleasant than the other huts the trolls still used. Within the hut sat a man exactly as Frank’s people had described him.

“Boss! Found some guys who want to talk to you. He might look like some scrawny nerd, but the one in front is tougher than he looks,” the sentry explained.

A dark-skinned man sat on a log just inside the hut, quietly brooding to himself behind a small cooking fire. Shadows

flickered across his face as he toyed with a hard blue pearl in one hand. It was one of the trolls' regeneration orbs, though this one was bigger than the others I'd seen. It was also bright blue. The same blue shade as the dust my escort had so eagerly sucked down.

The man shot me and Frank a look, then brought the blue pearl half the size of his fist up to his lips. In a maneuver that would have made both Bridget and Sakura jealous, he swallowed the whole thing in one gulp, without so much as wincing.

I watched the pulsing blue bulge slide down his throat. His veins pulsed in time with it, like worms crawling under his skin. When they did, his flesh turned a shade more toward purple.

"Are you sure that's safe?" Frank asked. "Because it definitely didn't look safe,"

The man stood. He really was a giant. While not as tall as the ogres, he was big enough that the rest of us had to crane our necks to look him in the eye. Next to him, Cyra would have looked like a normal-sized woman.

His arms were like tree trunks, and his body was covered in long scars that crisscrossed his arms and his face. He wore a look that set me on edge. The feeling was not unlike that of a high Charisma score—except that instead of making him more attractive, it had all been channeled to giving him an aura of fearsome intimidation.

It reminded me of Myrina's Killing Intent ability, only it was passive and less intense.

"We didn't escape the cells by playing it safe," the man said. He stretched his back and crackles ran down his spine. His eyes were slowly turning bloodshot. Swallowing a whole orb was probably slower-acting than sucking down some dust.

"The boss here was one of the earliest to reach the D-Ranks!" the sentry behind me said. "Some bastard stole the number one spot from him. He was furious when he discovered his racial bonus had already been locked in to..."

uh... acceleration-something-or-other. He had something else in mind.”

“Humanity has never wielded spells or magic,” said the boss of the former convicts. “Our might has always been that of our bodies and our minds. Why change what had worked for us so far? But it’s of no matter anymore. These orbs have given me a new path.”

“You’re all taking them, aren’t you?” I asked. “Putting those troll orbs inside of yourself, I mean.”

“This is the trolls’ source of power. Without it, they would be mere beasts. Humans are strong as we are. With these, though, my men and I will be invincible.” He ran his hand along his chest, massaging the blue veins that stuck out several inches below his neck. They were crawling further and further across his body by the moment.

For all his strength, he didn’t look good. Chuck had seemed like a healthy human, other than when he was regenerating. But this guy? The more I looked, the more warning signs I spotted.

First, there were the veins that crawled under his skin. Some of those had continued moving as we talked. His eyes were turning completely bloodshot, the sclera an unhealthy pink from edge to edge. And then there was the distant way his eyes shot straight through me.

It reminded me of someone on powerful drugs. This man wasn’t entirely stable. I would have to take care with my words if I wanted to get Marcus out of here without a fight.

“Now, why are you here?” the big man asked.

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-TWO

“Let’s start things off right. I’m Carter, and this is Frank.”  
I gestured to myself and then to Frank behind me.

I waited a moment. A few seconds of silence passed before the man spoke again. “This is Martin... Boss Martin to you,” the sentry said.

Boss Martin held up his hand. “Go back to keeping watch,” he ordered.

“Yes, boss!” The sentry nodded diligently and soon vanished.

“We’re the Vipers. At least that was our old name for ourselves, back in the cells. Now that we’re out, we kept it out of habit,” Martin explained.

“You’re from Crownhill County Prison, aren’t you?” I asked.

Martin gave me a tiny nod though his eyes seemed to pass right over me. “We were. But those guys are tough bastards. Fighting was getting bloody there. Lots of rough people. Compared to them, these trolls were easy pickings. We told ‘em we could help them trap the ogres... so we did. We told them we wanted those orbs of theirs in exchange. They gave us some orbs, but not enough. Stupid bastards.”

“So you killed them?”

Martin shrugged. “It’s a rough world. And it turns out trolls burn real easy.”



From the sound of things, Martin and his Vipers had approached the trolls as potential allies, then swiftly stabbed them in the back as soon as the opportunity presented itself. I decided then and there that we wouldn't be allying with the Vipers—even if they had taken out the trolls. They might be strong, but I knew I couldn't trust them.

There was one thing I was curious about though...

“Those blue orbs of the trolls. They make them inside their bodies. If you wipe the trolls out completely, how will you get any more of them?”

“We've still got some of the troll women. They're easier to keep a leash on than the bulls. Some of my boys think they can make half-trolls,” he explained.

Martin stared at me once he'd finished speaking. I would have thought he was studying my face, if not for his distant gaze.

Well shit... that was one way to go about it. I was increasingly less interested in having anything to do with Martin and his Vipers.

“Enough about us.” Martin shrugged his massive shoulders. His body was shaking now with unnatural tremors. His previously brown skin now had a distinctly purple hue to it. “Why are you here?”

I sighed inwardly. I was hoping to get Martin in a better mood before this part of the conversation, but this guy seemed a tough man to please. I suspected my particular Charisma bonus was much more effective with women than with someone like Martin and his band of troll-fuckers.

“Martin,” I began, measuring each word, “I'm here for Marcus. He's one of my guys.”

In the dim light, I could see Martin's skin had a faint glow to it. The way it concentrated in the unnaturally squirming veins made me feel like I wasn't talking to a fellow human at all.

“The kid who walked in here like he owned the place?” Martin asked.

“He wanted to talk to the trolls,” I explained.

“Too bad for him that we planned to gut the lot of them. He’s seen us fight. He’s seen what we do with the orbs. He’ll have to join us now... the same goes for the two of you,” Martin replied.

My heart sank. It seemed like this was going to come down to a fight after all.

“Marcus is coming out of here with me. Frank, too. We’ll be on our way and not cause you any more trouble.” Quiet as I could, I stuck a hand in my pocket.

Between my curled fingers, a Mana Bolt sprung to life. Then a second followed it.

“And what if I say no?” Martin crossed his brawny arms, staring hard at me. His fingers twitched with barely restrained violence.

I wished we’d gotten here a few minutes earlier. Martin seemed like a reasonable person at first, but the more that orb he’d swallowed went into effect, the more he seemed on edge. Like a rabid beast ready to do who knew what at any moment.

“You don’t want to say no. Check my level... if you can. You’re outmatched,” I warned him, hoping my level at least would prevent a fight.

Martin and his Vipers were a bunch of crazy druggies. I wasn’t going to ally with them, but perhaps I could still use them. If they could wipe out the trolls, then maybe they could help me take out the ogres as well. Then we could talk about getting them sobered up.

I felt a tingle run up my spine as Martin scanned me. At the same time, I scanned Martin.

### **Martin, Boss of the Vipers (Pugilist — Level 26)**

Behind me, Frank slowly lowered his posture, bracing himself for a fight. His fingers twitched for the gun he kept at his waist—not that Frank’s little pistol was going to do much against the man before us.

I ran my tongue over the unusual word. Pugilist... that meant...

By the time I remembered what the word meant, I had barely enough time to dodge the punch that was headed straight for my face.

Martin's fist skidded off my shoulder, leaving a bruise, as I Warp Stepped clear. I pulled my hands out of my pocket and stopped hiding the Mana Bolts I'd been generating. I funneled more power into them as I prepared to release the whole lot of them.

Meanwhile, Martin's fist turned the wall of the troll hut to rubble. His knuckles splintered wood and shattered stone.

I unleashed my Mana Barrage at the same time that Frank reached for his gun. Drawing faster than I could track, he fired. Both ranged attacks struck Martin at once. The bullets sank into the skin of his chest, cutting straight through his clothes but only scoring his tough skin. They left little red welts on his flesh which vanished a moment later as he healed back to full health.

My Mana Bolts did a lot more. The raised red patches of flesh they left lingered a few moments longer. But they too quickly showed clear signs of fading.

Martin let out a hissing roar—it sounded more like a troll's than a human's voice—and charged us with his arms outstretched.

His mind seemed entirely gone. Talking to him earlier, he'd seemed fairly sharp. But now the orb he'd eaten had overtaken him completely, leaving behind nothing but rage.

I pushed Frank out of the way as I dove aside myself.

Frank emptied every bullet in his gun into Martin's back, but the whole magazine failed to accomplish much of anything. The wounds healed as fast as they appeared. "Well, crap..." Frank muttered.

"Get Marcus and get out of here!" I shouted to Frank. "I'll hold him off!"

Frank nodded and ran out of what was left of the hut. Hopefully I'd draw all of Martin's attention, giving Frank and Marcus the time they needed to escape. It was time to put my new abilities to the test.

I threw out an Eldritch Blast, striking Martin between the eyes while I conjured more Mana Bolts.

"You're probably used to fighting people much weaker than you," I said conversationally. "You're not used to battling someone who has also reached D-Grade. It's a big jump, isn't it?"

"Stand and fight like a man..." Martin growled as he held his bare knuckles up before his face in a boxer's stance. His voice was lower and more guttural than before.

"No." I fired another Eldritch Blast at him.

This man was tough. He was strong too. And his regeneration was incredibly fast—though not as fast as Chuck's had been. That seemed odd to me. Maybe there was something special about Chuck that I hadn't noticed before.

Martin lunged at me again, using an ability this time. His movements were a blur, but I leaped over him without difficulty.

Despite my best efforts, my Mana Bolts weren't doing much damage. I was hitting him in all the vulnerable points according to Exploit Weakness, so I figured I had to be dealing more damage. I knew a few of those had been critical hits, too.

My eyes flickered to the cooking fire, and I remembered what I'd heard about trolls. Being set on fire went poorly for them—it was how Martin and his people had killed them, despite having a much lower average level.

Martin had the powers of a troll. Did he have their weaknesses as well? I intended to find out.

Dodging left and then right, I kept Martin off me with strategic uses of Eldritch Blast. The pulses of dark power didn't do much damage since I hadn't pushed myself to the first level of Mania, let alone the third. I just didn't feel the pressure to do so against Martin.

He was certainly fast and strong. Hell, he probably could have given the Alpha Wolfman a run for his money, had he been as strong as he was now back then during the early integration. But my tutorial with Myrina had completely transformed me at a fundamental level. My proficiencies alone made this less of a fight than it should have been.

Though Martin was stronger than the Amazonian Kidnapper and Ranch Hands I'd fought, this was only because of his experience in combat and his own proficiencies. He was behind them in levels. His proficiencies bridged the gap, but he was behind me in both levels and proficiencies.

Though it probably didn't seem like it to onlookers, I was in total control of this fight.

The troll hut had been barely holding itself together. With all of Martin's punching, it had quickly disintegrated, taking our fight out into the open. The massive willow-like swamp tree that had made up the back of the hut received the last punch it could take, and his fist split the tree in two. It groaned as it toppled over, collapsing in the middle of the Vipers' camp.

If everyone hadn't already heard Martin's battle cries, they did now.

I used the distraction as Martin tore his hand free from the trunk to look around. I quickly spotted Frank nearby. Marcus was with him—tired and battered, but alive. Good. They'd soon be out of the camp, which meant it was time for me to end things with Martin.

I unleashed the gathering storm of Mana Bolts that circled my head, each already lit with fire mana from the nearby troll pyres and cookfires and strengthened with fire affinity from my Pendant of Magical Fire. They struck Martin all at once.

When they did, his skin caught fire, the flames spreading rapidly.

"Argh!" Martin let out a piercing scream as he tore his coat off, but then realized his skin was burning beneath it.

Whatever had been running through those sickly blue veins was more akin to oil than water. That was the only explanation I could think of for why his flesh burned so vigorously.

The whole fight had been surprisingly easy. Martin hadn't been able to touch me once, despite his power. I glanced down at my hands and frowned. I was stronger than I realized.

I shot a quick glance at my combat notifications.

**You have scored a Critical Hit x10!**

**You have dealt Elemental Weakness Damage!**

Martin stumbled around for a few moments, setting several of his own men on fire before gathering his senses and running into the swamp. Flesh sloughed off him as he dove in. I waited for him to reemerge, but the damage I'd dealt him must have been severe.

He didn't rise from the water even after several seconds.

With a shrug, I detonated my Corrupting Marks. The water churned and blood gushed upwards in a fountain from the water, but I received no notification of a kill.

"Damn... still alive?" I muttered.

It didn't look like Martin had plans on coming up any time soon. He knew what would happen if he did, I'd just light him on fire again. His higher stats would probably let him hold his breath longer, but for how long?

I was still thinking the problem over when the sentry from before came at me with his machete.

"Die!" the man snarled. He swung just as hard as before right for my neck. But just like before, he was too slow.

I ducked beneath his blade, grabbed his arm, and pulled it backward. Bone snapped. I pinned him down with one foot, face down in the mud. Then I pointed my finger at the back of his head and fired off an Eldritch Blast. Something in the man's spine snapped and blood pooled out beneath him.

I tore his machete from his hands just as another person came for me.

*Arcane Blade.*

Bright blue energy lined the weapon, reinforcing its failing metal with magic.

Another man came at me with a machete, another stood by his side, and from the looks of them they planned to take me down together.

Fighting two people at once was exponentially harder than fighting just one. But I was an exponentially better swordsman than either of them. When one lunged, I stepped aside and took his hand off at the wrist. That distracted him long enough for me to drag my blade across the other's throat.

The first switched hands by then and raised his sword to block my weapon, but I deactivated Arcane Blade midway through my swing, shortening the machete by about a foot. He missed his block, and I sliced clean through his collarbone.

That cost me my weapon, since I wouldn't be getting it out of his neck without leaning over him and prying it free. That didn't matter much though, since he had another sword to give me right there for the taking. I snatched his machete as he fell, then thrust it forward just in time to hold another attacker at bay.

We clashed blades twice, but he wasn't expecting me to reactivate Arcane Blade and change the size of my weapon mid swing. The glowing spectral tip of the weapon went straight through his heart.

An Eldritch Blast rocked back his head, pushing him back while I drew my weapon back out. There was a growing crowd of people coming for me, but not all of them were so eager to run to their deaths.

I flung spells left and right, pushing myself to the first level of Mania to boost my damage a little more. I called on fire mana to fill my Mana Bolts, and one by one I lit blue-skinned humans on fire.

This wasn't so tough. Why had I left the job to Martin and his men when I could have done it all myself?

I should have dealt with the trolls myself the moment they were going to be a problem. Now that I knew the trick, they weren't that hard to kill.

"He's a monster! A demon!" someone shouted. People were screaming, and only when I heard the high-pitched voice of a terrified woman did I realize I was about to slaughter everyone here.

I shook my head to clear it. The dissociative effects of Mania were dangerous, I knew that. I had to let it go. Now that my mind was clear, I realized nobody was rushing forward to attack me anymore.

I experimented with giving an order instead.

"You there, fetch me one of those jugs of gasoline." I nodded toward one of the gas jugs sitting nearby and to a woman in torn clothes who looked like she'd been dragged through the mud more than once.

"Uh..." The woman glanced between her and everybody else standing nearby. The men around her took one look from her to me, then shoved a jug in her hands and pushed her in my direction.

I took the jug of gasoline, popped the cap, and dumped it into the swamp. If it had worked for Martin and his crew, it would work for me.

After emptying the jug, I lit it up with a Mana Bolt and the swamp started to burn. A screaming man-shaped figure jumped out of the lake. I shot him with an Eldritch Blast, and he fell on his face. One swift swing of my sword put him out of his misery.

"Shit. Martin's dead..." someone muttered.

"Yeah. He is," I replied. "Now here's what's going to happen. All of you are going to put yourselves in order. You're going to behave like honest, civilized, functioning members of society. I don't care who you were before or what you did for a living before the System. I know many of you broke out of



Crownhill County Prison, but I don't care, provided you don't plan on repeating the behaviors that landed you there."

"You're not taking over?" a man asked.

"No, I'm not. I've already got a city, and it's full of hardworking people. Maybe if you prove yourselves, you can stop by and join us. Or not, I don't really care. All I do care about is the fact that if you cause trouble, I'll have to come back here and do this all over again. Understood?" I pointed to Martin's burned and blackened body with the rusted weapon in my hand.

With a flick, the blade spun end over end and embedded itself in his back. A small rush of experience points flowed through me. Not quite enough for a level, but putting me damn close to one.

"Anybody care to disagree with me?" I called out to the gathered Vipers.

There was silence all around.

"Then I'll be leaving now... it would be unhealthy for any of you to try and follow me." I made my way through the camp. Wherever I looked, people shrank away from my gaze.

One thought echoed through my mind as I departed.

I was a lot tougher than I thought. It was past time I put these stats to real use.

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-THREE

Frank and Marcus were waiting for me on the hill with the rest of their men. The entire group was armed and had been ready to help fight off anyone chasing me.

“I’m alright, you can stand down,” I told them.

“How did you make it out without getting messed up? Their leader is a tough bastard. I watched him beat the old troll chief into the ground with his bare hands!” Marcus shivered.

He ran a hand across his cheek. One of his eyes was swelling up, and come morning he’d probably have a black eye. Something told me Marcus knew how hard Martin the Boss of the Vipers could punch firsthand.

“I’m fine. I... handled him,” I replied.

Somehow, I got the sense that Marcus and the others wouldn’t believe me if I told them I’d beaten him so badly I’d lit him on fire and he’d dived into the swamp to put it out. Then his entire gang stood there in terrified silence as I walked out.

I didn’t think of myself as the kind of person who could intimidate a gang of hardened criminals into submission, but apparently that was who I was these days. It was an odd thought. I’d never considered myself as anything more than a normal guy trying to do his part with what he’d been blessed with.

Back when all I’d been blessed with was a normal job and a modest career with a good enough relationship with my boss

for some upward mobility, that had been easy. But ever since the arrival of the System, I'd felt an increasing burden of responsibility settle on my shoulders. First I'd been blessed with Sakura, and then a powerful class. And then the secrets of my old childhood friend had become increasingly valuable. Then there was Bridget, my fight with Craig, and all the other things that had happened since the integration.

Despite my humble beginnings, I'd ended up with far more power than any ordinary man ought to have. Perhaps I wasn't so ordinary anymore.

So instead of telling my companions what really went down, I turned to Marcus. "You feeling alright, Marcus?"

I wished we had someone like that healer Myrina and her family had. Unfortunately, I hadn't met anyone in Crownhill with that particular skill set. I wasn't sure how you even went about unlocking a healer class.

Was it a class, or had the system made it a job?

Marcus shrugged. "I've survived worse. They just muscled me around a little. They wanted to show me who's boss. The punch happened when I told Martin—the big guy you fought—that he had the cheesiest gang name ever."

I chuckled. "You know, I was thinking the same thing. What kind of guy names their gang 'The Vipers'? Is he trying to be some cliché stereotype?"

"I'm pretty sure he got it from that apocalypse video game. There's a tribe of raiders from Vault 15 in one of the games. They roam the Mojave Desert. When I asked if that was where he got the name, he denied it... but he looked very suspicious." Marcus let out a short, wheezing laugh as he clutched his midriff.

"So, tell me... what did you hear while you were there?" I asked, curious. "You must have heard something."

Marcus nodded. "I saw a lot, too. Despite their dumb name, The Vipers took care of the trolls pretty quick. Seemed like the trolls weren't expecting a thing. And after dinner, they didn't put up much of a fight."

“Poisoning. I heard one of The Vipers poisoned the trolls’ food so they’d be easy pickings,” I interjected.

Marcus shrugged. “That sounds about right. Anyway, the trolls were expecting some humans to come by and trade for some of those blue orbs. They wanted more of those traps dug that killed a bunch of ogres.”

I knew the trolls hadn’t come up with the idea themselves. This was the first time I’d heard that humans had provided the labor for the traps, too.

“The first thing they told me, though,” Marcus continued, “was that this was going to be the last batch of traps they needed. The ogres had stopped attacking, and the trolls planned to hide in their swamp and rebuild. But Martin and The Vipers wanted those orbs... And man, they really wanted them.”

“If left to their own devices, do you think they would have defeated the ogres?” I asked.

“The trolls are smarter than the ogres,” Marcus admitted, “though not exactly what I’d call geniuses. I was able to fool them into thinking that I was the human representative they were waiting for, and they told me all about their dealings with The Vipers.”

“Apparently people from Crownhill County Prison have been trading with them for some time,” I told him.

Marcus nodded. “But when the real messenger from The Vipers showed up, that’s when things got dicey for me. I was able to play it cool for a while. I even got front-row seats to watching The Vipers burn most of the trolls alive.”

“And the female trolls?” I asked. “Did Martin and his gang lock them up against their will?”

Marcus shook his head. “Not really. Near as I could tell, the male trolls had the female trolls locked up already. I didn’t get to see the female trolls fight at all. I suspect they’re something like lion prides—if a new group of male lions move in and take over, that’s fine by them.”

He shrugged. “The females will just keep doing what they were doing. That’s what Martin and his gang were to them—just a new pack of males moving in and claiming their tribe as their territory.”

“I guess that’s better than enslaving them, like I originally thought.” I frowned.

The trolls may have been man-eating monsters, but they were still too smart to be just beasts of burden. That would end poorly, one way or another.

“Oh no.” Marcus shook his head. “From what I saw, Martin and his crew hate slavers. It’s the main reason they moved out of the Crownhill County Prison complex. Most of the Three Kings—the gang that runs things at the prison—have been raiding the surrounding areas and taking slaves.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Somebody always had to be the asshole.

“At first, they were stealing the skill books the System was giving out so their men would have a wider choice of abilities. But now, their slaves are used as monster bait. Apparently almost half of Martin’s crew were former townspeople captured by the convicts and brought to the prison by the Three Kings. They only achieved their freedom when Martin and his crew left the prison for greener pastures.”

I rubbed my temples. I’d killed Martin because he was dangerous, unstable, and addicted to magic troll orbs. Now, I was hearing that he’d freed a bunch of people from slavery. It was a complicated world. Why couldn’t people just be plain good and evil? That would certainly make leading Crownhill easier.

I had one last question for Marcus. “What about those cores? Did you see people swallow them?” I asked.

Marcus nodded. “Oh yeah. They tore those things right out of the dead trolls and gobbled them down like candy. It was nasty. I got the impression that Martin and some of his people are pretty much addicted to the things. They got this weird look in their eyes after taking one.”

I had a lot to think about—so much to think about that I stayed behind on that rock keeping an eye on Martin’s camp while Frank and the others took Marcus home. The weight of responsibility had been growing on me, but it hadn’t felt quite so heavy until now I lay there alone as the sun set, far from home.

Going back to the farmhouse would only lure monsters there. Or would it? Perhaps I could use Share Curse on some minor wildlife and send the little monsters coming to harass me scurrying off after other prey.

That was something worth testing out.

The sky turned red, and then night came. Clouds crept over the moon, blocking my view of the stars. It was a shame, really. I’d wanted to look at the stars—it was one of the things I’d gotten used to doing after my parents’ deaths.

It’s what I did every time I went down to the beach where Myrina and I were supposed to meet.

A few sprinkles of rain came down and in the distance I heard a crack of thunder. I just lay there, looking up at the cloudy sky.

What did I want? Truly?

Things were stable enough now that I wasn’t afraid that we would lose Crownhill. And I was strong enough to keep the farmhouse safe. My trade and training with Myrina and her world would always ensure I was a notch above everyone else on this newly integrated planet.

I could kick back and practice my craft. The Three kings could fight it out. The ogres, too. I was strong enough to keep them all at bay and protect what I cared about.

Why take on more burdens?

Like any other man, I cared for my friends and family. But there was something more weighing on my shoulders than merely protecting my farmhouse or Crownhill. It called me to bring order and stability to this entire shard.

I had little desire to become a ruler, though. That was why I'd handed off most of the day-to-day duties of managing Crownhill to the council. So long as I had my farmhouse, my valley, and my friends just across the way, I would be fine. There was no need to reach for more—I wasn't some aspiring tyrant who wanted to crown himself king after the apocalypse.

Myrina wanted me to become something she called a true elite. And, truth be told, that was what I wanted, as well. But I was already on that path. I didn't need to become the absolute ruler over my entire shard to make that happen.

I stared at my hands. These were the same hands that had slain Boss Martin and his most crazed thugs. And he had been among the strongest survivors. I'd already left most of humanity behind with my growing power. And I saw how others treated me because of it.

Kyle, Marcus, and the others I'd met didn't treat me like I was their friend. They acted like I was above them, someone they took orders from. If I continued down this path, I might very well end up sitting on an uncomfortable and lonely throne. But I couldn't bring myself to stand by idly, either.

In the wise words of Spider-Man's uncle: 'With great power comes great responsibility.' By the time the rain started coming down with full force, my decision was clear in my mind—I would bring order to this shard.

I would make it a good place to live. And not just for me or not just for my family and my friends. I'd do it not just to uphold my promise to Ben and all the others who fell to make the shelter in Crownhill possible. Or even for the generations of unborn who would come into a world with the System and need somewhere safe and stable to learn and grow.

I would do it for myself.

I'd do it for this sense of duty that pressed down on my shoulders, and because I knew anyone who wanted to rule didn't deserve the job. I hadn't met any of these Three Kings yet, but from what little I'd heard about them, I knew they weren't anyone I wanted ruling over me and mine.

Decision made, there was only one thing left to do. I needed to ensure I had the power to wipe out my enemies—no matter how strong they were. It was my power that had put a stop to Martin and his crew. It would do the same to these Three Kings... and eventually to anyone in Myrina's family who said we weren't allowed to do what we wanted.

When I shook my cloak out, the rainwater slid off the oil-slick fur. I vanished into the night. Earlier, I'd come to the realization that the ogres were wounded, hurt, and easy pickings. I'd been thinking about bringing out another team from Crownhill to fight them and level, but that had been all wrong.

I dropped everyone from my party. The others had their monsters to fight and level on. These ogres were for me.



## CHAPTER

# FORTY-FOUR

Rain sprinkled over the trees beyond the troll's swamp. The forest seemed peaceful and sleepy, but that peace was a lie. Inside it, the ogres lay huddled around their campfires.

They had no tents or homes, relying only on their thick hides to repel the weather as the rain slowly doused their campfires, one by one. The slowly roasting human and troll bodies they'd been feasting on lay on their spits, only partially cooked. Most of the ogres drifted off to sleep in the rain, with only a few remaining to keep watch.

These were no sentries like those that guarded Martin's encampment, though. They were merely a few sleepless ogres motivated by the hard rocks beneath where they lay to remain a bit more wary than the rest of their kin. One of them caught a glimpse of something strange in the distance.

First one, then three, then dozens of fireflies flickered into being in a nearby tree. A shadow lay in a tree, illuminated by a hundred buzzing lights drifting around it. The ogre sentry stood, approaching the shadow and the buzzing lights with a mixture of curiosity and irritation.

Perhaps these lights were the reason he couldn't sleep. Club in hand, he swept at the lights and the shadow.

"Get! Stupid buzzies..." the ogre grumbled.

He threw his club at the tree, but it met nothing but air. By the time it reached the shadow, the shadow was gone. But the lights remained. Like a swarm of tiny fireflies, they flew toward the ogre.

He swept his big hand at them, but they dug into his flesh and burned him. “Oww! Stinging buzzies!” the ogre hissed.

He reached for his club that had fallen to the ground after bouncing off the tree trunk, but before he could scoop it up, he felt a sharp pain in his back. Something as thick around as his finger was there, plunged all the way into his back. He reached around behind himself to tear it free, but placed as it was, his thick and muscular arm prevented him from getting ahold of it.

Suddenly, piercing pain wracked his body, and he growled as strange energy tore strength from his limbs. Again, out of the corner of his eyes, he spotted the same shadow from before. Except it was no shadow at all.

He could see that, now. A small, by ogre standards, figure stood within the darkness of a weirdly shifting cloak of shadows. His eyes had an unnatural purple glow to them, and more of those buzzing lights sprang from his hand with every passing moment.

In his free hand, he held a shaft of steel that glowed with blue energy.

“Human...” the ogre muttered.

Then he yelled the word again, louder, to alert his kin. But ogres didn’t have the keenest perception at the best of times. With the rain pouring down in sheets, and the thunder cracking overhead, no one heard his final scream.

The first ogre died, and I wiped my sword off on the little scrap of raw hide his kind used as a loin cloth.

**You have slain an Ogre Basher (Level 24).**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level to Level 39!**

“That wasn’t all that hard,” I said to myself.

The ogre had been on the verge of D-Rank, yet I’d taken him down without much trouble. And I’d gotten a level for it, too.

I glanced at my character sheet, and then at the dozens of ogres, most of them already wounded as they lay around their

soggy campfires. They were totally oblivious to the fact that I'd just killed one of their own.

Now was the time to be bold. To be deadly. To be the hunter in the shadows.

“Let's see if I can't hit level 45 before sunrise,” I muttered to myself.

That would put me far enough ahead of everyone else on this shard that I could deal with whatever issues reared their heads. Including these Three Kings. And so my hunt began.

My next victims were three ogres that lay sleeping and helpless around their doused fire. Two sported heavy wounds. Their blood seeped into the ground around them without a care for bandages or infection. They had only their natural resilience to protect them from infection or disease.

The third was missing his arm, just past the shoulder. From the looks of things, it had been wounded badly enough that the ogre had simply torn the limb off—though he hadn't discarded it. Most of the ogre's arm sat on a spit next to a dead troll's torso. It seemed the ogres planned to eat it for breakfast the following morning.

Not that they'd get the chance.

I charged my Mana Barrage from the safety of the trees, targeting the strongest of the three ogres first. I would take out the biggest and highest leveled of the three with my opening barrage while he slept. Then, when the other two awoke, I'd be able to deal with them more aggressively. Only they never woke up.

My Mana Barrage at full power, combined with a burst of Lifesteal and a rapid detonation of all my Corrupting Marks put the biggest of the three down before he could do much more than let out a short, gasping cough. Even to me, it sounded like a snore.

I shrugged, charged another batch of Mana Bolts, and then did it again. The third one-armed ogre did wake up at that point, but he didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell against

me—even if he'd had both of his arms. With just one, I made short work of him.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency increased by one to Level 13!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level to Level 40!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained two levels to Level 33!**

After that, I grew a little bolder with my approach. These ogres didn't know how to set up proper defenses. I took my time scouting the area. Visibility was terrible in the storm, and the rain was coming down hard. Even if I screwed up and the fighting got too loud, the ogre groups were far enough apart that the others were oblivious to our fighting.

To the ogres, I was a ghost in the shadows. A gust of wind that appeared with a hail of Mana Bolts and blazing sword and then was gone just as fast.

One after another they fell to sword and spell—especially to my spells. Between my Mana Barrage and then detonating the dozens of Marks this laid on my targets, it didn't take me long to cull their ranks. I had their measure now.

Before, I'd been hesitant, fearing the ogres would have true elites a caliber higher than the Alpha Wolfman. But now I began to think otherwise.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency increased by two to Level 15!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained two levels to Level 42!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained three levels to Level 36!**

The reason the Alpha Wolfman had gotten so strong was because he was fast and ruthless. He'd led from the front and had attacked human settlements one after another, harvesting our lives to fuel his levels. He'd been far more intelligent than the ogres I now faced.

These lumbering brutes had gained levels, too, but only through accident and happenstance. They were stronger than I remembered, roughly keeping pace with the average level of growth I'd observed in the scavengers of Crownhill. They weren't trying to gain levels, just to hunt down materials and food to sell. But fights came to them now and again, and those fights brought levels. That was probably how the ogres lived, killing every day to get their food and gaining experience accordingly.

But despite those levels, the ogres weren't my match.

As the storm grew fiercer, my Mana Bolts became increasingly effective against the ogres. Wondering why, I took a break midway through my slaughter to check my combat notifications.

**You have landed a critical hit x 38!**

**You have dealt Elemental Weakness damage!**

Interesting. It was just like with the trolls and their weakness to fire. Unfortunately, lightning was a lot tougher to carry around than a lighter. When this storm ended, I would have a harder time adding lightning mana to my spells. I wondered what kind of elemental weaknesses humans had.

There was a time or two when a few ogres managed to wake and score a lucky hit or two on me. I managed to dodge almost every attack—but with their strength, even a glancing blow did a lot of damage. But I hadn't picked up Iron Will for nothing. Some damage wasn't going to be enough to put me down—not when I'd gain as much health or more with my next Mana Barrage.

With the massive health pools these ogres had, I could afford to take risks. If I got hit, I would just heal myself by detonating my Corrupting Marks or launching another barrage of Mana Bolts as I let Lifesteal refill my health.

I sank into that same rhythm I sometimes fell into when training with Myrina and Cyra—that odd state where all else fades away, and my mind focused completely on the fight. Every now and then, I used Blood Sacrifice on a particularly

resilient foe. Blood dripped from the corners of my mouth, out my ears, and from the corners of my eyes.

But a moment later I healed, and my opponent was worse off for the rest of the battle.

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained two levels to Level 44!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained three levels to 39!**

**You have gained 16 proficiency levels across various domains:**

**Caster: +4 to Level 31**

**Combat Tactics: +2 to Level 7**

**Dodge: +3 to Level 48**

**One Versus Many: +2 to Level 17**

**Sword: +5 to Level 49**

In one night, throughout that single storm, I fought more deadly fights than I had the rest of the integration combined. My combat instincts had needed honing, especially with my new skills and new proficiencies. I now had that, in spades. All the training I had done with Myrina and Cyra had been good for my fundamental skills—but there was something different about putting them to the test against opponents who wanted me dead.

By the time the rain began to slow, we were deep into the night and close to early morning. Two-thirds of the remaining ogres were dead. More than forty large corpses littered the area. The last few groups of ogres had finally caught on and realized something was happening.

They rallied their allies to their feet and gathered together in a large group.

“Evil spirit! Begone!” one ogre shouted, clutching his club in terror.

Gathered close together and awake once more, they were much harder to pick off. But that didn't mean they were

impossible to attack. Behind the wind and the rain, and hidden within the thunder, I struck with every spell I had. Each Mana Bolt was laced with lightning, and each Eldritch Blast was empowered with all the might I could give it.

The third layer of Mania, Blood Frenzy, had me lusting for battle to the point that I had to fight from diving right in amongst the ogres. I was a higher level than any of them and could probably survive long enough to make it back out.

But my appearance among them would lift the veil from the unknown evil spirit they feared and teach these ogres that I could be hurt. I wanted these ogres huddling in terror in the rain as I picked one or two out and layered them with so many Corrupting Marks that their flesh began to peel and fall to the ground.

One by one ogres popped like over-ripened fruit as I detonated my marks, blowing them up from the inside out.

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained 5 levels to Level 44!**

**You have gained 10 proficiency levels across various domains:**

**Caster: +4 to Level 35**

**Combat Tactics: +2 to Level 9**

**Dodge: +3 to Level 51**

**One Versus Many: +1 to Level 18**

Alas, no good thing lasts forever. The sun would rise soon; its rays were already burning away the clouds that had brought the rain and the thunderstorm that had hidden me so well. Even worse, not even my prodigious mana reserves could keep up with the number of spells I was using—not for this long.

Even stopping every few minutes to meditate and utilize the enhanced mana regeneration it provided, I was running on fumes.

I forced Blood Frenzy to quit, not realizing how close I'd been cutting things until I calmed myself back to a semblance of normalcy.

“Evil spirit! No more!” one of the ogres shouted.

The rest of them took up the chant. “No more! No more!”

The normally brutish voices of the ogres sounded beaten and drained. Apparently the system sensed the resignation in their tones.

**You have defeated the ogres!**

While some of their number remain, their spirits are broken, and they no longer possess the manpower to feasibly defeat the remaining major human factions on their own!

The survivors will remain, but have lost the ability to claim this shard on their own.

I was surprised not to see the familiar exploit, enslave, or exterminate menu, but I supposed that was because I had defeated the ogres in spirit, but didn't have their remaining members at my mercy.

Truth be told, given the opportunity, I probably would have selected exterminate. These creatures had the bodies of humans roasting over their campfires on spits. But the ogres seemed not to care what they ate, so long as it was meaty and easily roasted. They were apparently willing to eat each other, given the opportunity.

I ignored their pleas and continued my hunt. I was only one level away from the goal I had set myself. After finishing off two more ogres clustered in the large group, I got the notification I'd been waiting for.

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level to Level 45!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level to 45!**

I didn't have the energy to finish the rest of them off, but I was glad the problem was dealt with... for now. I was running on fumes—so much so that I wasn't able to Warp Step home. I had to get out of here before the rain stopped and the sun fully rose. If the ogres spotted me in this state, I would be in real trouble.



The run back to my farmhouse was brutal, made worse by a few quick stops along the way. I spotted a giant pigeon, three fire squirrels, and a fluffle of carnivorous rabbits. They looked somewhat agile, especially the rabbits, so I tested out my idea to distract the local monsters.

“A little curse for you... and you, you, and you... and finally, all of you.”

Repeatedly, I cast Share Curse on each of the wild beasts. Hopefully they would take the heat off me long enough for me to get a good night's sleep. I didn't want to wake up being overrun by monsters.

I didn't even make it to the bedroom—not that I wanted to, as bloody and dirty as I was. As soon as I made my way into my farmhouse, I flopped down into my recliner. The last thing I saw before I let sleep swallow me whole, was my System screen.

**Carter Smith:**

**Race: Homo Acceleratus**

**Racial Level: 45**

**Class: Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge**

**Class Level: Level 45**

**Average total level: 45**

Mission accomplished.

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-FIVE

When I woke, it was to warm hands fussing over me. I hadn't been as exhausted as I'd been the previous night in a long, long time—not since before the arrival of the System and all the extra stats it brought. I hadn't even been this wiped out when I'd come back from the dead.

I was normally a light sleeper. It was rather startling to think that someone could sneak up on me like this, despite my new skills. When I heard her speak, I realized why this person could sneak up on me. It was Bridget, and her voice was full of concern—even as she grumbled to herself.

“Stupid. All men are crazy...” she muttered.

Judging by the soft feeling beneath me, and the spring that dug into my hip, I was still lying in the recliner I'd flopped down onto. But now my shirt was off and I was a lot cleaner than I'd been when I'd fallen asleep.

Bridget ran a hot towel across my stomach to clean me up. I also felt something that was probably a bandage wrapped tightly around my right arm.

“We leave you alone for one night and you look like you went to war...” Bridget grumbled, still thinking I was asleep. “Maybe we really do need Myrina's help to reinforce us. It'll take all three of us to tame a stallion as wild as you...”

I fought to keep from laughing at Bridget's fussing. Her nervous fretting was cute, and it sounded like she and Myrina had at least gotten along well after my departure. That was also good news.

I kept quiet for another minute, pretending to sleep a while longer before letting out a loud, jaw-cracking yawn.

“You’re awake! Sakura, Carter’s awake!” Bridget jumped off the recliner and yelled to Sakura, who was probably just outside the room.

“Coming!” Sakura came rushing in.

She set her fists on her hips and glared at me. “You, mister, are in big trouble! Just what kind of fight did you get into without us?”

I groaned as I pulled myself out of my chair. I still had quite a few bruises—where I’d taken an ogre club to the stomach or caught a glancing blow to the side of the head from the equivalent of a thrown tree. Under the effects of Blood Frenzy and Iron Will, I’d hardly felt any of them.

I was certainly feeling them now, though. As much as my stomach hurt, it paled in comparison to the pounding headache I had. I’d run my mana pool dry last night. It was a good thing that that last Mana Barrage took out the two ogres that got me to level 45. There’d been nothing left by the time I’d finished.

“Ogres,” I replied, my fingers massaging my temples.

Sakura’s expression softened when she saw my brow furrowed in pain. “Carter? Carter! What’s wrong? Are you hurt? Maybe we should take you to Doctor Roswell.”

I waved her off. “Fine... I’m fine. Just a splitting headache. Severe mana depletion.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes at me. She seemed half a step away from carrying me off to see the doctor, anyway.

“I could use some coffee... please?” I asked for coffee more to give her something to do besides glaring at me with her hands on her hips.

“I’ll be right back,” Sakura promised, disappearing around the corner.

Bridget fussed over me a while longer, taking a few more liberties now that I was awake. I tried to wave her off, as well

—telling her I planned to simply hop in the shower. She wouldn't hear of it.

“Got your coffee. And some aspirin, too,” Sakura said, handing me a mug.

I took a sip and then swallowed the aspirin. I wasn't sure which one helped the most, but between the two of them, my headache started clearing up.

“You looked pretty bad when we arrived,” Bridget said, gently kneading my shoulder. “You were bruised all over and absolutely covered in blood.”

“It looked worse than it was,” I insisted. “Most of that blood wasn't mine.”

“But... you're okay? You'll be alright?” Sakura asked.

I nodded. “Give me a bit of time to meditate and replenish my mana. Then I'll convert it to health points and regenerate a bit more. I imagine I'll be back at full health before the end of the day.”

“Good!” Sakura jabbed a finger in my direction. “Because we're very cross with you right now. You scared the shit out of us.”

She leaned in close and planted a kiss on my forehead as her voice softened. “Make sure you get better soon so I can be mad at you properly. No fighting today.”

I chuckled. “Sure. I didn't mean to worry you. I thought I would have time to wake up, to shower, and to change before the two of you joined me. But there's no need to fuss over me all day. I have plenty of crafting to do, so I doubt I'll get around to doing any fighting until tomorrow.”

Sakura put her hands back on her hips. “Good! Craft as much as you like. But I've got my eyes on you, mister. You already went and got yourself killed once. I don't plan on letting you do it again.”

Between Sakura and Bridget watching me like hawks, I was forced to stay at home. I'd planned on focusing on my crafting, anyways. Not that I minded, of course. My Mana

Bombs were still our best-selling product on Myrina's world. Without them, we wouldn't be able to keep the goods flowing between worlds at their current rate.

On my latest trip to Crownhill I had purchased plenty of crafting materials, and Gobgob and the goblins had already done the prep work for a bunch of regular Mana Bombs, as well as the mega variant.

In short, everything was in place ready for me to crank out a bunch of Mana Bombs, pushing my Artificer level to new heights. Who knew what new blueprints might materialize once I was finished?

I didn't. What I did know was that I was eager to find out.

So, stumbling a bit and groaning all the while, I made my way to my workbench. Before I could get started, I needed to refill my mana pool. I spent the entire first two hours sitting cross-legged on the floor behind my workbench, meditating.

**You have gained 2 Meditation Proficiency levels.**

**Your Meditation proficiency has reached level 12!**

Mana pool sufficiently recovered to get some work done, I sat at my workbench. Once seated and in the flow of things, work became easier. It helped that the goblins had already done anything that required nimble fingers.

All I needed to do was to pour in my mana and finalize whatever aspects of the design Gobgob hadn't been able to complete. Which, at this point, was surprisingly little. Her new job made her a surprisingly effective assistant.

Thanks to her hard work and that of the goblins, one job level after another poured in.

**You have gained 8 Artificer levels!**

**You are now a level 22 Artificer.**

**You have unlocked several new Blueprints!**

**You have achieved mastery of the Mega Mana Bomb design.**

**You can now craft them more efficiently, using less mana.**

“Not bad at all...” I muttered as I looked through the new blueprints. There was a lot to be impressed with: a self-repairing shield, a gem that would spew fire, and a...

Wait a moment, what was that blueprint at the end, there?

**Talisman of Protection from Order and Chaos: This talisman can be added to any item—most commonly a type of jewelry. When worn, the jewelry will grant protection from the deities of Order and Chaos. This talisman will make influencing the wearer harder for any deity of the Order or Chaos aspect.**

**Note: This does not affect any abilities the god’s physical body might possess and will not protect you should they appear in person.**

A grin split my face. The System had called the Chaos Wolf a god of Chaos. He was an A-Grade entity from the outskirts of the Arcadia Multiverse, with powers the System considered the equivalent of a deity. If anything would protect me from him, it was this item right here.

I quickly checked the list of ingredients.

**Required Ingredients:**

- **A strand of purest silver**
- **A thumb of pure salt, ground fine as dust**
- **Unaspected, neutral mana**
- **The core of an elemental over level 60**

The hardest ingredients to acquire for other Artificers would likely be the pure salt and purest silver. Both would be hard to find on worlds of Myrina’s technology level. But on Earth, even grocery store salt was pretty pure. I was sure I had some non-iodized salt somewhere in my barn. And Sakura had plundered plenty of jewelry. There had to be some sterling

silver that was wire-like in there. If not, I would have to try my hand at melting some of it down.

The only thing that would be hard to get was the core of an elemental over level 60. Perhaps it was finally time to check in on that lava elemental where it had camped out in the road on the way to Crownhill.

Sooner rather than later, I wanted to craft this talisman. I remembered how strong the fourth layer of Mania had felt. My mana costs had dropped to practically nothing and the amount of damage I could dish out had massively increased. I went from merely being able to fight above my level, to being a walking piece of mobile artillery capable of laying low small armies on my own.

I wanted to have free use of that power without worrying about the Chaos Wolf. And it looked like I finally had a path forward to do just that.

I handed off the Mana Bombs and Mega Mana Bombs I'd finished to Sakura and Bridget, who placed them in paper grocery bags they stacked on the teleportation array platform. While none of us could return to Myrina's world for some time, we could send goods back and forth just fine.

The next time I checked on the teleportation array, there was a pile of goods where the Mana Bombs had been. I wasn't sure what system Bridget, Myrina, and Sakura had put together, but apparently it was working.

Sakura was outside working on her latest project. I'd gathered quite a few ogre hides before I ran out of mana to cast Disassemble, and Sakura insisted they would be extremely useful for her craft. I trusted her to make the most of them.

It was just Bridget and me in the house. She was cooking again. When she could take a break in the kitchen, she helped me get the new goods organized.

Myrina had sent quite a few swords and sets of armor over this time, along with a couple of skill books.

“Mystic Claw!” Bridget yelled with delight when she saw one of the skill books.

“This is one of the skills that Marol, the Theory Crafter you recommended I visit, said I should take. It should mesh well with my existing abilities, though I’ll need to start putting a few more points into Strength to make the most of it.” She glanced at me shyly, and I grinned.

“You know what?” I told her. “I bet you’ll look good as a tough-girl.”

“You think so?” she asked.

I nodded, combing my fingers through her blonde hair.

“Alright. Next set of levels I’m putting a few more points into Strength.”

There were a few other odds and ends, including more wands for me, as well. I was happy with the one I had, but if I ever needed to switch out precision spell strikes for extra mana, I now had options to choose from.

Myrina had also seen fit to include a list of suggestions for what other goods her family might want enchanted.

“A magic sword that shoots dragons that eat all the evil spirits whenever an awesome battle cry is shouted...” I muttered. “Uh... let’s give that a solid maybe.”

“The other ideas are good, though, right?” Bridget asked.

“Eh... maybe?”

My mind turned back to what I had stacked on the shelves next to my crafting bench. I might not be able to make magical dragons shoot out of a sword, but I might be able to integrate some of the Mana Bombs’ effects into a blade. Perhaps an enchantment that would let someone using the weapon convert physical damage to magical damage?

Against physical foes, to whom ordinary damage was enough, the enchantment would probably reduce the speed and cutting power of the blade. But the Samhain Clan had physical damage to spare. Raw magical power was what they were lacking.



Maybe a much more modest version of Myrina's idea would be possible, after all.

"Hold that thought, Bridget. I'll be right back!"

I ran to my workshop, pulling out pencil and paper as I sketched out my general plan. I could layer some of the elements of my Mana Bombs into the blade. I might even be able to make the sword able to recharge itself on the bodies of magical beings. They seemed to release a lot of mana when they were destroyed.

That'd be good, because these enchantments would lose mana over time. If stored for too long in an armory without use, they would eventually fail. But they'd never fail in the middle of battle when they were being used, because they'd constantly be topping themselves back up. Doing something like that would be something akin to my Life Steal skill. Good thing I had that to work from as an example...

Before I knew it, I'd fallen into my craft like it was the only thing that existed. The rest of the world fell away as I entered a fugue state—just like when I was fighting the ogres last night. I assembled the sword before me, marking, bending, and twisting it in a thousand ways as I slowly puzzled through how to do what I intended.

I hadn't realized I'd figured it out, but then the system praised me for doing so.

**You have created a new Blueprint!**

**Your Artificer job has gained another level to Level 23!**

**Name your creation.**

"Hmm..." I muttered. "Mana Sword? How about that?"

"Much better than last time!" Sakura called from the other side of my workshop. She had a troll hide stretched out on a rack and was busy furiously rubbing it with what looked like a rib bone.

"Mana Sword, it is," I muttered.

I entered my answer and was soon holding the very first Mana Sword in my hands. It wouldn't shoot dragons after a cool battle cry, but hopefully Myrina would find it useful.

I took it to Gobgob. She'd have to study it and, with my help, hopefully she and the rest of the goblins could do the bulk of the work for me. That would leave me to add the finishing touches. This creation was a bit more complex than the others, but I was confident Gobgob could do it.

I demonstrated the process of making a second sword for her. She seemed a bit sharper than she'd been when I first met her. I didn't feel all that much more intelligent than I'd been before, but she and the goblins seemed less confused about new things than they had been.

I'd even seen Gobgob making proper use of a few of my electric power tools—without needing training or instructions. That was a far cry from the stone-age hut-dweller she and the other goblins had been before the integration.

“So, Gobgob... think you can build it?” I asked after giving Gobgob several minutes to study the sword.

Gobgob nodded, struggling to lift the sword off her workbench. “Think so. Need sword for tem...” She paused, as if trying out a new, unfamiliar word. “Need sword for temple-plate. And metal drawing sticks.”

“For a template?” I asked.

“Yes.” She nodded. “For temple-plate. Need metal drawing sticks, too.”

“You mean engravers—that's the name for metal drawing sticks.”

“En-grave-hers...” I watched as Gobgob mouthed the new word.

“Yep... engravers. And you're welcome to them.” I reached down and gave Gobgob a hand, taking the prototype Mana Sword from her and moving it into the bag of holding hanging off my left hip.

“I have a bunch of spare swords, so you can afford to make a few mistakes. But the more that work, the better.”

“Gobgob understands. Will craft!” She eyed the bag of holding at my waist.

I’d noticed her looking at it before. One of the things in Myrina’s care package of goods had been a low-grade bag of holding. I’d put the unenchanted swords and other crafting supplies in it earlier. Now, I unhooked it from the right side of my belt and held it out to Gobgob.

“Here, Gobgob. Consider this your bonus for all the good work you’ve done so far. A magic bag of your own.” I tossed her the bag. “There’s a bunch of crafting stuff in there you’ll need, including a set of engravers.”

Gobgob’s eyes grew as wide as saucers. “Gobgob likes! Gobgob thanks chief humie!”

Still a little nervous, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around my leg, giving my thigh a quick hug. She looked up at me with wide eyes, afraid I’d be furious at her bold action.

I laughed. “You’re quite welcome, Gobgob. Now, I see you have a lot more Mana Bombs ready for me. It seems I’ve got more work to do.”

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-SIX

I spent the next few days intensely focused on crafting. I enchanted Mana Bombs, Mega Mana Bombs, Mana Swords, and a few odds and ends that showed up amongst my blueprints as I leveled. Nothing came up that would be immediately useful to Myrina, but there were a few trinkets I invented that would make things a whole lot easier here on Earth.

“Check it out, Bridget! It’s an ambient mana generator, connected to a modern power outlet!” I waved my newest creation before Bridget’s eyes in the kitchen. “With this, you should be able to plug in any modern electric device and get it working.”

Bridget’s eyebrows rose. “This will be wonderful back in Crownhill! Few people have the elaborate backup power system you’ve got here between the solar panels, a generator, and a small hydroelectric unit. Every time I go into town, everybody’s jealous that I can still use a modern oven—while they’re stuck cooking over an open fire. It’s made my job levels come far faster than most people’s.”

I chuckled. “Yeah... I guess it would be useful for that.”

I’d been thinking more along the lines of the fact that it would let Bridget bring some of her kitchen appliances to Myrina’s world. I’d gotten too used to eating good to give that up just because we occasionally had to take trips to a world that had yet to invent electricity. Helping everyone in Crownhill would certainly be a bonus—though I’d have to

find some way to bring down the cost of making them to truly distribute them everywhere.

When I settled in for another long day of crafting, the levels flowed in like water. Myrina told me once that most people had job levels significantly higher than their class or racial level.

I was the odd man out, it seemed, with my class and racial levels so much higher than my job level. The other way around made more sense. Even in the System, most people spent their days working, rather than fighting—apparently that didn't change, even on a world like Myrina's with dungeons and the occasional monster.

Come to think of it, that was probably true of all the people in the shelter, too. They were focused on their jobs instead of on training with the militia. Not everyone was cut out for combat, after all, and I suspected most people were better suited to working a job than to combat.

So, I continued to work, and the levels continued to come in. As I did so, I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for people on Myrina's world. The enchanters there had to make most of the materials they used for their crafting themselves, painstakingly creating the raw materials they needed with nothing more than hand tools.

In contrast, I had a shop full of power tools. The tedious parts of the crafting process went by in the blink of an eye. Instead of spending all day working on a single item, I could be done and on to the next in a little more than five minutes.

Combine that with the experience point bonus the system granted me for being part of a newly integrated world, and the fact that I had a workshop full of goblins doing most of the tedious work for me, and I was probably crafting a year's worth of magical items every day.

And I was getting the levels to match.

**You have gained 5 Artificer levels!**

**You are now a level 28 Artificer.**

**You have unlocked new blueprints.**

These new blueprints were good ones, just like the last batch. There was even a variant of the talisman I was so interested in making. Instead of granting protection from Order and Chaos, though, it granted protection from Good and Evil. That felt like something which would be useful to have in the long run, though my need for it wasn't quite as pressing as my need for the Chaos talisman.

The other blueprint that jumped out at me was for a pair of sunglasses. They were magical sunglasses that provided moderate eye protection to anyone who wore them, as well as bestowing night vision when used in the dark.

I almost dismissed the item entirely, even though I already had all the materials to build it. That is, until one thing jumped out at me.

**Stylish Sunglasses: Provides eye protection, night vision, and +10 to Charisma.**

The bonus to Charisma was, frankly, incredible for such a hard stat to level. I wasn't at my Charisma stat cap, but based on what Marol had told me to expect, I had no doubt I'd hit it any day now—even placing points into it as conservatively as I was.

With my unique titles, my Charisma stat was particularly effective, so anything that gave it more of an edge was a welcome bonus. I had to make the sunglasses. Even if they made me look stupid, I'd wear them all the time... especially at night.

Sakura had scavenged a lot of jewelry the last time we'd been in Crownhill. I hadn't paid much mind to it before, but I remembered seeing a nice pair of men's sunglasses in there somewhere. I asked her about them.

“Finally willing to add some style to your wardrobe?” Sakura asked. “I looted them for you. Of course you're welcome to wear them!”

I took the sunglasses and immediately butchered them. The wires on the sides had to be made out of pure silver. It looked like I was going to have to get more of that, since it seemed

Artificers needed a boatload of the stuff. No wonder Galbatorix and his wizard friends had wanted so much fine copper wire. It was a passable substitute for the silver wire I needed so much of.

Perhaps once I'd found a steady supply for myself, I could start selling some to him. If he'd been impressed by the purity of Earth's copper, he'd no doubt be even more impressed with fine silver wire.

After wrapping the frame in silver wire, I popped the lenses out of it. Engraving these would be the tough part—I couldn't afford to screw up. I only had the one set of lenses that fit this frame, and I wasn't about to mess around with building these things from scratch.

That was another advantage Earth had over the rest of the Arcadia Multiverse. Piles of little odds and ends like this had poured out of factories before the integration. Making these sunglasses by hand would have taken me weeks—and that was before I could even start enchanting them.

I fell into the now-familiar workflow of Artificing, only taking the occasional glance at the blueprints in my system menus. In a way, it wasn't too dissimilar to following along with a YouTube video as someone in the video crafted something step by step. There was even some helpful advice at each stage for common problems and things that could go wrong. And the drawings of the item I was crafting was depicted from several different angles.

The bearded dwarf man demonstrating the creation of these stylish sunglasses seemed quite proud of his work, and he was pictured trying them on multiple times throughout the process. His were perfectly sized for his dwarven head but, thankfully, he went through the process of making them adjustable so they could be sold for profit.

The blueprints I was working with had the feeling of something created long ago by an Artificer who had likely died ages ago. Hopefully the system had rewarded him for contributing his invention to what would one day become the

level rewards for my Artificer class. Maybe someday my Mana Bombs would appear in one of these blueprints.

According to the dwarf who made the blueprint, these things sold quite well in the markets of most worlds. Enough so that he often mentioned how reluctant he was to share the blueprint.

If I found more sunglasses of high enough quality to do this with, I would have to try selling these things on Myrina's world. They seemed to like anything that could give a Charisma bonus, and it would be helpful to have products to sell after the Shadefall rebellion was over and the demand for Mana Bombs subsided.

I finished up and put the stylish sunglasses on... and then frowned. I certainly didn't feel any more charismatic. I assumed they were working. I looked at myself in the mirror, not seeing any changes there either. Turning my head from side to side, I looked the same as always—just that I was wearing a silver-framed pair of sunglasses.

“Hey, Bridget... hey, Sakura!” I called out.

Neither of them were around. I'd forgotten that half an hour ago the two of them had mentioned they were going to patrol the area around the farmhouse and take out any weak monsters that might be gathering because of my Death Curse.

I thought about testing them out on Gobgob or some of the other goblins, but I didn't want to disturb them. They were all hard at work cranking out new items for me to enchant and I didn't want to throw them off. I shrugged and just left the sunglasses on.

They were surprisingly comfortable, and the magic in them allowed them to fade out of sight completely. Between that and the fact that they were practically glued to my face, it was easy to forget that they were on at all.

“At least I won't have to worry about them falling off in the middle of a fight...” I muttered.

I went back to work, figuring that by now Gobgob and the goblins had plenty more Mana Bombs and Mana Swords for



me to enchant. I finished up the next batch of Mana Bombs I had stacked on the shelf beside me, and then took them all over to the teleportation array.

Last time they'd sent over multiple low-grade bags of holding, like the one I'd given to Gobgob. I filled all but the one I'd given to Gobgob with new goods, which is what I figured they were for. They'd be ready for the next time my partners on Myrina's world transported a load of goods over.

I was debating what to do next when Bridget and Sakura finally returned.

"Hey Carter, what do you want for dinn—" Bridget cut herself off midway through her sentence.

"Carter, guess what we..." Sakura trailed off as soon as she walked inside.

"What?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

Both of them were staring at me with wide eyes. They each had dumb, blushing smiles on their faces. A little bit of drool leaked from the corner of Sakura's lips.

"Hello?" I waved my hand in front of the two unresponsive women. "Is anybody home?"

"Mine!" Sakura lunged forward and wrapped me in a tight embrace, tackling me straight to the floor.

"Oof! What's gotten into you, Sakura? Okay, okay... hold on, let's take this to the bedroom."

She tugged and tore at my shirt as I lay there on the ground.

I expected a little more sanity from Bridget but, much to my surprise, she seemed just as hungry for me. She grabbed one of my legs with Sakura on top of me and started dragging the two of us together towards the guest bedroom. It had been a mess before, but I'd cleared it out for Sakura to stay in... only for her to set herself up in my bedroom on a permanent basis.

I figured Bridget might use the room, but she'd moved into my room as well. Sadly, the guest room remained unused.

Until now.

The three of us tore the place apart. Clothes went flying everywhere, followed soon after by the sheets. My two beautiful women practically threw themselves at me with wanton abandon. In the blink of an eye, I found myself lying naked, flat on my back, on the bed.

Sakura went right for my cock. Her earlier eager teasing had me sporting half an erection, but now she gripped my entire package after spitting onto her fingers and jerking my length until I was at full mast.

“Damn, girls, what’s gotten into the two of you?” I chuckled as Bridget literally tore the last of her clothes off. I winced; that had been one of her favorite athletic bras.

“The two of you certainly seem motivated today.”

Neither said a word; both just stared at me with hungry eyes.

Sakura jumped up, knees over my hips as she grabbed my shaft with one hand and guided it into herself. Without a chance to protest—not that I would, mind you—my tip slid inside of her incredibly wet folds. Her breasts bounced freely on her chest and I would have liked to enjoy the view for a while longer, if not for Bridget.

She seated herself next to me, the bare skin of her thigh pressing against my cheek. She bent low and her warm lips brushed mine in a long, deep kiss. When she came up for air, I caught a glimpse of Sakura riding me. She was gyrating her hips up and down with a speed and force that would have been impossible for someone with the stats of an ordinary human.

“I... I don’t know what it is, Carter. It’s just that the moment I saw you...” Sakura gushed, words coming out between heaving pants.

Her pussy felt like a vice around my shaft, squeezing down on me rhythmically—like her sex was desperate to draw my seed straight out of me. Between that and all her bouncing, I wouldn’t have lasted a second before the System. Thankfully

my Fabulous Phallus skill meant I wasn't prone to many of the weaknesses that plagued other men.

I held on a while longer.

Bridget broke off our kiss, straightened, and spun herself around to ride my face while facing Sakura.

“He looked like such an adorable dork wearing sunglasses inside the house,” Bridget said before biting her lip. “It was strangely arousing...”

That was it! The sunglasses!

It seemed the Charisma bonus had gone into full effect with both Sakura and Bridget. In fact, I feared that—if anything—it had been a little too effective. The two of them seemed completely overcome with lust the moment they saw me.

Hopefully the sunglasses only affected the two of them so severely—likely because I already had several additional bonuses with each of them. It would be impossible to wear these sunglasses if the bonus was so great that this happened everywhere I went.

System help me if that happened in the middle of the street in Valkyrie's Watch.

“Oh god...” Sakura moaned as she rode me. Her finger ran in little circles around her clit as she brought herself to an orgasm with record speed.

**You have drained a level from Sakura Miyamoto!**

Crap. With how quickly the two of them had pounced on me, I hadn't had a chance to disable the level drain from my system menus. I pulled my hands off Bridget's thighs to flip through my system menus, but with Bridget's ass on my face I couldn't read what I was looking at.

There was a way to get the System menus to appear in my head instead of in front of me. I remembered that Myrina had told me as much. I hadn't selected the option at the time, though, because I preferred interacting with my menus like

they were a tablet floating in front of me. That came back to bite me now.

I tapped on Bridget's thigh for a moment, hoping to get her attention, but apparently I'd picked the wrong time to do so. Her knees clamped down tight around my head as she, too, brought herself to a back-arching, shuddering orgasm directly on my face.

### **You have drained a level from Bridget Larsen!**

If Bridget hadn't been on my face, I would have let out a sigh. Here I was, trying to keep my two lovely women at a reasonably high level, only for the two of them to give those same levels up without a care in the world at their first opportunity.

I was much higher level than either of them, so for me to gain a level, they'd each have to lose several of them. They had to be getting the notifications. They just didn't care.

I resigned myself to power-leveling the two of them again later.

“Switch?” Bridget suggested.

“Okay, switch,” Sakura agreed.

The two of them moved to dismount. Letting the two of them do their thing would have been a perfectly fine choice—there was something exquisitely relaxing about having the two of them on top of me. But I couldn't help but feel a little annoyed.

A tiny bit of extra Charisma was all it took to have my two companions drag me off to the bedroom. Really? They needed to be stronger willed than that.

Once free, I sat up. “Hold on, I think it's my turn now.”

I grabbed Bridget's arm as I slid off the bed. I pulled her backward and flipped her face-down on the bed. I gave the perky ass that had been riding my face up until a moment ago a smack and a squeeze. Firm and dripping wet—just the way I liked it.

I positioned myself at Bridget's entrance and hilted myself in one smooth motion. Bridget gasped, still sensitive from my earlier teasing. Her fingers clutched the sheets, knuckles turning white as I picked up speed.

"What about me?" Sakura asked from behind me.

She draped her arms around my neck and rested her head on my shoulder. I pulled one hand free of Bridget's ass and cupped the back of Sakura's head, pulling her face close to mine and planting a kiss on her lips.

When we broke apart, I shook my head. "You lie down on the bed, too. Face the opposite direction to Bridget."

Sakura bounced onto the bed, her head at the edge of the bed as she lay on her back. I picked Bridget up with my cock still inside her and flopped her down on top of Sakura. Soon Bridget had a face full of Sakura's freshly fucked snatch, while Sakura had front-row seats to me plunging my length deep into Bridget.

Sakura had already pushed me close to my limit when she'd ridden me hard; I blew my load deep in Bridget moments after giving her a second orgasm.

**You have drained a level from Bridget Larsen!**

"There we go." I gave Bridget's ass a squeeze as I started to go flaccid.

I turned my eyes to Sakura beneath Bridget. Her lips were parted she watched my cock slip out of Bridget's pussy. Some of my seed spilled out of Bridget and onto Sakura's face.

"Good girls... both of you." I sighed in contentment. "But it's quite clear my new shades are way too cool to wear around the house."

Pulling my sunglasses off, I set them on the nightstand next to the guest bedroom bed. I let out a yawn. "Alright, I need a nap after that. What do you say the two of you—" I cut my sentence short when I found Sakura's arms wrapped around my thighs prevented my full withdrawal.

“Where do you think you’re going, Carter? We’re just getting started!” Sakura said.

Her tongue darted out, giving Bridget’s cum-stained netherlips a long lick.

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-SEVEN

Sakura and Bridget kept me busy for a good long while. By the end of it, I had gained four levels to my race. I was now level 49 and a good ways towards level 50. Bridget and Sakura were both back below level fifteen after all was said and done—though, fortunately, they kept all the bonuses for having reached D-Grade already.

I shook my head. “You two really shouldn’t look so satisfied after losing more than ten levels a piece.”

“Worth it,” Sakura muttered, curled up against my side.

“Now that you’re even stronger, you can get them back for us even faster than we got them before,” Bridget said from my other side.

“True enough,” I chuckled.

We relaxed for a while, and I spent the time trying to meditate while using Mind Over Flesh at the same time. Meditating bolstered my mana regeneration, and Mind Over Flesh converted that mana to health points. My wounds from the previous night already felt mostly healed, and by now I could take off the bandages and discard them. After another hour, I felt like I’d spent a month recovering. By tomorrow morning I was pretty sure I’d be as good as new.

The three of us didn’t get up until we heard the familiar whoosh of the teleportation pad activating.

“Ooh! Delivery!” Sakura squealed as she sat up, stretched, and hopped out of bed.

Bridget followed soon after and, seeing how eager the two of them were to see what we had, I decided to take a look as well. Sakura snatched the bags of holding off the pad. They looked much the same as the ones we'd placed there not long ago, but Sakura's eyes lit up when she inspected what was inside.

"Yes! She finally got it!" Sakura reached her entire arm into the bag and withdrew a skill book.

I read the title.

### **Book of Headbutt**

"That's what you're so excited about?" I asked, looking at her askance and trying to hide a smirk. "Do you really need a skill to be able to headbutt someone?"

Sakura shook her head and clucked her tongue. "There's a reason Marol is the Theory Crafter and not you. Headbutting is an ancient art practiced by Oni everywhere! Our horns are naturally sensitive, since they're used to help with our magic rather than for combat. But that doesn't mean the right set of skills can't make them useful for combat!"

She stroked the pointed red shaft sticking out of her forehead. I imagined getting skewered by that thing would be bad news for anybody on the receiving end of her horn. I certainly wouldn't want to be on the wrong end of an Oni headbutt.

"I'm sure it'll be a lovely skill." I chuckled. "Just don't expect me to participate in any of these ancient Oni headbutting rituals Myrina might have told you about. I need my forehead in one piece."

Besides the skill book, Myrina and Misa had also included some leatherworking tools for Sakura. I'd brought back a mundane set of leatherworking tools for her on my first visit, but this set seemed to have a bit of magic in it.

"My Job isn't innately magical like yours is, mister Artificer," Sakura explained. "But we have an awful lot of magical hides, and I need magical tools to work with them



properly if I want to preserve as much of their magical abilities as I can.”

There were also a few items for Bridget. “Mystic Flour! She found some for me! This is wonderful.”

Bridget hugged a small sack of flour to her chest, coating her bare skin in a sprinkle of thin, white dust. None of us had gotten dressed after our little romp, since usually the three of us all piled into the shower together shortly after.

“What’s the difference between flour and mystic flour?” I asked.

“The magic, silly!” Bridget smiled. “Mystic Flour comes from wheat grown in an environment with extremely high ambient mana—usually of a specific aspect. This flour feels like it received the sun aspect. Eating anything made using this flour will feel like enjoying a warm summer day.”

“These are for you, too.” Sakura passed Bridget a pair of fingerless gloves.

I could tell at a glance that they were enchanted, which would have made them rather expensive at the auction house on Themyscira.

“Gloves of Speed!” Bridget dropped her flour to try on her new gloves. Her fingers moved visibly faster when wearing them, as each delicate wrist movement became a blur. “Wow, these feel... weird. That’s going to take some getting used to.”

“Huh... I’m not sure who this is for...” Sakura picked up one more item. It was another skill book, by the looks of it. She read the title aloud. “...Ghost Shark. Must be a Carter skill.”

“Ghost Shark?” Bridget held a hand over her lips, smiling at me as she stifled a laugh.

“Really?” I asked with furrowed brows. “And what makes you think it’s mine?”

“You’re the one with the edgelord class. Who else would have a skill named Ghost Shark?” Sakura handed me the book with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Ghost Shark...” Bridget struggled to contain her laughter.

“Fine. Let me see this thing...” I flipped through the first few pages.

The skill book took the reader through the process of summoning a small, human-sized shark that could phase through objects and bite things. It sounded pretty lame, at least at first. A spectral shark that bit things its summoner targeted seemed like a middling ability at best—which I suppose befitted a common-rank summoning skill book.

I soon realized there was more to this little book than a pet that could annoy people like Myrina who had no natural means to deal magical damage. It would also fit neatly into a class spell slot, letting Mania enhance it and not taking up one of my dwindling racial skill slots.

### **Book of Summon Ghost Shark (Common)**

**This ability summons a spectral shark. The spectral shark swims through ambient mana as though it were water and is capable of inflicting damage with its bite. It will take on the color, abilities, and temperament of whatever mana it is fueled with. Fueling the Ghost Shark with neutral mana will create a nearly invisible shark capable of phasing through solid matter. Its attacks are considered attacks by the caster. Cooldown between summons is eight hours.**

“This... sounds awesome!” I grinned, much to the surprise of Sakura and Bridget.

“Wait, really?” Bridget asked.

“Really. Imagine an invisible shark that can inflict Corrupting Marks while I’m distracting the enemy. I have to learn this!”

I took a seat and settled in to read. Minutes flew by as both Bridget and Sakura got back to work, as well. I focused on the skill book for a while, wrapping my head around the delicate weave of mana required to summon a Ghost Shark.

Before too long, I was greeted by a notification.

**Your Neutral Mana Proficiency resonates with the skill Ghost Shark!**

**Expend Neutral Mana proficiency levels to increase the rarity of Ghost Shark?**

Intrigued at this rare opportunity, I expended 5 Neutral Mana proficiency levels, curious to see what Ghost Shark would become.

**Due to your understanding of Neutral Mana, Ghost Shark has improved from Common to Rare!**

**Book of Summon Ghost Shark (Rare)**

**This ability summons a spectral shark. The spectral shark swims through ambient mana as though it were water and is capable of inflicting damage with its bite. It will take on the color, abilities, and temperament of whatever mana it is fueled with. Fueling the Ghost Shark with neutral mana will create a nearly invisible shark capable of phasing through solid matter. Its attacks are considered attacks by the caster. It is now possible for your summons to evolve over time—given proper care and feeding. Cooldown between summons is four hours.**

Damn, that was pretty good. I'd only been hoping for a single rarity rank increase, not for it to go all the way from common to rare. That was even better. And with the number of spells I was throwing around these days, I was sure I'd earn back the five Neutral Mana points it had cost me in no time at all.

I finished learning the new and improved Ghost Shark ability, and soon I was ready to try casting it. I found Sakura already outside working on her new headbutt skill. She was busy ramming herself face-first into a tree. From the look of things, she'd be at that for a while.

Summoning a ghost shark required me to draw a circle on the ground. A line in the dirt was sufficient, though it did have to be a neat, uninterrupted circle. It would be next to

impossible to summon my Ghost Shark in the middle of a fight unless I got lucky with some nearby graffiti or a circle of mushrooms. If I didn't make a brass hoop or something to carry around in my bag of holding, I would have to make sure I cast the spell ahead of time—whenever I thought I might need it.

“Come forth, Ghost Shark!” I proclaimed as I held my hands wide after making the appropriate gestures.

Everything turned dark within my dirt circle, like a portal was opening up to some distant void beyond my reach. The deep purple color reminded me of my Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge class. Hopefully it synchronized as well with my abilities as I hoped it would.

The first thing I saw was the faint outline of teeth. They appeared one after another, row after row of them. They had no color, and I could see straight through them. They almost looked like an outline made of chalk, drawn onto the real world.

It opened its mouth wide, teeth bared in a silent growl. It would have been terrifying... if I'd been a foot tall. Unfortunately, when my skill book said the Ghost Shark would be body-sized, it was talking about the shark's length.

The ghost shark was about as long as I was tall, but that meant it was a relatively small shark. In my head, I'd been picturing a ferocious great white that could swim through the air and gobble up my enemies in one bite. But that didn't mean I couldn't aspire for it to do great things—one day.

“I dub you Devourer of Souls!” I declared.

Sakura stopped headbutting the tree to stare at me. “Really? Devourer of souls?”

“What do you recommend, then?” I asked.

Sakura walked over to me, staring down at my ghostly shark apparition.

“Hmm... How about... Sharky!” Sakura smiled.

I rolled my eyes. “Sharky? And you made fun of my name.”

“Bridget, come over here!” Sakura beckoned Bridget outside when she looked through the kitchen window at us. Catching her eye, Sakura hollered, “Bridget, we need you to vote and settle things. Should Carter call his pet shark thing Devourer of Souls or Sharky?”

“Definitely Sharky,” Bridget shouted back in reply.

Sakura turned to me, a smug smile on her face. “You’ve been outvoted.”

I sighed. I should have waited until we were with Myrina to name it. She would have voted for Devourer of Souls.

“Go forth, Sharky. Hunt!” I ordered.

I was surprised when Sharky seemed to understand the command and took off for the woods. Not long after he disappeared into the trees, he returned like a puppy with the remains of a dead rabbit-looking thing in his teeth.

“Hey, that’s not bad,” Sakura said. “If nothing else, Bridget and I won’t have to run around taking care of those little monsters that always hound you and make life around here annoying. We can just unleash your Ghost Shark to kill any who dare come too near.”

I perked up a little, hearing this. My Ghost Shark really would be handy for that. It would mean we could finally get a good night’s sleep. Lately, the girls had been waking up every few hours to take care of the host of minor monsters clawing at the front door.

When their levels had been really low, it had been good source of experience points for them. But by now, there was little they could gain from killing giant cockroaches. Leaving them to Sharky to deal with would be a welcome boon. Especially since as my summons, any experience points Sharky earned me didn’t go to waste. As long as Bridget and Sakura remained in my party, the two of them would still benefit.

“I want to test Sharky out for real, and the two of you need some levels. What do you say the three of us go on another trip around the valley?” I asked.

Sakura grinned. “As long as I get to headbutt something, count me in!”



We spent the rest of the day running around the valley, attacking anything we could pick a fight with. There were more of those golems we'd fought before. I would have thought Sakura would shy away from headbutting them, since they were made of stone, but she lunged forward anyways. Her horn plunged right through their rocky exteriors, shattering the core in the center of the golem and putting it down in just one blow.

It would have been rather impressive, if she hadn't gotten her horn stuck in the golem in the process. I ended up having to chisel the golem's remains from her horn.

Another discovery I made was that if I channeled Earth mana into Sharky, he became solid.

“Check it out, you two... I have a mount!” I laughed as I rode on top of Sharky.

He continued to swim through the air, toothy maw hungry for anything worth eating. Now that he was physical, he could even make sounds. “NOM NOM,” Sharky said as he bit the head off a dead golem.

His voice was peculiar. I wasn't sure what a shark would have sounded like if it could breathe air and talk, but I doubted it would sound like Sharky. He sounded almost like a gravelly-voiced, two-packs-a-day smoker pretending to sound like a shark.

Riding Sharky around made the process of slaying the minor monsters Bridget and Sakura required to regain their lost levels a lot more fun. And it seemed the monsters had gotten a little stronger in our valley. Since Bridget and Sakura were both down to level 14 again, thanks to their dragging me

into the bedroom with my sunglasses on, the levels came quickly when I targeted monsters over level 30.

I was almost to level fifty—at least for my race. There wasn't anything in the valley capable of harming me. The only real unknown was whether or not they could defeat Sharky.

“Go forth, Sharky!” I commanded the moment we spotted what might once have been a small group of coyotes.

### **Shadowflame Coyote Alpha (Level 25)**

All the other Shadowflame Coyotes were between levels 15 and 20, but since there was a group of six of them, they represented enough experience to make them worth our while. Plus, I wanted to see how Sharky did against multiple opponents.

My ghost shark shot forward like a torpedo toward the Coyote Alpha. Sinister purple light streamed behind him, and he charged forward with gnashing teeth and the same battle cry as before.

“NOM NOM NOM,” Sharky said as he bit into the head of the Coyote Alpha.

The moment he had a grip on the coyote, he tossed and turned his head in an attempt to tear the head free. At some point, the coyote's neck broke, but that didn't stop Sharky from gnawing his way through it. Eventually, the coyote's head came loose completely and Sharky gobbled the head down before swallowing the rest.

The meat of the coyote fell to the ground.

Sharky was just a ghost, so he couldn't really eat it. Somehow, I got the impression that something vital had been stripped from the body. I couldn't really say how I knew it, but I was sure that Sharky had just eaten the coyote's soul. The skill book had suggested such a thing was possible, and even desirable for a summoner such as myself. It was why I'd picked Devourer of Souls for his name—before Sakura changed it to Sharky.

**Your Neutral Mana proficiency has gained a level to Level 18!**

The other coyotes ran in terror, but that didn't stop Sharky. All he saw was his dinner trying to escape. Some of them tried to fight back, but by now Sharky had shed the Earth mana I'd infused into him before to ride him, and now I was trying fire mana. Their attempts to take him down only ended with them getting burned.

“NOM NOM.” My ghost shark flew forward, hungry as ever. One by one, it chased down the fleeing coyotes and did to them what it had to their alpha. Sharky showed no pity or remorse in his ruthless pursuit, only endless hunger to seek and consume.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency has increased by one to Level 19!**

“Who's a good shark?!” I called him back to stroke his sensitive nose. My hand went right through him until I channeled more Earth mana into him to make him solid.

“Uh... Carter, you might want to watch your fingers around him,” Bridget said warily. “That ghost shark of yours is even more of a bloodthirsty killing machine than I expected for a spectral... uhh... shark thing.”

“The skill book said it would take the soul of the most deadly aquatic predator it could find, strip it of any desires other than that of a hunger for blood, then combine it with a limitless need to devour souls to sustain its structure and solidify its existence.”

“Like leveling?” Sakura asked.

I shook my head. “It isn't quite like leveling, but apparently he can evolve or something—assuming I continue to feed him. That wasn't possible in the original version of the ability, but after I improved the rarity of the skill to rare, the option opened up.” I gave Sharky a fond pat. I'd really done a good job with him.

Bridget glanced between me and Sakura. “So now we have a mindless killing machine that consumes souls to empower itself? It just tore apart a group of coyotes higher than the level



of the average person in Crownhill and devoured their souls. And we're treating it like some sort of pet?"

Sakura shrugged. "Seems like Sharky's been a good boy to me. Here, Sharky, fetch!" Sakura picked up half of a dead coyote and threw it.

Sharky didn't budge, likely because he'd already stripped that chunk of Coyote of whatever soul had been in it.

"I think we need to find live food if we want Sharky to fetch," I suggested.

"Ooh, you think Sharky likes to chase squirrels?" Sakura asked.

I studied my ghost shark. He was wiggling excitedly under my pats and our praise like a puppy. "I would imagine so."

"Let's hunt down one of those mean fire-breathing ones! I saw one a little ways back."

Bridget shook her head and rolled her eyes. "At least I gained a few levels..."

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-EIGHT

I hoped to get Bridget and Sakura back up to their old levels as soon as possible. I was a bit jealous of how easy those who could simply kill monsters had it with respect to leveling. I suppose people who fought monsters all day might be tremendously jealous of how I leveled with my Fabulous Phallus skill and Soul Vampire title. It might be one of those things where the grass was always greener on the other side.

Over the next two days, we fell into a routine. We'd wake up, eat breakfast, hunt some monsters so the two of them could level, then return for lunch. After lunch we'd craft and resupply. Sharky got the most out of the hunting trips, and after the first day he seemed appreciably bigger than he'd been before.

I didn't tell Bridget or Sakura, but my end goal was to finish things off by taking out that Lava Elemental. I needed its core so I could build that Chaos talisman. I didn't dare take the elemental anything less than seriously, though.

It was a deadly foe and a much higher level than I was. Sakura and Bridget wouldn't be able to back me up as I'd hoped, since they were still less than half my level, but if I could push them up a little higher, perhaps they could find a way to help me safely.

I'd figured out how to make the Mana Bombs to take out the Specter haunting my house, after all. Another invention like that meant to target the Lava Elemental's weakness would be a huge help. The only problem was, of course, figuring out what Lava Elementals were weak to.

I pondered that thought during my mid-afternoon crafting sessions. With Gobgob and her tribe of goblins working every day to craft new items for me, I always had plenty of items to put the finishing touches on. I'd noticed that the price we were getting for my Mana Bombs had started to drop—likely because we were supplying so many of them.

The Mega Mana Bombs would probably see a drop in their price, next. But that was okay. Based on the last note Misa and Myrina had sent us with a load of enchanted goods, the Mana Swords were a huge hit.

I wasn't worried about declining sales prices, because I was sure that with a bit of brainstorming I'd come up with new items that would sell just as well, if not better. After all, I was a far superior Artificer now than I had been just a few days ago.

**You have gained 4 Artificer levels!**

**New Blueprints are available!**

The experience I was getting from the items I crafted on a daily basis was starting to slow down. I suspected the enhanced efficiency I gained from mastering an item also meant decreased experience points for my job from making them. It made sense, in a way.

The System wouldn't want someone to become a master of their craft while only knowing how to make one or two items.

Whenever I caught up with everything Gobgob and the other goblins had prepared for me, and if Sakura and Bridget weren't quite ready to go hunting monsters again, I focused on experimenting. There was nothing quite like cobbling together useful odds and ends into something useful in my workshop. The feeling of unfettered creation was fulfilling.

I hoped to craft every item I had a Blueprint for at least once. The instructions for each were fairly easy to follow, given the background knowledge the System had stuffed into my head when I'd first picked up my job. With the additional experience I gained in my job, I could feel not just my level, but my actual understanding of Artificing grow each day.

“An active defense shield. Not bad...” I said as I hefted one of my latest creations.

It was based on one of the blueprints I’d picked up with my latest job levels. When activated, the shield shot out tiny beams of light that knocked incoming projectiles out of the sky as they flew toward the wielder. The best part was that it wasn’t just an individual protective item. It let someone carrying the shield protect their entire party instead of just themselves, being powered by a combination of the owner’s Vitality and raw mana.

Unfortunately, that meant it was unsuitable for me or my companions. I was the only one who had picked up a shield proficiency, though I’d only used one in training with Cyra. We liked to fight with both hands—Bridget dual wielding her daggers, Sakura smashing things with a two-handed grip on her club, or my own combination of sword and spells.

Nor were we the sort of party that fought in a tightly packed formation, with a tank at the front. That was who this sort of thing would be perfect for.

Not wanting it to go to waste, I packaged it and a half dozen other items up for transportation back to Crownhill. I’d seen members of the militia wearing shields. Some of them would no doubt find this useful. And keeping my militia alive was something I was very keen on. Their continued willingness to fight was what allowed me to make Crownhill and the surrounding areas safe.

It was nearly time for me to head into town to pick up more raw materials to craft with anyways. Gobgob and the goblins were running low. Selling off my scraps would hopefully earn me more than enough to pay for the crafting supplies we needed for Mana Bombs and Mana Swords—that is, if the gold and goodies from Myrina’s world hadn’t sold yet.

“Anybody up for a trip?” I asked Bridget and Sakura that afternoon. “I want to visit Crownhill again.”

“It would be nice to check in on people,” Sakura agreed, her head once again stuck in a nearby tree. She’d been

diligently practicing her new headbutt skill. “We could introduce everyone to Sharky!”

I grinned. “Yeah, that would be cool. Let me resummon him again!”

Sharky had, unfortunately, met an untimely end when he’d tried to eat a spectral swamp monster twice his size by swimming into its mouth and biting its tongue. For all his ferocity, Sharky wasn’t exactly the sharpest tool in the shed. I’d killed the spectral swamp monster easily enough, but Sharky had to be resummoned.

I’d been waiting for the four-hour cooldown to expire and the right opportunity to bring him back.

“I suppose we’ll need to start venturing beyond the valley, anyway,” Bridget said and then shrugged. “We’ve wiped out anything worthwhile around here. The valley is safe once more, despite the monsters constantly coming for our dear beloved Carter.”

The three of us packed our things into bags of holding and started the long walk to Crownhill. This same trip had once taken Sakura and I hours, but now all three of us could leap over rocks and from ledge to ledge to avoid detours that would have taken us hours to walk around or scale before.

Every time I was reminded of the might of my new body, I was impressed once more. I could hang from my arm one handed without the slightest strain from a ledge as I swung out far enough to sail over a deep crevice and then slid down a rock face, landing at the bottom without even breaking a sweat.

“Catch me!” Sakura yelled, already jumping off a cliff the height of a four-story building.

I held out my arms, darting forward with my arms extended as Sakura fell to catch her in them. Bridget rode down on Sharky’s back, as he floated through the air behind us.

Sharky seemed supernaturally strong—at least when loaded up with Earth mana. Whether one person, two people,

or all three of us rode on his back didn't matter to him. He just kept swimming forward through the air. The three of us rode into Crownhill in style on the back of a ghost shark.

It prevented people from thinking he was a monster and attacking him. We certainly got a lot of strange looks. Most people backed away at the sight of the ghost shark, but one young lad approached without a care in the world.

“Are you a pimp?” a kid asked me as we entered the city.

I raised my sunglasses and adjusted the flowing fox fur cloak I wore over my shoulders. “What makes you think that?”

He looked me over, as well as the two beautiful women riding my ghost shark, Bridget in front of me and Sakura behind me.

“Uh... no reason...” The kid quickly scampered away.

I shrugged my shoulders, while Bridget stifled a giggle.

“Is it just me or does the place around the obelisk seem way more crowded than normal?” Sakura asked, pointing ahead.

What she said was true. There were a lot more people standing around the camp than usual. The walls looked different, as well. Instead of a barricade of cars and scrap metal hastily thrown together, there was a neat wall of salvaged masonry from some of the nearby system-generated buildings.

The new wall was much further out, too. Instead of merely containing just the small cluster of six buildings that surrounded the obelisk, this one appeared to wrap around the entire city block. Still, the number of people hanging around the front gates made the newly expanded shelter look smaller than the old one had—despite being five times its size.

“You're right. It looks like something is going on.”

We flew ahead, eventually coming to a stop at the back of a mass of people somewhere halfway between a mob and a line. People made way for us, since we cut a rather strange sight—riding a ghost shark and dressed for battle, like we

were. Everyone else was still wearing the trappings of life before the System.

In contrast, the three of us were outfitted in clothes from Myrina's world or leather gear that Sakura had made from monster hides. While not as intricate or comfortable as modern textiles, the ranking and remaining magic in the materials made our outfits considerably tougher—even if it did make us stand out in the crowd.

I hopped off Sharky, leveling my gaze at the sea of anxious faces. Spotting a guy in the queue, I raised my hand. "Hey, what's the holdup?"

"We're queuing for the obelisk!" he shot back, a hint of excitement in his voice.

I looked at the semblance of a line that stretched more than a hundred yards from the gate.

"It's a game-changer," he continued. "Think online auction, except for the real world. It's the best place I've found to buy computer parts."

"Computers?" My skepticism was evident in the tone of my voice.

He shrugged. "I'm trying to get a few machines networked. Some of us think we can make the System give us related jobs by using them."

I squinted into the gaps in the crowd ahead of us, my confusion palpable. "Why the line, though? The obelisk can handle a crowd, right?"

He shook his head sadly. "It can. And it still would if we were allowed to approach. The trouble is when the people here blasted out a description of what the obelisk can do over the airwaves, we weren't the only ones who heard it. Seems to me like sharing was a big mistake."

I tilted my head, sensing trouble. "What happened?"

"Crownhill County Prison's worst decided to pay a visit," he spat, his disgust evident. "The three big players over at the prison? They're all over level 30. They're locked in a tenuous

power balance. One of them, Cromwell, heard the broadcast and thought the obelisk would give him the upper hand.”

I leaned in, intrigued. “Cromwell?”

“Mob boss, pre-integration. He’s got a brutal crew, and they snuck in with the rest of us hoping to get a look at the obelisk. They let Cromwell and his men right through the gates before they realized they were here to cause trouble. Now the militia here shut the gates while Cromwell demands their surrender.”

I stood straighter, grabbing the guy by the shoulders. “And then? What happened? Did they kill him? Did he kill them? Tell me!”

“Easy there, guy.” The man took a step back from me at my sudden outburst. “So far, it’s a whole lot of nothing. Gangsters and militia staring one another down. But if you ask me, I’m not feeling too good about the militia. Cromwell’s crew is brutal. They earned their stripes killing men, not monsters. They were killers before the System. The integration just made them better at it.”

“We’ll see. The militia here have been through a lot since the integration began as well...” I turned my gaze to the front of the line. I heard the occasional pop of a gun firing off, but nothing like the sound of bloody slaughter. That was a good sign. If they were still at the stage where they were taking potshots at one another, I’d arrived in time. I’d have to make my way to the front and see this Cromwell for myself to know for sure though.

His eyes darted around nervously. “Just... um... steer clear of them, okay? See that big guy by the gates? He’s over level 25... and he’s just one of Cromwell’s enforcers. He’s not letting anyone through the outer gates. He probably doesn’t want us getting in the way of the inner gates, where the real battle is taking place.”

I tracked the man’s line of sight. Three menacing figures stood near the gate of this new wall. The middle one, in particular, seemed the most powerful.



## **Raider Brute (Level 25)**

### **Raider Thug (Level 19)**

### **Raider Thug (Level 18)**

The only one worth my attention was the Raider Brute. My eyes lit up at the familiar class designation. I'd gotten into fights with quite a few Raiders and Bandits with various subclasses like Brute and Thug. How many of them had been Cromwell's subordinates?

I needed to deal with this sooner rather than later. If what the man next to me had just said was true, Marcus, Frank, Margaret, and everybody else in the shelter were fighting for their lives right now. They needed my help.

"Out of the way, please!" I yelled.

The crowd didn't budge for me so much as they did for Sharky, who glided forward menacingly. But in any case, the end result was the same. I soon found myself at the front of the line.

I locked eyes with the trio of raiders at the gate. "I'm passing through. Please step aside."

The leader of the other two thugs barked out a laugh. He was a big man with a sharp face and a jaw that looked as sharp as a chisel. He wore a black leather biker's jacket with the obvious outline of a gun at his hip. In his right hand, he loosely held a machete.

"Where do you think you're going, little man?" the Raider Brute demanded.

"Through the gate. Move." I had neither the time nor the patience for this.

The Brute laughed and it was a deep, mocking sound. "You think you can just waltz past us?"

I didn't just think I was going to, I knew I was going to do just that. But it was clear these three were going to be a problem. My mood had taken a sudden turn for the worse, and it looked like these three were going to be on the receiving end of my growing anger.

“Yes.”

The man stared at me good and hard, his brows scrunching together, but nothing happened.

“Are you some sort of stealth specialist? The stupid level scanning thing isn’t working,” the Brute grumbled, then frowned.

I reached for the short sword at my hip and drew it. In one quick motion, I thrust it at the Brute’s center of mass. Truth be told, talking to him was just out of habit, and I’d known it wouldn’t work. If this was one of Cromwell’s men, and he’d already come here with hostile intent, he had to die. Him and all his men.

He reacted just in time to put some distance between him and my blade, but I’d fought fast foes before.

I cast Arcane Blade, extending my weapon’s length by another six inches.

The Brute’s eyes widened in shock as the arcane energy pierced his torso just above his belt. The air around us hummed with power.

“Watch out!” one of the thugs shouted, but it was too late.

I swept my sword upward, disemboweling the level 25 Brute in one clean motion. A critical hit notification flashed up on my screen. The man clearly had plenty of hit points, though, because that wasn’t enough to bring him down. It was, however, enough to take him out of the fight for a moment.

“You bastard!” one of the Thugs shouted.

I flicked my free hand towards him, blasting him in the face with an Eldritch Blast.

“Sharky,” I ordered, “get him.”

The man reeled backward from my spell. Right into Sharky’s waiting jaws.

My ghost shark bit down on the Thug’s head. Bridget and Sakura jumped to the ground just as Sharky started to thrash

back and forth, tearing the Thug's head free with a sickly snapping sound.

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

The other Thug was slower to react—so slow, in fact, that Sakura had her club in hand before he could rush me. I heard his bones snap as Sakura brought her glowing red bat down on the back of his leg, sending the man sprawling to the ground.

Sharky was on him an instant later. “NOM NOM,” Sharky said as he rushed forward to attack the vulnerable man on the ground. My summon's teeth clamped around his head and he started thrashing back and forth, just like he'd done with the man he'd killed moments ago.

Soon both thugs were dead and sliding through Sharky's ghostly throat.

**Your Neutral Mana proficiency has increased to Level 19!**

“Holy fuck. Who... who the hell are you?” the Bandit Brute gasped. He had both hands on his stomach and was desperately trying to keep his insides... inside him.

“The one who's going to kill your boss. This is my territory, not his, and not any of the Three Kings,” I snapped. “You want to live? I need you to point him out to me.”

The terrified Bandit Thug climbed shakily to his feet and stumbled forward, both hands pressed to his stomach.

“Okay, okay... I'll lead the way,” the Brute said.

There was a keen glint in the corners of his eye, and he paid no mind to Sharky tearing apart the remains of his two former comrades behind us. This man was scum, plain and simple. I would have to keep an eye on him.

“He's at the second set of walls up ahead. We're having ourselves a little siege.” The man couldn't point, so he nodded to indicate where he meant.

Sure enough, after we rounded a few more sets of buildings, we came across the old walls. While the Council

had gotten ambitious, building the second set of walls further afield, they hadn't abandoned the original walls that had repelled the Alpha Wolfman and his kin.

There were settlement militia manning those walls, now. I heard the occasional pop of gunfire every now and again between shouted insults. While I watched, one of the Bandits threw a flaming beer bottle filled with diesel fuel at a chunk of plywood that reinforced the wall. The bottle shattered and that chunk of the wall caught fire.

One of the militia defending the wall rushed forward with a bucket of water to put it out, only to be shot three times by the hollering group of bandits besieging the settlement.

"Now, point out this Cromwell to me," I growled, but the bandit next to me was already running.

"Boss! Boss! Help me!" the Raider Brute yelled. "Everybody, get that guy!"

He doubled over to keep his guts from spilling out as he pointed an arm back at me. All heads turned in my direction.

## CHAPTER

# FORTY-NINE

“Everybody! Shoot him!” the Raider Brute I’d just spared shouted, pointing back at me.

A row of his people raised their guns.

“Bridget... Sakura... get behind me!” I yelled.

I’d been killed by a hail of gunfire before. I had no plans of doing so again. Fortunately, these days bullets weren’t enough to put me down. Plus I had a few tricks now that I didn’t have back then.

About half of the bullets missed me, while most of the other half got caught up in Deflect. A few bullets got through after my Deflect spell discharged, but I’d shielded my head with my arms to keep any from hitting my head or those of my companions. A gut or a leg shot here or there was nothing to worry about for me—at least since I reached the D-Grade.

My wounds immediately started healing, with little chunks of lead popping out of my flesh. While they did, I activated Mana Barrage and charged three Mana Bolts before sending all three hurtling toward the Raider Brute who’d hunched over as he ran to rejoin the enemy lines.

I used Exploit Weakness and homed in on his legs. All three Mana Bolts struck home with dull thuds.

“Aaargh!” the Raider Brute cried out as he fell.

“Sharky!” I ordered, though I needn’t have bothered.

Sharky was on top of him a moment after he fell. “NOM NOM NOM,” Sharky said as I channeled more Earth mana into him. Sharky tore the Brute apart while his comrades watched.

They wasted their bullets on his partially ghostly form, completely unable to deal any damage to him at all. In moments, there was little left of the Brute but a pile of ruined flesh. Blood covering his ghostly muzzle, Sharky advanced on the rest of my enemies.

**Your Class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

**Your Neutral Mana proficiency has gained a level to Level 20!**

Good.

Meanwhile, I prepared myself to deal with whoever Sharky didn't eat. Most of them were only levels 10 to 14, which meant they were little more than food for Sharky. I kept looking for this Cromwell character. Where was he?

I spotted three potential candidates, as those were the only people I could see over level 25. Hopefully he was one of them. I had no interest in going easy on my foes, so I activated Mania to the first level, achieving Dissonance.

The sensation was as familiar to me as putting on an old coat.

Since I'd first summoned him, Sharky had grown larger. He went from the relatively thin, man-length shark I'd first summoned to something about the size of a modest sedan. But when that happened, he'd still been fundamentally a shark. In all my earlier tests with Sharky, however, I'd ignored the key feature of my class—I neglected to test how much Mania enhanced all his abilities.

This time, Sharky shifted from a ghost shark to ghost... something. Tentacles sprouted from the sides of his face, and his jaw opened wider than should have been possible. His form solidified, no longer drawn like a chalk outline but rather

looked solid, as if he'd been painted into this world with a brush.

He was large, imposing, and completely unnatural. Sharky was now an otherworldly abomination that sought to destroy everything in his path. "NOOOM NOOOM." Sharky's voice echoed now, sounding significantly more sinister than it had before.

The tentacles surrounding his toothy maw reached out, grabbing an unfortunate bandit by his waist.

"Oh god, it's got me!" he screamed as the tentacle dragged him toward Sharky's waiting maw.

Moments later, row after row of supernatural teeth closed down on the bandit, shredding him to bits. Unlike before, chunks of pulverized meat didn't fall to the ground. Instead, they disappeared... never to be seen again.

"Uh, Sharky?" I glanced back at Bridget and Sakura, who both seemed just as shocked as I was at this new development.

By now, Sharky had drawn the full attention of all the Bandits. They'd turned their guns and swords on him and were firing with reckless abandon. They were shooting at Sharky so recklessly, that they didn't seem to realize that their bullets passed straight through him without accomplishing anything at all.

I was perfectly happy with this development, though, as it meant I could pick off everyone at D-Grade while Sharky provided a better distraction than I'd initially expected.

"Oh God! It's almost level 50! It's going to eat us all! Run! Run for your lives!" a bandit woman screamed.

Both those things were true. Sakura and Bridget had since noted that Sharky shared my level when examined. As my summoned familiar, his power was tied to mine—so his level registered as the same as my Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge class.

A moment later, Sharky grabbed the bandit woman with a tentacle and pulled her into his hungry maw.

“Let’s go take out those D-Rankers,” I said with a glance over my shoulder at Sakura and Bridget.

One of the D-rankers had a faint glow enveloping his sword. I wasn’t sure if it was an attack that could deal magical damage—but if it was, then he might be able to hurt Sharky. The other had a bow and was firing off a few arrows. They exploded against Sharky’s side and looked to be doing a bit of damage, so I’d have the girls target him first. The third had a gun and was firing bullet after useless bullet at Sharky, so I could safely ignore him.

“You two take the archer while I take out the swordsman. I’ll come help you when I’m done,” I ordered.

“On it!” Sakura dashed forward, with Bridget close behind her.

I used Warp Step to appear just behind the Swordsman bandit. In the few seconds it took to assess the battlefield and give the girls my orders, I’d conjured a small swarm of Mana Bolts—all of which orbited over my head. I flung them forward with a wave of my hand and the whole lot of them slammed into the back of the swordsman I’d targeted.

He staggered forward, caught by surprise by the sudden, unexpected attack from behind. “What the…” He turned, righting himself in a fluid motion that showed he had a lot of experience in a fight.

He raised his sword in a protective stance, then turned his stumble into a lunge. I was impressed. Doing all that in a fraction of a second after taking multiple Mana Bolts to the back of his head was impressive.

From the way he held his sword, I could see that he had some idea of how to use it. That would have been a scary thing before my training with Myrina and Cyra. Despite his apparent skill, I knew in an instant that I was the better swordsman.

When he rushed me, I stepped into his charge and sidestepped his blade. His lunge passed through empty space where I had just been. I shoved his arm wide with my elbow,



only unsheathing my sword when I was nearly pressed up against him. I drew, cut, and cast Arcane Blade all at once.

The moment I finished my strike I stood, sheathed my sword, and turned to deal with the gunman. Behind me, the swordsman I'd just killed struggled to turn to face me. He'd managed to twist his neck around when gravity finally caught up to him. The bandit slid apart in two pieces, cut evenly straight through the torso in my attack. He was dead before he hit the ground.

I dealt with the gunman fairly easily. He was so preoccupied with shooting at Sharky, that he didn't notice me charging up half-a-dozen Mana Bolts. When I judged I had enough of them, I unleashed them all at once.

The man fell to his knees, not taking his terrified eyes off Sharky for even a moment. Pulling a throwing knife from my bag of holding. I cast Arcane Blade on it, cocked my arm back, and threw the blade all in one smooth motion. It landed with a wet *thud* blade-first in the back of the bandit gunman's neck.

Sharky appreciated the assistance. The now-paralyzed gunman was helpless to flee from Sharky's hungry tendrils.

**Your Neutral Mana proficiency has gained a level to Level 21!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

I turned to help Bridget and Sakura only to find that they had their fight well under control. Bridget had the archer's bow in her hands, while the archer was on the ground under Sakura's boot. I finished my fight just in time to see Sakura finish off their opponent with a loud *crunch* as her club smashed in the side of the archer's head.

I turned my attention to the remainder of the bandits and raiders. Most of them were busy trying to fight or flee from Sharky. I targeted all the ones who seemed to be doing some

actual damage. I was impressed by the array of mundane and magical weapons Cromwell's forces had brought to the fight.

It was odd to realize that the forces of Earth already wielded a more diverse array of abilities than the warriors of Themyscira. Perhaps we'd gotten lucky because the System had rained down all sorts of skills on us, instead of just the ones that we sought out or favored.

Whatever the reason, Cromwell's lackeys were better suited to dealing with Sharky than the Samhain Clan had been at dealing with the Shadefall Clan's summoned spirits. But just because they might eventually be able to bring Sharky down didn't mean he didn't terrify them as he gobbled them up and ate them, one after another.

I conjured a host of Mana Bolts and sent them flying at everyone who even had a chance of putting Sharky down. That sudden barrage killed three of the bandits outright and heavily wounded a half dozen more. Sharky rushed forward to devour the wounded and distracted bandits.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency has increased by one to Level 20!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level!**

**You are now a level 50 human.**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

I grabbed one of the bandits and pulled him aside before he became Sharky's latest victim. "Where's Cromwell?" I demanded.

"F-fuck you!" the bandit spat at me, struggling to be brave in the face of terror.

I wiped my cheek, then with a glare tossed the bandit into Sharky's waiting jaws. I repeated my demand with the next bandit. "You! Where's Cromwell?"

"In your m-mother's bed!" he choked out.

I sighed and tossed him to Sharky, as well.

Even fear of a giant tentacled-shark-ghost-monster couldn't cure stupid. Or maybe this Cromwell character scared them even more than Sharky? It wasn't that hard to believe. There were plenty of stories about what the cartel did to traitors.

None of those stories ended happily. Maybe some of these guys thought being devoured by a ferocious shark monster was a better fate. Judging by their incessant shrieks of terror, they couldn't have considered it *that* much better.

It seemed I wouldn't be learning anything about Cromwell from these idiots. I wasn't worried, though, since I was certain my allies had gathered some intelligence of their own.

Sharky was quick to deal with everybody else still alive, so I waved to the gates while he, Sakura, and Bridget cleaned up.

**Your Neutral Mana proficiency has gained a level to Level 22!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

**You are now a level 50 Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge.**

“Hey guys... it's Carter. I'm back!” I yelled.

“Sir! Is that you?” a familiar voice yelled from behind the wall.

When he poked his head up, I saw Kyle—the kid who'd so eagerly joined the militia all the way back when I'd first formed it before the Wolfman attack.

“It's me! Don't worry, I took care of the bandits,” I yelled back in reply.

“A-and the giant tentacled-shark-monster?” Kyle asked hopefully.

“Oh don't worry... Sharky's with me.”

“NOOM NOOM,” Sharky growled. His voice was only barely audible over the screams of his victims and the *crunch* of shattered bones.

“O-oh. Are... are you sure?” Kyle asked uncertainly, ducking back behind the wall.

“Positive. Now, do you know which one of these was this Cromwell fella who’s been giving us trouble?”

He peeked up to respond, “He wasn’t here in person, but he sent his right-hand man to negotiate our surrender.” Then he ducked down until his eyes barely crested the top of the wall.

I nodded. “And what did this right-hand man look like?”

“He had a magic sword,” Kyle replied, finally keeping his head above the wall.

I glanced back at the man in two pieces behind me. “Well, looks like I took care of him early on. Sharky will clean up the mess. You can tell everyone the bandits are taken care of. They can stand down.”

I heard a ragged cheer from behind the wall when Kyle repeated what I’d said to the other militia inside the wall.

“In a minute or two, after Sharky eats the bodies, you can open the gates back up and we can resume normal operations. Please tell the council I want to meet with them to talk about our little Cromwell situation.”

“A-alright...” Kyle said. He darted back behind the wall the moment he caught sight of Sharky.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY

After calming down and eliminating my Mania, Sharky shrank back down to his normal, ghostly shark form. Nowhere else would everyone have been relieved to see a ghostly shark hovering in the air over their heads—but after the show Sharky had put on, they were at the Shelter.

I jumped over the wall using Power Jump, while Bridget and Sakura rode up on Sharky's back. Everyone steered clear of him, and I figured he might be difficult to have around if everyone was going to get all shy around him.

“Go hunt monsters,” I ordered my summons. “There's bound to be plenty of weak ones roaming the city, since it's been a while since my last extermination run. But remember, don't eat any humans! Or anyone who is mostly human. Or any goblins. If you spot any wolfmen, trolls, or Ogres, though, they're okay to eat.”

“NOM NOM,” Sharky said before swiftly departing.

Kyle eyed his departing fin warily. “Are you sure that thing understood you?”

“Sharky? Of course he did. He's a good ghost shark—as long as he isn't hungry.” I laughed when Kyle audibly gulped.

I knew I had good control over Sharky. Even now, with the ghost shark out of sight, I could vaguely sense what he was doing and dismiss him at any time. If I was a little more skilled, I might even be able to see out of his eyes.

I checked in on the obelisk to see if the stuff I'd listed last time had sold. A quick glance after flipping through the menus told me it had. It seemed people were quite fond of the gold coins, too. More than one had caught my eye in the hands of various people buying things from the nearby crafters, so I suspected they were being used as currency.

I'd have to avoid dumping too many more on the market all at once, since I wanted prices to remain stable.

Besides the gold, almost everything I'd listed had already sold. The only things left were tools for jobs Earthlings didn't know what to do with. I was sad to see the Theory Crafter introductory textbook hadn't sold yet, since we could have used one of those in Crownhill.

It wasn't a job that had existed before the System, though, so I realized people would have a harder time seeing how it might be valuable. I slashed the price down to a third of what I'd initially listed it at and, much to my surprise, someone immediately picked it up. A moment later, I spotted it in the eager and giddy hands of a young woman. Perhaps we'd have a Theory Crafter of our own sooner than I thought.

All in all, I had several million contribution points. I'd sold so many goods that my listings made up the bulk of transactions for the past week. Hell, I'd made ten thousand points just off of the taxes the obelisk took out on my products.

The products themselves generated points in the hundreds of thousands, making me far and away the wealthiest person registered with the obelisk. I could clear out its entire inventory several times over and not finish tapping into my reserves.

Rather than doing that, though, I just bought up all the copper, jewelry, gemstones, monster cores, and other items that an Artificer might find useful. No doubt other crafters needed them, too. But this early in the integration, people were still learning the value of things.

Once people started figuring out that I wanted all sorts of metal, monster cores, and other crafting supplies, they would

no doubt start hunting it down to list for sale in the obelisk. After making my purchases, I made room in my bag of holding by clearing out the latest batch of stuff we'd received from Themyscira.

This involved a lot of swords, shields, and a bunch of blacksmithing equipment. Plenty of people here in the settlement had taken up blacksmithing for their job, but it would be some time before they adjusted to making medieval weapons.

When Marcus, Margaret, and Frank arrived with a few others, we convened an official council meeting. I recognized most of the faces, but a few people were new.

"This is Reginald. He's representing the crafters in town," Margaret introduced a hefty man wearing carpenter's pants with holes in their sides and a soot-stained shirt.

"Smith?" I asked.

Reginald nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"And this is Terrance. He's been the one in charge of keeping the peace. Right now, he's in the militia like the rest of us, but eventually we'd like to reestablish a police force."

Terrance was a lean black man with a southern accent, complete with cowboy hat and the tattered remains of what had once been a police uniform.

"You were a cop before the integration?" I asked.

"Yes, Sir. Never thought I'd make it to police chief, though," Terrance laughed.

"We'll have to make a badge for you at some point. Perhaps there are some left over at the old police department."

Sheriff Drayton and the local cops had put up a good fight for a while, but the Alpha Wolfman and his elites proved too much for them. The wolves ate most of them, and any who survived sped off to who knew where. I knew for a fact that we'd already scavenged anything left in the armory. That gear had outfitted the shelter's militia.

“I’m in no rush. Besides, I think it would mean more to me and the boys if we had our own badges. The world ain’t exactly like it used to be,” Terrance replied.

I chuckled. “Agreed.”

We settled in around the table in a conference room, and a System menu appeared before me the moment I sat down.

**You have gathered with your advisors concerning official matters of state.**

**The following issues plague your lands:**

- **The roads surrounding your settlement are plagued by monsters. Issue quests to have them slain and restore order and trade.**
- **Neighboring settlements within your domain do not acknowledge you as their liege lord. You will receive no taxes, tribute, or warriors from them until you gain their allegiance.**
- **Your settlement has reached the population and infrastructure requirements to upgrade from Shelter! You must decide between becoming a Castle or a Fortified City.**
- **A foreign power, Cromwell of the Crownhill County Prison, lays claim to your lands! Defeat him to regain uncontested control of your domain.**

I glanced up from the notification to find all eyes on me. Apparently I was the only one who could see the screen before me. Silently, I thanked the System.

I hadn’t exactly prepared for this meeting, but I was certain minor lords everywhere were thankful for the instant meeting notes the System provided. I went through the three major issues the System had listed for me, starting with the roads.

“Okay, so we need to clear the roads so people can actually come use the obelisk. If the crowd gathered outside is any indication, Margaret’s radio announcements were even more effective than we’d hoped in getting the word out.”



I looked from one council member to the next. “But most people don’t have multiple D-Rankers in their group, so they’ll need to have the roads cleared. I know where a few major settlements are, and we’ll need to clear the way between them and us.”

“And in exchange for that, do we tell them they’re joining up with us?” Marcus asked.

A few of the others shifted in their seats. It was the question on all their minds.

I drummed my fingers on the table a moment before shaking my head. “No. We won’t force anyone to join us. But do let it be known that we have a lot to offer... and those that get in early will get more than those who get in late.”

The shelter really had come a long way. With the obelisk’s food preservation abilities, we’d been able to save a lot of the meat and other foods that would otherwise have long since gone bad. We were probably the only place on the shard where anyone could get a proper burger after the integration.

And the leveling programs we were building with the militia were extremely beneficial to those who were willing to put the work in. And that didn’t begin to account for the slew of supplies I was bringing from Themyscira for the crafters.

In the shelter, we were already rebuilding some semblance of civilization.

The same wasn’t true everywhere. Most other groups of survivors were huddled in terror in their basements or fortified manors, too scared to leave their homes for fear a level 2 Cockroach Scavenger might get them. We’d left those fears behind long ago, having replaced them with the ambition to make the most of this new life.

Decision made, I issued some quests. The rewards would come from my own cut of the taxes—not that I minded. I was propping up more than half of the economy already, thanks to my exclusive trade with Myrina’s world. I had more points to reward people with than anyone else. And in the end I’d probably benefit more than anyone else.

The people around the city collecting wire would be a little bolder if they knew the roads between the obelisk and the ruins that surrounded the city were safe to travel. With the first two issues settled, I addressed the matter of the upgrade.

“The System says that I have to choose between upgrading the Shelter into either a Castle or a Fortified City.” I shared the two options with the council.

### **Choose your settlement's path!**

#### **Fortress:**

##### *Advantages:*

- **+70% Defense against raids.**
- **25% faster elite unit training.**
- **10% faster leveling speed for official militia, guards, or military units.**
- **Expanded storage for supplies.**

##### *Disadvantages:*

- **-30% trade income and fewer trade routes.**
- **Slower population growth.**
- **Higher upkeep costs.**
- **Fortified City**

##### *Advantages:*

- **+50% trade income and routes.**
- **Rapid population growth.**
- **10% faster militia training and recruitment.**
- **Cultural events and diverse economy.**

##### *Disadvantages:*

- **Only +30% to Defense.**

- **Increased crime.**
- **Potential for internal strife.**

Unlike the previous two subjects, choosing the settlement's future sparked a healthy debate. Marcus, Kyle, and Terrance were all in favor of the settlement becoming a Fortress. Marcus and Kyle in particular had been in the militia when we'd been attacked, and from what I'd heard Terrance had been through something similar at a smaller shelter before moving here. All three of them wanted the settlement strong enough to stand against our enemies.

Margaret, Reginald, and Frank were interested in turning the shelter into a Fortified City. In the long term, the shelter would no doubt become the beating heart of the shard where everyone came to trade and prosper.

The decision had always rested with me and me alone, as the settlement owner, but I'd hoped the council would lean clearly one way or the other. That would have made the decision easier. Instead, I was the deciding vote.

I sighed, weighing the options over. In the end, I made my choice. "We cannot afford instability at the moment—not while we have enemies at the gates. We must turn the Shelter into a Fortress," I declared.

"Yes! Elite units here we go!" Kyle grinned.

I wasn't sure what the exact classification of an elite unit was, but I was pretty sure all the fighters on the council would qualify. Truthfully, that was the bonus, more than anything else, that had tilted me in favor of designating this place a Fortress.

The additional militia training and recruitment were tempting, but I wasn't keen on just bulking our numbers. It was clear to me now that what really mattered to a faction's ability to overcome another, was the power of its elites. The junior members of any group merely represented their eventual potential. If we wanted to make it in this new world, we'd need a core group of elites to protect Crownhill from all the factions out to get us.

As for building a city, we had no trade routes to speak of—besides the one I'd forged with Themyscira. And population growth didn't matter, not when our upcoming issues were on the scale of months instead of generations like most settlements of the Arcadia Multiverse.

There was a combination of groaning and cheering, but I consoled everyone who'd been on the side of building a city. "I happen to know that it's possible to build a small city outside of the fortress. I wouldn't worry too much about it, now. When the time comes that we want the city bonuses, we'll figure something out."

I pictured Valkyrie's Watch in my mind. We weren't that far away from creating such a place ourselves. Assuming we absorbed the other shelters, we'd be roughly the same size—though significantly more productive, since we were getting some of the old manufacturing equipment together to re-industrialize.

In a decade, we'd be bigger than Valkyrie's Watch.

For now, building a Fortress seemed like the right choice. And if in the future we discovered it wasn't? Well, the System always left a way. I was sure there'd be some method to reverse things and convert the Fortress into a fortified city.

I made the selection, and the process began without much fanfare. A progress bar appeared on what had been my settlement tab, showing that the upgrade would take about a week. Presumably, I'd see what the new Crownhill Fortress could do when the progress bar filled.

I idly wondered if I'd see that before I went to visit Myrina again. A full week was just past the minimum time I had to stay here on this shard before I could visit Themyscira again.

"And now for the final topic of this meeting. This Cromwell character who's been hassling us... tell me everything you know."

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-ONE

“Who is he?” I began. “Where’d he come from? I’ve heard a little here and there, but I want to know what you’ve learned.”

Terrance nodded and stood. “I think I’m best suited to answer that. I’ve seen his file. I was actually here to interview him about a few leads back home.”

He gestured in the direction of Crownhill County Prison. “He managed to talk the judge into having him locked up here in Crownhill. He had a bunch of his own cronies here already, which is probably why he chose Crownhill. He likely leveraged the fact that he already had an organized group when the System showed up.”

That actually made sense. I nodded for him to continue.

“I did some investigating, and even talked to some of those survivors from the troll camp. They didn’t like me too much in uniform, but I know a thing or two about getting gossip out of unsavory sorts while undercover. The story they gave me was that fighting turned real bloody real quick in the prison. And with skill books raining down for everyone who picked up a couple of levels, the guards couldn’t keep the prisoners in line.”

It had to have been a nightmare for the guards.

“The guys locked up there were bad news to start with—a rough crowd not afraid of violence. Some of them were real fucked in the head, too, and had no problem with killing each

other for levels. About three quarters of the prison ended up as levels for the rest.”

Margaret buried her head in her hands.

“From there, Cromwell and the leaders of the other two main prison groups signed something like a peace treaty. Most of the convicts hadn’t seen a woman in ages, so finding some was hot on all their minds. They started running wild over that corner of the city.”

Terrance shook his head. “You guys had to deal with the Wolfmen, but everybody on the northern end of the city had to deal with the guys who now call themselves the Three Kings. Cromwell was one of them. The other two are Knuckles and some crazy bastard calling himself Caesar.”

My eyebrows rose. “Caesar? As in... Julius Caesar?”

Terrance chuckled. “Yup. Word is he fancies himself something of an aspiring emperor. He’s actually got the smallest faction of the three, but he’s personally got the highest level and has the strongest men under his command.”

“What about the others?” I asked.

“Knuckles is somewhere in the middle, with Cromwell in third. But Cromwell is the most aggressive of the three about conquering territory. He swept over the whole northern half of the city. Men either joined him or turned into experience points, while women were handed out to his men as rewards or traded to the other two factions in the Crownhill County Prison.”

I grimaced. Cromwell sounded like a real gem. I could only have imagined what might have happened if he and Craig met around now.

“So Cromwell is the biggest scumbag of the group I’ll have to deal with...” I drummed my fingers against the table. “Do we know his class? His level?”

Terrance shrugged. “His level is somewhere over 30. That might just be a rumor, though. Some people say he is over level 40—but I think that’s just a rumor. As for his class... it has something to do with causing pain. Apparently he can

make every moment of existence pure agony. Most of his opponents ended up on their knees the moment they saw him. The only two it hasn't worked on were Knuckles and Caesar. Knuckles has a berserker skill that lets him ignore pain, though I'm not sure how Caesar blocked it."

"Sounds like a rough one. The rest of you should avoid direct conflict with him," I said.

"But... not you?" Marcus asked curiously.

I let out a grim sigh. "It's pretty obvious how this is going to go, isn't it? He wants Crownhill. I have Crownhill. It's going to come down to a fight, sooner or later."

I shrugged. "The way I see it, I might as well make it sooner rather than later and get it over with. From what I hear, he's been a real terror to the northern chunk of the city. I've promised protection to everyone in the shelter, and I plan to honor that. That protection applies to bad men just as much as it does to monsters."

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Terrance asked. "His class lets him cause intense, crippling pain that renders his opponents unable to fight. The number of people who can stand against it are so rare, that only the two other strongest people in the Crownhill County Prison can stand up to him. He's built the biggest organization of ruthless bastards on this shard—bigger than your militia, in fact."

"Which makes it that much more important that I deal with him," I replied.

My council exchanged looks.

Margaret was the one who finally spoke. "Carter, the Three Kings are really bad news. I know you defeated the Alpha Wolfman in single combat. And I heard you cleared out the Ogres, as well. But the Three Kings are humans. And this Cromwell guy was a ruthless killer before the integration... who knows what he is now?"

"Oh, I understand, Margaret. Fighting him will mean risking my life. But it's not like I haven't risked my life before." I gave her a shrug.

The others looked unconvinced. “He had three people at D-Rank, Carter. Three of them!” Frank warned.

“Emphasis on *had*, Frank. All three are dead now. You can add that to the message, Margaret.”

Frank frowned. “True. But Cromwell wasn’t here. Who knows how many of his subordinates are as strong as we are?”

“Bridget and I are at the D-Rank,” Sakura said.

She had a vote in other meetings, but not in this one. Since she lived with me, she wasn’t really serving on the council today so much as serving as my secretary. She was in on the meeting to take notes.

It was an odd reversal of our former roles. In the past, she’d been the boss running the meetings while I took notes.

“As are Michael, Marcus, Frank, and me,” Margaret replied. “We don’t know if Cromwell has more D-Rankers than we do. But we do know he’s a lot more ruthless than we are.”

“He may have me on ruthlessness,” I admitted. “And I’ll admit I haven’t seen him for myself. But I think I could win if the two of us had a duel. And that, I think, is the easiest way to settle this.”

I grinned at Margaret. “He heard about the obelisk on your radio show, Margaret. So for your next broadcast, I want you to advertise that I’m ready and willing to meet him in battle. If he wants Crownhill, he can come and face me like a man for it.”

“I don’t think mobsters do duels to the death,” Frank said.

I shrugged. “He’s not just a mobster anymore, though. You said people were terrified of him because of his class. That means he rules through fear, not respect. And if people learn the person they fear is afraid of someone? I imagine he’d lose a lot of loyalty overnight.”

This could be a good thing, I decided. “Since they know by now that we welcome everyone who wants to contribute, I



imagine we'd have quite a few defectors to welcome with open arms."

Kyle stared at me hard. "Will... will that giant shark thing you had be with you?"

I nodded.

Kyle slapped the table. "Carter can do it!"

Margaret held up her hands. "Let's not be hasty, Carter. You realize you're risking a lot here? You're the settlement owner, so all this"—she gestured around us—"hinges on you. It hinges on your reputation, your personal power, and your continued survival. If you die, we're all screwed."

"And if Cromwell is allowed to do as he pleases, we'll be screwed as well." I stood, putting my foot down at last. "I have played things pretty safe until now. I've focused on crafting and leveling my proficiencies. I've been staying away from the shelter so I wouldn't attract monsters, helping small teams level, and generally waiting things out until victory is clear."

I shook my head. "That isn't an option now. Cromwell is coming for us—coming for me. I want to show the Three Kings they can't shove us around. I'll probably have to kill him, and maybe both of the others, too, to teach them that lesson. But that's a price I'm willing to pay."

Margaret sucked in a breath. "Alright... alright. I'll do it. Hopefully it will scare Cromwell off just hearing that you're willing to fight him. He'll likely back off just on the chance that you might be able to fight him. I doubt he got to his position as a crime boss by taking big risks."

I remained silent. I had my doubts about Cromwell backing off. I doubted he'd become a crime boss by yielding to any challengers. But as long as Margaret sent the challenge, I'd be alright.

"See that it's done. I'll be back to check for his reply, daily." I pushed my chair in. "And with that matter settled, our council meeting is adjourned. The next time I see you all, we'll hopefully be discussing the recent upgrade of the

Settlement to a Fortress, and what to do with Cromwell's rotting corpse."

I let out a chuckle, but only Kyle let out a soft laugh in reply.



After the meeting was over, I regrouped with Bridget and Sakura. Our brief visit to Crownhill had taken a lot more time than I'd thought it would. But we'd finished everything we wanted to do and were ready to return home.

"So... you're going to fight a difficult foe soon," Sakura purred in my ear. "He's a foe you might need as many levels as possible to defeat."

"Yeah," I shrugged, "maybe."

"So that means you'll need some help from Bridget and me. The two of us racked up quite a few levels in that fight, you know. Both of us are at level 29."

Chuckling. I planted a kiss on Sakura's forehead, right at the base of her horn.

"You know what? Sometimes you're just too darn cute, Sakura. Sure. If you're offering your levels up, I'll help myself. But not to so many that you'll drop below level 25. Understood?"

Sakura wrapped me tight in a warm embrace. "Just wait until I tell Bridget!"

The night that followed was a long one. And a hard one, too—for Bridget and Sakura. The two of them really loved my Fabulous Phallus skill.

**You have drained four levels from Bridget Larsen!**

**You have drained four levels from Sakura Miyamoto!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained two levels!**

I ended up promising the two of them afterwards that we'd do it again if they leveled back up to at least level 28

tomorrow.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-TWO

Sakura, Bridget, and I woke up early the following morning. Through great effort and an act of will on my part to give the two of them a stern ‘no’ after four levels each, I managed to get a good night’s sleep.

We woke up early, took out a few monsters, and cut a couple of the surviving ogres down to size. Their old stomping grounds were mostly empty—since my hunt. They certainly weren’t hunting down and eating people with such scarce numbers.

*Good.* This was right where I wanted the big, ruthless bastards. They’d caused enough trouble for humanity.

We returned to Crownhill to check in with Margaret, so I could be there to send my challenge to Cromwell during her radio show. Instead, I found some of his forces already there, waiting just outside the gates. There were about fifty people blocking the gates, which was quite a crowd.

I didn’t like that they were blocking the road for people visiting the obelisk, so when I saw them I decided to tell them to move. “Step aside, please. You’re blocking the road,” I said.

“Hey! We’re Cromwell’s people! Who the hell do you think you are?” one of the bandit thugs demanded.

“Someone who prefers safe, open roads,” I replied. “Now step aside. There are lots of people who come through here every day to buy and sell their goods at the obelisk and I don’t want you blocking the path.”

I gave the group a hard eye. I wondered which one of them was Cromwell? Surely he wouldn't take my provocations lying down.

I glanced around, trying to see who everyone looked to for leadership. There were a few who stood out. There were two people over level 25, both men and both tough-looking. But neither of them gave me the vibe I was looking for.

I was looking for a powerful mob boss. Someone scary. Someone who'd been scary before the integration, and who was even scarier, now. Nobody fit that description. Perhaps Cromwell hadn't arrived yet.

"Well?" I asked.

Behind me, Bridget and Sakura stood waiting. Between the two of them and Sharky, we had the D-rankers beat—and that wasn't counting myself. Too bad none of Cromwell's bandits had survived yesterday's battle. Otherwise, they would be terrified of Sharky instead of merely nervous.

After some reluctant grumbling, the bandits moved to the side of the road. Bridget, Sakura, and I continued on our way.

"Did they Examine the two of you?" I murmured to Sakura and Bridget.

Sakura nodded. "Yup. I felt at least a dozen tingles."

"Same here," Bridget replied.

"None of them got through to me. That was probably what spooked them." With a shrug, we continued on our way and entered the settlement. It looked like I'd still have to talk to Margaret and the others to arrange for the duel.

"Carter! You're here. Cromwell is here!" Margaret said as soon as she saw me. "He... he's got a lot of people out there. I think he really does want to fight you."

I nodded. "I saw his people. But don't worry, they'll be gone soon enough. Mind if I use your radio?"

"Yeah. Sure. Okay..." Margaret glanced up at me nervously. "You... you're really sure you can fight him? It's not too late to back out."

“My challenge has been made. I wasn’t going to back out before, and I’m not about to back down now.”

Reluctantly, Margaret led me back to her office and the radio. There, I issued my challenge and we waited for a reply. Eventually, one came through on one of the weaker bands, something from a small hand radio.

“Cromwell accepts your challenge... so-called Baron of Crownhill. Be prepared to hand your title over to him before your death,” came the reply. The person on the other end of the line hung up and static was all that we heard over the channel.

“Melodramatic much?” I chuckled.

“Carter, you’re about to fight a duel to the death against an infamous mobster. Can’t you at least act like you are a little worried?” Margaret asked.

“This is my worried face.” I grinned.

Margaret scowled. “You better not die, my friend.” She pointed out the window. “See everyone out there? They’re counting on you.”

I nodded. “I know that all too well. But don’t worry, if I die I’ll just come back. I’ve done it before.”

Walking out of Margaret’s office, I discovered the walls were lined with the worried faces of my militia. The crowd around the obelisk was relatively thin. Most people seemed quiet and hesitant.

I sensed many eyes on me. A few people waved, and I smiled and looked confident as I waved back.

Bridget approached as I neared the gates. “Kick his ass, Carter!” She planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Yeah, show him who’s boss!” Sakura did the same on my other cheek.

“You ready, Sir?” one of the militia manning the gates asked.

I nodded. “I’m ready. Open the gates.”

The gates swung wide open and I strode out to find a black limousine waiting for me. The back seat window was open, revealing the arm of a man holding an unlit cigar. One of Cromwell's men opened the door for him, and a rough-looking man in a suit stepped out of the limo.

His hair was slicked back and, to me, it seemed he appeared roughly as he would have prior to the integration. He was a clean-cut mobster who seemed to be above the affairs of his underlings. This was a man familiar with power. A man who knew his power and was casual about displaying it.

I fought back a grin and bit my tongue to keep from laughing. He knew what power *used* to be. I knew what power was now.

He made me wait, standing there impatiently as he lit his cigar in a childish display of power. "So..." he finally said, "you're the townie who put together this little place?" He waved his free hand around.

"Not bad. Here we thought the whole world outside our little old prison had turned into a shithole." Cromwell puffed a few times on his cigar. "We didn't think anybody outside the joint had the will to do what needed to be done in this new world."

He pointed a finger at me. "Turns out someone did."

"I can't take all the credit," I replied. "There are a lot of hard-working people behind me, a lot of hard-won battles we've fought to get here. You see, while you and everyone else in Crownhill County Prison were busy trying to make yourselves kings, we took care of the goblins, the wolfmen, and the ogres. The real threats facing humanity."

Cromwell waved me off. "Just a bunch of monsters. We've killed plenty of monsters. Let me tell you, no monster is as scary as the one that dwells in here"—he patted his chest—"in the human heart. The things I've seen and the things I've done would chill an innocent townie like you to the bone."

"Is that so?"

I felt my jaw clench. The integration could have been a clean victory if all of humanity's forces had banded together right from the start. We'd outnumbered every other faction by a wide margin. These guys from the Crownhill County Prison had probably killed more of their fellow humans than any of our enemies had.

"Tell you what, Townie..." Cromwell waved to me casually, like I was just an annoying bug standing in his way.

"Carter. The name's Carter, Cromwell."

"Yeah, I'll bother learning your name someday... if you prove yourself. How about this? You hand over that nifty baron title you've got, and ownership of this settlement—I want them both. You do that, and you can join me. You'll start at the bottom of my new organization, of course, but if you work hard maybe you can work your way up the ladder."

I was surprised to read his face and see that Cromwell actually thought he was offering me a good deal. I snorted to myself—like I'd throw myself at his mercy in the hopes of preserving a tiny bit of wealth and status. Maybe that's what people did when they heard his name back at the prison, but he was in my territory now.

"I have a counteroffer, Cromwell." I stuffed one hand in my pocket as Mana accumulated at my fingertips. "You and your people have done a lot of harm to Crownhill since the integration. Submit yourself and your men to a trial by your peers for your crimes. I swear it will be fair and as close to how things were done before the integration. You'll get a jury and a chance to justify yourselves. After you serve whatever sentence we give you, you and those of your men who are still around at the end of it can join us as we rebuild civilization together."

Cromwell choked on his cigar. He turned to his men, a wide grin on his face. "Hear that boys? He wants you to surrender... like he's the damn police! Is Terrance with you? I'm going to gut that son of a bitch, but not before I give him a taste of an interrogation of his own."



Cromwell tossed his cigar to the side. “Boys? Move in and knock down those walls. We’re taking over the joint.”

“Are you afraid to duel me, Cromwell?” I asked. “I thought that’s what you were here for. Or are you a coward?”

A hushed silence fell over Cromwell’s men, and the jovial grin fell from Cromwell’s lips.

“Boy,” Cromwell growled, “you did not just say what I think you just said.”

“Hurry up, Cromwell. I told your men earlier to move. People need to travel on this road to use the obelisk and you’re obstructing traffic.”

I had five Mana Bolts in my pocket by now. Soon it would be six. Then seven.

“You stubborn fool...” Cromwell spat.

“As for the rest of you...” I turned to address Cromwell’s men. “I know some of you were coerced into joining this clown. That will, of course, be taken into account during your trials. Give yourselves up without a fight and things will go much easier for you.”

The crowd of Cromwell’s lackeys laughed.

“Teach him a lesson, boss!”

“Make him beg for death!”

“The cocky bastard’s going to get it now! I’ve never seen the boss this mad!”

Cromwell jammed a finger in my direction. “In all my years, I’ve never been disrespected by anyone like you. Not by the cops, not by a judge. Nobody,” he snarled.

“You realize what I’m going to do to you for that? You’re going to feel like I’m peeling the flesh from your bones. Today, tomorrow, next week... I’ll keep you around a good long time so you can experience nothing but agony. Starting right now!”

He gripped his fist, and I felt my world turn to sheer, agonizing pain. The edges of my eyes turned red and

bloodshot. The sky overhead seemed to grow dim. Everything became pain—just as Cromwell had promised.

But none of that mattered, because I had the Iron Will skill. And no amount of pain or damage could lessen my faculties in the slightest.

“Give it to him, boss! I wanna see him beg!”

“Make him cry!”

“The bastard’s going to be miserable!”

Cromwell’s lackeys continued to cheer for my death, not realizing that Cromwell had already played his card. And nothing had happened.

Cromwell himself held his fist higher over his head, squeezing his hand like he was wringing my neck. The pain increased, but did nothing to affect my control over my own faculties. The pain was there and I could sense it, but it felt hazy and distant. I knew I could just ignore the pain and all would be well.

Back when I’d gotten my wisdom teeth removed, the dentist had hooked me up to something that had done something like this. But unlike back then, this time I felt fully awake and alert under the effects of Iron Will. I still cared about the world around me, I just didn’t care about the pain.

The voices quieted as Cromwell’s lackeys saw their boss starting to grow red in the face. Meanwhile, the man who’d taunted him stood across the street, apparently unharmed and unaffected.

I’d run out of fingers for each of the Mana Bolts in my pockets and gave up on hiding them. They were dancing in the air around my heels now, just waiting for the right moment to be launched at my foe.

The streets went quiet. The raucous cheers of Cromwell’s lackeys died. They were soon replaced by a growing anxiety as his people realized their boss hadn’t taken me down with one move like all of them expected.

To the contrary, I was standing there, a grin on my face, completely unfazed.

Confusion spread across their faces as their jeers and taunts died in their throats. The wisest of them exchanged uneasy glances as they realized they might have misjudged the situation.

Cromwell's face turned a shade redder as several bulging veins started to pulse on his forehead. He put even more force into his grip, though it did nothing to enhance the intensity of his ability.

I took the time to Examine Cromwell for his level and class.

### **Hector Cromwell (Level 35 — Bandit Overlord)**

It was a fitting class, given his current position. But his class had to include more abilities than just this. I stared at my opponent, raking him with my eyes, up and down. Perhaps this was his equivalent of my Disassemble skill. It was largely meant for looting, but I'd been able to turn it into something to finish off weakened foes.

This pain ability was likely something meant to torment disobedient subordinates, but Cromwell had transformed it into an offensive ability that incapacitated his foes through sheer agony. It was great when it worked, but if someone like me had a skill to counter it, then it was useless.

“Are you finished yet? Surely you've got more than one trick—or are you just a one-trick pony? I won't have anyone saying I beat you with a surprise attack,” I called out.

“You... why isn't it working?” Cromwell snarled, his voice laced with disbelief. “You're on the same level as Knuckles. Or Caesar, that crazy bastard...”

“Shit indeed, Cromwell.”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a revolver. It was a high-caliber gun, too—a .357 Magnum, from the looks of it. Too bad for him that calibers didn't matter much to Deflect. My always-active defensive spell specialized at knocking aside high-speed, low-mass projectiles.

The bullet was aimed right for my forehead, but it bounced off and smashed into the ground, exploding as it did so. It seemed Cromwell had some sort of exploding bullets skill, similar to Craig's. But I'd beaten Craig long ago. If I faced him now, he'd be nothing to me. And so was this Cromwell.

"My turn," I replied, and all my Mana Bolts shot forward at once.

My eyes lit up with Exploit Weakness, and every one of my swarm of Mana Bolts struck Cromwell's vulnerabilities.

His gun exploded in his hands when a Mana Bolt struck it. Two more went for his eyes, while another went straight through his ear. Another shot through his gaping mouth. A dozen more slammed all over his body, striking all at once with the full might of my prodigious proficiency bonuses.

**You have scored multiple critical hits!**

**Your opponent is afflicted with a severe concussion.**

**Your opponent is afflicted with internal hemorrhaging.**

**Your opponent is afflicted with a broken spine.**

Cromwell staggered, instantly face-planting into the ground with a tiny fraction of his health pool remaining. He hadn't even lasted a single exchange.

"Y-you..." Cromwell managed to gasp.

I shook my head. "Sorry. You missed your chance for last words by making me wait. Goodbye."

I snapped my fingers and detonated my Corrupting Marks. Cromwell exploded into a fountain of red paste. I dusted my hands off, though I hadn't even gotten dirty. This had been much easier than taking care of the ogres.

"Boss!"

"Holy shit, who the hell did we just piss off?"

"Fuck this, I'm getting out of here!"

I turned my gaze to Cromwell's escaping lackeys. "Hey! Where do you guys think you're going? I told you to surrender... not that you could run away!"

"Fuck no!" someone screamed as he started sprinting away from the gates at top speed.

I shook my head. Some people only learned things the hard way. Fortunately, I'd had someone ready to retrieve them lying in wait this whole time.

The last time I'd brought Sharky into Crownhill, he'd caused something of a scare. I didn't want a repeat, so I'd left him just outside the settlement this time.

In other words, right between the fleeing bandits and their route home.

"Sharky... fetch!" I shouted.

A ferocious voice echoed through the city. "NOM NOM."

I let Mania claim me, taking myself to the first level. But this wasn't for me, it was for Sharky. He grew larger, his mouth tentacles spreading wide. Out of curiosity, I pushed myself to the second level of Mania. After seeing my summon's new appendages and increased size when using Dissonance, I wondered what Fervor or Blood Frenzy would do.

The world darkened immediately, as shadows grew longer and the light of the sun overhead grew dimmer. Anyone with a brain could tell at a glance that something was very wrong.

Sharky's tendrils lashed out. His form hadn't changed, nor had his size. But there was a greater weight to him now—along with a palpable aura. He opened his maw and air rushed in to fill it. It was like he was sucking everything around him into his belly.

Several bandits lost their footing and were dragged towards him by the suction alone. Those that could resist weren't able to resist for long when Sharky's tentacles reached them. Soon, Cromwell's fifty bandits were reduced to thirty. Then to twenty. Then to ten.

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained two levels!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained two levels!**

**Your One Versus Many proficiency has increased to Level 21.**

Those that remained soon resorted to begging. “Wait! Wait! I surrender! Please, don’t let that thing eat me!” a bandit pleaded.

I frowned in thought for a moment, letting the pleading bandit and his fellows sweat a little. Eventually, I waved Sharky off.

“Sharky, stay. These guys are accepting my offer of a fair trial.”

Sharky paused, his mouth tentacles lashing back and forth right in front of the pleading bandit.

I stared them down, hard. “You know, all of you, I would have gone a lot easier on you if you’d surrendered right away. You’ll still get a fair trial, but the jury will know you wouldn’t have surrendered had I not defeated Cromwell.”

There were a few nervous nods.

“Good. Well, with that in mind, throw your weapons down.” I turned my head to nod at the people on the walls behind me.

They’d been watching the whole thing, first in nervous trepidation, then in bewilderment, and now finally with surprise and excitement.

“Yeah! Carter’s invincible!” Sakura raised both her arms overhead.

“You showed them who’s boss, Carter!” Bridget added.

With the two of them clapping and cheering, the others soon joined in. “Carter! Carter! Carter!” shouted everyone from the walls.

I smiled. Maybe being responsible for everyone here wasn't so bad after all.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-THREE

Following my victory, the people of the Settlement threw a party.

“This is a little much, isn’t it?” I chuckled as someone handed me a drink. “All I did was cast one spell and use one class skill.”

“One spell that laid low a terrifying mobster who wanted to take over the whole settlement!” Margaret grinned, swirling a cup of wine in her hands. By the flush in her cheeks, it looked like she’d already had several.

“You don’t understand what this means to everyone, Carter. You didn’t just kill Cromwell. You showed everyone on the Shard that this settlement is under the protection of one of the Shard’s strongest—that not even the Three Kings can cause trouble here. It will bring a lot of shelters who’ve been wary of associating with us under our influence.”

“There are really that many avoiding us, for fear of Cromwell?” I asked.

Margaret nodded. “I’ve talked to plenty of them on the radio. When he announced he was taking this place over, everybody got real skittish. Most of the shelters have had some rough encounters with raiders from the Crownhill County Prison.”

Her mouth twisted up into a grimace, as if speaking the name of that place left a bad taste in her mouth. “They’ve been a bigger menace to most of the survivors than the non-human factions. But now that they know you are strong enough to



stand up to someone like Cromwell, I bet they'll change their minds real quick."

I returned her bright smile. "I'm just glad I could help. If you think word of my victory will be that valuable to everyone, then I'm happy to drink a beer or two in celebration."

"I had no idea you'd gotten so powerful. Just what have you been up to in that little farmhouse of yours?" Margaret shook her head in wonder.

"Interplanetary tourism," I replied.

After Margaret was pulled away to begin her preparations for her radio show, Kyle, Marcus, and Frank all came over to congratulate me.

"Way to go, man!" Frank grinned. "That mobster is paste. Normally, I'm not one to celebrate death, but I've seen that guy on the news before. Apparently, everybody knows he's had hundreds of people robbed, swindled, or executed—but the only thing they could get him on was tax evasion." He gave me a fist bump. "A lot of people would have loved to watch you pull off what you just did."

"And you showed everybody else not to mess with us!" Kyle grinned. "And that shark monster of yours made quick work of everybody he brought with him."

"Sharky is a hungry boy." I raised my glass toward the gates, towards where Sharky patrolled the city for more monsters... for more food.

"I'm sorry we ever doubted you." Marcus held out his hand in apology.

"No apologies needed. Really. I'm flattered you were all so worried for me, but I'm pretty sure that the System would have forced me to fight him eventually. The notification I got when it assigned this place to me said as much." I shrugged.

The four of us chatted for a while longer before Bridget and Sakura tried to drag me away, but I reminded the two of them that we'd celebrated preemptively the night before and if

they'd earned enough levels to celebrate again, it hadn't been before the duel, like we'd agreed.

Bridget kept herself busy in the kitchen. She only had the one power-source that I'd made, but people were already gawking at the ability to fire up any electrical gadget they could plug in. Through the window to one of the buildings, I watched a bunch of people cheer over a running microwave.

I wasn't really sure what all the excitement was about. I knew for a fact that they'd dug up more generators to get electronics in these buildings up and running. Perhaps there was something exceptional about a device that could turn mana into electricity. It did say something about the future of Crownhill. Maybe someday I'd make a giant one of those and get the electrical grid back up and running again.

Midway through the party, I left to find Margaret so I could make a guest appearance on her radio show again.

"And here's the man himself!" Margaret waved me over to sit down when I entered her office. "How would you say that fight went?"

I took my seat next to her and she pushed the microphone to me. "Well... let's just say that Cromwell won't cause problems for Crownhill anymore. Or anyone, really... ever again."

"He's dead, folks," Margaret added. "I saw it with my own eyes—as did hundreds of other people. Him and most of his organization. There were about a dozen survivors who surrendered to us and will face a trial for whatever crimes they've committed out of the fifty odd bandits he brought with him. If you, or anyone else, has been wronged by Cromwell's minions, please come and testify for, or against, the people we have in custody."

I spoke up. "And let me just add that we take the law over here very seriously. Cromwell broke it, so now he's dead. That's going to be true for anyone who breaks the law in the city. This may be the apocalypse, but that doesn't mean people can run around like wild savages murdering as they pleased," I growled.

“It starts here,” I promised, “but going forward I’m going to be cleaning up this entire shard.”

Margaret smiled. “You heard it here first, folks. Law and order is back in style in Crownhill. Once again, we’re located in the old downtown. There’s plenty of real estate up for grabs, but we’re going to start deeding places in the near future, so pick up a place in the heart of law and order in the city while you still can!”

I left Margaret to close out her show. I suspected we were going to have a whole lot of new people coming to check out the obelisk. Safety, law and order, and food were things people would be eager for after just about anything that could have been considered a government organization had been wiped out.

The next thing I had to see to was the prisoners. I’d taken them captive on a whim, but offering them a chance to surrender had felt like the right thing to do. Unfortunately, I hadn’t thought through what I was supposed to do if they accepted. It seemed I’d suddenly created a whole lot of work for myself.

We needed a jail, a judge, and maybe an executioner. I supposed Sharky would be suitable for that last job, but we definitely needed a judge... and a jail.

I found the prisoners all tied together near the center of the settlement while the party moved on around them. People occasionally stopped and stared, like the captured bandits on display were proof of my victory.

“So... I’m just checking, but do you guys all want a trial by a jury of your peers? If you want to waive that right, Sharky and I can get you judged right now,” I offered, jerking a thumb back over my shoulder towards Sharky outside the gates.

“Jury! Definitely jury,” replied one of the bandits. The rest of them all nodded in agreement.

I sighed. It had been worth a shot.

“Alright, trial by jury it is. Now, since Crownhill County Prison is fully occupied at the moment, we’re going to have to get a bit creative about where you’re going to stay until we can line up a judge and pick a jury.”

I had to ask around a bit, but eventually I found a building with a row of small offices. They’d actually been nice enough for upper management before the integration—since each office was a small private space complete with a little bathroom that had a toilet and a sink.

But throw a lock on the door and put a pillow on the executive desks, and they instantly transformed from a private office to a prison cell. It was a remarkably easy conversion. I suppose that said something meaningful about life before the System.

“Now,” I instructed the prisoners before I shut them into their pseudo-cells, “somebody is going to come by and ask you a few questions about Cromwell, his organization, and what’s going on in Crownhill County Prison. I expect your full cooperation, understood? Lie to us, and it will be noted in your records and be used against you when you go to trial.”

There were nods all around.

I glanced behind me to Terrance. He’d seen me hauling the prisoners away and had come out to help. He had actual training and experience doing interrogations, so I let him run the show. The only reason I was here, was because a lot of these guys were higher leveled than Terrance and I didn’t want them thinking they could try something.

I simply crossed my arms and stood menacingly in the background as Terrance asked question after question, jotting their answers down in his notebook. After going through each of the prisoners, one by one, he pulled me out of the last pseudo-cell to share his findings with me.

“Well, I’ve got good news and bad news,” Terrance began as he laid it out for me.

We both took a seat as he flipped his notebook around. “All but one of them claims that they were just normal citizens

before the integration, not convicts at the Crownhill County Prison. After the prisoners slaughtered the guards, the convicts started spreading their influence to the nearby town. Since the prisoners had higher levels than anyone else, they naturally made the civilians they found do as they ordered.”

I drummed my fingers on the desk of the empty office we were in. “I’m not sure I believe it. That might be the case for some of them, but we’ll have to recover the prison records to sort out the liars from those who are telling the truth.”

“Well, true or not, we do know that they’re holding a lot of women and children captive. The men they were with are either dead or joined Cromwell, but the prisoners will be able to sort out who’s who if we rescue them.”

My eyebrows rose. “They’re not all at the Crownhill County Prison?”

Terrance shook his head. “No. Cromwell had an apartment complex he was using for people storage. Apparently bringing women into the prison was his main source of power and influence there. He didn’t want to keep the goods where he was trying to sell them, so to speak.”

I grunted, my mouth twisting into a scowl.

“Apparently he’s got several such places for his captives to stay, based on how cooperative the women in question are,” Terrance continued. “The ones he liked get to spend their days leveling up job skills, cooking for the prison, and assembling makeshift weapons. The ones he doesn’t like end up taking care of... less savory activities.”

Terrance pursed his lips, reading over his notes. “He also kept the wives, girlfriends, and sisters of any of the men working for him under lock and key. He claimed it was for their protection, but in reality it was one of the ways he kept his own troops in line.”

I grimaced. “We’re going to need more food and more housing. There are a few apartment complexes nearby, but I don’t think the women will appreciate us keeping them the same way Cromwell did. It sounds like the ones doing jobs

will integrate into Crownhill just fine. Those who were tasked with the less savory activities will need help getting back on their feet.”

I sighed. I was going to have to put up a job offer for a psychiatrist or a therapist... probably several such offers. I knew there had been a few places that had provided psychological counseling in Crownhill. Some of them had to have survived the integration.

“I would reckon so. I think I know a lady who can give you a hand. She’s been working as a cook lately.” Terrance shrugged. “As for the rest of it, I’ll make it an official council security matter. We’ll set a building or two aside for these captives.”

With Terrance’s help, I made arrangements to set aside food and housing, and to provide therapy for the kidnapped women. With a place for them to stay secured, Terrance gathered a group of the militia to bring them back to the Settlement.

I went with them, though as soon as we left the gates, I traveled on ahead. Odds were good that Cromwell had some of his remaining men still guarding these places. They wouldn’t know that the organization they worked for had been completely decapitated unless they’d heard it on the radio—and these two didn’t appear to have a radio.

The building we went to appeared much as I’d expected it would. It looked run down, consisting of old brick walls, broken windows, and it had a few rough-looking guys standing out front. The apartment complex might once have been fairly nice, but the integration hadn’t been kind to it.

I approached the guards on foot. Both of the people at the doors had the same class and level.

### **Bandit Enforcer (Level 10)**

“Is this where Cromwell keeps all the women he’s taken?” I asked.

“Who are you? This place belongs to Cromwell, and I don’t recognize your face,” one of the guards demanded.

“I’m the guy who just killed Cromwell; this place doesn’t belong to him anymore.”

One man snorted with laughter. “Listen here, you little shit. If Cromwell hears you came here trying to break into the playpen with a line like that, you’ll end up on one of those posts.”

He pointed at the rows of severed heads and mangled corpses that dangled from fence posts across the street. They made the whole area smell like a charnel house.

I glanced at the severed heads and mummified bodies, then back to the guards. “And how many of those did the two of you put up there?”

“Lots. And it’s looking like I’ll put one more up there right now,” he snarled as he reached for the machete at his waist.

I was faster.

My short sword was in my hand in a flash, and an instant later his head rolled on the ground. “Looks like you were right,” I replied as I punted the guard’s head toward the fence.

The other guard was frozen, like a deer caught in the headlights. “I... uh... is Cromwell really dead?”

“He is,” I replied. “I’m Carter, and I killed him. Go to the obelisk downtown. It’s a giant black pillar—you can’t miss it—and surrender yourself to the militia there.”

I reached for the door. It was locked, but I used Eldritch Blast to tear the lock apart. The door swung open a moment later. Seeing this, the guard scurried backward, dropping his weapon as he fled for his life.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-FOUR

The first apartment complex I'd visited painted a pretty grim picture of Cromwell. This was where he'd kept his lowest-value merchandise, as the second set of guards I had to kill put it.

Apparently, this was where the wives and girlfriends of men who refused to join him ended up. They had to do whatever Cromwell and his men demanded of them. And all the while, they had two decomposing bodies and numerous severed heads lining the fence across the street—presumably those of the men they'd loved—to stare at.

I couldn't make out much between all the sobbing and crying, but I was gathering that Cromwell and his men had made sure to put the severed heads of brothers, fathers, husbands, and boyfriends where each woman could see them out her window. It was a cruel and twisted way of encouraging people to join his organization.

Any man who rejected Cromwell's offer knew that their corpse would be used to torment their loved ones. Perhaps I'd been wrong to focus on dealing with the trolls and ogres first. They only ate people. Cromwell and his crew tortured them.

"Don't worry, it's all over now. I'm getting you out of here," I promised a sobbing woman.

She wrapped her arms around me, her tears staining my shirt. I didn't normally think that I had a very comforting face, but perhaps my Charisma bonuses were changing that.



“They gutted him! Beat him to a bloody pulp and then executed him in the street while I watched helplessly...” she wailed, tears coming in thick streams.

“And they’ll pay for it. If you can remember their names and faces, you should tell Terrance. If whoever did it is still alive, we’ll make sure they are brought to justice.” I gave her back an awkward pat.

I really wasn’t any good at this.

Despite being locked away in here, she was all the way at level 8. That meant she likely would have made a capable warrior if she’d been allowed to continue leveling. It reminded me of what Craig had tried to do to Bridget and Sakura, stifling their growth.

I wasn’t particularly skilled at comforting frightened and hurt women, but I did my best until Terrance and the militia arrived.

“There are a lot more women here than I thought. We might need to radio back for more people to assist us,” Terrance said as he surveyed the women lining the halls.

They’d been packed in six to a room, with most of them sleeping on the floor. How had Cromwell been feeding all these people?

“Radio back for some civilians to come help. I think these women are tired of seeing armed men in uniform. Margaret, Sakura, and Bridget should come,” I suggested.

Terrance agreed before relaying my request.

This first building had ruined my good mood, so I was eager to move on. Fortunately the others weren’t nearly as bad as the first one had been. Most were simply workshops where the women inside sweated away over benches littered with supplies.

An organization as big as Cromwell’s required a near-constant supply of food, so several restaurants had been repurposed into kitchens. Most of these supposedly weren’t under Cromwell’s control; they were controlled by someone

associated with him. In actuality, they were fully under his sphere of influence, so they might as well have been his shops.

In practice, that meant I had to deal with someone somewhere between level 15 and 25. These were the people who formed the backbone of those who had maintained Cromwell's sphere of influence. They were weaker powers, carving out wealth and opportunity for themselves by seeing to Cromwell's needs—either directly or indirectly.

They worked for Cromwell much in the same way that all the scrap collectors scrounging the city for wire worked for me. I didn't employ them or tell them what to do, but I created a system that would make them rich and comfortable, if they did so. The main difference between my people and Cromwell's people, however, was that with me everyone was free to make their own choices and use the obelisk as they saw fit.

For Cromwell, only his key subordinates could embark on such entrepreneurial ventures. And those that did were given a steady supply of prisoner labor to make it work. It was a heavy-handed approach, that I didn't think would scale much further than it already had.

I'd found the amount someone cared about their work often depended on their compensation for that work. And I doubted people who weren't getting paid at all were too concerned about the quality of what they were producing.

I cleared those stores out, killing anyone too closely associated with Cromwell who didn't surrender to be tried for their crimes. My impression of the man and his organization only got worse throughout the day. If it wasn't for Terrance and the rest of the militia making arrests, I might have simply wiped out anyone I found with a Bandit class.

But if even one in ten were redeemable, as Chuck had been, I wanted to make sure they were given a chance to prove themselves. In his case, all it took was exploding his head—and forcing him to regenerate a brain free of what I'm sure were some pretty nasty memories—a few times for a clean slate.

The hardest batch to free were those who'd associated with Cromwell of their own free will. These were the lovers of Cromwell's direct subordinates—and it showed. Cromwell had taken over a gated community for them. Instead of being crammed into tiny apartments, each of them got a rather luxurious house. There were even a few generators running and some of them had electricity.

Though life here seemed good, they weren't as far along as we were downtown.

The trouble was that these people didn't want to be freed of Cromwell's influence. So long as their brothers, husbands, sons, or whoever it was Cromwell wanted kept in line behaved themselves, they remained under his protection and were free to do as they pleased. Most of them seemed to have resumed whatever it was they'd been doing before the integration.

I even found one woman with a microscope staring at a petri dish and what looked to be a tissue sample from a troll. I would have liked to ask her about her discoveries, but she turned to me as soon as I spotted her and yelled, "You're not supposed to be here! Guards! Guards! Oh, where are the guards?" She fretted nervously as she adjusted her glasses.

I left the gated community and reunited with Terrance. Sakura, Bridget, and Margaret had caught up with us.

"Seems like those people back there don't care about being let out." I shrugged. "We could make them leave and come with us to Crownhill, but they wouldn't be happy about it... and I don't want to make needless trouble for ourselves. Some of them might have classes at a high enough level to defend themselves. Those who don't will hopefully come to their senses and head somewhere safer."

"I suspect a few monsters rampaging up and down the streets ought to change their tune. Now that Cromwell's people are dead or have been arrested, they're without protection," Margaret said, then shrugged.

"Besides, if they don't want our help, then they won't get it." Sakura scowled as she stared at the beautiful, gated community.

I chuckled as I realized what she was thinking. “Sakura, you used to live around here, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Stupid squatters...” Sakura grumbled. “They tore my stuff apart already. I caught one of those women wearing my favorite dress.”

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders to comfort her. This, at least, felt far more natural.

“Don’t worry, Sakura. When the time comes, I’ll make sure you have hundreds of dresses that are out of this world! Well, from out of this world, at any rate.”

She gave my hand a comforting squeeze. “Leave these fools to their fate. We’ve already helped everybody who wants to be helped.”

I offered to visit Sakura’s old place in the gated community with her. We ended up breaking in, taking all the surviving stuff we could fit into our bags of holding, and then leaving.

“My spare car is completely trashed,” Sakura moaned. “First my new one. Now the spare, too.”

I placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Don’t worry. You can always borrow my truck.”

Sakura gave me a playful shove.

By the end of the day, we’d rescued all the survivors who wanted our help, bringing them back within the Shelter’s fortifications. When Sakura and I returned to Crownhill, we found Terrance hard at work taking testimonies from all the rescued women.

“You certainly have your work cut out for you, figuring out who’s who. I bet you’ve never dealt with this many suspects and witnesses before. There’s got to be at least a thousand witnesses and nearly a hundred suspects.”

“More than that, actually.” Terrance jotted down a note on his notepad, then glanced up at me. “And what do you mean by me? Aren’t you—”

“Ah, I think I hear Bridget calling me. She desperately needs my company. You know how it is,” I chuckled as I slipped away.

I wrapped one arm around Sakura’s waist and the other around Bridget’s as she came up to us before scampering off. Part of the benefit of being in charge was not needing to sort through the boring, tedious bullshit—like interviewing hundreds of witnesses. I’d leave that job to Terrance.

I checked in with Margaret again.

“Do you think killing Cromwell will make the other people from the prison keep their distance?” I asked.

Margaret shrugged. “If that won’t, nothing will—short of executing the other two ‘Kings’, at least.”

I stood up straighter. “You think I should do that? We haven’t gotten a notification from the System about finishing its little mission to consolidate rule over the shard... maybe that’s what it’s waiting for.”

I found myself ready to see to the task right away. After what I’d seen today, what Cromwell’s organization had been up to, I wanted to put a stop to the remaining leaders from the prison right away. But Margaret had other ideas.

“No, don’t do that.” She shook her head. “I’m in touch with the other shelters. They’re overwhelmed as it is by all the new people asking for their help and protection. It’s the same for us, too. Taking out Cromwell may have destroyed a nasty and evil organization, but it also disrupted the delicate balance that’s formed here since the integration.”

“So... you want me to leave the other two be?” I frowned. I wasn’t so sure about that.

“I want to try diplomacy first,” Margaret replied. “I want to see if the remaining Two Kings can be bargained with—now that they know we’re negotiating from a position of strength. Perhaps they’ll see the value in the rule of law.”

“And if they don’t?” Somehow I doubted a man who called himself ‘Caesar’ would let go of his budding empire so easily.

Margaret shrugged. “Then we’ll have bought ourselves a week to get the people we saved today settled in and clear the streets again. You took out the leadership of Cromwell’s organization, but there were plenty of low-level thugs and enforcers still on the loose. Keeping the roads clear will remain a challenge—one we won’t be able to handle if we make it an even bigger challenge by decapitating the other organizations that operate out of the prison.”

“I don’t know...” I didn’t think that leaving the prison alone was the wisest course of action. Who knew what was happening there?

“I’m convinced that I can prevent more deaths through talking and delaying things. I’ve already spoken to some of the other groups through the radio. Everyone is nervous and scared. We hold all the cards right now... Well, the card that counts—meaning you.”

I sighed. “Alright. You’ll have a little more than a week. But you can let them know that if they don’t turn over a new leaf, the same thing that happened to Cromwell will happen to them. I meant it when I said I was going to reestablish law and order on this shard.”

Margaret smiled. “I didn’t realize how much you meant it. And a week should be plenty of time to get everyone settled before another big shakeup.”

I left Margaret’s office to find where Bridget had disappeared to when I went upstairs. She was in the kitchen of what had once been a local fast food joint. It was the very same place Sakura and I had raided for donuts what seemed like an age ago.

Bridget wanted to stay the night so she could help train a few aspiring chefs. Apparently, there were quite a few women who’d picked up a Cook job while working for Cromwell’s followers. Now that their fates were in their own hands, they needed a steady source of income. I’d given them all a small stipend of credits to use at the obelisk from my own account, but that would only last them a week or two.

Bridget was intent on helping them get the hang of their jobs.

Normally, I would have vetoed the idea. Me hanging around Crownhill was dangerous because of my Death Curse. That was the whole reason Sakura and I had retreated to my farmhouse in the first place. But with Sharky on patrol, the militia had reported no notable spike in monster activity.

The walls were quiet, so I reluctantly agreed. We'd need to find a place to stay for the night, though. I had to ask Frank about where a good place might be to stay.

"Don't sweat it, Carter. We actually have a place already reserved for you. It's all yours!" Frank led me to a rooftop apartment in one of the buildings that made up the new, outer walls. The windows of the apartment faced the settlement and we looked down on the obelisk and the Shelter around it.

I sat on the balcony facing the obelisk, fiddling with the items I had for sale. The obelisk worked so long as you had a direct line of sight to it, and from as high up as we were I could still see it clearly. One of these days apartments like this were going to be very valuable for anyone doing business in the city.

Anyone who bought or sold a lot of goods would want one of these places.

"Carter, close the window and come in here. I don't know whose bed this was before the integration, but I found some clean sheets," Sakura called from behind me.

I held up a hand. "One moment. Just trying to get a bit more copper wire..."

Sakura went silent for a while. Then, I heard the click of her heels as she came up behind me. She cleared her throat, then in a professional tone said as she tapped my shoulder, "Carter Smith! I need to see you in my office right away."

I finally turned my head and saw Sakura dressed much as I'd always known her to dress when she ran her father's business. She was dressed in a black pant suit and had her arms crossed under her bosom, resting her weight on one leg.

She'd held that exact position often enough at the office that it was burned into my memory. Back then, what was virtually a management uniform had hung a bit loose on her. But following the integration and the awakening of her Oni bloodline, she'd gotten taller and gained a significant amount of toned muscle.

Now, her old outfit was so tight around her butt and chest that it seemed like the seams might burst at any moment. From the look of the straining top few buttons—one of which had already popped off—I doubted it would be on her long.

“Well, Carter? I think it's well past time I reviewed your yearly progress.”

I chuckled. “Alright, Sakura. Let's go back to your ‘office.’”

Naturally, Sakura led me to the bedroom.



## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-FIVE

**B**ridget, Sakura, and I returned to my farmhouse early the following morning. I was highly tempted to have a whole lot of fun with Sakura the previous night, and we did end up fooling around quite a bit. But I needed her to have all her levels for now, so I avoided draining her of anything for the moment.

Around the city, Sharky had kept the predators at bay, but I didn't want to push our luck. The militia already had their hands full dealing with all the new people I'd brought in, so if there was an incident, they'd be understaffed manning the walls.

So we returned home. Just in time, too.

The timeline I'd given Margaret to maintain the peace hadn't been a number I'd pulled out of my ass. It was the length of time I expected to spend on Themyscira. This time, instead of sending goods over, I would step onto the teleportation array myself.

Sakura explained the system she had set up with Myrina and Misa. "The teleports happen every eight hours at regular intervals. The days on Themyscira don't quite line up with ours, but they're close enough. I sent Myrina and Misa a battery-powered clock to make sure they knew when to use a portal. They're still working with that orc woman I almost attacked."

"Foolishly, I might add," I said as I poked Sakura in the arm. "And her name is Thulga."

Sakura blushed. “I can’t help it. Blame Oni physiology.”

I chuckled. “I know, Sakura. And I don’t think you’re any less smart than you were before your transformation. Now you’re just... special.”

Sakura looked at me sharply. “That’s a nice way of saying dumb. Next thing I know, you’ll be saying ‘bless her heart’ every time you mention my name.”

I chuckled. “Well, I mean it in the way it’s intended. Now, how long until I’m teleported out of here?”

Sakura picked up a clock she’d strategically positioned beside the teleportation array. “About thirty seconds. Safe journeys, Carter. We’ll be coming through right after you. The Teleportation Array can only handle so many bags of holding at once, and we’re hauling a lot of goods through with us.”

A flash of light later and a bit of waiting around and I found myself standing in a small, unfamiliar building. I was surprised I’d ended up here instead of the usual location in the capital city.

“Surprised to see me?” Thulga asked, hands on her hips and a grin on her green face. “Your two friends made me an offer too good to refuse. I’m your private teleporter for the month. I don’t know what you people are up to, but it’s going to buy me a condo in the capital. You know how much those things go for?”

She must have mistaken my look of surprise for confusion, because a moment later she scratched her head awkwardly. “Right, I forgot... you’re from a newly integrated world. You probably don’t know what a condo is.”

I chuckled. “You’d be surprised, Thulga. My home world had a lot of condos before the integration. And those in the big city were quite expensive, too.”

Thulga’s eyebrows rose when she realized I’d remembered her name. I doubt many high-profile clients with a lot of money to spend remembered her name. I was pleased to change that.

Thulga seemed like a down-to-earth woman with goals and a plan for the future. I liked that in a woman. If I was still the man I'd been before the integration, I might have tried to get to know her better.

“Carter! You're back!” Myrina said, jumping over to wrap her arms around me. She practically dragged me off the Teleportation Array.

“Two more coming through after me,” I told Thulga.

She nodded as I cleared the platform to make way for Sakura and Bridget—or rather, I was cleared from the platform. Once I got Myrina to put me down and caught my breath, I got a good look around at my new surroundings. I found a window and looked outside.

With a start, I realized we were already in Valkyrie's Watch. “You guys set up a Teleportation Array in the city?” I asked.

Myrina nodded. “Yep! I found one of the properties my family owns that wasn't in use. It was originally a weapon enchanter's shop, but after the Shadefall Clan pulled out, the place was left empty.”

She beamed at me. “I went to the capital and rented a whole Teleportation Array system, had it installed, and then hired Thulga here to operate it! It's helped streamline our operations... and keeps them discreet. Plus, this building is right next to the official teleportation center, so anyone who can sense an incoming teleportation will just think it's business as usual!”

“Very clever, Myrina.” I gave her a grin and a side-hug with one arm, though I was really tempted to give her a pat on the head.

She was shorter than usual today because I was now taller than her—for once. She must have done that Amazonian thing where she compressed her body mass, storing it up for when she needed it.

“So, don't leave me hanging. What are the numbers? How are we doing?” I asked Myrina.

“Uh... there are numbers. And they do exist.” Myrina looked around a little guiltily.

Misa cleared her throat to get my attention. “I’ve been keeping track of our sales figures, Carter. I have them all here, if you want to look them over.”

Myrina sighed with relief at the aid and snatched Misa’s notebook from her hands. “See! We did good, right? Tell me we did good. At least, I’m hoping we did good...” Myrina twirled her hair with a finger, nervous smile on her face.

I looked through Misa’s notes. “Looks like the Mana Bomb price is dropping...”

“Crap! Misa, we need to—” Myrina started to say.

I held up a hand. “Don’t worry, Myrina. I expected this. With the number of Mana Bombs we’ve been shipping over, they aren’t exactly rare anymore. I figured the price would have plummeted already, but your family is still buying a lot of them...”

“So... are you proud?” Myrina’s voice was full of hope.

I chuckled. “Yes, Myrina. You are a good business partner.”

Myrina thrust both fists in the air in victory.

“Just make sure you keep Misa on staff,” I said and then chuckled.

I’d seen Myrina’s handwriting when rummaging through her desk for a scrap of paper. The elegant hand that had penned these notes definitely didn’t belong to the Amazonian War Chief.

“Oh, well, would you look at that... the Mana Swords are a real hit,” I muttered with surprise.

“They are,” Misa replied. “The Samhain Clan has been arming their rank and file with them. We rarely see so many enchanted weapons made to the exact same specifications. While the enchantments on them aren’t powerful, the fact that they’re all exactly the same is valuable in its own right. It

means a warrior can pick up any of them and instantly wield it with familiarity.”

I nodded. Standardization was a thing with most Earth militaries for a reason. The Roman Empire had figured out the value of establishing factories to crank out arms and armor of the same general design, and the idea had stuck around ever since on Earth. That didn’t seem to be the case across the Arcadia Multiverse, though.

“I take it the Samhain Clan is outfitting their guards with these things?” I asked.

“And the family, too!” Myrina smiled, patting her hip. “Mother bought me and Cyra one.” One of my Mana Swords was hanging from her hip. She wore her regular sword too, but the Mana Sword was new.

“Well, you’ll both be glad to know that I brought a whole lot more with me. Sakura and Bridget have even more on them, and they’ll be coming through in a moment.” I tossed Misa my spare bag of holding.

She immediately peeked inside it.

Thulga brought Bridget and Sakura over, and we soon parted ways with Misa as she ran off to sell this latest batch of goods. We chatted a bit about what had happened on Earth, much to Myrina’s joy. She clapped her hands together when I told her about my fight with Cromwell and how killing him and destroying his organization had been surprisingly easy.

“That’s amazing, Carter! Did you step on his head afterwards, raise your sword in the air and loudly proclaim your victory? That’s what I would have done,” Myrina grinned from ear to ear.

I chuckled. “My Corrupting Marks made him explode. There was no head left to step on. But I think people got the message loud and clear. I didn’t proclaim my victory by shouting it, we broadcast it on the radio.”

“Well, if the rest of his organization is smart, they’ll join you. If they’re not, you can behead them all,” Myrina cheered with a manic grin.

I sighed. “So, in your experienced opinion, I should crush the remaining two? Knuckles and Caesar are the last two of the group formerly known as the Three Kings.”

Myrina wrapped her arm around mine. “Yeah. It’s often best to wipe everybody out and ask questions later. And then hope the dust settles in your favor. And if it doesn’t, you wipe out whatever new hostile organizations form and hope things come out better that time. Rinse and repeat as many times as needed! Great-Grandma told me that’s the Samhain Way!”

I wasn’t really sure that was something to be proud of, but Myrina seemed to be happy with it.

“So what are we up to today? Quests for your family? Hunting down monsters to clear the roads? Weapon training?” Bridget asked. She snuck her arm around my other elbow—the one Myrina wasn’t already holding.

“Actually, my family has something of a feast planned. It’s to celebrate our victories so far, regroup, and then unite our forces with those of several of the Elders. They’re all coming to Valkyrie’s Watch. Mother is rallying the troops for a big push that will deal a decisive blow to the Shadefall Clan’s supply lines. Done right, it should be a turning point in the rebellion and help us finally bring an end to the war,” Myrina explained.

My eyebrows lifted. “The elders will be there?”

Myrina shifted nervously. “Yeah, they will. If... if you can impress them, it would mean a lot.”

“Then it looks like we’re going to a feast. And after that, a battle!” I chuckled.

“Great!” Myrina smiled at me. “I’ve already taken the liberty of signing Sakura and Bridget up as mercenaries. You’ll all be in my platoon, along with a few others.”

Myrina turned to Sakura and Bridget. “I hope the two of you can hold your ale, because a night of drinking before battle is an Amazonian tradition!”

I made a mental note to pick up a few more of those hangover removal potions Kyrina had given me. Sakura and

Bridget were going to need them.



For the first time, the walls of the Samhain family castle didn't seem empty. There were ten figures up on the walls, and four more guards at the gates. While still not manned to their maximum capacity, the place at least had the look of a guarded fortification.

“Carter and my two new mercenaries!” Myrina jerked her thumb back at the three of us.

“Please remember to behave yourselves as guests of the Samhain Clan,” the guard said, looking at Bridget and Sakura as she did so. “While we treat our mercenaries generously, we will not stand for too much drunken foolishness.”

“Understood,” Sakura replied.

Bridget nodded.

The guard eyed Sakura's horn. “You're an Oni, correct? Just remember that headbutting contests with non-Oni that end in death will result in manslaughter charges. You've been warned.”

“Uh... also understood.” Sakura's cheeks flushed.

After that, Myrina led us into the castle. The guest chambers were full, so Bridget and Sakura were officially given bunks in the barracks. The place was crowded as, for once, the halls were full.

I took a peek inside the barracks and saw bunk beds assembled in neat rows in a space the size of a gymnasium. This wasn't the only barracks, either. Only half the beds appeared to be in use, but it looked like the Samhain Clan had room for an entire army to bunk in the castle. They really were marching to war.

There had to be at least a thousand beds. That was quite a large force for any society based on a feudal level of technology and farming practices. I wondered if they'd figured out crop rotation.

Bridget and Sakura pretended to settle in, but before long we all headed upstairs to Myrina's room and got comfy there.

"Carter gets his own miniature apartment and we're supposed to sleep in some barracks?" Bridget shook her head.

"Hmfffph. I really thought you'd be sharing your bed with us," Sakura told me with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face.

Myrina smirked. "Well, if you insist... sure. The two of you can sleep in Carter's room and Carter can share my bed over here."

Before the three women could start a fight, I interrupted. "Alright, is there anything in particular we should know for this little family feast of yours? If I'd known we were going to an event, I would have brought something nicer to wear."

"It's not some fancy ball like you might find on other worlds, Carter. It's a family gathering. My mother and the elders will be drawing up battle plans. Everybody else is going to be drinking up a storm and building bonds of comradery with their new allies. There will be a lot of warriors from the Elder's cities present tonight."

The feast was much as I'd remembered it last time, only a little more extravagant. Where before there'd been a roast boar of roughly normal proportions, this time the boar being roasted was the size of a truck, and it had wings. Whatever I was looking at had been powerful. Even roasted and skewered it looked intimidating.

"Mother caught that herself," Myrina explained. "It's a level 110 Flying Sky Pig. She's had it in a bag of holding for a year under time dilation, and just waiting for a feast like this to bring it out."

I let out a low whistle. "Level 110? That's C-Grade."

Myrina picked us a few seats, a bit further back than where we'd sat before. We grabbed our trestles, some food and took a seat—which looked to be what everyone else was doing, too. Unlike last time, though, this time everyone was waiting to eat.



Myrina pointed out the people I was most curious about. The Elders.

I'd heard a lot about them—most of it about how they were the reason Myrina and I couldn't pursue anything romantic, even if we got her mother's blessing.

"That's Elder Caelia." Myrina pointed to a caramel-skinned woman with a small, lean build.

She looked tiny amidst the towering Amazonians, but people kept a wide berth around her clear wherever she walked. There was something sharp about her gaze, and the many tattoos covering her skin seemed to shift from one moment to the next—though I could never catch them actually moving. She had two short swords, one on each hip. Both had handles polished until they shone from many years of use.

"Behind her is Elder Thalassa. She's an archer," Myrina explained.

This woman appeared to be much older, with streaks of black in her gray hair instead of the other way around. Despite her age, she stood straight and walked without hindrance. Honestly, she seemed as fit as any woman here. Her skin had a slight blue tinge to it, so she likely came from whatever region of this world boasted that complexion.

"Elder Elara's over there." Myrina gestured to another woman.

Whereas Caelia and Thalassa were on the smaller side, Elara would have made Cyra look tiny. She was a towering behemoth of a woman with legs like tree trunks. She had to duck to avoid hitting her head on the door frame, despite the entire castle already being built to Amazonian proportions.

She seemed like the sort of woman who could hold an entire battle line on her own. She had red hair of such a faded color that it almost looked pink and tan skin with almond eyes. Elara seemed not to have strong blood ties to the Samhain Clan—since her shade of hair and facial features seemed rather foreign.

“None of the elders are from the main family?” I asked, suddenly curious.

Myrina shook her head. “I know some clans do it that way, but honestly the Samhain Clan has never had the numbers for that sort of thing. Most of my aunts and older sisters ended up marrying outside of the family. So, instead of coming from the main branch of our family, the elders are essentially the matriarchs of the vassal families under our rule.”

As I had suspected, the Samhain Clan was set up like a small kingdom. Myrina’s family were royalty, but there were other important nobles beneath them. And each of those nobles had their own cities and domains to manage. They brought troops and resources to bear when the Samhain Clan called for them.

They formed the backbone of the Samhain Clan’s martial class, and apparently their approval would make or break the future Myrina was hoping for. I could tell by the tension in her shoulders that Myrina was worried about what the elders might think.

“Relax, Myrina.” I brushed the backs of my fingers down her cheek.

“This is important, Carter. I’m going to introduce you to them later, and then you can impress them with a good showing on the battlefield. If they aren’t impressed...” Myrina’s voice trailed off.

I chuckled. “You worry too much. If they’re not impressed, then... so what?”

“Then... then...” Myrina stuttered.

“Then we wait until I’m level 100. And you are, too. Things are going well for me on Earth. And they are going even better for me here, on Themyscira. We’ve got a good thing going right now. I don’t know about you, but I’m not in a rush to rock the boat.”

I gave her a shrug. Myrina was eager to force her family to declare our relationship official. Not me, though.

If her family didn't approve of me, so what? Earth hadn't integrated all that long ago and I was already powerful. More than that, Crownhill itself was progressing steadily, with more unique resources being revealed with each passing day.

In a few years, I might be able to stand against the Samhain Clan as a peer in wealth and power. And if I surpassed them in power? Well, her family would have to respect her decision to join me then—whether they approved of our relationship, or not.

Ideally, though, I'd build a power base of my own strong enough to win the Samhain Clan's favor when everything aligned. Meeting with the elders now had not been in my plans, but Myrina was eager to get this done—right here and right now.

“Welcome one and all to Valkyrie's Watch!” Kyrina Samhain, Myrina and Cyra's mother, began. “I see some faces I recognize, and some new friends I don't. I don't want any strangers in my warband after tonight! Drink and be merry!”

I raised my cup alongside Myrina and everybody else, though I'd made sure mine was filled with water this time.

“To our impending victory!” Myrina yelled, and several others followed suit.

I winced. I could already tell this was going to be a long night.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-SIX

Half an hour later, the table we'd been sitting at had been smashed through the center. I stood, with my plate in my hand, eating a piece of boar and keeping a wary eye on the increasingly rowdy crowd.

I had been worried about them at first, but Sakura and Bridget fit in remarkably well with the Amazonians. And Sakura had the rare opportunity to meet one of her own kind—a fellow Oni—for the first time.

“Well well well... looks like we have a runt from a dormant bloodline...” the beefy Oni woman said when she first saw Sakura.

This Oni woman stood as tall as the largest Amazonians, and she had two horns on her head instead of only one in the middle like Sakura.

“Who are you calling a runt?” Sakura glared at the woman, though she had to crane her neck back to do so.

“Don't like that, hmm? Well, tell you what, I'll take it back if you can show me what you've got. Give me your best headbutt!” the large Oni demanded.

Sakura tilted her chin up and sipped lightly from her mug of ale. “I can't. I promised the guards no headbutting contests.”

“No headbutting contests against Amazonians or orcs! They didn't say anything about headbutting another Oni,” the Oni said and then laughed.

She ended up taunting Sakura for a while, holding out the lure of information about her race until Sakura finally agreed to a headbutting competition, to the joy of the crowd. The Oni mercenary Sakura was up against had nearly twice Sakura's levels, but Sakura still put on a good show—admirable enough to shatter the table we'd been eating at. Which was why I found myself standing here, holding my plate in my hands.

Far from being annoyed at the shattered table, the spectacle sent a cheer running through the Amazonian crowd. The whole thing ended up turning into something of a brawl until Kyrina and the elders restored order.

“I hope you're all feeling a little less full of energy!” Kyrina laughed as she viewed her half-destroyed feast hall. From her tone and expression, it seemed like this was a regular occurrence. The last feast I'd been part of was a dull, quiet affair by comparison.

Or maybe I'd already blacked out by the time the fighting started.

At Kyrina's prompting, everyone settled down, either standing at attention or finding one of the scattered less-than-completely-destroyed seats somewhere around the room and taking a seat.

I pulled several camp stools out of my bag of holding and the four of us sat down.

“Alright, now you all know why we're here. We're going to take this fight to the Shadefall Clan at last and stop their damn summoned ghosts once and for all!” Kyrina raised her fist in the air, and cheering followed.

She waited for people to quiet down again before continuing. “To that end, we're going into Shadefall City to cut off the supplies they need to make their summoning stones. If we cut those off and arrest every supplier providing them materials, it'll be over for them before they know it!”

This was, of course, followed by another cheer.

Kyrina held her hands up for quiet and waited for things to settle down before continuing. “But I doubt the Shadefall Clan

will just let this slide. We'll need several special teams to keep their attention off the rest of us while we seize their goods and make the arrests. For that, we'll need several teams of special volunteers. This will be dangerous, but—"

"I'll go." Cyra stood, raising her arm overhead. Behind her, a band of unfamiliar warriors stood to join her.

"And me!" Myrina stood.

The Amazonian warriors we'd been sitting with joined her, as did Sakura and Bridget. I figured this was our cue, so I stood and thrust a fist in the air, as well. A few more groups volunteered for this special mission, and Kyrina waved us all into the back of the hall where the elders were seated to receive special orders.

"Your two daughters came," said a grim-voiced woman.

Something about her made me think of weathered ironwood, hard as nails. I could tell at a glance that this wasn't her first campaign. Myrina had pointed her out to me during the feast. This was Elder Thalassa, the gray-haired archer.

"As I'd expect of them," Kyrina said proudly.

Elder Thalassa made a noise of disagreement. "Hmmmph," she grunted. "It might be better for them to remain behind. They are our best bargaining chips with the other factions, should this expedition go poorly."

"My daughters will not stand by while the clan fights," Kyrina said firmly.

Elder Thalassa stared at Cyra and Myrina in turn. "Don't die... either of you. That's an order. And try not to take any blows to the face. A bad scar would take a year or more to remove."

I didn't like the way Elder Thalassa's eyes roamed over Cyra and Myrina. It felt less like she was looking at two strong warriors ready to fight for their clan, and more like she was appraising a pair of prized horses she contemplated selling off.

There was something here that I wasn't seeing about the Samhain Clan. Once again, a worm of doubt burrowed its way

into the back of my mind. There was more going on here that I still didn't understand. And that probably meant trouble for me.

Another of the elders spoke up. It was Elder Caelia, the small and severe-looking one with a short sword on either hip. She cleared her throat to brush aside the awkward silence. "Cyra, I see you brought your usual crew. Blooded veterans, each and every one. You are obviously qualified for this mission."

Elder Caelia then turned her head to Myrina. "However, you, Myrina... your team is one I'm unfamiliar with. You hired new mercenaries recently?"

"Yep!" Myrina replied cheerily. "Don't worry. We went out and killed some monsters and stuff to test their skill. They can handle this, no problem!"

Elder Caelia looked doubtful. "Two of your mercenaries are barely over level thirty." She stared at Bridget and Sakura.

"They both pack a bigger punch than their level would suggest. And they synergize well with my handsome companion here." Myrina wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "This is Carter! I'm not sure if you've heard about him. He and I go way back! Don't you worry about him either, though. His spells will cut right through—"

Elder Caelia held her hand up. "Yes, your mother has told us all about your... about Carter. He is supposedly a competent spellcaster."

"From no notable family," Elder Thalassa butted in to add.

I felt my jaw clench tight when she turned her gaze on me. Her eyes narrowed and she gave me a fierce glare. I wasn't sure what I'd done, but I was pretty sure Elder Thalassa didn't like me. And I wasn't sure that was something I could change. Myrina seemed determined to try, though.

"It's no secret that Carter's from a newly integrated world! The same world I was supposed to grow up on, if it hadn't been for the Shadefall rebellion."

Myrina met Elder Thalassa glare for glare. “On his own, he’s built a sizable faction there. He told me recently that he wiped out all of the foreign factions on his shard. The only thing left to do is clean out some rabble of his own kind, and then he’ll rule the whole shard! The System’s given him a title, and that’ll make it official and permanent. That’s not someone from no notable family.”

“And you know how quickly newly formed houses rise and fall. Such rapid changes are even more dramatic on a newly integrated world,” Elder Thalassa replied.

Cyra raised her voice then, waving a hand to get the Elder’s attention. “If I may, Elder Thalassa. We are not debating Carter’s background here—only his competency to reinforce Myrina’s team enough for her to pull off an assignment as important as this one. And on that front, I can attest to Carter’s combat capabilities.”

The Elder’s brows lifted a fraction of an inch.

“Yes, his level might not be where you’d like it to be, but I’ve fought and trained with him. His proficiency levels are incredibly high, and he has an epic class with many highly ranked skills. More than that, he deals magic damage—which is something we sorely lack in fighting the Shadefall Clan. If not for our new Mana Swords and Mana Bombs, we wouldn’t be able to fight them at all. Carter doesn’t need expendable items, though. Having him on our side will be a great boon to our forces... one worthy of a great reward when all is said and done.”

Kyrina flashed her elder daughter a smile. “Quite right, Cyra. When all is said and done, we will make sure to reward Carter quite handsomely for his efforts. His presence in Valkyrie’s Watch turned what might have been a disaster into a clear victory. I only hope he can do something similar this time.”

Elder Caelia looked skeptical, and Elder Thalassa snorted in disbelief. Elder Elara, the massive woman who had yet to speak, looked me up and down with a critical eye.



“Fine. Myrina, you can come. But I’m including several of my own people in your platoon to ensure you make it out of this mission alive. Their duties will be to extract you, should you fall into danger, not to help you fight,” Elder Thalassa declared with a note of finality in her voice.

She shot a glance at Kyrina. “That’s an acceptable compromise, is it not, Matriarch Kyrina? I would not want to lose Myrina any more than you would.”

Kyrina grimaced, but nodded. “Just ensure they don’t get in my daughter’s way.”

Myrina turned to me, brows drawn tight and a scarlet flush heating her cheeks. I could tell she didn’t like how that had gone.

“Carter,” she whispered, “should we tell them about...?”

I shook my head. “No.”

Her shoulders slumped, but she nodded.

I knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to reveal that I was the creator of the Mana Bombs and Mana Swords. Between that and the small fortune I’d earned, Elder Thalassa would owe me respect.

But I’d considered and dismissed that route, long ago. And I was becoming increasingly confident in my choice. There were politics I didn’t understand at play here.

The rest of the meeting delved into the specifics of our mission. Elder Elara and Kyrina took the stage, both women being more tactically oriented and less political than Elder Thalassa and Elder Caelia. Each team leader, including Myrina and Cyra, was asked to come forward to get their specific orders.

Myrina brought me up with her to look over the plans.

Elder Thalassa glared at me. “He’s under your command, isn’t he? This information is need-to-know only. You can tell him what he needs to know when we’re done,” Elder Thalassa said.

“Hold, Thalassa.” Elder Elara held up a hand.

Given her size, I would have thought her a brute. But when she spoke, her voice was surprisingly cultured. “The boy has the look of a strategist.” Her surprisingly calm gaze settled on me. “I know most of you wizard-types are scholars. Have you read much of battle, Carter Smith? What do you think of our tactics?”

I looked over the map that depicted the various forces arrayed around Shadefall City. It was the same one that I’d seen in the dungeon, not that long ago.

“I see no major flaws in your tactics,” I admitted. “However, the lynchpin to this mission will be logistical, not tactical. Each force will need plenty of Mana Bombs to counter the Shadefall Clan’s summons. You must ensure that every team has a clear supply line. That is how this battle will be won—resupply will be of greater importance than where you place troops on the field.”

The massive woman smiled at me approvingly. “He speaks with wisdom beyond his years. He can stay.”

Elder Thalassa reluctantly yielded when she saw clear support for me on both Elder Elara’s and Kyrina’s faces.

So I sat in on the whole tactical discussion. For once, Myrina didn’t look bored as she studied the map intently. Many of the other small unit leaders took a few notes, but Myrina didn’t bother. I could tell from the glances her sister shot her, that Cyra figured she’d have to tell Myrina what she was supposed to do later.

I gave Cyra a tiny nod when she glanced my way. Somehow, I doubted Myrina was the ditz she acted like in front of others. Her class was Amazonian War-Chief, after all. And if she forgot a few details, I had things covered.

Our part of the mission was relatively straightforward. Cyra’s team would create a diversion while our group and a few others snuck into the city. We each had our assigned workshops, where they made those ghost monster summoning stones that caused the Samhain Clan so much trouble.

In the workshops, we'd destroy their stockpile of raw materials and steal the tools used to process them. With the workshops disabled, the Shadefall Clan would soon run out of supplies. When they finally ran out, they'd be helpless to repel the Amazonian Warriors from the Samhain Clan and the forces the loyal elders had brought with them.

If our mission succeeded, Kyrina believed a brief siege would be necessary in a strategy of attrition to burn down the Shadefall Clan's remaining supply of summoned spirit stones. Once they were running low on summoned spirits, a final battle would see their forces break through the gates. The Samhain Clan would be able to take the city, secure the rogue Elder behind the Shadefall rebellion, and bring peace to these lands at last.

We just had to play our part.

"That will be all for tonight," Kyrina proclaimed. "Remember your orders, everyone. We head out tomorrow at first light!"

We departed, rejoining Bridget and Sakura before heading back up to Myrina's room. It looked like we had a war to fight.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-SEVEN

Despite Kyrina's warning to head in early, some of the younger warriors planned on spending one last night on the town before going into battle. For once, Myrina was the wise one and wanted to go straight to bed. I was trying to talk her out of it.

She stared me up and down the moment I proposed leaving the castle with the others, pinching my cheek as she did so.

"Who are you and what did you do with the real Carter?" Myrina asked as she poked me. "Have you been replaced by an evil time-traveling spider from an alternate dimension?"

"No," I chuckled, "I'm still me... Wait, that can happen?"

"Sure can. Timeweaver Spiders..." Her mouth twisted into a grimace. "They're nasty critters and almost impossible to kill. They reverse time on one another to resurrect each other if you kill one. Because of that, they're one of the few species capable of perfect healing. They also plant their eggs inside you and steal your fate."

Myrina shuddered. "They love eating people who otherwise would have gone on to do great things."

That sounded like one of my worst nightmares come true. "That's concerning, but no. I'm not a Timeweaver Spider." I shuddered, like Myrina had, just thinking about it.

"And no," I continued, "I don't want to go out to keep drinking with everybody else. I do need to pay Misa a quick visit, though. And maybe check in with Galbatorix, the wizard

down the street from her. I didn't realize we'd be leaving Valkyrie's Watch so soon and there are a few business things I want to take care of before we leave."

I leaned closer to whisper in Myrina's ear. "And I want to go get a few of those Mana Bombs and Mana Swords we were going to sell. We'd be better off keeping them for ourselves. We might need them."

Myrina's eyes lit up. She'd known as well as I, that her family would be rationing Mana Bombs and Mana Swords. The Samhain Clan had a lot of soldiers and mercenaries to outfit, but considering our group would be inside the city, we'd need them more than most.

"Oh! You're right, Carter. Fine, we'll go, and I'll even cover for you... on one condition." She held up a finger. "Bring enough for Cyra and her team too. I... I don't know what I'd do if she died."

I had planned to do something along those lines anyhow, so I shrugged one shoulder. "Sure. But you're going to be the one to figure out how to give them to her—discreetly!"

"Deal!" Myrina turned back to Sakura and Bridget. "Come on, girls. It looks like we're going out on the town for a second round of drinking after all!"

"Ugh," Sakura moaned, clutching her temples, "my head already hurts..."

Bridget groaned, "I would really rather sleep this off..."

"Nonsense! We're on an important mission!" Myrina wrapped her arms beneath the shoulders of my other two companions and hauled them alongside her.

I followed close behind, though we split ways down the street when Myrina pulled the girls into the closest bar. I stopped just inside the doorway, wondering just what Myrina had planned to 'cover for me'.

"I, Myrina Samhain, am here at this bar! Who dares challenge me to a drinking contest?!" Myrina loudly proclaimed.

“Oh please, little girl, I’ll drink you under the table…” A large orcish mercenary waved a hand at Myrina dismissively.

“No doubt you grew up in some small village and thought being the best among them at holding your liquor meant you could drink. Think again! You are just a frog in a well, unable to see the vastness of the sky before you!” Myrina scoffed.

“I’ll come and get you three as soon as I can,” I told Bridget and Sakura.

“Be quick, please,” Bridget pleaded with me before joining Myrina.

One thing about Myrina, she sure knew how to draw attention to herself. The entire bar was looking at her, giving us a rock-solid alibi for what we’d been doing the night before the battle.

Chuckling at the redhead’s antics, I slipped out the door and down the street. When I got to it, I found the auction house was already closed. Fortunately, after thinking about it for only a moment, I knew where Misa must be.

I’d spotted a bed roll in the building Myrina had commandeered for our operations, as well as some furniture. It had been too small for Thulga, so it could only have been Misa’s. She had probably moved into the office, as well.

It took a few knocks on the window, but Misa eventually answered the door. She was already in her nightgown though the sun hadn’t quite fully set.

“Carter? Is there an issue?” Misa asked, hurriedly combing her fingers through her hair to straighten it.

“More like news,” I replied. “And I apologize for the late visit, but the Samhain Clan is heading out in force tomorrow. If we want to make money on Mana Bombs and Mana Swords, now is probably the last chance to do so. They won’t need them nearly as much once the Shadefall Clan is dealt with. You may want to accompany the army with our supplies.”

Misa’s eyebrows rose. “Understood. I’ll keep an eye out and leave at first light by horseback. I should be able to catch

up with the army before they attack.” She tapped one finger against her cheek. “Taking trades of looted goods for weapons should be quite profitable. Perhaps I’ll try to sell more than just Mana Bombs and Mana Swords.”

“On that front, I’ll need some of those types of goods back. I’m headed out, too, and I won’t have my group under equipped just because the Samhain Clan couldn’t afford weapons for mercenaries.” I held out a hand, which was soon filled with one of the spare bags of holding we’d been using to transport our goods between worlds.

After making a quick plan to check in with her after the battle, I bid Misa a good night’s rest. Then, I headed to my second destination of the night. Fortunately, Galbatorix the wizard was still leaning over his desk, in the same place he’d been the last time I’d seen him.

All that napping during office hours probably meant he had no issues with staying up late. This time, he was poring over a book when I opened the door. Surprisingly, he seemed more alert than he normally was during my visits.

“Oh, it’s you!” Galbatorix stood, stretching out his back after leaning over the counter for too long. “Tell me, do you have some of that incredible metal you brought me before?”

I grinned and reached into my bag of holding. “All that and more... check this out. First of all, here’s more of the copper wire you wanted. You said you and your lodge were using it to make enchanted jewelry? Well, have I got something for you... here’s a silver chain, a white gold ring, and a few gemstones.”

“Incredible craftsmanship. If the metal is as pure as what you’ve given me so far, then this is worth many times its weight in humble coins. And these gemstones...” His eyes grew wide. “Are these diamonds? I’ve never seen them shine so...”

“Moissanite, actually. It’s extremely rare in nature, far more so than diamonds.”

“Remarkable... a new gemstone. I shall have to search the lodge’s records for its uses. Does it always come so flawless and beautiful?” Galbatorix asked.

“Naturally? I doubt it. This one was probably made in a laboratory on my home world. We have ways of using heat and pressure to simulate the environment needed to create a perfect gemstone.” I gave Galbatorix a shrug.

“Interesting. Very interesting, indeed. I must say, your home world must be an incredible place. I was debating doing this before, but now...” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a thin jade rod.

Its entire length was inscribed with tiny delicate symbols.

“What is this?” I asked, holding the rod up to examine the runes.

“It’s a rudimentary communication device. While not of the highest quality, it does have the greatest possible range. When exposed to candle flame, the light will be visible from both ends, and detectable even within a bag of holding.”

He handed me a scroll. “This will tell you how to use it. I will try to send you the results of my studies of these new materials so you know what my lodge would pay most for, when next we meet.”

I rolled the rod around in my hands while I read through the scroll the wizard had provided. The runes on the rod were remarkably similar to Morse code.

“Very well, Galbatorix. I look forward to our next meeting.” I grinned. “May all our future dealings be as profitable as this one.”

We shook hands, and I soon felt a lot better about all the goods I’d taken off Misa’s hands, removing them from the market. Galbatorix and his lodge really were willing to pay a pretty penny—if that penny was a fat gold coin and several thousand of its brothers—for a few trinkets from Earth. I could have found that stash of jewelry in the drawers of every married woman back home.



With the last of my obligations in town settled, I returned to the tavern to reunite with Sakura, Bridget, and Myrina. When I slipped in the door, I had to stifle a laugh.

Bridget lay face down on the table, fast asleep. Sakura had her horn stuck in one of the walls. While Myrina was still standing on a tabletop, proclaiming her superiority. An unconscious orc woman lay nearby.

Grabbing Sakura from behind, I helped her tug herself free.

“Well, that was humiliating...” she grumbled.

“What, getting stuck?” I chuckled. “I’m sure it would happen to everyone, if they had horns.”

“No. I missed the person I was trying to headbutt...” Sakura muttered.

I chuckled again, then turned to Myrina. “Myrina! Let’s head on back. We want to get a good night’s sleep before we march tomorrow.”

“It seems even champions must rest, but for good measure...” Myrina knocked back the rest of her tankard in one long pull before handing it back to the bartender.

With a grin she threw her left arm around my shoulder. “Now to enjoy a champion’s prize!”

The rowdy tavern cheered. Thankfully everyone was in such a drunken stupor that my absence had gone completely unnoticed. If any of them did remember, they wouldn’t come tomorrow morning.

Not letting go of me, Myrina picked Bridget up with one hand and tossed her over her right shoulder. I hauled Sakura up over mine. Kicking the tavern door open, Myrina dragged me out into the street and back to the castle.

“Yer back earlier than expected, Lady Myrina,” the guard smirked.

Myrina shrugged. “Duty calls and I must be ready to answer.”

With that, we tucked in for the night.



We awoke to the sound of a bell and pounding on the door.

“Myrina, I thought you weren’t going to do this anymore...” Cyra groaned from the other side of the door. “I swear, if you’re hung-over, I’ll—”

Myrina opened the door a moment later. “I’m fine, Cyra. I take it we’re heading out?”

“Soon,” Cyra promised. “Get down to the kitchen. This’ll be your last chance to sit down and eat a proper breakfast. Rations while on campaign tend to be harsh. But remember, don’t stuff yourself. We’ve got a long way to march.”

“I know. I know...” Myrina grumbled.

She turned back to the rest of us. “Time to get up and get moving, everybody! We’ll need to collect those two mercenaries I hired, too.”

I had secured some extra hangover cure potions for everybody during my last stay here and had stowed them under the bed Myrina had given me. I figured either one or both of my companions would need one sooner or later. So, between that and the potion Cyra had brought for Myrina we soon had Sakura and Bridget back on their feet. Together, we ate one last meal in the castle before hunting down Myrina’s two mercenaries and leaving the castle.

Much to Myrina’s annoyance, Elder Thalassa remembered to send two of her own warriors with us. Each were over level 80 and followed us, trailing close behind Myrina’s squad.

Myrina clearly didn’t appreciate the babysitters.

“The two of you aren’t just going to stand there when we get into a fight, are you?” Myrina asked, face locked in a scowl.

“Our orders are to ensure you finish your mission alive and intact,” the larger of the two women said. “Our orders are not to assist you in battle.”

Myrina sighed. “In other words, you’re just going to stand there while we do all the fighting and otherwise just be a pain in my side. Well, in that case keep out of our way!”

Elder Thalassa’s agents stayed behind from our group, watching Myrina carefully. The way Myrina occasionally glanced over her shoulder at them, I could see she was clearly hoping to ditch them, sooner or later.

“So... were you able to get those supplies you mentioned?” Myrina leaned in close and whispered to me.

I nodded, then opened my cloak. In a pocket sewn on the inside was the bag of holding I’d gotten from Misa.

Myrina darted in for a quick kiss, using the moment to snatch the bag from the pocket in my cloak as she did. “Don’t worry, I’ve got a plan to split these supplies with Cyra without her knowing where they came from!”

Not long after that, we found ourselves on the road.

When Cyra had said we were planning a march, I thought it would be more akin to a lengthy walk on foot. I should have known better. The introduction of the System had given people superhuman strength and endurance. Even those without movement abilities could cover ground remarkably quickly, given a few levels.

Our march turned out to be more like a never-ending sprint. Wind whipping across our faces, we ran in neat, even rows. Hundreds of warrior women kept pace with one another around us, not stopping for anything. The speed of the world whizzing by reminded me of looking out the window of a car on a quick drive through town. I tried to count the miles passing beneath me. I’d never been a marathon runner, but I was pretty sure we ran a marathon’s worth of distance in the first half hour, then continued on for several more before stopping for lunch.

I finally had a good chance to count up our forces. All told, there were just a little shy of a thousand people with us, though some of those were camp followers like Misa, who

struggled to keep up on horseback so she could sell her wares for a higher price at the front.

It was a respectable army for any medieval force, and that's really what this was—merely with enhanced physical abilities far beyond normal through the power of the System. I'd been worried for a long time that Crownhill and by extension Earth, would be in a bad position once the integration completed and other factions could cross over.

But building up a force like this one for Crownhill wasn't completely unreasonable. Certainly not any time soon, but with our current growth rate and if I managed to deal with the remaining Kings of Crownhill County Prison cleanly without wiping out their subordinates, we might be able to field a force like this one in a few years. Hell, it was possible we could field a force bigger than this if some of the shards we united with next included more broken fragments of Earth.

Once we reached the place where we were to stop for lunch, Myrina moved our group up next to Cyra's. We ate beside her warriors and chatted for a bit. It was perfectly natural to the mercenaries and warriors under the command of the two sisters to be grouped together. After all, both groups were sworn to a special mission the rest of the army wasn't privy to.

Cyra and Myrina chatted, with the older sister giving her younger sibling the occasional bit of advice related to leadership and command. I unabashedly listened in. A lot of it was good advice I might have to use myself, though commanding a modern Earth army would be different from commanding an Amazonian one. But leadership and command of smaller units were the same.

At one point during their chat, Myrina pleaded with her older sister to share her snacks. "I'm starving!" Myrina groaned. "Just a few?"

"Myrina, you're eating right now." Cyra pointed to the rations in Myrina's hands. "Finish your own food before asking for mine."

“I know you have something nice in your bag of holding. Just let me see!” Myrina grabbed for the pouch on Cyra’s waist.

“No way, get your own.” Cyra grabbed her bag of holding and held it at arms length away from Myrina.

“What if this is the last time you see me?” Myrina pleaded with her sister, eyes wide. “What if I die in glorious combat during this mission? Your last memory of me will be of you withholding the delicious snacks I know you have.”

Cyra rolled her eyes and sighed. Finally, she relented. “Alright, fine. Just... leave some for me. I plan to celebrate once our mission is complete and we rejoin the main army for the siege.”

“Yay! Best big sister ever!”

Myrina wasted no time going through Cyra’s bag of holding. She rummaged around, her arm deep in Cyra’s as she took out a dozen of Bridget’s baked goods I’d paid Cyra for my teleportation with. My friend wolfed them down, one after another.

Cyra shook her head, unable to watch. The moment her back was turned, Myrina made her move. She pulled out the small pouch I’d given her, quickly emptying the Mana Bombs and Mana Swords into Cyra’s bag of holding. The next time Cyra counted her supply of weapons and Mana Bombs, there’d be far more than she remembered.

Soon we were on our way again, but this time in a much smaller group. Myrina and Cyra’s team would arrive well in advance of the rest of the army. That should make infiltrating the city to destroy the various workshops easier. This whole mission felt surprisingly similar to the dungeon dive we’d done to get my first bag of holding. That feeling grew even more intense when we arrived at the gates of the city.

“There she is, Shadefall.” Cyra sighed. “Our enemies once again.”

Before us stretched tall walls. Unlike in the dungeon, though, these walls looked worse for wear. Instead of being

smooth, continuous chunks of stone, these had been repaired several times and there were whole sections of wall that had been replaced with blocks of a different color. The remainder of the walls weren't in much better shape. Welts, gashes, and burns littered their surface.

“Well, time for us to find a way in. Spread out!” Cyra ordered the other teams.

She hadn't been placed in charge of all the infiltration teams, but her experience and reputation meant they all listened to her anyway. Well, everyone except for the two women Elder Thalassa had sent to keep an eye on Myrina.

I decided to do something about that.

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-EIGHT

“Cyra, can I have a moment of your time?” I asked.

Cyra looked at me with surprise, but then shrugged. She waved her warriors away and took me off to the side.

“What’s the matter, Carter?”

I sucked in a breath. “We’re supposed to be infiltrating the city, right?”

Cyra nodded.

“You and the other Amazons are going to stand out like a sore thumb.”

Cyra grimaced. “I’m aware it won’t be like the dungeon run. We’ll have to get a bit creative entering the city. But the other teams are all on the smaller side, and Myrina shrank herself down recently.”

“She did, but those two didn’t.” I waved a hand behind me in the direction of Elder Thalassa’s two warriors.

Cyra went silent for a moment before sighing. “You’re right. They’re going to throw away any chance Myrina and the rest of you have of accomplishing her mission the moment they show their faces. I know Elder Thalassa isn’t stupid; she probably intended for Myrina to fail right off the bat.”

“She seems to have something against Myrina,” I probed, hoping Cyra could illuminate some of the strange politics in the Samhain Clan I had yet to be privy to.

Unfortunately, Cyra only shrugged. “I suspect she has some political scheme in mind for Myrina. The only reason she didn’t have anything planned for me is because my mother needs an heir. Don’t get me wrong, she plans on ruling for many centuries, but it’s not wise to have a matriarch without a successor. It leaves the clan vulnerable to assassins.”

Cyra pinched the bridge of her nose between calloused fingers. “But you’re right about those two following Myrina giving everything away. I won’t let them interfere with the success of the mission, whether Elder Thalassa ordered them here or not.”

“Besides,” I added, “with their levels, they’d help this mission much more by joining your team than by trailing behind Myrina and ruining our mission.”

“Agreed.” Cyra nodded.

With my prompting to set things in motion, Cyra marched over to confront the pair who’d been tailing Myrina. They started talking. Shortly thereafter, they started shouting. I wasn’t sure whether or not she would succeed, but I recognized an opportunity to give them the slip when I saw one.

“Myrina, I think this is our time to go.”

Myrina was staring at the city intently with a frown on her face and a look of concentration I rarely saw in her eyes.

“Myrina,” I asked, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Carter. It’s just...” She sighed. “I’ve never really been in command before—not on a secret mission like this one. I need to put on my serious face,” she said, staring ahead sternly.

Spinning on her heel, she turned to the mercenaries who lingered behind us, making occasional small talk with Sakura and Bridget. “Alright, you heard Carter... move out!”

We were gone before Elder Thalassa’s people even knew we were missing. By the time they figured it out, we were well on our way along the main road into the city, approaching on foot. That meant we were close enough that anyone on the



walls would see us running from two ferocious high-level Amazonian warriors and react accordingly.

Cyra must have convinced both of Elder Thalassa's minions that they'd be able to protect Myrina better by making sure her distraction mission succeeded, because they didn't come chasing after us.

"Ah, free at last!" Myrina tapped my arm and smiled. "Thanks, Carter."

"Just doing my part, Captain." I grinned back at her and gave her a wink.

Myrina returned my wink. "Hmm. I think I like the sound of that... Captain Myrina."

We made it all the way to the city gates before we ran into our first obstacle. The line moved quickly and Myrina had a few silver coins in hand to pay the standard fare for a few traveling merchants carting goods from one city to the next. I only hoped we were able to slip through without trouble.

It wouldn't be shocking to see armed and armored guards, either, since traveling merchants walking through the wilderness still needed to fend off the occasional monster during these uncertain times with the Samhain Clan at war and unable to fully patrol the roads.

"Names, classes, and jobs," the man at the gates asked.

"Uh... here's the coin for the entrance fee!" Myrina held out a handful of silver.

The man glanced at the pocket full of coins in Myrina's hands, but didn't take them.

"Sorry, Miss, I'll take that in a bit, but the paperwork is the important part. You can give me the entrance fee afterwards." The guard picked up his quill again and started scribbling.

Inwardly, I cursed. Names were easy enough, as were jobs—but Myrina's class was Amazonian War Chief. That was exactly the sort of thing that would raise suspicion.

We could lie, but odds were better than even that they had someone with the Examine skill nearby making sure we

answered truthfully. Were we doomed to fail before we'd even entered the gates? I cursed inwardly, already planning for our escape.

“Names, classes, and jobs,” the guard reiterated, his quill poised over a scrap of parchment. “Hurry up, you’re holding up the line.”

“Myrina, Carter, Bridget, Sakura, Lark, and Robin.” Myrina gestured to us and then to her hired mercenaries behind us. “As for our jobs and classes... I’m a humble warrior and my job is lawyer.”

I choked on my breath. What was Myrina doing?

The man scribbled the information down on his sheet of paper, staring at Myrina skeptically. He shot a questioning glance at another guard behind him, who waved his hand back and forth in an uncertain gesture.

“Wait right there a moment,” he instructed Myrina, pointing off to the side.

Myrina stepped to the side while the rest of our companions introduced themselves one by one. Sakura and Bridget went through fine, as did the mercenaries, Lark and Robin. When he got to me, the guard’s eyebrows rose when I told him my class and job.

“Did you say your job was Artificer?” the man asked skeptically.

I nodded. “You heard right.”

“Prove it,” the man demanded. “If I have a mana circuit shaped like this, where would the power source go?”

The man flipped over the scrap of parchment he’d been writing on and quickly drew out a circle with a series of familiar lines on it. I’d seen similar depictions before while going over the System-provided blueprints and quickly pointed out the right answer.

“You would connect the power source here and here.” I pointed out two points on the diagram.

The guard nodded in approval. “I can’t test you more thoroughly than that, but all seems to be in order. You can go on in.”

“And my... uh... lawyer?” I asked.

“She can go in too.” He waved us through. “The Samhains wouldn’t have an Artificer under anything but lock and key.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, not sure how I felt about that.

I had a lot of questions I wanted to ask the man. Some were about my class and some about the Samhain Clan, but I was forced to bite my tongue on all of them. We headed in.

Once clear of the guards I lowered my voice and whispered to Myrina. “How’d you get away with lying like that? I know they Examined us. I felt it, and the guard using it was pretty high level.”

Myrina smiled and winked. “Magic ring. It lowers the rarity of my class from Amazonian War Chief to just warrior—one of the common-grade classes it comes from.”

“And lawyer?” I asked skeptically.

“That’s my real job.” Myrina shrugged.

“Lawyer? Really?”

“Yes, really!”

I shook my head in disbelief. From the looks on Bridget’s and Sakura’s faces, they couldn’t believe it either. We walked through Shadefall City, much as I had before with Cyra and Myrina on our dungeon run. Only this time, it all seemed muted and grayer.

At first, I thought it was all just in my head, but the more I examined our surroundings the more I realized it was true. The colorful walls and banners I’d seen all around us were worn through. I remembered there being a lot of stone buildings with tile roofs back then, and although there were still plenty of stone foundations, the majority of buildings were now made of rough-sawn wood with thatched roofs in the same style as Valkyrie’s Watch.

A solid third of the cobblestones in the streets were missing. And those that remained had been repaired, with many of them being either misshapen or poorly placed. The neat and orderly streets I'd seen in the dungeon were no more. Here, little more than a general mob of people pushed in one direction or another.

“Is something wrong, Carter?” Bridget asked as she peered at me curiously.

“Nothing, I'm fine. Myrina, where do we go from here?” I asked.

Myrina pointed ahead. “Two more streets and then we'll turn to the left. There will be a signpost on the right, just outside the workshop.”

“Have you been here recently?” Sakura asked.

Myrina shook her head. “No. I memorized the map back in the castle. I figured it would help to know where our target was, and even better to know all the escape routes.”

“You have a good head on your shoulders after all, Myrina,” I said.

Myrina cocked her head back and narrowed her eyes at me. “What do you mean, ‘after all’?”

Fortunately we came across something familiar not long after and I was able to distract her. I pointed ahead of us. “Hey, Myrina, is that what I think it is?”

Myrina's eyes followed my finger, lighting upon a dilapidated corner shop. During our dungeon run, it had been a high-end clothing store—high-end enough to sell the bag of holding I still wore strapped to my pocket. Now, though, it was looking worse for wear. The fine glass windows had been replaced with wooden boards. It had to have happened long ago, though—long enough for those boards to turn gray with time and age.

“Yeah, I think it is!” A smile spread across Myrina's face, though she quickly squashed it. “Maybe we can check it out when the war is over. But right now we've got a job to do.”

She nodded to a lane ahead to our left. “We turn left there, and then the workshop we’re looking for will be just ahead.”

We turned left where she’d indicated and then continued on until we saw the signpost off to the right-hand side of the lane that Myrina mentioned. Sure enough, it was right where she’d said it would be. We gathered around it to regroup, surveying the workshop we were supposed to break into.

I looked up and down the street. It didn’t look all that upscale—at least not compared to how I remembered how things had been. In fact, this whole part of the city looked rather rundown. This neighborhood had been converted from a shopping district into an industrial zone at some point. It still had the bones of inviting architecture that had once housed store fronts, but that was it. Now, it had the tired gray and grimy feel of a place people went to every day without enjoying it.

“So... how do we do this?” Myrina turned to me.

I stared at the workshop, then glanced up and down the street again. I made careful note of the smashed windows of nearby buildings.

“It’s the latter half of the workday, but we can’t exactly wait for nightfall because by then, the rest of the army will be here. I think the best we can do, is to break in and make a mess.” I gave her a helpless shrug.

“Okay.” Bridget’s fingers tightened on the hilts of her daggers. “I just heard something behind us, near the gates. I think whatever Cyra is doing to distract the militia has started.”

Myrina nodded. “Alright then, breaking and entering it is. Here, I brought something for everyone...”

Myrina pulled out a group of masks that closely resembled ski masks and each of us put them on.

As I put my mask on, I groaned inwardly. I’d come here to help Myrina. How had it come to this? I’d gone from supporting my old friend to conducting clandestine military operations with her.

What we were about to do wasn't something I was looking forward to. Had I known what helping Myrina's family would entail, I probably wouldn't be here with her now. I steeled my nerves far more than I had before my fight with Cromwell. My mother wouldn't be happy with how this would look.

Hopefully her soul was already far beyond the reach of the System and she couldn't see what I was up to now.

"Let's get this over with..." I grumbled.

Off to either side of me, Bridget and Sakura looked a bit awkward. Myrina had grim determination etched on her face. For the mercenaries, Lark and Robin, this seemed to be business as usual.

In the distance, we heard shouts loud enough that even I could hear them with my low Perception build. I flipped on Eldritch Augmentation to allow me to borrow the stats of a more physical class, and I could hear things more clearly. I heard shouts from Cyra, as well as a whole lot of militia. As I listened, they transitioned from shouting to fighting.

"That's our signal," Bridget confirmed. She'd been listening the whole time.

We approached the workshop, six awfully suspicious-looking masked strangers. Stepping forward, Myrina kicked down the front door. As soon as she was through, she shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Everyone on the ground! This is a robbery!"

## CHAPTER

# FIFTY-NINE

There was a moment of surprised silence at first as people looked up from their benches. Rows of workers sat lined up in columns with basic tools like chisels and hammers arrayed on a long table before them. It reminded me of the goblin workshops that I had set up back home, only instead of goblins there was an array of humanoids from throughout the city.

The tools they used were merely hand tools, each meant for carving into or inscribing runes strictly through the force of one's own power. From the state of the assembly line I could see, each step in the process of making an enchanted item probably took a full day.

But despite the slow nature of the work, I couldn't help but recognize the items they were working on. Each worker held a monster core before them as the centerpiece of their enchantment. Through delicate manipulations of mana and their own job skills, they were building forms around the core that would allow whoever used the item to create a temporary apparition of the monster the core had once come from.

It was the same weapon the assassin from the Shadefall Clan had used indiscriminately in Valkyrie's Watch. I rubbed my chest over the spot where she'd put a hole in me. I hadn't forgotten about that attempt on my life. And, truth be told, I was still more than a little angry over it.

"Stop gawking and get on the ground!" one of the mercenaries yelled—I think it was Lark—repeating Myrina's order.

Even with several masked intruders screaming at them, the workers seemed afraid to leave their desks. Apparently breaks were a rare thing in this workshop.

“Who do you think you are, barging into this workshop?!” a small woman with distinctly rat-like features growled.

Despite her diminutive size, she met Lark’s glare with one of her own. She had a whip in her calloused hands and was in the middle of uncoiling it in preparation for use.

“This Workshop is owned by the Shadefall family, and its workers are under contract. Wait here for the city militia to come arrest you and you might be lucky enough to get away with just a year of forced labor as punishment for—”

“You talk too much,” Lark replied, annoyed at the woman’s barking. She swung her sword and the rat woman’s head was severed at the neck.

The Ratkin overseer still wore a look of surprised confusion on her face as her severed head tumbled across the ground. Blood leaked from the severed stump of her neck and started spreading across the floorboards when her body toppled to the side.

That finally stirred the workers out of their uncertain stupor. They stood, one by one, rising to their feet and then getting onto their knees behind their benches.

I peered curiously at the nearest worker—a young woman who looked mostly human, save for her blueish skin. “Please... my family needs the money, and jobs are scarce in Shadefall. My mother and little brother... I can’t afford to die...” the young woman begged when she saw the naked blade in my hands.

When I approached closer, I revised my guess at her age downward. She looked like a woman, but only because she’d aged faster than she should have because of the hard life she’d lived. She had the face of someone hardly out of childhood, though she bore the calloused and bandaged hands of someone who’d been working with them for a long time.



“I’m not going to kill you. Turn your head to the side,” I instructed her as gently as I could. She was nervous and afraid, so I pushed her hair back for her. As I’d suspected, there were marks on her neck and shoulders roughly matching what I’d expect from a whip. Seeing them, I grew increasingly confident that how the Shadefall treated their labor force was little better than slaves.

What a mess this was. I didn’t like what I found myself doing for the Samhain Clan, but I didn’t like the Shadefall Clan, either.

I’d always had it in my head that if Earth ever met aliens, they’d be an advanced society—one that had moved beyond all the issues that plagued humanity. I hadn’t thought that we’d be the ones who’d have to teach the universe right from wrong.

“Take the tools and the crafting supplies. Hurry, we don’t have much time!” Myrina yelled.

She ran from table to table, scraping the hand tools and items off of them and into her bag of holding.

“I found their supply closet!” Bridget yelled. “There are lots of monster cores in here, already in bags of holding. I’ll just take it all.”

“We should take the money, too. I bet this one”—Sakura gave the body on the floor a nudge with her boot—“has a safe in her office filled with emergency funds. If we take that, they’ll have a hard time employing anyone.”

That might have worked back on Earth, but I had a feeling the workers here weren’t paid particularly well by our standards. Much of their reward for their labor probably came in the form of not being whipped. Still, breaking into a place and not taking the money seemed more than a little foolish, so I ran after Sakura.

Sure enough, there was a safe in the small room in the corner of the building, just as Sakura had predicted. I thought we’d have to smash it open, but much to my surprise, the lock was magical instead of mechanical.

“Uh... I don't know how to get through that...” Sakura pointed at the glowing symbols on the metal box. “Should I just try to smash the whole thing open?”

I shook my head. “No. This is actually easier for me to pick than a mundane lock. Give me a minute...”

The lock itself was little more than an arcane puzzle centered around three knobs. In terms of complexity, it was similar to a traditional lock, the only difference being that the mechanicals of the lock were inscribed right on the surface of the box for everyone to see.

That meant anyone with an artificer class like mine could simply look at the diagrams and see how the box was supposed to open. I was surprised it worked in a city with so many enchanters. Perhaps everyone outside of a few supervisors were merely crafters and genuine enchanters were more rare than I thought.

With a click, I opened the locking mechanism. The safe slid open and, sure enough, there was a bag of holding in it. When I pulled it out and handed it to her, Sakura checked it.

“There's a lot of gold in here. I think this is it!” Sakura said as she stuck her hand into the bag.

I had my eyes on a different prize. The bag of holding hadn't been the only thing in the office safe. “Jackpot...” I muttered to myself.

**Mana Manipulation for Dummies: Reading this skill book will provide a permanent 20% boost to Mana manipulation while crafting items, allowing the crafter to create smaller and more detailed items while also conserving mana.**

**Enchanter's Cookbook: Contains 100 basic blueprints for hot-selling enchantment items for markets catering to people under level 100.**

**Thaumaturgical Thermodynamics: Master the art of using magic to convert between different expressions of energy. This book provides a guide on**

**applying artificing for the manufacturing of siege engines and other kinetic weapons.**

**Intermediate Warding: Improve upon your basic understanding of alarm and barrier wards, enhancing mundane defenses with magical defenses.**

Until now, I'd mostly been using Artificer with nothing more than the raw job the System had given me. Only now did I realize how much more was out there that I had to learn. From the looks of things, these books were the equivalent of both skills and proficiencies for jobs. If I read through all of these, my capabilities within my chosen profession would surge.

My mind went to the other workshops and the other Samhain strike teams that would be raiding the safes of their respective targets. They certainly wouldn't have a use for these books, but I certainly did. I would have to make doubly sure Misa bought up as many of them as she could get, no matter the cost.

It was a good thing I was now flush with gold.

I thought nothing could interrupt my good mood as I shoved those books into my bag of holding. Nothing, that is, until Sakura and I left the office and found the mercenaries Lark and Robin poised over the prone form of the girl I'd inspected for whip marks earlier.

She lay on the ground, face pressed into the floorboards and gently sobbing to herself as Lark raised her sword overhead. While I watched, Lark brought her sword down toward the sobbing girl's neck. My body moved the moment I saw this, though when my brain caught up and I realized what was happening. I made no move to stop myself. I leaned on Eldritch Augmentation to empower myself as I drew my sword and placed it between the girl's neck and the mercenary's falling sword.

*Clang!*

Our swords locked, and Lark looked up at me in surprise. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

“I should be asking you that question,” I spat back. “What the hell is this?”

“I’m following orders,” Lark replied.

I glanced at Robin, who just gave me a helpless shrug as she pinned the girl in place with her boot.

“We were ordered to rob the place. Not to kill everyone inside!” I hissed back.

“We were ordered to destroy the tools used to craft summoning stones. These workers comprise a substantial portion of those tools. If we kill them all, it will take months for the Shadefall family to train new ones. By then, it’ll all be over,” Lark replied.

I shook my head. “No. That’s not how this works. You don’t kill the workers of a rebellious city you plan to conquer—especially not those who are only working because they’ll be whipped, otherwise.”

“Move aside,” Lark said.

“No.”

“Don’t think I can’t make you.”

My eyes lit with a sinister purple light as I let the first layer of Mania take me. “You can try.”

Lark scowled at me and I watched crimson light envelop her sword. Mana Bolts sprang to life in the air around me as I cast them two at a time. Time seemed to slow down as I saw Sakura and Robin both moving out of the corners of my eyes.

“Stop this at once!” Myrina demanded.

I wasn’t sure where she’d come from, but all of a sudden she was between Lark and me with a scowl on her face.

“He’s keeping us from doing what needs to be done,” Lark growled to Myrina.

“She wants to execute everyone here!” I gestured to the terrified workers cowering around us. They flinched at my words.

“Robin, Sakura, guard the door,” Myrina ordered with a surprising firmness to her voice. Both Robin and Sakura found themselves obeying her orders before they even thought to question them.

Myrina turned to me. “Now explain, Carter, and do it quickly. Cyra is fighting as we speak to buy us this time.”

“Myrina, were your orders actually to kill the workers here?” I fought to keep the tension out of my voice.

Myrina sucked in a breath. “We... we weren’t supposed to leave anything of the workshop standing by the time we were done. Those were my orders. Whether that involved killing the workers or not is up to personal interpretation. You have to understand that this is a civil war we’ve been fighting for a long time. Every day it continues, is another day our forces on our border territories remain divided. It is another day that costs us lives in those cities that stayed loyal to us. These...” Myrina scowled at the silently sobbing woman at my feet, then shrugged. “They’re traitors.”

“They’re just workers, Myrina. They don’t know anything about the Samhain Clan or the Shadefall Clan. All they know is that if they do their job, they’ll get paid instead of getting beaten. Killing them might slow the Shadefall Clan down, but what then?”

Lark narrowed her eyes, shifting her grip on her sword while Robin, Sakura, and Bridget all seemed to hang on my words.

“You’ll defeat the Shadefall Clan soon enough. You told me this city used to make all your enchantments. How quickly do you think they’ll get back to working for the Samhain Clan when you slaughtered the last batch of workers? How many citizens here do you think will want to study enchantment when they know falling afoul of you Amazonians will get them killed?”

“This is the way wars are fought, Carter.” Myrina had seemed firm at first, but I sensed the uncertainty in her.

“Not where I’m from, they’re not.” I shook my head. “What your family has been doing for generations isn’t working, Myrina. You say this is how wars are fought, but maybe that’s just because nobody thought to try a more civilized way.”

Myrina scowled. “You’re asking me to choose between trusting you and trusting my family.”

“I know I’m asking a lot, but—” I was silenced by Myrina slamming her sword into its sheath.

She leaned forward, planting a kiss on my hooded cheek. “Obviously I’m going to choose you, dummy.” She pulled back and gave my shoulder a punch. “Now come on, let’s get these people out of here before we light this place up.”

When I just stood there, mouth agape, Myrina frowned. “And put those Mana Bolts away, I already laid down the oil, so one stray spark and this whole place will go up in flames.”

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY

After letting the workers flee into the city, Myrina lit the workshop behind us on fire. The old wood caught in moments, and before long the entire workshop was going up in flames.

“Mission accomplished. Time to go,” Lark said.

She’d been glaring at me since our altercation. She was Myrina’s mercenary and prepared to follow Myrina’s orders, but she clearly thought letting the workers go was me being soft rather than pragmatic.

I was just glad that she was dedicated enough to her mercenary contract that when Myrina gave the order to stop, she stopped.

“Which way is our escape route?” I asked Myrina.

“Behind us and to the left is a sewer grate. It continues on through the outer wall. It’ll be a bit of a jump to the base of the wall, but we can make it.” Myrina jerked her head behind us.

“What about Cyra and the others?” I asked.

“She can handle herself... probably.” Myrina cast a hesitant glance back toward the city gates. The clash of weapons had gotten more intense, and from where we were, even I could hear the sounds of heavy fighting, mixed in with more than one Amazonian scream.

“That doesn’t sound like she’s handling herself,” Bridget muttered, a frown on her face.

“Crap. You’re right. Let’s go!” Myrina took off at a jog, and the rest of us followed her.

It wasn’t long before we came upon Cyra’s distraction. And what a distraction it was.

Cyra stood in the center of the street, a juggernaut of steel and fury. Her crimson hair tied back behind her head streamed behind her as she smashed her way through enemy lines. She had one of my Mana Swords in either hand and all around her were summoned monsters.

She battered the shell of an enormous turtle with the sword in one hand. Meanwhile, she cut through balls of fire from another summoned monster with the other. Far from overwhelmed, she was chipping away at the shell of the turtle beneath her. Before long, it would disperse into the mana it was made from and she’d be on to her next target.

Unfortunately, the others in her party lacked Cyra’s fearlessness in combat. Two Amazonian warriors lay dead on the ground, one of them from the pair Elder Thalassa had sent to keep an eye on Myrina. If Cyra lost any more support, I feared she might get overrun with more summoned monsters than even she could handle.

Despite the ferocity of her strikes, each strike of her Mana Swords could only convert so much kinetic energy into magical energy; each blow only dealt so much damage. Had Cyra been fighting physical monsters, she’d no doubt have already cut a swath straight through them all the way back to the gates, but these specters were a tougher challenge.

“If we don’t jump in, they’re probably going to die,” Robin said and then shrugged, casting a glance at Myrina. She seemed not to care, either way. To her, this was just another day on the job.

“Dammit, ” Myrina hissed, “now *we* need to be a distraction for *her*. We need something that can draw their attention away to buy time for us all to reach the gates.” She shot me a hopeful look.



I frowned. “Give me a moment, I might actually have something.”

I’d stashed a wire circle from a car’s sunshade—the kind that folded up into a coil and then sprang apart into a sunshade all at once—in my bag of holding for summoning Sharky. I withdrew the coil of wire and tossed it on the ground where it was supposed to unravel into the perfect circle I needed to perform my summons. I’d tested this wire as a summoning circle once before, but in the heat of the moment, mistakes happen.

When it uncoiled on the ground, it caught on the edge of a cobblestone and bent. With a curse, I squatted down and straightened it out. Eventually, I got things right and dark mist swirled within the circle.

A huge ghostly shark appeared, already with sinister tendrils writhing around its mouth from my Mania. The shadows around him spread out to coat the streets. If anything could catch more attention than a battle-hungry Amazonian warrior wielding two swords as she cut through monster after monster while screaming at the top of her lungs, it was Sharky.

“Sharky, see those ghostly monster things? They’re today’s snack. Go get ‘em!” I pointed at the things attacking Cyra.

“NOM NOM!”

Sharky shot forward with his tendrils extended. He managed to get surprisingly close to the group of monsters before they reacted. None of the militia moved to interfere, though I wasn’t sure if that was because they were afraid of him, or if they assumed he was one of their monsters.

The first thing Sharky did was bite the turtle Cyra had been fighting in half. Though he was a lower level than Cyra, he had no problems dealing damage to spectral foes. Cyra jumped back in shock and surprise at the sight of this strange new monster, but the rest of us wasted no time as Sharky drew the attention of the crowd of ghostly beasts.

“Big Sis! It’s us. We’re done. Let’s get out of here!” Myrina yelled.

“Don’t harm the giant shark ghost summons, he’s with me!” I warned just before Cyra attacked Sharky. Cyra took a few steps back, seemingly surprised that Sharky didn’t lunge for her.

Cyra pointed a sword toward the other end of the city. “The other two workshops haven’t gone up!”

Myrina shook her head. “Either the other groups completed their mission or they failed. It’s time to go!”

Cyra’s eyes darted between the unburned workshops in the distance and her younger sister. She came to a decision while cutting into the spectral head of an octopus monster. A moment later, Sharky took a chomp out of it and finished it off.

“Fine, let’s go. To the gates!” Cyra yelled. At her order, her subordinates peeled off for the gates.

“There they are, but they look to be more heavily guarded than they were on the way in!” Robin pointed ahead of us.

Sure enough, the formerly empty towers back behind the gates were now crowded with militia. No doubt each of those militia could summon a dozen or more spectral monsters, if the need arose. And if we tried to break through the gates, then the need would definitely have arisen.

“Crap! We can’t take them.” Cyra skidded to a stop. “We need to find another escape route.”

“Myrina, you have the map memorized. Which way should we go?” I asked.

All eyes turned to Myrina.

“Uh... this way is the nearest exit!” Myrina started running down a side street and the rest of us followed.

We ran through the streets, no longer trying to hide who we were or what we were doing. We had to shove aside a cart to make it through a crowded marketplace, much to the frustration of its owner.

“My cabbages!” the man behind the cart yelled.

“Sorry!” I yelled back as we ran past.

Myrina led us through an elaborate series of turns. She seemed to know exactly where she was going, so everybody followed her without question.

“Crap! This one’s heavily guarded, too. Next one,” Myrina yelled, turning us once more when the side gate she’d led us to was guarded by several dozen militia.

Cyra cocked her head to one side. “One of the other targets is nearby. We should see if the other team accomplished their mission and made it out. If not, we can escape with them!”

Myrina took us on a quick detour. Rounding the corner, we found one of the other elite teams of Amazonian warriors struggling with the lock on the door of the workshop.

“You’re still not inside?” Cyra asked, flabbergasted.

If she’d still been fighting to buy time for the others, she’d be on her last legs by now.

“We just got here! We took a wrong turn,” the leader of this squad of Amazonian elites snapped. “And this lock is impossible!”

One of the team was hunched over, trying to open the magical lock with a set of mundane lockpicks. No wonder they hadn’t had any luck with it.

“Oh for the love of...” Cyra raised a boot and slammed it into the door, shearing the bolt holding the doors shut with one swift blow.

I jumped up behind her. “Hey everybody, if you don’t want to die, get out of here!” I yelled.

Cyra shot me a surprised look.

I shrugged. “The militia already know we are here. Causing a bit of panic will only help us get away,” I explained.

Cyra shrugged. “Make this quick then, we don’t have much time!”

Bridget and Myrina went for the tools on the workbenches, as did most of the other Amazonians. Meanwhile, I ran

straight to the rear office. This workshop was structured surprisingly similar to the one we'd destroyed—similar enough that I found the safe in the back of the small office without any issue.

I had it open before the others were done. This time, I didn't have time to read the covers of the books I swiped, just stuffing them into my bag of holding for later examination along with all the money in the safe. There was no sense in leaving that behind.

“Everybody out, I'm lighting the place up!” Cyra shouted.

We all got out as quickly as we could. We were already running when the weathered wood caught and flames rose up behind us.

“The western wall is well manned, too!” Myrina growled, pointing to the closest exit.

Cyra grimaced. “Figures. We took too long. That leaves us with only one option. We'll head to the other workshop and unite with the last team. Then, we'll fight our way out through the gates, manned or not.”

We pounded down the cobblestone streets, keenly aware that the clock was ticking and the window on a successful mission was closing fast. When we rounded a corner and saw the final workshop, its door was still closed.

This workshop was bigger than the others and in a nicer part of town, too. If I remembered our dungeon run correctly, this had been that upper part of town where the wealthy used to live. The city's population had shrunk since then, though, so now part of what had been the better part of town was dedicated to a higher-class workshop than the ones we'd destroyed so far.

Despite its nice appearance, the entire area seemed to be completely devoid of people. It was like this chunk of the city had simply been abandoned.

“Where's the other team?” I asked.

Cyra cursed. “They must have never made it. They're either lost somewhere in the city or dead somewhere in the

streets. We'll need to finish the job. Come on, let's—"

Cyra took two steps, but then something caught my eye. Something not quite right with the cobblestones in front of the workshop. "Wait, Cyra!" I grabbed the back of her broad leather belt, hauling her back.

I had done so just in time. Her foot passed over the trigger to a hidden arcane trap just before I jerked her back. That trap detonated with explosive force where her foot had been about to land.

"Damn! Must be some sort of magical trap..." Cyra cursed. She cocked her head at me and blinked with surprise and gratitude. "Seems like I owe you a leg, Carter."

I chuckled. "Don't worry, you can keep it. Come on. We can't enter that way. I see three more traps just like it."

We ducked around the corner, keeping our eyes open for the missing team of warriors the whole while. Eventually, we found them. Two were dead, and the remaining four were trapped in an energy barrier. They hammered on the walls of the barrier from the inside with their Mana Swords as they struggled to escape.

"They're trapped!" Myrina yelled. "We have to break them out!"

Myrina and Cyra ran for the energy barrier, but I traced the flow of mana leading to it. There was something else nearby... Ha! I found the power source for the force field nearby hidden under a fake cobblestone.

It was something akin to a battery, only it recharged itself by absorbing kinetic energy. No wonder the surviving Amazonian warriors hadn't broken out by now. Every moment they spent pounding on the walls only charged the spell holding them prisoner.

Hauling the battery out from under the cobblestone, I slipped it into my bag of holding. I could already think of a dozen uses for something like this—especially when combined with what I expected to find in some of the books I'd picked up.

With the barrier down and the last squad of Amazonians rescued, we looted the final workshop in less than a minute. With the experience of cracking two similar locks under my belt, I made quick work of the safe and was out the door with the goodies it contained.

As two of the squad we'd rescued set the place on fire, I took a quick count. There were now twenty-five of us, in total. While not exactly an army, it would hopefully be enough for us to fight our way free.

“Now we make for the nearest exit!” Myrina said, already running in the direction of the western gates.

They'd be well defended, but we had no choice but to fight our way through them.

I winced as I felt a flash of pain. “My ghost shark summons just died. It'll take the militia a few minutes to get over here, but we could well be dealing with flying spectral monsters any minute now.”

Cyra nodded her thanks for the information, then hurried us along.

We ran for the western gates anyway. There, we found about two dozen militia. We outnumbered them, and certainly outleveled them, but they had a trick up their sleeves.

The moment the guards saw us, instead of drawing their weapons they reached into their pockets and cocked back their arms. A second later they threw tiny little stones at us—monster cores.

“Take them out before they manifest! If those things block the gate, we'll—” Cyra shouted.

But I was one step ahead of her. As we'd approached the gates, I had started casting Mana Bolt over and over again. By the time we reached the gates, I'd built up a constellation of buzzing balls of energy that floated around me. Each magical bundle of energy drifted in lazy circles, waiting for my command to strike.

I gave the command.

Without Exploit Weakness highlighting each target, the wand extended in my hand, and my Spell Sniper proficiency, I probably wouldn't have pulled it off. Even with all of those advantages, it still took a fair bit of luck to land eleven critical hits in rapid succession.

The sound of shattering glass rang through the air as each modified monster core exploded one after another when struck by my Mana Bolts. Wild mana flowed through the area as the monsters those cores would have created dispersed into nothing.

“Damn! Nice shot, Carter!” Myrina whooped. “Let's go!”

The people at the gates panicked when they saw their initial volley of monster summoning stones had failed. Now, they'd have to fight the band of ferocious Amazonian warriors charging them up close and personal.

One drew her sword, but the others all looked at one another and quickly realized they were hopelessly outmatched. All but that one brave soul turned to flee. Suddenly, that brave soul found she was left guarding the gate by herself. One of the Amazonians shoved her aside before she could so much as get a single slash off.

Unfortunately, the militia standing before the gates themselves weren't the only ones we had to contend with. There were others up on the wall. And when they saw us escaping, they threw out another wave of spectral monsters for us to fight.

These I wasn't ready for, and I only managed to snipe three of them out of the sky before the rest manifested.

“Mana Bombs!” I yelled. “Don't hold back... throw what you have!”

I fired off a few more spells, but at my shout Cyra produced four Mega Mana Bombs from her bag of holding, held between each finger of her right hand. She threw them down and they scattered on the ground before us. Each lit up like a firecracker, exploding in a sudden bright flash as

collectively, they weakened the magical structure of the spectral monsters arrayed before us.

“Charge!” Myrina yelled, and the Amazonians all ran forward as one. Suddenly, everything was slashing swords and sudden bursts of raw physical energy. Armed with my Mana Swords, that physical might was converted to magical damage—letting them put the wave of monsters down with surprising speed.

I wanted to get some more spells off, but my allies were everywhere all at once and I couldn’t be certain they wouldn’t jump in the way of one of my Mana Bolts or Eldritch Blasts if I fired them. I could either move in close and join the fight with my Arcane Blade or I could keep back. I opted to remain at a distance and scanned for any more incoming monster cores, which I took out before they activated. I figured that was the best use of my abilities.

The fight lasted no more than a minute, though it felt like it took hours. All the while, I heard the pounding of armored boots on the parapets. If we were captured, Bridget, Sakura and I would be fine—assuming we could avoid being executed until our time here ran out and we were sent back to Earth. Myrina and Cyra, however, would certainly die.

If I had to, I would buy time for them to escape myself.

“We’re through, come on!” Myrina yelled.

Glancing back at the gates, I wondered if I should stay a moment to fire off a few more shots to buy some time for everyone else to make a clean getaway.

“Carter, don’t even think about it!” Myrina seemed to sense the direction of my thoughts as soon as they came to mind, and she snagged me by the wrist. “I’ll throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of here if I have to,” she snapped.

I turned and ran. Myrina knew me too well. We sprinted at full speed away from the gates, dodging arrows as we ran. In the distance, I could just barely make out the rest of the Samhain Clan’s forces.



## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-ONE

**B**y the time we made it all the way to the army, more than a few of us had arrows sticking out of our backs—with some folks looking like pincushions. Cyra resembled a porcupine instead of a pincushion, though she seemed to pay them no mind. Most of the arrowheads were merely lodged in her armor, but a few had gone all the way through and poked out of her bare shoulder. She was leaking a lot of blood.

I asked her about it when we finally came to a stop. “Uh... Cyra? Don’t you think we should pull those out and put some pressure on the wounds?” I asked.

Cyra shook her head. “It’s fine. Just leave them in. The healers can pull them out. It’s a little painful because of how they shift slightly every time I move, but I’ve lived through worse.”

I looked at her skeptically. That was a lot of blood running down her front and her back.

“Don’t look so surprised.” She gave her hard belly a pat. “I know I look all slim and lean, but my actual mass is something on the order of twelve tons. The rest of my biomass is stored in another dimension, thanks to my Amazonian racial trait. I’d have to lose a sizeable pond’s worth of blood before you needed to worry.”

This was the first time I’d seen the Amazonians’ racial trait on full display. Unlike my boost to proficiencies and jobs, the Amazonian racial trait only made its benefits known on the battlefield. But seeing it in action, it seemed pretty damn

powerful. It was no wonder these Amazonians could pound back that hellish liquid they called ale. If Cyra's real weight was twelve tons, she could drink an entire bar dry on Earth before getting tipsy.

When we approached the Samhain army, we waved from afar to show that we were allies. A few scouts rode out to get a closer look at us, but soon gave us the all clear to approach. After they did, Kyrina Samhain rode out to meet us.

She was mounted on a truly enormous horse. Cyra might have been able to sit astride it, but since her mother was of a more normal size, she sat cross-legged atop her massive steed. I was impressed she could keep her balance so easily like that as she galloped toward us.

She hopped off when she got closer and looked like she was going to embrace her eldest daughter until she saw the arrows. Arms still held out, she turned and pulled Myrina forward into an embrace. Myrina had only one arrow sticking out of her, and it was only stuck in her armor so she'd torn it free and tossed it aside before her mother got to her.

"Well done! I'm proud of all of you, but especially Cyra and Myrina. The two of you have proven you are true daughters of the Samhain Clan. Your ancestors would be proud if they were here to see it."

"Grandma was probably spying on us the whole time." Cyra rolled her eyes. "Ever since Grandpa gifted her that scrying mirror, I always get the feeling someone is watching me."

Kyrina laughed. "Maybe so. But that doesn't mean you didn't do a great job! And everyone else, I'm thankful for your hard work. I'll have all of you on the rear lines during the siege to rest and recover. You've already earned enough contribution points to sit out the rest of the war if you'd like, though your share of the loot will be even greater if you join us when we take the walls."

"Sounds like fun." Lark cracked her knuckles.

“What about Carter?” Myrina asked. “Our escape would have been a whole lot harder without his help. And with him being on a time limit, he might not be here when we finally take the city. We should get a proper reward for him squared away before he has to leave.”

“A good point, daughter.” Kyrina waved me over. “Come, Carter. Let’s chat while the others set up camp.”



Kyrina had always unnerved me a bit, though she’d been nothing but cordial. I’d always chalked it up to her being a whole higher rank than I was. Myrina told me that most people innately sensed when they were in the presence of someone much more powerful than them. It was an instinctual self-defense mechanism of the spirit, as it sought to protect itself.

But another part of that might have been the fact that she didn’t look like she was Myrina’s mother. Kyrina could easily pass for another older sister, so the motherly smile and hand placed on my shoulder sent confusingly mixed messages to my Earth-raised brain.

She had me take her through the entire mission from start to finish. I wasn’t sure if she trusted my account of events more than that of her own daughters, but I gave her my most honest recollection of events from start to finish. She’d remained close beside me the whole time, staring at me with an intensity that had me wriggling in my chair like a kid under the eye of their school’s principal.

I was almost grateful when someone else finally entered the tent. That is, until I saw who it was. Elder Thalassa had arrived.

“What’s he doing here?” Elder Thalassa jerked her chin at me, though she stared at Kyrina the whole time.

Kyrina climbed to her feet. “He was reporting to me about how the special mission went. The reports I’ve gotten so far tell me it was an incredible success, in large part due to the man you see before you.”

Elder Thalassa shook her head. “Well, then, I’m sure you’ve finished with him by now.” She scowled at me. “He can clear out. We’ll be having our command meeting in a few minutes to figure out how we are going to crack the defenses of this city.”

“Hold, Thalassa.” Kyrina lifted a hand. “We haven’t finished deciding his reward.”

The Samhain Clan’s matriarch turned back to face me. “Carter, what do you want? I already promised you some warriors to help you secure your growing territory the moment we’re able to send people over. Do you want even more warriors? I’m sure that can be arranged. Or would you prefer some of the gold from the Shadefall treasury, assuming anything’s left to loot given how long we’ve been fighting.”

I frowned in thought for a moment.

After thinking it through, I realized what I wanted. “You said everybody’s getting a share of Shadefall when you take the city. How about this? I want the people—specifically the skilled crafters and laborers who worked in the workshops throughout the city—like those Myrina and I just looted.”

Kyrina coiled a strand of her hair around her finger thoughtfully. “I see... no wonder you stepped in to save them. You think your growing settlement needs crafters?”

I nodded.

She shrugged after a moment. “Fine. Consider it done. Most of them would probably have been executed for betraying the Samhain Clan, anyway. Giving them to you is no great loss. Just make sure to keep a tighter leash on them than we did, else they might turn on you, too.”

“What? No way!” Elder Thalassa stopped pretending she wasn’t interested in our conversation. “Those workers are crucial to reestablishing the balance of power in this region. I would not have allowed you to execute them, Kyrina. And I certainly won’t allow him”—she jabbed her finger at me—“to take them away.”

Kyrina looked shocked. “They’re just workers, Thalassa. Shadefall always produces more low-level assemblers and technicians. It’s a common low-level job. Now, if they were enchanters or the like I would agree that we might want to hang on to them, but if we lose this batch we’ll just have to wait for more to show up looking for work.”

“You’re too young to know this, Kyrina, but good workers are harder to come by than you think—especially after a war. And the time they put in at the lower levels makes it more likely they’ll be able to evolve their Jobs in the future through continued hard work. They are more valuable than you think.”

“What did you plan on doing with them?” I asked, arms crossed.

Elder Thalassa scoffed. “I planned to bind them with indentured servitude contracts, of course. Something much firmer than whatever hold the Shadefall Clan had on them. Then I would sell their contracts off to some of the crafting guilds back home. They can always use a bit of extra labor. I have one enchanter in particular in mind. He’s quite good, but to truly get the most out of him I’ll need extra hands.”

“Hmm... tough decision, then...” Kyrina ran her finger across her chin. “Should the crafters go to Carter, or to you, Thalassa?”

Thalassa grinned, thinking she would get her way.

Kyrina shrugged. “It seems to me that looting privileges should set the precedent here. There will be other workers, but the ones from the destroyed workshops will go to Carter. He was the one who took those workshops out, after all.”

When Thalassa opened her mouth to argue, Kyrina added, “He took all three workshops out.”

I could hear Elder Thalassa grinding her teeth together. “Fine. If that is your decision as matriarch, then I will abide it.”

I slipped out of the tent before I could cause more tension between Kyrina and her Clan’s Elder. I didn’t want to spend any more time in the vicinity of Thalassa than necessary. The

sharp glare she sent my way as I departed, however, had me worried I'd need to watch my back.



After the tense meeting with Myrina's mother, things went far more smoothly. Myrina and Cyra were both having their wounds tended to, but I'd somehow made it through the whole run from the city walls unscathed. That wasn't so much due to skill or the fault of luck, but was thanks to my Deflect spell. Plenty of archers had aimed for me; they'd just never hit me. As much as I admired Cyra's ability to shrug off arrows, I greatly preferred my ability which ensured I did not get hit by them in the first place.

The other Samhain warriors had erected a tent for Myrina's entire group, including me, so I headed inside and found it surprisingly well furnished. We had traveled fast, and no medieval army would have been able to outfit their forward base so luxuriously. But bags of holdings made many things possible that weren't possible without them.

The mound of cushions I plopped down onto were stiffer than I liked, but were more than comfortable enough to curl up with a book or ten. Which was exactly what I planned to do. After all, I had quite a haul to work my way through.

I stacked up *Mana Manipulation for Dummies*, the *Enchanter's Cookbook*, *Thaumaturgical Thermodynamics*, and *Intermediate Warding*. Looking them over, I was half certain this had to be some sort of trick. But no, each of the books were straight up upgrades to my job. I could learn them with no penalties, and my skill as an Artificer would forever be improved after doing so.

With a grin, I checked my loot from the second workshop. That haul was comparatively disappointing. Whoever had stashed the books in that office's safe had been more concerned about improving the efficiency of their workers than upgrading their own skills. There was only an odd gemstone and a bundle of identical books.

I checked out the odd gemstone first.

### **Lesser Gift of Resource Enhancement:**

**This is a unique reward granted by the System for completing an important crafting quest. Use it on any resource to increase its rarity one rank. The original item will be consumed, and a one-rank-up substitute will be provided directly from the System. This item is single use and will not work outside of stabilized and fully established worlds of the Arcadia Multiverse. Do not take this item to frontier sectors. This gift will only upgrade Epic rarity items or lower.**

The more I stared at the Gift of Resource Enhancement, the more I realized it wasn't actually a gemstone at all. It was like a point of light trapped within a physical structure. Others might have seen it as merely a gemstone, but there was something extra-dimensional about it—something that took my mind back to that run-down arcade I'd envisioned myself in when I'd died.

It was an interesting trinket, and one I would need to use before returning home. It was fortunate that I'd obtained so many exotic materials in my recent adventure. Perhaps I would try enhancing one of them.

The other item from the second safe was a bundle of identical copies of the same book.

### **Enchanter's Assistant Guide:**

**Improves the efficiency of any technician assisting in the assembly and maintenance of arcane tools, equipment, and products.**

Perhaps Gobbob could find a use for these. She was an Artificer's Assistant rather than an Enchanter's assistant, though, so she might not get the full benefits of the skill book. The book promised a twenty percent increase to working speed and a commensurate reduction in errors. Even half that would be fine by me, especially if some of the other goblins could use the skill books to get the bonus, too.

There was a journal tucked in the bundle of Enchanter's Assistant Guides. I noted it was different from the others and

opened it to find a few pages hastily written in a cramped hand. Like before, it took me a moment for my Forerunner of the System title to kick in and translate the text for me, but eventually I could read it. It was a general guide on how to run a business in Shadefall as an enchanter, though it appeared to be written in three different hands.

The first hand passed on a few basic tips on enchanting, as well as the best products for grinding class levels early on. It seemed to be written from the perspective of a father trying to pass on some last-minute career advice to their son and heir from beyond the grave—from one enchanter to another. At least that's how I interpreted the first part.

Though I wasn't an enchanter, I carefully noted a few crafting strategies and was genuinely interested in how a successful enchanter in Shadefall had run their business. He actually recommended pushing an item to mastery if it was at least somewhat profitable, and perfecting it to finance those early class levels. That wasn't too dissimilar to what I'd been doing with my Mana Bombs.

Interestingly, he operated under the assumption that most of the early levels would be a real resource sink. Apparently there were so many people trying to become skilled enchanters in the first writer's day, that finished enchantments were cheaper than the raw materials needed to make them. Students had been happy to work at a loss, if it meant gaining a few more levels and thus getting a leg up on their competition.

It was an interesting observation, and one that I suspected would eventually come to pass on Earth if I didn't secure a supply of raw materials for all of our crafters. Thankfully, the ruins of our old city had enough scrap metal to keep our crafters busy for a generation at our current rate—though who knew what the future held. Someday, we'd need to get the old mines and refineries operational again.

The subject of the Gift of Resource Enhancement came up as well. Apparently the first writer had earned it many years ago, back when the System itself had commissioned a powerful item from him as a reward to be delivered to a far-off frontier sector.



He had planned on using it to upgrade raw materials for the greatest masterwork he could produce, but had never located a project worthy of the materials. In the end, he'd decided to save the quest reward for his son to use, and there it had sat in the safe.

By the time the second writer put quill to parchment, that all had changed. From the sound of things, he'd never quite lived up to his father's expectations. He hadn't even been able to craft some of the wondrous magical items his father had been fond of making, and both he and his business were poorer for it. Enchanters had become scarce as times grew tough for them, with much slimmer margins under the Samhain Clan's rule. Apparently, the Samhains didn't give much status to even the best crafters, nor did they work to secure the materials those crafters required to advance in their jobs.

Between wildly fluctuating materials prices, the limited lifespans of those who did not achieve a racial evolution, and the Samhain Clan's preference for those under their banner to train and become warriors, the shop owner was one of a dwindling number in his generation of enchanters.

Apparently it wasn't uncommon for an enchanter to be summoned to distant cities and expected to make their way through the wilderness between settlements as though they were a high-leveled warrior. Many died on such journeys, much to the continued bafflement of the Samhain Clan's various stewards. Most of the warriors appointed to govern by the Samhain Clan didn't understand that enchanting was a Job that took a lifetime to master.

It was equally clear that they could not comprehend how a skilled enchanter might not ever pass level ten if he or she focused all their efforts on their job and none on their class. To the warriors who ruled this realm, anyone worth noting should be strong enough to handle a few farmers-turned-brigands on the road.

Unfortunately for these traveling enchanters, they were both incredibly weak and incredibly tempting targets due to the wealth they carried in the form of their tools and crafts. For

many craftsmen, being summoned to work in another city spelled their probable doom. This second enchanter had saved his father's quest reward, hoping that maybe his own son would be able to use it.

This enchanter had a plan for his son and would do things differently than his father had. He would have his son trained as a warrior, and only when he'd reached level 25 would he have the young man switch over to enchanting. That would make surviving under the Samhain Clan's rule much easier.

Naturally, the process would take decades, and without his father's quest reward he wouldn't have dared do it. But his hope was that with the Gift of Resource Enhancement, the young warrior-turned-enchanter would be able to craft a masterwork, receiving both job levels and money to fuel his craft.

Unfortunately, the father died and passed on his shop before that possibility could come to pass. And the son, having been raised as a warrior, saw little use for the Gift of Resource Enhancement. While the first writer had been a skilled enchanter, and the second enchanter less skilled than his father, the third person who'd added their words to this parchment seemed hardly to have been an enchanter at all. It was clear he knew next to nothing of enchanting. He was just a businessman who knew a few common items technicians could easily make on their own that still sold for a pretty penny. He'd been working hard on tight profit margins to keep it all together.

Most of his wealth came from a willingness to venture into the wilderness and obtain the resources the workshop needed—particularly the cores of monsters between levels ten and twenty-five. The Shadefall family had been buying a lot of those for use in their rebellion against the Samhains, so those had been a particularly good seller.

The whole journal was a bit sad, in a way. It detailed the steady decline of Shadefall from what had once been a thriving metropolis as the trade that made them famous was slowly relegated to the shadows. It also showed the broken

dreams of a family slowly losing their passion for enchanting, one generation at a time.

To me, though, it highlighted how other magic craftsmen worked. At first, I'd assumed that all the crafting workshops operated the same way the goblins and I did things, building items in an assembly-line style. But that wasn't the case. Few were willing to part with the detailed knowledge I'd shared freely with Gobgob and the other goblins.

They hadn't bothered with the assembly line process I'd borrowed from Earth's industrial past. They just planted a few crafters with the right mundane job at a desk or a worktable, and had them hammer out the rough materials needed to make an enchanted item. Then, the master craftsman or chief enchanter would take those materials and finish the enchantment themselves in secret.

Apparently, this strategy was considered advanced enough by the locals to be worthy of praise. I suppose it was, if the enchanters in other lands had to work completely by hand with no help at all. It sounded like they never got out of the mindset of a single craftsman supported by a host of relatively unskilled laborers they were afraid to raise up for fear they'd just become more competition.

I set the journal aside after reading through it once more. There were tips worth noting from these enchanters' experiences, but there was one more safe's worth of loot I was looking forward to digging into. I tucked the journal back into the bundle of Enchanter's Assistant Guides with a grin.

At first, I feared I was in store for another disappointment. Most of the books I'd looted from the third shop were clearly for assistants, as well—though of a higher grade than either of the other two shops. No wonder whoever had owned this last place had put up such sturdy magical security. In terms of volume, their safe was the fullest of the three. They'd likely been more profitable than the other two combined.

There was a book on applying magic to leatherworking, which I figured would be a boon to Sakura, though it was useless to me. I hoped for something that might help Bridget

as well, but had no luck there. I was starting to think that I'd simply gotten lucky with the first safe and that I shouldn't expect much from the final batch of loot when I stumbled across my greatest find yet.

### **Artificing: Book of Mastery**

The book's spine was lined with gold, and the cover was made of a leather that I was certain came from a C-rank monster. Like the Gift of Resource Enhancement, it was likely the most precious artifact the family of wealthy enchanters who had owned the third shop had possessed.

I tried to open the cover, but it wouldn't budge. Try as I might, the pages would not separate, though there was no lock to keep them shut. I didn't realize what was wrong until I checked my System messages.

### **You have obtained a job upgrade book!**

**These rare crafting guides allow you to enhance the capabilities of your craft. This book is intended for Enchanters seeking to enhance their potential and become Artificers. As you are already an Artificer, this book will not work for you.**

"A pity..." I muttered.

But then I had an idea. I fingered the small gemstone-looking Gift of Resource Enhancement. It had said the System would accept it as payment to upgrade any resource. I wondered if this would count as a resource.

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-TWO

If these two precious items had been my family's heirlooms, I probably would have been shaking in my boots and too nervous to expend them. After all, if this didn't work, I would likely lose them both. But I'd gained both of these things through luck and happenstance. Why not roll the dice in the hope that I could turn the Artificing book of Mastery into something useful?

I placed the strange gem atop the book and waited. After a moment, a prompt appeared.

**Would you like to use the Lesser Gift of Resource enhancement on the book *Artificing: Book of Mastery*?**

**Both items will be consumed in the process and your results will be influenced by an element of availability. This action is irreversible.**

After a moment's hesitation, I dismissed the warning and accepted the prompt. The gemstone atop the book immediately cracked and shattered into a million pieces. From those pieces I caught a glimpse of something no mortal should see.

Wincing, I clutched at my temples as a bolt of pain shot through my head. I kept my eyes open all the same, though.

**Your mind has struggled to comprehend the incomprehensible.**

**Through your efforts, your knowledge of the unknowable has increased.**

**Your Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge Class has increased by one level!**

Some realization crossed my mind, only to vanish a moment later as the thought slipped away like sand between my fingers. Whatever I'd just come to understand had been too big for my mind to hold onto at my current realm of power. Myrina hadn't been kidding when she'd said the scholar class was often considered a worthy consolation prize.

I was glad to earn a class level. More alarming, though, was the fact that the book and gem had both disappeared.

I scrolled back with my mind's eye, trying to remember just what happened a few moments ago. I ignored the burning pressure between my brows that only grew the more I focused on remembering exactly what I'd seen.

Something like a tiny black hole had opened up, unfolding from inside the gem. It swallowed the book beneath it in one big gulp before vanishing along with the object it had swallowed. The gemstone had been an extension of something from the System's dimension, packaged and bundled so that it wouldn't harm the minds of every mortal who looked upon it.

"Did it fail?" I muttered, still staring at the empty space before me.

Not long after I had that thought, the empty patch of void opened up once more. This time, seeing it hurt my brain even more than before, but at least I was ready for it. There was something that resonated very well with my class in this strange void.

If I could just figure out how this void worked, I knew I could create a new and improved version of the spell for myself.

**Your mind has touched upon the incomprehensible and grasped a sliver of enlightenment.**

**This enlightenment can be expended to upgrade or create a new spell for your class.**

**Your Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge Class has increased by one level!**

Then, a new book appeared before me as though it had always lain there. Compared to the sinister aura of the void it had come from, this book was beautiful to behold.

The system's messages from before implied that this book had been obtained on my behalf from somewhere far distant. Wherever this book had come from was generations ahead of even the most advanced enchanters of Shadefall. There was magic in everything from the bindings to the pages of this book.

The cover appeared to be leather from a distance, but it was too flawless and perfect to be natural. It was some sort of synthetic material, not dissimilar to what we'd produced on Earth before the integration. Whatever means had been used to create this material had been magical, though, instead of technological.

The page within the synthetic material that formed its covers was special. The book was as thin as a tablet, and it had only the one page. Somehow, that single page scrolled through far more text than would fit on any traditional medium. It was generations more advanced than the crude video capture tablets that the maids back in the Samhain Clan had treated as precious, or even the collection of gaming devices Cyra had collected to lure a man into her clutches back at the castle.

**You have obtained a Book of the Master Artificer!**

**This variant of Artificers gain access to unique abilities that enhance the speed and ease of artificing; this includes expanded cognition when thinking about subjects related to magic and artificing, as well as access to unique opportunities. This book may only be utilized by those who are already at least level 25 of the Artificers class.**

The new book was simultaneously less and more than what I'd hoped for. I had wondered if I would receive an upgraded job that encompassed a greater domain, like how Artificer encompassed the domains of both Runesmiths and Enchanters. Master Artificer, on the other hand, seemed to be a general upgrade that would enhance all my Artificing-related abilities.

## **Do you wish to use the Book of the Master Artificer?**

That made the decision to use the book rather straightforward. Of course I would use it on myself. There seemed to be no downsides to the upgrade, and plenty of upside.

I activated the tablet. The language was different from what the Amazonians used, which might have been a problem for anyone else, but my title kicked in once again. After a bit of time to focus, the meaning of the strange characters settled into my mind.

Minutes ticked by, but my mind remained absolutely focused on the page before me. I sensed Myrina and the others come to check on me after getting healed up, but they left after waving their hands in front of my face a few times and receiving no response. Myrina seemed particularly interested in the strange tablet book I was staring at. Fortunately, she didn't try to take it from me.

It was dark when I finally finished the information contained in that seemingly never ending page. My eyes ached from staring at it for so long. I closed them after the tablet went dark, all life gone from it. The afterimage of the final words I'd read swam before me until I blinked.

At some point during my reading, I'd learned that all such objects were single use. The how and why came to mind when I had the thought; all the knowledge the tablet had contained was now mine. It would be some time before I fully integrated it and could recall everything with a thought, but I knew it was all there.

I checked my status screen to ensure it had worked, calling up only the information I wanted to see.

**Name: Carter Smith**

**Job: Master Artificer (Mythic)**

I grinned. "Well how about that..."

I was suddenly eager to craft something. I started rummaging around in my bag of holding for some supplies. I had plenty of enchanting tools and equipment after clearing



out three buildings' worth of in-progress enchantments. Surely there had to be something...

Yes. There it was. A few monster cores should work for this. I didn't have any weapons to enchant or copper wire to make Mana Bombs, but I decided to try for something new. My mind was already thinking of what to build when I realized my hands were still flipping through the books I planned to read. The monster cores and tools I was pulling out of my bag of holding seemed to pop free of their own accord.

They froze when I turned to look at them. When I held out my hand, one of the monster cores drifted toward me. This was me controlling all these floating materials, as if I had a hundred hands. I quickly reviewed the list of abilities my new class promised.

**Grants access to unique abilities that enhance the speed and ease of artificing.**

Apparently, that meant I now had the power of telekinesis—at least when it came to holding tools and crafting materials.

“Yeah, I could see how this might enhance the speed and ease of artificing.”

I chuckled. When I'd read that extremely vague description, I'd assumed I'd get some minor productivity bonuses. In a way, that's what this was, only it manifested in a way that was a hell of a lot cooler than being able to tinker slightly faster than before.

I spent the next hour jumping between reading the book of blueprints I'd gotten and doing some actual crafting. I found several items I had all the materials for and I crafted several items in quick succession. My first few attempts weren't all that great, but there was something satisfying about having them floating before me as their constituent pieces assembled themselves with rapid speed. These telekinetic powers were a lot faster than my fingers.

I wasn't sure how I'd ever lived without them.

They also seemed quite handy to have. Soon, I had quite a collection of magic wands—though I'd never really thought of

myself as a wand guy. On the Gandalf to Harry Potter spectrum, I liked to think I was much closer to a Gandalf. Alas, I hadn't found many staffs for sale.

That was when I had my brilliant idea. If there were no staffs available for me to purchase or loot, I needed to make one. There was an orb in one of my new blueprints that should work nicely for the head of my new staff. And the length of the staff itself meant it was essentially a giant wand. The extra room along the length of it would allow me to inscribe multiple enchantments along it. I would be sacrificing size for power, but that didn't bother me in the least—especially if I could hold the staff using my telekinesis without the need to keep it in my hand during battle.

I refined the design for my staff several times before finally coming up with something suitable. It would be a length of ebony as tall as I was. The branch was slightly crooked at the end, as the piece of wood I'd stolen hadn't been of the highest quality, but I worked the crooked bend into the design. When complete, the gnarled crook would give the staff some character. I left the branches on it, too, which made the staff look a bit like a small, withered tree in winter.

I had plenty of monster cores, and I knew I could access the mana inside them. For a while, I debated summoning spectral monsters in the same fashion as the Shadefall Clan had done, but the more I studied the blueprints for those, the more worried I became.

The Shadefall Clan barely had a leash on their summoned monsters. I wondered how often the users had been eaten by their own creations. More often than I was comfortable with, of that much I was sure.

Unless I was missing something, these monster summoning artifacts were very much a double-edged sword. There may have been a reason the Shadefall militia were a much lower level, compared to the Samhain Clan's warriors. Sooner or later, a bad monster core killed its wielder.

Not to mention that, unlike my bond with Sharky, these things were more like another party member than a summoned

monster. This meant that the wielder would, at most, only get a share of the experience points the spectral monsters generated, rather than the whole lot.

All in all, I decided to avoid pursuing the Shadefall Clan's beast core inventions. Now that I was able to examine the half-finished product, I saw them for what they were. These were a desperate, half-assed invention meant to exploit a critical weakness in one's foe—regardless of the risk. Up until I'd started selling Mana Bombs and Mana Swords, the risk had paid off. Not anymore, though.

Instead, I decided to explore a different route—I used the monster cores to store mana. The mana stored in them retained the aspect of the original monster—but instead of being harmful, that was actually useful to me. Power of Nature allowed me to augment my neutral mana usage with other aspects. More than once I'd enhanced my Mana Bolts with fire mana, turning them into fire balls.

Instead of opting for just one big orb at the head of the staff, I attached hundreds of monster cores to my staff's many branches. Round as they were, from a distance they looked like hundreds of eyes. Peering closely, I was pretty sure I could just make out the shadows of the creatures these cores had once been part of. The faint, constant shimmer of movement around the staff seemed almost but not quite detectable. This gave the whole piece an eerie look with so many orbs suspended like leaves from a tree.

Along the length of the wood, I engraved a web of enchantments meant for drawing mana out of the monster cores and channeling that mana into me. It was an elaborate process that would have been impossible for a wand at my skill level, but with a whole staff to work with I somehow managed it.

When I was finally done, I held my new staff aloft.

**Your job, Master Artificer, has gained a level!**

Ebony black and festooned with glowing eye-like monster cores, it would strike fear into the hearts of my enemies. "I shall name you... the Doom Seeker Staff!"

I looked around the tent, half expecting Sakura to pop out of nowhere and tell me it was a lame name. She must have been busy, though, because she didn't pop up and tell me how silly the name of my new staff sounded.

I shrugged. "Doom Seeker it is."

I thought it was a fitting name, given the hundreds of eyeball-looking things and the shape of the crooked piece of wood that twisted just over my head. I wasn't sure how much use I'd get out of the staff, but it was a worthy test of my new abilities. And, at the very least, it had been worth a level in Master Artificer.

"There you are!" Myrina said as she opened the flap of the tent. "I was worried Mother and the elders had knocked the sense right out of you or something. Come on! We're all patched up and it's time for some training. Don't think your tutorial is over just because we're fighting a war!"

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-THREE

With Myrina dragging me out of the tent, I soon joined the others for training, food, and a bit of celebration. Though the siege was just beginning for everyone else, our part was largely done. Thanks to our recent accomplishments, we were allowed to kick back while the rest of the Samhain Clan's warriors dug trenches and built fortifications for the camp.

Apparently, their biggest worry was being overrun by summoned monsters thrown from the city walls. That wasn't a fear without merit—it's what I would do if I was in command of Shadefall.

The Samhain Clan's plan from here on out was to bleed the city's reserves of monster cores before eventually storming the walls and taking them. That would be a tough job, and even with my new staff I had no intention of being among those who'd have to climb the flimsy wooden ladders I saw dozens of Amazonians assembling.

Cyra ran Bridget, Sakura, and I through our paces. Myrina thought she could play assistant instructor for a bit, but the moment she made a mistake, Cyra made her join us as she drilled us through sword and weapons' forms.

By now, I'd gotten the hang of wielding my sword. Cyra estimated I was as good as she might expect a warrior to be with a few years of combat experience under their belt. That lined up with my growing Sword proficiency. I was much less adept with spears, shields, axes, or just about anything else, but I was mainly interested in improving my skill with my sword.

Arcane Blade didn't work with the other weapon types.

After training, Bridget cooked for us. I found it interesting that the Amazonian forces seemed largely dependent on their camp followers to provide these kinds of services. They'd packed travel biscuits, field rations, and water, but not much else.

Lucky for them, traveling merchants like Misa had spotted the army moving out and had quickly packed up their things and hurried after them, happy to market common goods to this captive audience. I'd never seen quite so many traveling cooks wandering through camp offering freshly baked pies to the exhausted warriors—in exchange for a chunk of the loot they'd gain when the Samhain forces finally took the city, of course.

These traveling cooks had been quite disappointed to see Bridget pull out a small electric stove powered by the magical generator I'd made for her. With that and a frying pan, she quickly whipped us up a dinner that had others in the area salivating with envy—and I mean literally salivating.

“Mhmm... Bridget, you are definitely my favorite chef,” Cyra mumbled around her fourth grilled chicken sandwich. “Food that provides a bonus to recovery rate? If only the castle cooks had half your skill.”

“Thank you. I've been practicing,” Bridget said as she slid another sandwich onto Cyra's plate, filling the space the last one had taken up before vanishing moments before.

Cyra's bottomless stomach could probably provide Bridget with more experience points for her Chef job than the rest of us combined. Perhaps she should proclaim herself a chef for the entire army, and rake in a month's worth of levels every day for feeding an army of ravenous Amazonians. Though if she went that route, finding things to cook might soon become a problem.

After dinner, I showed off my new staff.

“Behold, the Doom Seeker Staff!” I held my ebony creation aloft. “I... erm... I found it... uh... recently.”

I eyed Cyra out of the corner of my eye. Of all my friends and companions gathered here, she was the only one who didn't know I was an Artificer... actually, at this point, a Master Artificer.

“Doom Seeker?” Sakura sighed. “I knew I shouldn't have left you in there all alone.”

“I like it!” Myrina grinned. “I would have called it the Twisted Cane of Everlasting Doom, or maybe the Thousand Eyes of the Dark Wizard! Or maybe—”

“It's a staff. It does... staff things. Does it need a special name?” Cyra asked.

Myrina and I both turned to Cyra, aghast.

Cyra sighed. “As long as you don't loudly proclaim the name of every spell and weapon you're going to use in the middle of a fight... I've seen people lose a tournament doing exactly that.”

Myrina giggled. “You've also seen someone win a tournament doing exactly that!”

Cyra let out a long sigh.

And so Myrina recounted tales of the tournament victory which had, by her account, made her quite famous among the younger generation of Themyscira. It made for a comfortable evening around the campfire—far better than how I suspected most enjoyed their sieges.



I spent the next few days alternating between training, crafting, and spending time with my companions. I got to test out my new staff in a few mock duels. I was disappointed to learn it didn't provide me with near infinite mana. Despite the number of monster cores dangling from it, each spell still needed a little bit of power from me.

At my current level, I would run out of mana long before I depleted every monster core hanging on my staff—but that was alright. By my calculations, I could now cast some ten

thousand Mana Bolts before running dry if I augmented each spell with as much mana from the staff as was possible.

It also gave me the chance to play with a host of other aspects. Mana Bolts took well to fire, but lightning mana also added quite the punch. Bolts fired when loaded with Earth Mana launched forward like stones flung from a sling, and shadow mana bolts were practically undetectable.

I dueled with Myrina several more times. If I let the fight go on too long, I still ended up in trouble, but as long as she held back her level and I made sure to hit her with as much as I could right out of the gates, our fights usually fell my way. Cyra had a complicated look on her face the first time she saw me win a duel against Myrina, and more so when I beat Bridget and Sakura handily.

We practiced as much as we could, but every so often Cyra was called away to train and practice with others. Though she was strong and skilled and had an instructor Job, she hadn't halted her own training.

During those free days—at least when I wasn't crafting—I made sure to check in with Misa, who had joined the camp followers.

“How is business, Misa?” I asked.

“We're all out of Mana Bombs and Mana Swords. You wouldn't happen to have any more of them, would you?” Misa asked hopefully. “The west flank of the siege had to take out a surprise monster ambush yesterday and nearly exhausted their supply of Mana Bombs.”

“That's Elder Thalassa's soldiers, right?”

Misa shrugged. “I think so. I only talk with the officers, but they are desperately in need of more Mana Bombs. Demand has driven prices up to the point that they're running out of gold to pay for things. With your permission, I'm going to start accepting promissory notes for a share of their loot from the city when they finally take it.”

“Interesting.” I stroked my chin. “What are they offering?”



“Mostly property—shops and such. Also captured civilians. That sort of thing.”

I nodded. “Take the promissory notes. Bargain for the most you can get. There’s no love lost between me and Elder Thalassa. As for new items... I don’t have the supplies on me to make more Mana Bombs, but I’ve been toying with local materials. They aren’t nearly as good as what I was providing before, but they are more skillfully crafted.”

I handed Misa a few odds and ends. Only a few were new weapons, but the blueprint book I’d gotten had included a lot of items meant to ease the daily life of a soldier on campaign. I figured they were sure to be hot sellers. I’d already decided I would make more of whatever was selling best.

“Consider it done.” Misa smiled, rubbing her hands together in excitement.

I couldn’t help but notice her dress was of much finer quality than the first time we’d met, and the tent she’d set up for her shop in the field appeared to have a few assistants working in it.



There was one more thing that kept me busy while the siege went on, and that was making good use of my memory of the System upgrading the book. I’d caught another peek behind the curtain, so to speak, and as time went on I became more and more certain that I could use that glimpse to upgrade or create a new skill.

In a way, it would be like the process by which I’d upgraded Mana Bolt to Mana Barrage. Only this time, I had a bit more choice in the matter and planned to leave a whole lot less up to luck.

I spoke with Misa again and asked her to be on the lookout for any new skill books that might be suitable for my class. There were plenty of skill books coming in, since the Samhain Clan was effectively seizing any goods destined for Shadefall. Whoever was in the lucky patrol that seized such windfalls claimed them as loot.

Some portion of those goods were skill books for spell casters, and while those skill books were of limited utility to the encamped Amazonian army, they were of great use to me. I browsed through Misa's growing collection, wanting to take them all for myself but waiting for the perfect option.

Eventually, my patience was rewarded and I found exactly what I was looking for.

**Soulchain Matrix (Rare): This dark spell afflicts enemies with links of suffering. When one member of the matrix is struck by damage or an affliction, all others within the matrix suffer an echo of that damage and affliction.**

It was an expensive prize, since it was already considered rare and a powerful ability. With the ability as it was, it would be particularly useful for layering on large numbers of Corrupting Marks—especially on multiple targets. I'd earned the One Versus Many proficiency from fighting multiple foes and, if I didn't miss my mark, I expected to be fighting a lot more battles doing just that.

I needed an area-of-effect skill. This wasn't actually an area-of-effect skill, but it would help me layer on my existing Corrupting Marks a lot faster and on a host of targets all at once. From what Marol had told me when Myrina had taken me to visit the woman, this was just the kind of edge I needed in combat.

The only question was, could I make it even better?

And so that's what I set about doing. One sleepless night turned into two. And then two turned into three. Each time I closed my eyes, I struggled to visualize the new spell, trying to incorporate what I'd seen from the System. There was something there about the interdimensional nature of the System that I knew related to how the Soulchain Matrix worked.

I just needed to understand it fully before I could implement it.

I wouldn't have dared crafting a spell like this before I'd gained my Master Artificer job. I'd been good with mana manipulation before, but the mental enhancements my new job granted were not to be taken lightly. Elaborate images formed in my mind, one after another, each appearing with a clarity that would have been impossible before the System.

It was like I'd been given a mental simulation chamber not unlike a computer-aided design program. All I had to do was think about how the mana would flow through the system I visualized and it would simulate what would happen.

Through several days' worth of continuous effort, I eventually twisted and tweaked the spell just the way I wanted.

**You have expended your moment of enlightenment to create Soulchain Nexus.**

**Your job, Master Artificer, has gained a level!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

**Soulchain Nexus (Epic): This forbidden spell tethers the soul of the caster to the souls of his targets. Afflictions layered upon your enemies will spread to nearby connected enemies with a 75% efficacy. When a foe linked to the Soulchain Nexus is slain, a portion of their stat points are attributed to the caster, increasing their abilities proportional to 10% of the total stats of the slain foe. Attributed stat gains last for the remainder of the engagement, expiring when the Soulchain Nexus dissipates.**

In a way, my new spell was somewhat inspired by Myrina's Tempo of Battle. Hers was a straightforward legendary ability that made her stronger the longer the fight went on. Soulchain Nexus did the same thing, though its capabilities weren't passive. If I wanted the extra stats, I needed strong targets and to kill my foes to power them.

I was eager to try it in battle. I'd practiced setting up the soul chains when training with Sakura and Bridget, but the

boost to my stats wasn't the sort of thing I could test in training.



By the time I figured out Soulchain Nexus, the siege was winding down, though it seemed like it might go on well past my return to Earth. That didn't sit well with me. I had a lot going on here, and I didn't want to go home and leave things up in the air.

If nothing else, with Misa and Myrina both here in the field, it would take me a lot longer to get in contact with them upon my next return. On a whim, I decided to lend the Amazonians a hand. They were hurling rocks at the castle walls with slings attached to staffs, one at a time. This was an impressive feat, as they could manage some fairly large projectiles with their impressive physical strength. I knew I could do better.

The complete lack of complex siege engines had been a bit of a disappointment for me on my first real trip to a medieval battlefield—our dungeon run didn't count. I'd been particularly eager to see trebuchets in actions, and had been disappointed when the Amazonians didn't set any up for me. So, I decided to be the change I wanted to see in the world.

If the Amazons weren't going to set up any trebuchets, I would set some up on my own. And maybe if they asked nicely, I would let them use one.

Back when I was human, I probably would have struggled with putting it together. I was pretty handy with my workshop's tools, and given a few minutes to sketch out my idea on paper, and maybe a little longer to look at existing designs online, I could have come up with something.

But now, with my Master Artificer class? Designing a trebuchet was simplicity itself. I could look at the nearby trees and know, with a glance, which ones would make the best beams. With a bit of telekinesis and recruiting my brawnier companions to lug the wood around, I soon had all the raw materials I needed.

I found a complete lack of screws rather annoying, but with my new telekinetic ability, it wasn't all that much trouble to get creative with dove tails and other odd joints until the pieces all fit securely together the way I wanted them to.

“What does this thing do, Carter?” Myrina asked curiously when I had it all put together.

“There are a lot of moving parts here. Is this some sort of mechanical religious totem?” Cyra asked.

“It's a trebuchet! And it flings rocks. See those slings your friends have been using?” I pointed to a row of Amazonian warriors loading, twirling, and then firing their staff slings. “This is just like that, only bigger!”

I waved to a nearby boulder. “Cyra, load the first shot!”

Cyra did as I'd asked, and then she cocked back the arm. I'd designed a pair of treadmill cranes to do the job, but I'd forgotten how freakishly strong these Amazonians were. All Cyra had to do was jump up to grab the end of the trebuchet and then walk it back.

“Like this?” Cyra asked.

I pulled a lever, locked the arm into place, and then had Cyra jump clear.

“Fire!” I yelled as I pulled the lever that released the arm and it whipped back around, flinging its payload overhead to send it crashing into the walls with a tremendous *thud*.

“Ah. I've wanted to do that ever since I was a kid.” I grinned.

“A fascinating contraption,” Kyrina said as she seemed to appear out of thin air.

She and several other Amazonians had seen us setting the trebuchet up from afar and had apparently grown increasingly curious about what we had been doing. Now that they'd seen the device in action, they all wanted a closer look.

“Sure is.” I gave the trebuchet a pat. “This baby can fire a 90-kilogram projectile over three hundred meters.”

“Fascinating.” Kyrina looked at the wall where the projectile had landed. The rock had slammed against the shield and thudded to a stop. The attack had been more symbolic than effective.

I gave her a shrug. “It’s an interesting machine for understanding how a lever works. I guess you could say the principle is pretty much the same as those staff slings you’ve had your warriors using. This is the same idea, just scaled up.”

Kyrina ran her fingers through her hair. “Do you think this throwing machine of yours could hurl Mana Bombs at the walls? Enough to take down the wall’s magical defenses?”

My eyes lit up. “You know, I think it could.”

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-FOUR

**M**y trebuchet and its brothers that Kyrina had me build, once armed with the right magical armaments, were surprisingly good at whittling down the walls. Apparently, this was what Kyrina had intended with all the women slinging stones at the walls. The trebuchets I'd built were able to accomplish the task much faster than several dozen Amazonian warriors.

In short order, I constructed nine more trebuchets. After Kyrina issued her edict, I was able to commandeer the aid of most of the army's spare forces. Each trebuchet I built was slightly better than the last, as I continued to refine my design. Soon, the original trebuchet I'd built looked positively diminutive next to the ten-story monster I'd built last.

That trebuchet had a sling pouch large enough to fling an automobile at the walls, and the force it struck with scaled up accordingly. The Amazonians powering it actually had to use the elaborate pulley and winch mechanism I'd designed for it to cock the arm back.

This massive behemoth would have made Warwolf—believed to be the largest trebuchet ever made, and used by King Edward the First for the siege of Stirling—look tiny. Its size and scale would have been impossible using mundane materials, as a normal wooden trebuchet arm of its size would have snapped in half the first time we fired it, given the forces it was under.

But Kyrina herself had hunted down a C-rank tree and chopped it down to make the main arm, specifically with this

war machine in mind. All in all, it was an incredible sight to behold. I would have given it a name if the Amazonians hadn't named it already.

“We need more Mega Mana Bombs for Lil' Sticky!” An Amazonian thumped the side of the enormous trebuchet. The limbs that formed the base were each wider around than she was. And she was no small woman.

“Lil' Sticky... I can't believe that's what they called it,” Myrina grumbled.

I sighed and placed a hand on her shoulder in consolation. “Tell me about it. Between you and me, I still call it the Engine of Destruction.”

“Engine of Calamitous Destruction and Magnificent Splendor!” Myrina corrected me. I'd opted for the truncated version of the name she'd picked.

Between designing new siege engines that were a little better suited to taking a city, I practiced with my new Master Artificer abilities.

After a bit of work, I was able to replicate some of the effects of a Mana Bomb using a monster core and some other odds and ends. It wasn't even as effective as my original Mana Bombs had been, but at the moment, quantity mattered more than quality. Most of the wasted mana was dispelled as kinetic energy, meaning that—unlike my Mana Bombs—these weren't safe for people to be around.

But that didn't matter when they detonated on the far side of the battlefield when they crashed into the city wall. The shields Shadefall was using were meant to block kinetic energy as much as magical energy, so the extra power wasn't wasted. It helped bring down the shields that much faster.

Thanks to the trebuchets, what was expected to take multiple weeks, if not a months-long siege, was significantly truncated. By that afternoon we were already starting to see cracks in Shadefall's walls.

“The shields are coming down!” Kyrina yelled. “Prepare the ladders! We're going to take the city!”



“Wish us luck!” Cyra gave me a pat on the shoulder, which from her was nearly enough to knock me off my feet.

Amazonians seemed to favor elite strike teams, so Myrina and Cyra hadn’t hesitated to volunteer yet again. They and their squads were to scale the walls on ladders, fight their way along the parapets to the gates, and then open them from the inside.

It was a dangerous job, and one a wizard like me was unfortunately completely unsuited for. I was remaining behind. Bridget and Sakura could have joined, had they been over level fifty, but at their current level Myrina and Cyra had said they’d serve better sticking close to me.

I cut a rather odd figure among the Amazonians. And though most knew me from our work on the trebuchets, I didn’t want to be mistaken for one of the enemy in the heat of battle. Having two warrior women on either side of me did a lot to mitigate that threat.

“Good luck!” Sakura wished Cyra and Myrina as they departed.

They ran to their assigned ladder teams, with Cyra and Myrina each at the very front. As I understood it, that was the most dangerous role one could have in a siege like this. They were each expected to be the first up their ladder, were responsible for clearing the way for everyone else in their squad, and had to hold that section at the top of the wall until reinforced by those behind them.

Bridget, Sakura, and I stayed near the trebuchets. With them fully operational and teams of Amazonians trained to use them, I only stuck around to help with repairs if something broke.

Myrina, Cyra, and the others with their ladders waited impatiently as the cracks in the wall grew greater. They spread across the bubble-like dome of energy protecting the city like spiderwebbing lines across a sheet of glass. Eventually, the moment we were all waiting for came to pass and the dome finally shattered with one last magic-laden host of projectiles from Lil’ Sticky.

*Crack!* The barrier shattered. And moments later, the Amazonians charged.

“To the walls!” I heard Cyra yell from the front of the line. She was already running, sprinting across the battlefield.

The defenders fired crossbow bolts and hurled monster cores to spawn spectral monsters in her way, but she either jumped or sprinted past every obstacle, ducking twice to dodge arrows that nearly caught her in the face.

By the time she reached the wall she was carrying the ladder all by herself while her allies raced to catch up. Slamming it into the ground at the base of the wall with practiced efficiency, she leaped halfway up the ladder before racing up the remaining rungs, arm over arm.

She cleared the last dozen rungs with another jump and drew her sword, landing and swinging it in a wide arc to force the militia on the wall back before they could rush her ladder and shove it away. She held that patch of wall on her own for the next ten seconds, which was long enough for two of her Amazonian allies to clear the top of the wall and join her.

Moments later, Myrina managed a similar feat on a distant section of the wall, further dividing the city’s militia forces. While the militia had knocked over six of the eight ladders sent to breach the walls, it was already too late to stop Cyra and Myrina.

Seeing those patches of wall had been secured, the other strike teams either repositioned their ladders in either of those sections or simply ran up Cyra’s or Myrina’s ladders to reinforce them. Soon both forces had a hundred fierce Amazonian warriors fighting for control of the gates.

The militia fought as best they could, but they were significantly outleveled. Without the ability to hide behind their summoned monsters, they were no match for their Amazonian foes. The sight before me seemed even more one sided than the Samhain Clan storming the dungeon’s version of Shadefall had been.

When the gates swung open, that was when I knew victory was as good as ours.

“Onward! Straight to the palace and take the city!” Kyrina yelled.

The remaining forces lying in wait or manning the trebuchets drew their weapons and charged the gates.

Even Sakura and Bridget got into it. “Yeah! Conquest! Let’s go!” Bridget raised her fist in the air, jogging with me at the rear of the army.

Sakura was considerably more into it than we were. “AAAAAARGHHH!” she bellowed, club raised overhead and crimson light streaming from both her weapon and her horn. She fit right in with all these screaming, battle-hungry Amazonians.

“Let’s not go to the palace with everybody else!” I yelled just to make sure Sakura could hear me. “I think we’ll find more of interest to us in the working districts.”

It looked like everybody was headed for the nicest quarter of the city, where the nobles and wealthiest merchants lived. No doubt the Shadefall family responsible for the entire rebellion lived in a palace over that way. I figured it would take the Amazonian army some time to knock down the second layer of defenses that guarded the Shadefall Clan’s inner walls, but with Kyrina leading that part of the attack herself, I had no doubt that they’d break through.

I was more interested in the people and the part of the city that Kyrina had already promised me. Along the way, we saw a few Amazonian warriors were busy breaking into houses and shops to loot and pillage.

We broke off from the group we’d been following, but didn’t have any trouble finding our way. Between our run through the city to take out the various workshops and my dungeon run, I had a pretty good sense of the city’s layout. We soon came across where the first workshop had burned to the ground. The city’s residents had done a decent job restraining

the fire, managing to prevent it from taking out any buildings other than the workshop.

Screams erupted around us once again, but these were not the fierce cries of Amazonian warriors. These were the shrill cries of the locals realizing their city was done for. Bridget and Sakura flanked me, sending anyone who saw us into knee-shaking terror.

“Oh System have mercy on us! The Amazonians are here!” one woman yelled in fear.

“Quick! Bury your valuables. They’re bound to come raiding this way as soon as they’re done with the noble and merchant districts,” a man hollered.

“Screw that!” another man replied. “Why hide your gold? It won’t do you much good when they shatter your pelvis!”

These Shadefall people would tear their own city apart if left unchecked. I had to nip this chaos in the bud. Kyrina had promised me a slice of the spoils in this area and I wasn’t about to let it go to waste.

Forget the ritzy estates the bulk of the Amazonian forces were pillaging. The real goldmine was here in this working district. If I could control this, then I’d have the perfect venue for Misa to continue peddling Earth’s goods without having to hide my affairs right under the Samhain Clan’s nose.

“Enough!” I yelled, firing a few Eldritch Blasts into the air.

Behind me, Doom Seeker hovered in the air. It caught considerably more attention than I did.

“Everyone, listen up!”

Some people stopped to listen, though others tried to run. I think the fact that I was a spell caster gave them pause, though, and a few of them looked to me for protection.

“Hey! He said to listen!” Sakura thumped the ground with her club, sending out a shockwave that knocked a fleeing pair of men right off their feet.

I shot Sakura a smile of thanks as she rounded up those who’d attempted to flee. “The Shadefall family that rules the

city is finished. I don't see any future where the Samhain Clan lets them live. But you are not part of the Shadefall family, and life in this city will go on."

I gestured to the buildings around me. "These workshops will continue to function, and things will go back to the way they were before the siege. Gather your loved ones here and have them stick with me. I'll make sure nothing bad happens to you."

"Do as Carter says, and everything will be alright," Sakura added.

"And the first step," Bridget chimed in, "is to stop tearing apart your own city or murdering your former bosses and neighbors. Got it?"

I'd hoped for a murmur of agreement, but what I received was closer to trembling acceptance. These people were terrified, but compliant fear was better than rampant chaos.

Sakura and Bridget did a good job setting the crowd at ease. A city on fire and filled with terrified people wasn't an unfamiliar sight to those of us who'd lived through the integration. Dealing with terrified people was just business as usual for us. Soon, we'd rounded up one whole city block's worth of people. Then two. Then three.

Soon, we had a decent chunk of the workshop district secured. But then I learned we weren't without competition. I should have suspected an encounter like this would happen, given what Elder Thalassa had said. She wanted the workshop district as badly as I did.

We ran into the first group of her soldiers as we were securing the fourth city block and they came around the corner. Unlike the Samhain—who depended largely on mercenaries and hired help—Elder Thalassa's people all shared the same general features. Hell, most of them were probably related. They all had a tall and lean build, in contrast to Cyra's large and well-toned body.

I recognized the same type of armor that Elder Thalassa wore. There was less metal to it than most Amazonians

favored and more black-stained leather. I heard them before they came into full view, and the *clink* of loose chains rang loud in my ears.

I fired off a Mana Bolt to get their attention. Supplemented with Earth Mana, it sounded like a gunshot as it slammed into the cobblestones at their feet. “And just what do you think you are doing?” I demanded.

An Amazonian with a jagged scar down her cheek sneered at me. “You’re that brat the Samhain have been hauling around, the one who built the rock-throwing machines...”

“I am,” I replied. “Now let me ask again, what do you think you are doing?”

I followed the length of chain in her hands back several paces behind her. Several of the city’s people were already in shackles connected by such chains. It was pretty clear what Elder Thalassa’s warriors were doing. But I wanted to hear it from their own lips.

“What’s it look like?” the scarred Amazonian scoffed. “We’re taking captives on Elder Thalassa’s orders. Now move, ‘Lil Sticky boy. You might be important and precious to the Samhain Clan, but we’ve no use for you. And without Cyra and Myrina here to protect you...” She let out a dark chuckle. “...well... let’s just say accidents have been known to happen.”

Sakura tightened her grip on her club. “That sounds like a threat,” she growled.

I crossed my arms. “Let those people go.”

“This is our loot!” The scarred woman gave the chain a tug. “These skilled crafters will fetch a pretty penny once they’re locked into long-term work contracts.”

“Slavery with an extra step,” Bridget scoffed.

Myrina had told me once that the System didn’t allow slavery, but that didn’t stop people from doing their best to get around any such safeguards.

The Amazonian scowled. “The strong do what they can, the weak endure what they must.” She gave the chain another tug. “These crafters were stupid enough to focus on their Jobs instead of their classes. This whole city is filled with morons who thought they could sit here and play with their little toys, making money and not worrying that trouble would come knocking. It’s their own fault, really. If we don’t lock them into contracts, somebody else will.”

One of the Amazonians lifted her weapon—a long spear. It was pretty clear that they weren’t about to release their prisoners. Or to stop looking for more crafters to capture. Still, I made one last attempt at diplomacy.

“The Samhain Clan promised all these people to me. Elder Thalassa was there and agreed to the Matriarch’s decision. You understand you’re stealing my rightfully earned reward, don’t you?”

That finally gave the scarred Amazonian pause. But she shook the feeling off a moment later. “Shut your mouth, you greedy little prick. These are our captives!”

She and her two companions drew their swords. I shot a glance at Bridget and Sakura. It looked like I’d get the chance to test my new staff and skill after all.

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-FIVE

“Last chance to run...” The scarred Amazonian sneered as she drew her sword.

“Nah, fuck that. The Elder will have less trouble taking this place over if they’re dead,” one of her companions said. She unslung a bow from her back and knocked an arrow.

The third hefted her spear, remaining silent but just as ready as the others to engage in deadly combat.

**Amazonian Warrior (Level 61)**

**Amazonian Archer (Level 59)**

**Amazonian Spearwoman (Level 60)**

As I sized them up, I felt them doing the same to me. Each of them were four to six levels above my own, but I had been taking on people higher than my own level for a while now. I spared a glance for Bridget and Sakura. This would be a real test of their skills. The two of them would be at a stark level disadvantage, but that didn’t dissuade either of them in the slightest.

Off to either side of me, Bridget and Sakura prepared themselves. The two of them had come a long way since we’d fought the Wolfmen, and thanks to the many new skill books we’d all acquired, along with daily practice sessions, their abilities were night and day from what they’d been before.

Crimson light flashed from Sakura’s horn and all three Amazonians prepared for her attack. But it was Bridget who struck first. I wasn’t sure what she did, but one moment she



was by my side, and the next she'd lashed out with a dagger at the archer.

The archer flinched, still drawing back an arrow to shoot Sakura. The archer turned, twisting to point her bow at Bridget, instead—but that was exactly what Bridget wanted.

She lashed out with a quick, darting strike—not at the archer, but at her taut bowstring. With a single flick, the bowstring snapped in the archer's hand. She fumbled her arrow as the severed string slapped her across the cheek. Just as quick as she'd appeared, Bridget was out of reach, having ducked back behind me.

The attack Sakura had been preparing was finally ready. She lunged forward, club raised high overhead in a strike that made no attempt to hide how devastating it would be if it connected. Crimson energy swirled around her as she allowed the full might of her barbarian rage to take her.

“Hyaaa!” Sakura screamed.

The three Amazonians jumped clear of the obvious strike, as Sakura's club slammed into the ground. Though the Amazonians weren't struck by the blow, the force with which it struck the ground was enough to knock all three of them off their feet.

I knew a moment to strike when I saw one. The moment I saw the Amazonians, I knew things would likely come to a confrontation. And now, I knew that confrontation would be a lethal one.

Holding out my hand, I cast my new spell—Soulchain Nexus. The spell sprang from my outstretched hand like shadowy black chains. Those chains wrapped around the scar-faced Amazonian, then the archer, and then the spearwoman. Finally, a long black chain larger than all the others shot back to me.

All the three Amazonians groaned, and I felt an agonizing ache deep in my core. It was like someone had tugged at my intestines. When the uncomfortable feeling faded, it was replaced with a sense of hunger. My spell couldn't wait to take

the power these warriors of Elder Thalassa possessed and make it my own.

With Soulchain Nexus established, I waved my other arm forward and launched the wave of Mana Bolts that circled a dozen feet above my head. I'd started conjuring them on the way to the city and had been adding to their number ever since. There seemed to be an upper limit on the number of Mana Bolts I could hold onto with Mana Barrage, but that upper limit depended on my mana regeneration—probably because it took a tiny bit of energy to maintain each Mana Bolt.

My upper limit for Mana Bolts had been pretty high before. But with Doom Seeker offsetting the mana cost both for each bolt's creation and its maintenance, that number was now over four dozen. When I flung my hand forward, fifty Mana Bolts flew forward all at once. I didn't bother targeting vitals this time. With so many bolts flying at one target, all her vitals were sure to be saturated, anyway.

I targeted the scar-faced Amazonian, since she'd acted like the leader of the group. Her eyes widened when she saw all the spells heading her way, but after being knocked flat by Sakura's attack she lacked the agility to scramble to safety.

Mana Bolt after Mana Bolt struck her, each different from the last. This was a true test of Doom Seeker's ability to draw out mana for my spells. Bolts of lightning mixed with molten magma and spikes of ice. To anyone looking, it probably looked like I'd used a dozen different spells instead of just the one.

The woman didn't even have time to scream before they struck her, all at once. Blood sprayed in all directions, and when the other two Amazonians clambered back to their feet, she stayed where she'd fallen on the ground.

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level!**

I felt a sudden rush of energy as her levels filled me. Some of that intense and gnawing hunger that casting Soulchain Nexus had brought faded. I felt measurably stronger, faster, and smarter—but most importantly, I was hungry for more.

The other two Amazonians groaned, blood leaking from their ears and the corners of their mouths. I could feel a host of corrupting marks on them, though I hadn't cast a thing on either of them. Any Corrupting Marks that were on them had been passed along by the shadowy chains of my Nexus.

The two of them stood anyway; neither seemed ready to give up. They ignored the chains wrapping around them tighter by the moment, though I didn't think anyone besides myself could even see them.

"You should have listened," Bridget hissed.

She darted forward toward the spearwoman, getting in close so that her daggers would be more useful than her enemy's spear. It was a trick Cyra had taught her during their many training sessions. Bridget was clearly outmatched in terms of brute strength, though.

The Amazonian spearwoman twisted her spear so the haft was in Bridget's face and shoved. Bridget ducked below the attack and was out of the way before the spear's blade flashed back around. When my blonde companion came up, I noticed that she only had one dagger.

The other was stuck in the gap where the Amazonian's leather vest met her leather skirt.

The spear woman grimaced as she tugged the dagger from her bowels, then staggered a moment and leaned on her spear. She had an assessing look in her eyes. She'd dismissed Bridget as a viable threat, before. But certainly not now.

Meanwhile, Sakura was busy fending off her own opponent. The archer's level was well above her own, but I wouldn't have been able to tell that from what I saw before me. Sakura attacked with relentless and overwhelming ferocity, swinging her club left and right in a ruthless offense that left the archer no time to retaliate. She kept reaching for the sword at her hip, but every time she took a hand off of her broken bow, Sakura lashed out with another attack.

The archer tried to put distance between herself and the Oni berserker, but Sakura kept charging in and swinging her

club. Though she wielded a club, the way it cracked through the air made it sound like a whip. A single mistake on the archer's part and this fight would turn decisively in Sakura's favor.

With both my companions having proved to their enemies they weren't to be underestimated, I figured I'd add my two cents' worth, tilting the scales a little further in our favor. I detonated my Corrupting Marks.

Both Amazonians cried out, and I was surprised to see just how many Corrupting Marks had made it onto them from the one I'd already slain. Soulchain Nexus essentially made it so that I could layer on Corrupting Marks exponentially faster than before, thanks to their ability to spread.

Sakura prepared another one of her obvious but overwhelming strikes, but this time the Amazonian archer couldn't dodge. She swung her club down, eventually cracking the cobblestones and sending up a fine red mist in all directions. When the dust settled, what was left wasn't even recognizable as a body.

The spear woman was a little faster to recover, and she was giving Bridget a tougher run. She shoved Bridget off her feet with a kick, then readied her spear high overhead, obviously planning to ram it through Bridget a moment later.

I shot her with an Eldritch Blast in the back of the head before that happened, causing the woman to stumble forward in a daze. That bought Bridget all the time she needed to scramble back to her feet. By then, Sakura was on top of the spear woman, and before long the two against one fight concluded in their favor.

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level!**

"Well done!" I cheered.

Bridget shook herself. "Sorry. I was almost too slow. It's just... fighting people is a bit different than fighting monsters."

Sakura placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Sakura had been by my side when we'd fought bandits and outlaws, so she'd killed her fair share of people. Bridget had done so a few times, but never quite as brutally as this.

"You did good. Her level was much higher than yours. If you were level 60, you would have cut her to pieces," Sakura said.

I reached down and picked up the length of chain the scar-faced Amazonian had been carrying. It was still attached to the manacles on the wrists of a half dozen residents of Shadefall.

"I'm surprised you didn't run," I told them.

"W-what are you going to do with us?" a rather nervous, blue-skinned woman asked.

I was surprised to see it was the same woman who I'd saved from being executed by Lark. She really had the worst luck.

"If you promise to keep this quiet"—I waved to the trio of dead Amazonians—"I can let you go."

The young woman nodded vigorously, as did all the others.

"Good. Now we're gathering everybody else up back this way. Follow me."

We led the freed prisoners to safety. I made sure to keep them buried deep within the rest of the survivors, somewhere they wouldn't be found—though they all gave me solemn promises that they wouldn't say a word. I didn't want them spreading around the fact that we'd killed three of Elder Thalassa's warriors. I already didn't get along with the Elder, but there was no reason to throw more fuel onto that fire.

I was taking a bit of a risk as it was, but if things panned out well for me here, I would be that much closer to building something that would both impress Myrina's family and provide endless resources and wealth for Crownhill.



The next few days were relatively peaceful, besides the executions. The Samhain Clan didn't take kindly to rebels, and

when they stormed the noble district they'd quickly sorted out who was a rebel and who wasn't.

Where they drew the line depended, from person to person. But the Shadefall Clan's main family was doomed, as were most of their direct subordinates.

Many of the wealthy merchants and money managers were executed as well, especially those who'd been managing the workshops that had produced the modified monster cores that had given the Samhain Clan so much trouble. And this included the crafters who'd destroyed the Samhain Clan's stockpiles of magical weaponry before the war, thereby making the whole rebellion possible in the first place.

I watched the executions along with everybody else. They were conducted right in the middle of the city square before the obelisk. I hadn't seen the obelisk since my dungeon run, so I was surprised to find it had been snapped in two. The broken top of the obelisk was nowhere to be seen.

I hadn't known they could be destroyed, but here it was.

"For betrayal of her oath by initiating an act of war against the Samhain Clan and its vassals, I sentence Lillia Shadefall to death. Lillia, if you have any last words, speak them now." Kyrina Samhain held a massive sword in one hand.

The former leader of the Shadefall Clan was on her knees in front of Kyrina. She was a small woman and, if not for the fine dress she wore, she'd look more like a shopkeeper than the powerful noble who'd engineered a rebellion.

"You're a fool, Kyrina," Lillia Shadefall spat. "You pretend that the strength of your arms and your ability to swing your sword gives you the right to rule, but you're not very good at it. See how close you came to defeat the moment your ancestors didn't step in to save you? Best cherish what you have, Kyrina. Should you ever fall out of favor with them, you'd face rebellion from each and every one of your vassal clans. That is the real strength of the Samhain Clan—pretending to be warriors, when in truth you're far better at wagging your asses before the most powerful kings of the Arcadia Multiverse."

Kyrina scowled and shook her head. “Such a waste of your final words.” She brought her sword around and cut off the rebel leader’s head.

There were about three dozen more executions after that. Considering most of the people leading the Shadefall rebellion had fought to the death, most of the city’s upper crust was either dead or was due to die soon.

Unfortunately, it didn’t look like the Samhain Clan had much of a plan for how to rebuild the city. Gutting the ruling class of the city as they were doing would likely lead to several years of turmoil as the people left in charge slowly restored law and order and rebuilt the many destroyed businesses from the ground up.

There was one shining light after the executions, though. That was when Kyrina started handing out rewards.

“To Carter, who aided in destroying the monster core workshops, I award four city blocks in the workshop district, along with all the workers therein! For his creation of the siege engines that enabled us to take the walls so quickly, I award him the sum of twelve chests of loot taken from the Shadefall Clan vaults.” Kyrina waved her hand, and Amazonians carrying several chests overflowing with gold and treasure came up to me.

I was quite impressed, especially when I opened the first of the chests and saw the treasure included a number of skill books. Kyrina smiled at me when my eyes widened at the sight. I was pretty sure she’d somehow shifted the skill books into my reward.

“Myrina, my daughter, for your brave efforts behind enemy lines, I grant you this sword from the Shadefall Clan’s collection of masterworks!” Kyrina handed her daughter a sheathed sword, which Myrina gripped with glowing eyes. “And for leading one of the two teams able to successfully take the walls, I grant you these three physical skill books to use or to trade as you see fit.”

Another chest came forward for Myrina, and she eagerly dove into the books.

Kyrina handed out several more waves of rewards, though I was surprised to see that she'd skipped over Cyra. The reason for that soon became apparent, though, since Cyra received what was, no doubt, the most biggest but most troublesome prize of all.

“To Cyra, my daughter, who led both the attack behind enemy lines and was the first on the walls. You also slew no less than six of the Shadefall Clan's elite singlehanded when we stormed their palace. To you, I grant governorship of Shadefall. Rule over this city as you see fit!”

Cyra looked more surprised than anyone to be given the entire city to rule. There was quite a bit of cheering at the announcement from the warriors, though. Cyra was quite popular among them—especially those who'd followed her into battle.

Cyra pointed at herself in surprise, blinking in confusion as her mother nodded.

Myrina was faster to react. “Yeah! You go, Sis! Just make sure you don't sell the city off too cheaply!”

Others shared a laugh, but it wasn't one of incredulity. If Cyra really did decide to simply sell the entire city off to the highest bidder, it seemed nobody would be surprised.

“Well, daughter, I hope you'll let the rest of us stay in your palace for these next few nights while we feast and celebrate our victory. But after that, the place is yours!” Kyrina stroked her daughter's head affectionately.

“Uh... I'm... I'm honored, Mother. And I'll take good care of the city.” She looked around herself with a nervous gaze. Apparently the thought of ruling the conquered city scared her more than the thought of storming its walls. She hadn't looked half as scared before or during battle as she did now.

Maybe I could lend her a hand as a fellow owner of a city. That would accelerate my plans a bit faster than I'd initially planned.



## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-SIX

The Amazonians feasted that entire night and would probably continue well into the morning. Sakura and Bridget joined in, but I had learned my lesson already and had no plans of repeating what happened last time I let the Amazonians get me drunk.

I waited for the right opportunity and pulled Cyra aside. Normally, she enjoyed this sort of thing, but I'd noticed ever since being granted ownership of the city she'd been tense. When I offered to help her get started, she leaped on the offer with far more speed than I expected. I'd thought I'd at least need to convince her she needed my help.

"That's right, you own a city!" Cyra said with a smile. "I need every tip I can get, Carter. Please."

I chuckled as she looked down at me with wide eyes. "No need to beg, Cyra. After all you've done to help me, I'd be a poor friend not to do the same for you."

Cyra wiped sweat from her brow. "A-alright. So... uh... where do I start?"

I led her to some seats nearby. There were plenty available. Most people had gotten up to watch the show nearby. The other Oni woman was running Sakura through some of her people's sacred rites. To me it looked a lot like headbutting a wall, but the Amazonian warriors really enjoyed it.

"First, tell me what you know about leadership," I began. "Whatever you know about governing a settlement."

Cyra stared at me blankly.

“Your mother runs Valkyrie’s Watch. Surely she taught you a thing or two about ruling over a city?”

Cyra shuffled her shoulders awkwardly. “She... uh... might have mentioned a thing or two. To be honest, it wasn’t my favorite subject.”

I frowned, getting a bad feeling. “It’s okay if you don’t remember much. What were these one or two things?”

“Chop the heads off of criminals and don’t abuse your citizens too much?” Cyra blushed. It was the first time I’d ever seen her embarrassed.

I tried to bite my tongue, but I was too surprised. The question was out before I could stop myself. “That’s it? Really? Your mother rules a city and that’s all she saw fit to teach you?”

Cyra shrugged sheepishly. “Well... she mostly just intimidates everyone if they step out of line. She’s a C-Rank, so it works for her.”

“What are the laws of the city? How do the guards know when they have a criminal on their hands?” I pressed.

Cyra shrugged again. “They just do what she would do. Valkyrie’s Watch is fairly easy to manage because Grandmother passed it down to Mother. Mother just makes sure not to do anything that Grandmother wouldn’t do. The guards just do what they were taught by their predecessors. There aren’t any real hard and firm laws. It’s just... a general vibe of what gets you beheaded and what the guards will just slap you around a bit for.”

I let out a loud sigh as I buried my head in my hand. One palm wasn’t enough, and I soon realized this was a two-hand job. I buried my head in both hands.

Valkyrie’s Watch ran off vibes and tradition. There were no rules at all. No firm schedules, rotations, offices, or bureaucracy. Come to think of it, I hadn’t heard anyone talk about taxes. Or about getting licenses for anything or registering ownership with the city.

I'd been critical of the Samhain's governance before, but only now did I realize why I'd been so unimpressed. Their governance barely existed at all!

I liked to think of myself as a pretty hands-off ruler. After making the city safe, establishing the militia, setting down some basic laws and establishing the council to create more if needed, and then giving everyone opportunity for work through the obelisk, I'd called it a day and returned to my farmhouse. I had no intention of lording it over Crownhill from a palace like the one these Amazonians were partying in.

That was what I considered the barest minimum amount of effort a ruler needed to go to if they wanted to fulfill their responsibilities. But when the Amazonians talked about being a hands-off ruler, they *really* meant hands off. From the sound of things, the city was lucky Kyrina did anything at all.

The way Cyra put it, most rulers only bothered to intimidate the criminals of the city into submission with their presence before doing whatever they pleased. Most settlements were lucky if their ruler turned part of their army into some sort of formal guard force.

“Carter? A-are you okay?” Cyra asked worriedly.

“I'm alright... I-I'm fine.” I rubbed my eyes with my palms. “Okay, so it looks like we're going to have to start with the very basics.” I reached into my bag of holding for a pen and a piece of paper. I laid them out between the two of us.

At the top of the page, I wrote the word ‘laws’.

“Uh...” Cyra accepted the sheet of paper with a nervous air.

“Here's your first task as ruler of Shadefall, Cyra. It's time to make the laws you will enforce. Start with the basics. The obvious things...”

Coming up with a list of laws for Shadefall took some time. I ended up writing out most of the list myself based on my observations of Valkyrie's Watch. I came up with things Cyra would be comfortable with. The easiest was the basics, like no killing people in the streets. I scratched through that

one and instead wrote, no murder unless it is in self-defense. Cyra got on board with that fairly easily. The tougher thing was putting in protections for property rights.

“But if someone gets robbed, it’s their own fault for not being strong enough to defend what’s theirs. Or at least for not having friends strong enough to protect them. Right?” Cyra asked.

I shook my head. “That will lead to a truly ruthless city, Cyra. A place full of warriors all hard as nails can live like that, basing that life on the law of strength... but not here. Shadefall is full of soft-hearted crafters. Most of these people are hardly over level 10.”

Cyra blinked, knowing I was right.

“But that is why this place is needed by your Clan. It’s these people’s job levels that make them valuable. And from what I’ve read, heard, and seen... the Samhain have difficulty understanding how difficult it is to level up both a class *and* a job. You need to have protections in place that ensure they can keep what they make or earn. Otherwise, why should they put in the work to get those things in the first place?”

Cyra closed her eyes and sighed. “Alright, I trust your judgement. So... no stealing or challenging people far weaker to you to a duel for their possessions. Stealing something especially valuable will come with bigger penalties.”

Cyra dragged a hand down her face, then froze as her eyes widened. “How will we know if someone owns a building or not? Couldn’t someone just say they own it when they don’t, effectively stealing it?”

“We’ll need to establish a department of property management to register who owns what,” I replied. “They’ll answer to you and keep a careful, official record of who owns what. They will have the final say on matters of ownership.”

Our planning took us straight through the evening and into the following morning. A few Amazonians chided Cyra about not having enough fun, but she waved them off. I was flattered

that she was so intently focused on what I had to say about leading and managing a city.

I would be the first to admit that I hadn't ruled Crownhill for long. And, truth be told, I didn't feel like I was very good at it. But I knew I was better than what normally passed for Amazonian leadership outside of battle and Cyra trusted me.

After all the partying, warriors retired for the evening or simply passed out on the floor where they'd been giving the night their all. Meanwhile, Cyra and I put our plan into motion.

"Do you really think we should recruit people so soon?" Cyra asked. "They're probably terrified of us. We already executed most of the city's nobility."

I shook my head. "The sooner we get this over with, the better. It's important to reestablish law and order. If people get used to the free-for-all of looting and murdering, it will be much harder to stop later."

Dawn found us scouring the noble district for survivors. I wasn't especially fond of the idea of reinstalling a noble class in the city, but we needed people with education and familiarity with local traditions who could help Cyra govern. We found a few people in some of the smaller houses outside the palace.

Most of these people had gone into hiding, but after visiting the various shelters back on Earth, I knew the signs to look for when someone was in hiding. Curtains were drawn tight, the doors were barricaded from the inside... that kind of thing.

"We just want to talk!" Cyra yelled as she rapped on the door. "We know you're in there, come on out!"

"I think you're scaring them off." I waved Cyra to the side and gave it an attempt myself. "Look, we're here looking for city administrators! We need help putting the city together. I heard from one of the other survivors that you used to manage property rights in the city. It seems that your old boss is dead,

which means you can be the new boss if you open this door and come with us!”

*Silence.*

Cyra shrugged. “It was worth a shot. Let’s move onto the next house...”

“Pity. I had a ten thousand gold signing bonus prepared for them if they opened up the...” I said this as I turned to leave, but a moment later the door swung open.

“Sorry. Sorry... um... you must be the new city lord?” A small, bespectacled woman with graying hair opened the door, staring up at Cyra with wide eyes. After Cyra nodded, she averted her gaze and turned to me. “And what was that I heard about a ten thousand gold signing bonus?”

The former nobles of Shadefall were a nervous and skittish lot—not at all like the brave warriors who ruled the various Amazonian clans under the Samhain’s banner. They were, however, quite interested in getting paid. Those who’d once been part of major noble families were harder to convince, but the ambitious minor houses were more than happy to accept a job from the city’s conquerors for a modest amount of coin.

We set up a governance meeting that very afternoon and went through who had experience and what they had experience in. I eventually helped Cyra assemble a series of five teams meant to manage civil affairs that we expected to crop up in the transition to Cyra’s rule instead of the Shadefall family.

“A good rule of thumb is to maintain the status quo,” I instructed everyone we’d gathered. “Unless it would contradict Cyra’s interests, just stick with whatever would have been done before. We’ll sort out the exact laws of the land later. For now, we just want people to feel safe enough to return to work.”

“A-and what about bandits and looters?” a nervous-looking woman asked.

Cyra stood straighter. She’d been letting me lead the discussion on her behalf, but this was where she knew she

could pitch in.

“I will personally make sure the streets are safe. My warriors and I will patrol every hour, day or night,” Cyra replied. “I will have to sort out the old militia, but the warriors among them will be able to find new work under my banner, should I find them to be loyal.”

The military aspects of city management were the one thing Cyra seemed confident about, so I let her do as she pleased on that front. By the evening of the following day, I was pretty sure the city was no longer in danger of falling apart or of turning into a lawless hellscape.

Most importantly, ownership of one entire block of the workshop district had been officially deeded to me, per Kyrina’s decree. I had been promised four, but was prepared to start working on one, at first.

Cyra set aside time for her first patrol shortly after her warriors started coming to their senses after last night’s drunken revelry. While she got her troops armored and out on the streets, I saw to my own affairs.

“Alright everybody! It’s safe to come out,” I told the workers I’d hidden in one of the larger warehouses for safekeeping.

“W-what are you going to do with us?” asked the nervous blue-skinned young woman I had saved twice before.

“I’m going to let you go.” I gave her a shrug. “I don’t plan to keep you prisoner, if that’s what you mean. Though if you want my advice, I’d steer clear of any of Elder Thalassa’s warriors. In fact, try not to leave the workshop district at all.”

“The workshops we all worked in were destroyed...” The young woman still looked worried and uncertain.

I waved her concerns off. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of that. But on that topic, if any of you are any good at carpentry, please let me know. Especially if you are familiar with the odds and ends of making a good workshop.”

A few people raised their hands and I pulled them from the crowd and had them start to draw up designs for me. Thanks to

my Master Artificer Job, I had an intuitive understanding of physics and material sciences—but that didn't mean I knew how to build a well-designed workspace.

I was confident I could put together a weather-tight box, but a good workshop was so much more than that. The rooms needed to be large enough for various tasks, the windows needed to let light into certain rooms, and the architecture had to suit the rest of the city. That didn't include all the little ergonomic choices that didn't seem like a big deal, but which would matter to the people who had to spend every day inside the building.

After that, I recruited Myrina, Sakura, and Bridget to help me secure some resources. The trebuchets I'd built had been made from a lot of wood, most of them enormous beams. They'd provide more than enough wood to frame a couple of warehouses with, in short order.

With some bags of holding and some strong Amazonian backs to lift what my telekinetic abilities couldn't, we'd soon replaced the warehouse we burned down with a six-story structure that would have ten times the capacity of the building we were replacing.

"I'm pretty sure this is much bigger than it needs to be." Sakura tapped the side of the bare wooden frame.

"Yes," I admitted, then shrugged. "Yes, it is. But I didn't want to waste such lovely pillars. Look at the size of these things!"

The tree trunks we'd built the trebuchets' arms with were both massive and strong. Hell, it would be perfectly reasonable to build a skyscraper out of them. With wood like this, the people of this world wouldn't need to resort to steel structures if they didn't want to.

After the first warehouse was framed out, I searched high and low until I eventually found Misa. At my request, she sent some of her new assistants off to buy and return to the city with a bunch of food. The city would starve without it, and I was pretty sure the Amazonians who'd conquered the city had



forgotten that the people they'd besieged for the past week were critically low on food.

With my personal business ventures seen to, I reunited with Cyra after her patrols. Armed and in armor as she marched through the city, she seemed much more confident in her new role.

She thanked me for my help so far. "Thank you, Carter. I don't think I would have thought to hire the very nobles we conquered to help me rebuild the city." Cyra gave me a thoughtful shrug. "Maybe we shouldn't have executed quite so many of them. I really owe you for all the help you've given me."

"What's done is done. But yes, if you find more nobles who previously helped manage the city in hiding after your mother leaves, try not to go overboard with more executions."

I chuckled, then placed my hand on her shoulder. She was a lot taller than me, so it took a bit of reaching.

"You don't owe me anything, Cyra. Friends don't keep score, after all. But if we did, I'd say I'm still in debt to you for all the training."

Cyra laughed. "I can see what Myrina sees in you, Carter." She pulled off her helmet and hooked it on her belt.

"I hope you'll have things well in hand by the time the army departs. All the warriors in the city are part of what is suppressing danger or further uprisings against you. You might face more dissent." I waved to Cyra's palace, which even now was bustling with activity.

"That won't be an issue," Cyra replied.

It was my turn to shrug. I suspected Cyra would have far less trouble putting down rebels than she would at managing everything else.

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-SEVEN

After Cyra was settled, I spent what time I had left leaving orders and establishing something along the lines of a chain of command in my district of Shadefall. I wanted the four city blocks I owned cleared and, eventually, for more workshops and warehouses to be built in it.

On my next visit, I would bring plenty of copper wire here from Earth. I'd rather people suspect the Mana Bombs and other products of Earth had been made here than all the way out on an unintegrated planet. Having these workshops at least appear to be operational would be useful.

Misa had returned with plenty of food, and I made sure all the workers under my care were fed—along with their families. Starving people didn't exactly make good employees, and I already had quite a bit of work for them to do.

After all, I'd looted four workshops dry of everything they had, including all their tools and materials. Once we had a building up, it wasn't hard to outfit a few hundred workstations. I flipped through my lists of blueprints and eventually realized I already had a project in mind for these people.

"What is this thing?" a worker asked as she hefted a piece of a wall outlet. I'd had to get the magical power source I'd given to Bridget back from her, so that my workers could copy the design.

"It is an item that will be extremely valuable in a very distant land. This item is a power source. It's meant to provide

a steady stream of electrical energy to a device connected to it through a cable.” I demonstrated what I meant by plugging in Bridget’s electric stove.

“So... like lightning mana?” the worker asked, scratching their head.

More of them gathered around to examine this new project.

“Yes, like lightning mana—though it’s important that you provide the right kind of lightning mana. That’s why there are several stages of energy regulation built into the enchantment. We can’t just draw lightning mana directly from a lightning monster core.” I gestured to several unassembled cores before me.

Carefully explaining each stage, I walked this group of workers through crafting power adapters. Once they’d mastered the item, I had each of them teach a dozen others. Soon, I had hundreds of my workers building power adapters. When I returned to Earth, these things would make life a lot easier for everyone in Crownhill. There would be no more need for messing around with generators or fixing the power grid.

Just slap a magical power adapter onto your gadget, and you’d be back in action. Not to mention, I had plans for all that wire currently in useless power lines.

I hadn’t measured the amount of energy a monster core could output—yet—but judging from how much time Bridget had already put on this one using her stove all the time, I was certain these monster cores packed a huge amount of energy in them for their tiny mass.

A big enough bundle of them would likely put out enough energy to compete with a fission reactor rod. In fact, I was pretty sure I was more on the mark with that analogy than I’d intended. The energy stored in the monster cores certainly wasn’t chemical—which meant there had to be some peculiar physics going on inside them.

If I were more scientifically minded, I might try to perform experiments to figure out exactly what was happening. Who knows... maybe I would someday. But for now, all that mattered was that they worked. And they were going to cut down the amount of time it would take for Earth to reindustrialize—I figured they'd reduce that from decades or centuries to months or, at worst, a few years.

“Whew... finally done with all that heavy lifting!” Myrina wiped her brow.

She, Bridget, and Sakura had been playing the part of day laborers lately. Myrina's levels and Strength stat, in particular, meant she was one of the few who could lift the full-size beams we'd framed the warehouse with. Her help had been invaluable—and not just with assembling the new workshop, either.

The storefronts I'd purchased often needed a few simple repairs to get them operational again. Someday, these shops would sell Earth's goods to the people walking the streets of Shadefall—but for now, they would sell the food Misa was bringing in from out of town.

My workers had their food guaranteed as part of their wages, but I wasn't against helping the rest of the city get back on its feet. And I'd told Misa to sell the food at cost, rather than aiming for a profit. It wasn't like the margins on trading grain were all that great, anyway. It was certainly not anywhere near as profitable as selling Mana Bombs.

“Yeah, I guess we're done.” I chuckled. “Let's sit down at one of those stores we set up and see if we've got any customers.”

We found a place that I'd earmarked for a coffee shop. Unfortunately, it was empty, but I was certain that wouldn't always be the case. We ate simple food, since it wasn't right to hold an extravagant feast in a city on the verge of starvation.

Still, Bridget put her cooking skills to the test yet again and cooked up a delicious barley stew that cured fatigue. Normally, I hated both barley and stew, but with Bridget's skills behind it, the meal was worth every bite. The smell was

enough to bring a few wandering shell-shocked survivors wandering over to investigate, and we ended up giving away our leftovers.

“So... Myrina,” Bridget began. “When are you coming back to Earth?”

Myrina coughed on her coffee, spluttering and red-faced.

“Like... like... coming to live with Carter and you all?” Myrina asked.

Bridget smiled in reply. “Why not? We’ve taken advantage of your hospitality several times now. It would be poor manners for us to not return the favor. Besides, you’ve had to put up with my limited cooking in the field. With a proper kitchen, I can make something much nicer.”

I wrapped an arm around Bridget’s shoulder and chuckled. “You’re far too humble, Bridget.”

Myrina took another sip of coffee, coughing to clear her throat. “Well... I told Carter this before, but I can’t come to Earth quite yet—not until your shard has stabilized. And even then, the System would not allow me full use of my levels. I likely wouldn’t be able to cross over at full power until you’ve merged several times.”

Sakura leaned forward. “But you would be able to visit if Carter finished wiping out all the other factions around Crownhill?”

Myrina shrugged. “Probably? After the System merges you with five large fragments of similar size, the System might let me teleport over in a weakened state. It really depends.” She frowned. “The rules change from integration to integration, depending on the power of the locals. The System does what it can to give the newly integrated world a fighting chance before letting outsiders in. Some need a bigger handicap than others.”

I stroked my chin, feeling the stubble there. It was starting to get itchy, but I didn’t have a razor. Perhaps making facial hair a toggle was something I could fix with my next racial

evolution. My brows drew down as I considered how to make it possible for Myrina to visit Earth.

Eventually, I nodded. “I suppose that’s one more reason to wipe out the remaining leaders of the Crownhill County Prison. They’re the last factions I can recall back on Earth standing in our way. Once they’re gone, Myrina should be able to drop by and say hello.”

“Well...” Myrina looked uncomfortable. “Going with you... it’s just...”

“Just what?” Bridget asked.

“It’s just not the sort of thing my mother or the elders would allow... not without their approval, at least.”

Sakura scoffed. “Myrina, you’re a grown woman. You don’t have to ask for your family’s permission to leave the house.”

Myrina shifted awkwardly in her seat.

I held up a hand. “Myrina’s family has some... ah... some unique traditions. It isn’t our place to tell her what she can and can’t do, and I won’t let us be a wedge that separates her from her kin. Most of them have been good to us.”

Sakura’s eyes darted between Myrina, me and Bridget. There was a certain sharp look in her eyes that I recognized. It was the kind of look I hadn’t seen too often since the integration. It was the way she looked when she saw a problem that needed solving, and knew she was the one who had to solve it.

Sakura rested a familiar hand on my shoulder. “Carter, why don’t you catch up with Cyra again? She seemed to be getting the most out of your help.” She turned her eyes to lock gazes with Myrina. “Bridget, Myrina, and I need to have a girl-to-girl talk.”

I shrugged. “Alright, ladies. I’ll leave this in your capable hands. But please, don’t talk Myrina into getting herself in trouble.”

“Oh, nothing of the sort. We just want to figure out where she stands... and what she plans to do going forward. You know, the usual.” Sakura ushered me off.

I was familiar with this kind of conversation. Sakura used to enjoy having the ‘what are your plans’ talk with most of her employees back in the office. I shrugged. I wasn’t about to deny the three women in my life a bit of girls’ time.

So far, I’d gotten pretty lucky. I was still surprised that Bridget and Sakura got along so well, largely through their own efforts. I knew when to stick my nose into something and when not to—and this was one of those ‘not to’ times.

“I’ll be back in a bit then.” I excused myself and was soon on my way.

I took a tour of the city. Without a pair of tough-looking women on either arm marking me as a clear member of the invading force, I was able to listen in on what the city’s conquered residents were talking about in a little more detail.

“The new governor the Samhains appointed isn’t as crazy as you’d think,” a woman was saying.

“I call bullshit on that. You weren’t near the gates, but I heard firsthand from my brother what happened. She was there in the thick of it, covered in blood and bellowing like a madwoman as she cut down anything in her path. That’s our glorious new leader,” a man scoffed.

The woman shook her head. “But that’s just it. She may be battle-mad and crazy in a fight, but she’s reestablished law and order fairly quickly. In fact, she and her guards are doing a better job patrolling the streets than the Shadefall main family ever did!”

“Propaganda!” the man snorted. “I’ve read my history books. Every time the Samhains stick their nose in anything but military affairs or interplanetary politics, things go to shit. They’re good at fighting and they’re good at popping out extra-tough babies for horny old bastards so rich they have their own planet. Nothing else.”

“Maybe not every Samhain fits in that neat little box...” the woman replied.

Their bickering continued a while longer, though it soon turned to other subjects and I moved on to listen in on others. Those two were a fair representation of the general opinion of the populace, though. People were surprised by the fact that Cyra was doing a good job, though they were still anxiously waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Eventually I met up with the city’s glorious new leader, herself. I waved her down in the streets while she was on patrol.

“Carter.” Cyra nodded to me. “Do you have something to report to me and my guards? Or is this a social call? I’m afraid I can’t stop while on patrol.”

I chuckled. “It’s a bit of both. And I’ll walk with you on patrol, if you’d like. I heard some rumors you might be interested in.”

I repeated what I’d heard to Cyra, as well as a few suggestions I had for clearing the air between her and the citizens. It would be some time before they were truly comfortable with Cyra—and, even then, there was no telling what the future held.

After all, Kyrina had appointed Cyra as governor of Shadefall, not permanent lordship over it. From what I’d gathered, Kyrina, the elders, and even the city’s residents expected Cyra to reign over Shadefall as a petty dictator. They figured she’d strip the city of its wealth and maintain order with an iron fist.

But they’d all underestimated Cyra’s sense of responsibility. The moment she heard the people here were her responsibility, she’d set out to do right by them. She was a good leader.

“These rumors are useful, thank you, Carter,” Cyra said.

“Anytime,” I chuckled and gave Cyra a pat on the arm. I still didn’t feel even close to having cleared my debt with her, given all that Cyra had done for me. “Now, I think it’s past



time I check back in with Myrina, Bridget, and Sakura. I trust Bridget, but Sakura and Myrina working together could get her into trouble..."

As I turned to leave, I felt Cyra grab my wrist. "Wait, Carter. I have heard some rumors, too. Rumors about you."

I turned, surprised at the urgency I heard in Cyra's tone. "People have been talking about me?"

It wasn't too surprising that Cyra's soldiers might talk. After all, I'd spent a lot of time with both her and her sister. And her mother, too, come to think of it. There had been plenty of gossip about me back when I was just hanging out with Myrina. Nowadays, they no doubt had far more to say.

"More than gossip..." Cyra shook her head, as if sensing my next question. "I've heard rumors about what the elders have planned for you."

I frowned. "Your mother likes me. And all besides Thalassa seem pleasantly disposed or at least neutral to me. What's the issue?"

Cyra let out a tired breath. "As you might expect, these rumors come from Elder Thalassa's troops. If it were only her, though, things would be fine and Mother could counter them. But that woman has a growing distaste for you. She thinks you are a bad influence on Myrina and on me, and seeks to see you cast aside and see our patronage stopped."

Cyra pinched the bridge of her nose. "Mother refused her first request, but there are others among the elders who follow Elder Thalassa's lead. And of those who do, some operate in... in less than savory ways. Be careful, Carter. In fact, it may be best if you avoid walking around the city alone." She looked around. "Even when fishing for rumors for me."

"I... see..." I took Cyra's grim warning to heart. "I promise I'll be careful—at least until the elders and their forces leave the city."

"We're nearly done with my patrol. Show me this coffee shop my little sister is making trouble in. I will walk with you there." Cyra took up a guard position at my side.

I didn't miss the wary look she cast a group of Elder Thalassa's warriors off in the distance.

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-EIGHT

I smelled the coffee shop before I saw it. Bridget must have brewed another batch. That probably meant the conversation between Sakura and Myrina had gotten pretty intense.

When I finally got close enough to see the place, I breathed a sigh of relief. If they'd gotten into a fight, I'd be able to see the collateral damage from here. I swung open the door and Cyra followed close behind me. As soon as I appeared, Myrina shot up from her seat.

Her eyes locked onto mine like a beacon, and I could tell by the sharpness in her gaze that they'd been talking about me. It seemed that Myrina had something to tell me. She waited patiently for me to approach, though both she and Sakura looked like they were ready to burst at the seams.

"Carter, we need to talk," Myrina began.

"Nice to see you too, little sis..." Cyra shook her head as her younger sister completely ignored the bigger woman.

Bridget poured Cyra a cup of coffee as she sat down with us. Once we were all seated and Cyra took a sip, I prompted Myrina to share what was on her mind.

"Alright, Myrina," I said with a grin, "spill."

Myrina wrung her fingers together, then took a deep breath. "So, Sakura, Bridget and I were talking while you were gone. We've been doing a lot of dancing around the subject, and Sakura asked me a very important question lately. Why

haven't we... um..." Her cheeks turned a bright pink. "Why haven't we been together yet?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Because of your family and your traditions, that's why."

Myrina nodded. "That's what you said before," she replied. She reached out and grabbed my hand in her own. "But shouldn't that be my call? They're my family. It's my price to pay."

I frowned. "Myrina, you shouldn't have to pay that price. You shouldn't have to pay any price for us to be together."

Myrina blew out a breath. "I want to make our intentions public. I want to let the family know what I'm planning. Mother will support me... some of the elders, too. They like you—especially after seeing how you fought alongside us. We don't have to do the formal battle yet; we can schedule one several years out in the future."

Cyra leaned forward, her face grim. She glanced between me and Myrina. "Myrina... you might want to reconsider this. I've been in your seat more than once. It's never turned out well for me."

Myrina gripped my hand tighter as she glanced up at her sister. "This is different. Carter's different."

Cyra looked me up and down. "He is different. But..." The big Amazonian balled her fists, her jaw clenched tight. The jovial smile she'd worn when we'd arrived had disappeared. "It's..."

"It's what, Cyra?" Myrina asked, chin raised as though daring her sister to try to change her mind.

Cyra growled, shook her head, and then abruptly stood. "You won't listen to me, anyway. You'll learn for yourself soon enough. I need to get back to the palace. I only came out this far to make sure Carter got back safe."

She stood and shot me a glance. "Carter, remember what I said earlier."

I nodded, surprised at Cyra's sudden change of mood. Then again, maybe it wasn't so sudden, considering what I knew had happened to her last lover. This conversation had to have brought up bad memories for her. The door swung shut behind Cyra as she departed, and soon it was just the four of us again.

"This is a big step, Myrina. Are you sure?"

Myrina nodded. "Dead sure."

Her hand gripped mine tighter, to the point that she was halfway out of her seat, certainty painted on her face. What had Sakura said to her while I was gone?

I let out a breath. "Alright then, it seems we need to go see your mother."



Kyrina was in the middle of a meeting with the Clan's elders, so getting a meeting with her was tough. I didn't have much time left on Themyscira, though, so Myrina was eager to get us in to see her, now.

"We need to see my mother," Myrina told the guards, her voice urgent.

Both guards looked skeptical, and one of them let out a sigh. "Your mother and the elders are busy. You can't just interrupt them for any little thing."

"This isn't just any little thing," Myrina insisted. "It's important."

The guards shrugged to one another, then stepped aside. "Alright, but make it quick. Don't waste the elders' time."

We entered the room that Kyrina and the Samhain Clan elders had taken over and used as their command center. Now that the city was theirs, most of what they were doing was dividing up the loot. I wasn't surprised to see piles of gemstones and enchanted weapons being sorted into piles.

"Mother," Myrina began, "can I talk to you? Alone?"

Kyrina glanced up from the table where she and the elders were dividing the loot.

Elder Thalassa was the first to respond. “No need to pull your mother aside, Myrina. We’re all family here. Speak freely.” Though her words were kind, she glared at me with narrowed eyes as she said this.

Myrina hesitated, but then shrugged and forged ahead. “Alright. I... I wanted to let you know...” She coughed to clear her throat.

Kyrina raised an eyebrow, setting aside the coins she’d been counting a moment ago. The eyes of the other elders were all on Myrina.

I recognized Elder Caelia, with her arms crossed and both swords on her hips. Elder Elara was there, as well, massive and leaning against the table. She, at least, was smiling. There was a fourth elder present I didn’t recognize, but I didn’t like how close she was standing to Elder Thalassa.

“Mother, Elders.” Myrina raised her voice as she met her mother’s gaze. “Carter and I have decided to date. And if all goes well, we plan to have a formal engagement duel in several years to prove that he is strong enough to be with me.”

There was a murmur of mixed reactions. Thalassa scowled, as did the Elder standing next to her. Caelia shrugged noncommittally, and Elara shot a glance to Kyrina, waiting to see the matriarch’s reaction.

Kyrina let out a long breath. “I was afraid it would come to this.”

“What?” Myrina demanded, arms crossed. “You’re not going to try to tell me I can’t do this, are you?”

Kyrina looked hesitant. She glanced between Myrina and me several times.

“Oh please, Kyrina, if you’re not going to tell the girl, I will,” Elder Thalassa said. Without waiting for a response, she turned to Myrina, sparing a moment to cast a glare at me. “Myrina, no, you’re not dating him. End of story.”

“What?!” Myrina’s cheeks grew red as she turned on Elder Thalassa. “Why not?”

“Because it isn’t in the best interest of the clan. Or of your family within it.” Elder Thalassa curled her fingers and made a shooing motion at me.

The guards stepped into the room from the open door to grab me and pull me out, but Myrina stepped between them and me with her arms outstretched.

“No! Explain!” Myrina insisted.

Elder Thalassa let out a discontented sigh. “Myrina, don’t be stubborn. If your mother was going to allow this, she would have spoken up already. Notice how she hasn’t said a word?”

Kyrina appeared deep in thought, eyes focusing on the window of the small palace room as she gazed off into the distance.

“Why can’t I date Carter? Cyra goes out with guys all the time!”

“And we’re not fond of that, either. But it’s not like any of Cyra’s dates would ever have a chance to win her engagement duel. We’ve been very careful to sabotage any budding relationship of hers that might cause trouble. It’s bad enough that she is thinking about marrying, though. If we lose you as well, the Clan will be in trouble,” Elder Caelia explained.

I turned to the Elder. “What do you mean by sabotage?”

Elder Caelia shrugged. “Just what it sounds like. Cyra can’t be allowed to marry herself off—not to anyone in the D-Grade, at least. She can talk and flirt with young men of her own rank, but none of them can be allowed to win her over. It would be a waste of her talents, even if the man she matched with was slightly stronger. The Samhain Family has higher standards than the usual Amazonian woman, and not just because of some ancient tradition.”

“Explain!” Myrina scowled. Her cheeks were red and her eyebrows were drawn tight together.

Elder Thalassa sighed. “It’s interplanetary politics, girl. Don’t be dense. You think the Samhain Clan would be as powerful and as important as it is if it were just us? A few C-Grade warriors and a matriarch?”

She snorted. “We’d be a continental power, at best, and not even a particularly major faction within the Amazonian Empire. We’d have to move to the capital to be anything more. But we’re not. The Samhain Clan is known far and wide, and wealth flows into our lands from worlds far distant from Themyscira, despite our relatively backwater region and status.”

“I know about that.” Myrina waved her hand. “The Ancestors are looking out for us. Well, most of the time. This incident with the Shadefall Clan was the exception.”

“Yes, they are.” Elder Thalassa nodded patiently. “How do you think the Ancestors reached their current level of status?”

“By fighting for it!” Myrina replied instantly. It had the ring of something that had been drilled into her head since she was a little girl.

“No.” Elder Thalassa’s voice was cold. “They achieved it by marrying into it. The Ancestors are all married to extraordinarily wealthy and powerful men across the Arcadia Multiverse. Each of them worked hard for their positions, and many have climbed to the top of their imperial harems or their husband’s planet’s politics.”

The glare the Elder froze Myrina with was ice cold. “The fact of the matter is that has always been your family’s true path to power. No Samhain main family member is meant to waste herself on an...” She glared at me again and snorted. “An ordinary man. You are destined to find yourself in the arms of a B-grade hegemon, a ruler of an entire world. Or perhaps even an A-grade one.”

Privately, I had wondered about this exact issue. If I had taken humanity down a path specifically tailored toward elemental magic, and then done so again at the C-Grade racial evolution, me and my family would be highly skilled at



elemental magic. All of my descendants would inherit my bonuses and be skilled in our chosen field.

That wasn't always a good thing, though. And it seemed the Samhain Clan's powerful racial boons were the solution for anyone who wanted to add some warriors to their wizarding family.

"That's ridiculous. The Samhain Clan is and has always been a noble family of warriors!" Myrina turned to her mother for reassurance, only to find her mother's face filled with uncertainty. "She's wrong. Right mother? Mother?"

Kyrina shook her head slowly. "It's... complicated, Myrina."

"Your mother won't be around forever," Elder Thalassa explained, eyebrows raised. "Did you know you have a brother? He's with your father—a strong man, if I've ever seen one. He's the reason wizard kings across the multiverse seek out the Samhains. Your family possesses one of the few warrior bloodlines powerful enough to breed true, even when paired with that of a B-grade wizard.

"Just as our clan was nearly undone by the Shadefall exploiting a vulnerability to magic," she explained, "many powerful wizard kings find themselves vulnerable to anything immune to magic. Some problems can only be solved through force of arms—at which point it is a good idea to have some fighters in the family."

"A brother?" Myrina asked in disbelief. "I have a brother?!"

Elder Thalassa nodded. "When your mother had two daughters in quick succession, she returned to her ancestral home to raise you both in the ways of her family. But your father will likely start missing his wife any day now, and soon she will have to return to him. By then, either you or Cyra must be ready to take your mother's place as clan matriarch."

Kyrina, pinching her temples between thumb and forefinger, finally spoke. "Yes, Myrina, you and Cyra have an older brother. It wasn't supposed to be a secret, it's just that he

deals with politics on a planetary level. Until you and Cyra have power bases of your own, you'd be liabilities to him instead of assets. You won't meet him until either he or you are fully established."

Thalassa turned to Kyrina. "Enough of this, Kyrina. Tell your daughter to send this boy away. Now that Myrina knows how things are really done behind closed doors, she should know why she can't waste herself on this backwater villager from a newly integrated world."

Eyes turned to me, and I stepped forward. I met Elder Thalassa's harsh gaze with a flinty gaze of my own. "Earth may be a newly integrated world, but it won't be that way forever," I replied.

"Yes, Mother!" Myrina latched onto my arm and my words. "Carter's doing a great job on Earth! He may not be that powerful now, but you promised him warriors and resources. He'll be strong and powerful someday, and a good leader. I know it!"

Kyrina's hands tightened on the edge of the table. Clearly, this was a conversation she hadn't thought she'd have for a long time. "Myrina, I like Carter too. But we have to think about the Clan. Just... give me a moment."

Elder Thalassa rolled her eyes. "Kyrina, I've seen enough of this. You were soft on Cyra and spared her feelings, and now my clanswomen have to follow her everywhere and make sure she doesn't get into the wrong sort of relationship. I won't waste those resources on Myrina, too. Fix this!"

Before getting Kyrina's response, Thalassa turned to the other Elders. "I call for a vote. All in favor of casting out this miscreant before he makes more trouble for the Clan?" She raised her own hand, as did the Elder standing next to her.

"Hold on a minute. What trouble have I caused you?" I glared at Elder Thalassa. "First, I completed quest after quest on behalf of your clan. Then I helped you sneak into the city and disable its defenses. After that, I built war machines that saved you weeks of slinging stones. More than that, I..."

I almost spilled the beans on my Mana Bombs, but I bit my tongue. Playing that card would be dangerous. Instead, I said, “I’ve helped you in a lot of other ways—some of which you don’t even know about. So what exactly is this trouble you’re talking about?”

Elder Elara glanced at Elder Thalassa’s direction. “He is right. He has been helpful.” She crossed her arms, pointedly not raising her hand.

Elder Caelia had been moments away from raising her hand in favor of Elder Thalassa’s proposal, but at my words she slowly lowered her arm. She had been the deciding vote. And with her, Elara, and Kyrina not raising their hands, there was a clear majority in favor of keeping me around.

Now all I needed to do was convince them to let Myrina and I stay together. It would be a hard argument to win, but if I proved myself—

Before I could even think of what to say, Elder Thalassa glanced to the fourth elder whose name I didn’t know. “Enough of this farce. Do it,” Elder Thalassa snapped.

The fourth Elder raised her hands and cast a spell, and suddenly the world started to blur.

I recognized what was happening immediately. This was teleportation magic. I tried to jump clear of the forming magic, but this time a barrier formed within it that prevented me from slipping through the rapidly forming spell. I could shatter it, given time, but like the other Elders, the one casting this spell was C-Grade.

I was outmatched in terms of raw magical power.

Myrina reached for me from the outside, but Elder Thalassa vanished into shadow only to appear right behind her. She grabbed Myrina around the waist and jerked her away from me.

I stretched my hand out, but the teleportation spell was too firmly established to escape. Then I was gone.

## CHAPTER

# SIXTY-NINE

When the light of the teleportation finally faded, I was far from where I'd been. Elder Thalassa had shooed me away like some sort of overgrown bug. That was likely the entire point of teleporting me away.

When the spell faded, all around me were waving stalks of wheat. They were taller than any wheat would have been on Earth, each bearing a bundle of seeds on their tops nearly as thick around as a corn cob. At least she hadn't dropped me off at the bottom of an ocean.

The actual trip in the teleportation array had been quick, so I couldn't have gone very far. At least I was definitely still on Themyscira. I used Power Jump to give myself a vantage point and was disappointed when I couldn't see anything but wheat stalks in every direction—even at the peak of my jump. This field looked large enough to feed half a planet.

I felt a sharp burning tension in my temples and realized I was clenching my jaw as tight as steel. Closing my eyes, I rubbed the sides of my face, forcing myself to relax.

“Deep breaths... the System was going to bring me back to Earth soon anyway...” I sighed. I had to be calm about this, no matter how big a wrinkle it put in my plans.

Then a giant beetle sprung out of the wheat to bite me in the face.

“Ugh!” I swatted the thing aside, opening my eyes to Examine the thing.

## Field Beetle (Level 2)

Despite being roughly the size of a dinner plate, the beetle was no more dangerous than the Scavenger Cockroaches I'd slain shortly after the integration. Despite the monster's apparent weakness, I hadn't the slightest bit of mercy for it. Spells flew from my fingertips one after another. Eldritch Blast. Mana Barrage. Corrupting Mark. Arcane Blade. Disassemble.

Moments later I was staring at a smoldering crater. There was no trace of chitin or twitching insect left. There might have been a beetle husk there a few spells ago, but now it was little more than a bowling-ball-sized hole in the ground.

"I think I need to take a few more deep breaths..." I muttered to myself.

I walked through the field for a few minutes, gathering up some of the wheat into my bag of holding as I did. My travels would stomp it flat anyway, so there was no sense in letting what was going to be destroyed go to waste. Perhaps we could plant some of this stuff back on Earth. I could tell there was much more mana in it than mundane wheat.

Maybe I could summon Sharky again. On his back, I might cover ground fast enough to get somewhere—assuming I still had some time left. But then what? Would there even be a teleportation array in whatever small town I came to first?

I hadn't been traveling for long before another wave of teleportation magic enveloped me. But unlike the elder's teleportation spell—which I could have resisted, if only I'd had the time to shatter the shield within—this one was inescapable. The System had decided my time here was up, and send me back to Earth.

And for once, I was grateful. But that gratitude did not translate into happiness. No. I was decidedly unhappy with this current turn of events. Things had been going incredibly well for me... up until recently, that is.

I'd been slowly growing my interests on Themyscira and things were finally shaping up to the point that we had

something along the lines of a genuine trade network. I'd been gaining levels steadily, as had Sakura and Bridget. I got along well with Myrina's sister, Cyra, and her mother, Kyrina, and I was sure that a few months or years of steady and reliable progress would have landed me permanently in their good graces. I had hoped at that point, that Kyrina would be okay with letting Myrina and I explore whether or not we were going to be more than friends.

But then that stupid, arrogant, nosey, entitled, evil bitch of a Samhain Elder decided to meddle where she wasn't wanted. If I'd been a twisted bastard with malevolent designs on the Samhain Clan, things would have happened differently. I'd had a thousand and one opportunities to steal Myrina away. She wouldn't have protested—a bit of self-centered prompting from me, and I could have lured her into doing all sorts of things.

They'd let me run loose in their castle, and I'd proven I could sneak around unimpeded. I'd taken their mark and treated them as friends and allies. I'd fought side by side with them, first to defend Valkyrie's Watch, then to sabotage the workshops of their enemies, and finally to take a city in open rebellion.

At any step along the way I could have betrayed or exploited them. At any step along the way I could have simply asked Myrina to ditch her family and run off with me. In fact, she'd been the one to come up with that idea. Instead, I'd warned her against the move in the hopes of preserving her relationship with her family.

Time and time again I'd sacrificed my own agenda for that of the Samhain Clan. And at the end of all those sacrifices... here I was. Alone on Earth.

If there was somewhere I'd gone wrong, I couldn't see it.

Elder Thalassa was simply intent on finding Myrina a better catch than me—despite both of our best wishes. Scratch that, Thalassa was intent on scoring the Clan a better catch than me. Myrina's desires didn't count at all, apparently.

The more I thought about what had happened, the more I worked myself up into a frenzy. There was something particularly frustrating with having my honest efforts not only go unrewarded, but they'd been entirely ruined.

I thought about flopping down on my couch and telling the world to kiss my ass. I figured I'd wait a few minutes and vent to Sakura and Bridget who should be only a few minutes behind me.

After my teleportation trip home, the System had deposited me on the pad in my farmhouse I'd left from, so it was just a few steps away. I tried to sit and let myself mope about it for a while, but this was not a smoldering ember. This was a burning-hot anger. In other words, it was not something I could sit and stew in.

After waiting twenty minutes, I figured something must have happened because of that spell to shorten my time on Themyscira. I would have to wait for the girls, trying to stay busy until they got back. But who knew how much time that teleport had shaved off of my remaining time on Myrina's world? Just one more reason to be pissed at Elder Thalassa.

Crafting the rest of the day away might be worthwhile. I had meant to make something from those troll orbs, after all. I wasn't about to swallow them, since I was highly suspicious of their side effects. I'd seen what happened to Martin, and one ability that turned me into a bloodthirsty killer was plenty for me. I didn't need to swallow a magic orb that made it even worse. That being said, a few regeneration items would be very useful indeed.

But the more I thought about crafting, the more I thought about the situation back on Themyscira. I'd set most things in motion, but not all of them. Would Elder Thalassa discover the items I'd been selling? Surely she'd shut down Thulga, the orc teleporter I'd been using to get to Themyscira. But would she track down and destroy everything else I'd built?

Bridget and Sakura would be fine, of that I could at least be certain. They'd been hired as mercenaries who had done their job but had yet to be paid. Any action against them would

look very bad indeed for Elder Thalassa. The Samhains, by all accounts, made sure their reputation among mercenaries was impeccable. It had to be, considering how many they hired.

But Misa and Thulga might get into trouble because of this. Something had to be done—only I was worlds away and would be unable to attempt anything at all until my cooldown between trips ran down. I growled to myself. No, crafting anything at all would just bring out the wrong sort of thoughts.

I needed to work this anger off by beating something into the ground. I decided to head into Crownhill. The run would give me the chance to burn off some steam. And with their growing population and larger patrols, there were probably some heads that needed cracking.

Come to think of it, we'd just passed the seventh day of peace Margaret had arranged for to allow people unwillingly taken under the Three Kings' sway to switch sides and join us. I needed to head back to the settlement anyways, to make sure I had the all clear to wipe out the remaining two members of the Three Kings. Once they were out of the way, I could secure this shard.

If I couldn't be with my girls, I might as well make myself useful. I cracked my knuckles in anticipation. I didn't want to be the kind of guy who looked forward to violence, but I was just in that sort of mood.



The run to Crownhill was uneventful. I jumped down the valley's sheer cliff faces, swinging across treetops to land among the leaves and underbrush. A few warp steps later and I was jumping over the lava elemental's crevasse in the road. Its day would come soon.

Then I was past it and off down the road toward the city. I could see people patrolling the main road leading into the city and standing guard, which was a good sign. I wasn't sure what I'd do if I'd arrived to find the city under attack in my absence again, but it most definitely would have involved lots of blood and screaming.



I didn't recognize the two guards standing at the entrance to the city, but one of them recognized me. They quickly waved me through, and then again at the barricade leading into the main settled area.

The barricade was still in place, though it didn't see constant use now. We'd grown strong enough that the small monsters that still plagued the city were only a problem for the weakest amongst us. And I was happy to note that most of those people were weak only because they'd focused on crafting over levels.

Perhaps it had something to do with the price of food going up in the obelisk. By now the obelisk was down to canned food. Fresh meat was still available, but for exorbitant prices. Real estate was no longer up for grabs either, but something the council charged taxes for, with occasional exceptions for anyone who could prove ownership prior to the System.

I didn't envy the council. But that wasn't a surprise. After all, needing things done that I didn't want to do was the whole reason I'd given them the job.

Once again, the settlement had swelled in size. Whatever Margaret and the rest of the council had been doing lately had pulled in a lot of the neutral shelters, and hopefully saved the people who'd originally thought they'd be forced to side with Cromwell and his ilk.

I was impressed by how many people there were on the streets. It reminded me of my trip to Europe with my family when I was young. The city was tightly packed and there were so many people just walking to their destinations. We probably had half the city's survivors packed into a chunk of street no larger than what had been a city block before.

The roads had been designed for a car-dependent city, but when the narrow one-lane streets became pedestrian pathways there was plenty of elbow room. Someone had even laid down reflective paint to mark the center of the road and smooth the flow of pedestrian traffic.

Humans could move a lot faster on foot now than they could before the System, so just because the city wasn't car dependent now didn't mean people were content to get by slowly. I spotted more than one person scaling the side of an apartment complex arm over arm before sliding in the back door of their twelfth-story residence. That would have been a feat fit for an Olympian before—now it was just part of everyday life.

I was surprised nobody came to bother me. Normally whenever I showed my face in the city there were a dozen problems all beyond the scope of the council and existing institutions or issues that people wanted to send straight over the council's head and into my arms.

But now, none of that came for me. In fact, I couldn't find any of my councilors either. That could only mean they were already in session. I'd have to drop by if I wanted to talk with any of them.

They weren't all meeting in Margaret's cramped office anymore. Now that she was using it to host the city's only official radio channel, it was filled with equipment and there was hardly any room at all. Fortunately, there was plenty of extra space now that the barricade had been pushed further out, and part of that expansion had included the old recreation center, complete with plenty of meeting rooms.

I hunted them down and dropped in on their meeting just as they were getting started. I sat through the talk about city infrastructure, since I didn't care much about that. It was entirely a council project. I did look up when they discussed their food problems though.

"Prices of raw goods in the obelisks are getting higher." Frank fingered his cup of coffee impatiently. "There's a lot to salvage across all the houses in the city, but most people are already down to canned goods. What happens when those get too expensive for the average person too?"

Terrance, the leader of our security force, gave a shrug. "Monster meat, maybe? You're going hunting often enough."

Frank waved his hand back and forth. “People aren’t adapting to the new dishes as fast as we’d like. And monster meat alone won’t fulfill our nutritional needs.”

I thought back to my growing trade routes in Shadefall. Assuming Elder Thalassa hadn’t figured out they were there or a way to shut them down, I could get us food.

My personal income as a Master Artificer would probably be enough to feed the whole city. It had been enough to feed the suddenly destitute workshop workers of Shadefall, after all. I didn’t like the idea though. Yes, I needed to keep things running both here and there, but I didn’t want everyone dependent on me to feed themselves.

The whole reason I’d made the obelisk public and let everyone use it instead of keeping it as my personal time-stopped piggy bank, and the whole reason I’d established the council, was because I didn’t want absolute rule. Just the thought of having something even halfway to a centrally planned economy where I held the monopoly on food seemed horrible.

*Find Carter copper wire otherwise you won’t eat tonight!*

It sounded like a lot of work all to end up with a lopsided economy in the end. I was no expert, but I had Adam Smith somewhere on my shelf. If kings of old made their nations prosper by his words, I would hope to do the same. The fact that a laissez faire policy meant less work for me was just a very convenient coincidence.

Really, just a coincidence!

“I may or may not be able to provide some food. Nothing major, but maybe some raw grains or something.” I shrugged. “Don’t count on it being a permanent thing though. Just enough to keep prices cheap enough that nobody starves. A better solution would probably be encouraging people to plant gardens.”

The council cast a few interested looks for me to elaborate, but I shook my head. One thing I’d learned from Elder Thalassa’s recent actions was that it was convenient to

compartmentalize my assets to avoid losing them all at once. Only Sakura, Bridget, and Myrina would be fully in my confidence on all my operations.

Besides, my allies here on Earth had dealt with enough issues just surviving the integration. So far only I'd interacted with the goblins, so every non-human intelligent life form everyone else had met had proven hostile. The Wolfmen, Ogres, and trolls were scary enough. No need to add in Amazonian warriors with a penchant for squishing heads.

"With the matter of food settled, I want to ask Terrance a question. Did you get the people we captured to talk?" I turned to the lean former policeman sitting beside me.

Terrance sighed as he put down his notepad. "Unfortunately, I did. Wish I hadn't though. The things the Three Kings have been up to aren't just regular crimes. They're more like war crimes. The kind of thing you get dragged up in front of The Hague for."

I drummed my fingers against the table and turned to the other council members. "Then I take it we have everything I need to re-arrest some former criminals? By any means necessary." I looked hard at Margaret.

She was the one who'd pressed hardest for me to hold off a little longer.

"Now you've brought up the elephant in the room. Yes, Carter, it's time we finished things." Margaret shook her head with a grim look of determination on her face. "We've given everyone as much time as we can, and the remaining two leaders of the Three Kings haven't exactly held up their part of the peace treaty."

"Really?" I leaned closer.

Margaret sighed. "They were supposed to stay confined to their own territory and let anyone leave their faction if they wanted. In reality, after the first few when it became clear they were both losing men to defection, they locked down the family compounds. The men and women in the upper ranks of their organizations who could leave already have. Right now

there are a lot of children and loved ones keeping the rest on a leash. And presumably the Three Kings have some true loyalists as well.”

“A lot of people ran off to join that troll camp. A lot of the Three Kings’ people are nervous about living close to these parts where everybody is all gung-ho about being a law-abiding citizen,” Marcus added.

Terrance flipped a page in his notebook. “Mhm. Lots of former convicts over there. Criminals, but of a lighter shade than what they’re up to in the prison. There’s also plenty of those who have since found such a lifestyle more appealing than continuing to walk the straight and narrow.”

“Good.” I turned to eye everyone gathered around me. “Well, if that’s all settled and our treaty time is up, it’s time to wrap things up with the Three Kings once and for all.”

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY

Less than an hour later, we were ready for battle. Crownhill's elite were gathered awaiting their leader. The uniforms were still mismatched, and their rows weren't quite even, but the difference from the last time I'd led them was night and day. Before, they'd been a mob of desperate survivors fighting out of desperation. Now they were conquerors who would secure peace for their families by any means necessary.

And I would be the one to lead them.

I recognized a few of them, especially those over level 25. Rick, Chuck, Kerrie, and a few others had all broken through to D-Rank. This might not be a host as mighty as the one the Samhain Clan gathered under its banners, but at the rate we were growing it wouldn't be long before we had something comparable. I was more certain than ever that Elder Thalassa would live to eat her words.

While scanning the gathered crowd, I noticed that the women over level 25 all looked considerably taller and sturdier than I remembered. The shift wasn't due to increased stats, since even archers like Kerrie were taller and more muscular than before. No, I knew the cause.

Back when I'd picked human racial evolutions, I hadn't realized there was a second tab for women—so all my modifications had passed over exactly as I'd selected them for myself. As a result, all women over level 25 were looking distinctly Amazonian these days. It was like everyone had

shifted upward in height and muscle from wherever they'd been before D-Grade.

It wasn't too big a change, especially for women who were on the smaller side prior to the integration. Women were still women, every woman just had a bit more *everything* to them these days. Hopefully nobody would notice and I could pass it off as just the effects of stats. It wasn't like we had many small and petite women left anyway, since only spellcaster classes would be viable with that kind of build, and I was the only true spellcaster we had.

Considering the company I kept, people might suspect I'd done it intentionally. Thankfully, nobody had put the pieces together yet, and everyone who'd broken through to D-Grade was just happy for the physical improvements—regardless of the exact nature of those improvements.

With everyone gathered together, a little speech seemed only appropriate.

“It's time to deal with the criminals! We will take care of the scum plaguing our streets. You've seen the bodies. You remember how we bled and died against the Wolfmen. Meanwhile, they were sitting comfy in our homes, looting and plundering the city we fought so hard to protect.”

“Boo! Down with the backstabbing traitors!” someone cupped their hands and shouted.

“They think the days of law, order, and civilized society are dead and gone! That the thief and the murderer rule the streets, now and forever more!” I raised my arms high overhead.

More jeering. More shouting. “We'll teach them a lesson!”

“We'll show them how wrong they are. Yes, the System came for us and destroyed the world we knew... But we survived! What was broken can be repaired. We will make a world for our children even better than the one we lost, that I promise you!”

“Carter! Carter! Carter!” they cheered. It felt good.

All together, and with fire flowing through our veins, I turned the small army on the thugs in the prison. I led us, and everyone followed behind me at a steady jog. Those gathered at my back had been empowered by levels and stats beyond those of an ordinary person, so the swift pace was no trouble—even for us former office workers.

Few, if any of us, could be out of shape after these past two months. It was hard to believe the integration was already that far behind us. It seemed like just last week.

We'd wiped out Cromwell's assets in the city already, so there was little to trouble us on our journey north across broken roads. Monsters scattered at our approach, and any bandit or thief who dared stick their heads out of the shadows quickly got the sense that we were predators, and not prey.

“Watch out,” Kerrie said, “a pair of scavengers got gutted here while picking over rubble for copper wire.”

I grimaced. The treaty we'd signed with the remaining members of the Three Kings had hardly been worth the paper it had been written on. Kings or not, the remaining leaders of Crownhill County Prison had no authority over the people here.

Eventually though, I sensed a group that didn't retreat. I suspected they were up to something, so I held up a hand to stop my army.

“Halt! Wits about you, everyone. You've all heard the stories about what's been happening here. At any moment we could—”

I cut myself off when I saw a flash of movement forward and to the right. There was someone standing atop a nearby building. A sharp glint of light had given away the motion. It had been like sunlight glancing off glass. Specifically, the glass of a rifle's scope. Someone was taking aim, and I suspected I was their first target.

I'd already summoned a cluster of Mana Bolts while we'd run here; they swirled over my head now. With a wave of my hand, I threw my spells. The high caliber of the sniper's bullet



felt like a punch, but my Deflect spell bounced most of the kinetic energy away from me. My retaliatory spells hit him a moment later and he fell over a railing to splatter head-first on the ground three stories below. The sound of a snapping neck echoed through the war-torn rubble of the city's northern reaches.

“Ambush!” Frank yelled.

Our enemies were suddenly on top of us. Perhaps the people here weren't quite as law abiding as I'd thought. Or the Three Kings had more pull than I'd initially assumed. I suspected they weren't too good at preventing their men from looting and murdering during a treaty, but had an easier time pointing the finger for that looting and murdering in the direction they wanted. And right now, that direction was us.

“Take out those snipers on the roofs!” I shouted.

A half dozen of my spells joined Kerrie's rain of arrows. I received a notification congratulating me on my successful kills.

**Your One Versus Many proficiency has increased to Level 22!**

I paused and pulled up the description for my One Versus Many proficiency as the notification momentarily flashed before me.

**One Versus Many: This proficiency increases the experience you gain from fights in which you are outnumbered by more than five to one. For each proficiency level, the experience gained from such fights increases by 2%.**

I had debated whether or not my Leadership proficiency made it worth forming a party, or if I should keep all the experience I'd get for putting these thugs down for myself. I elected to stay solo—I needed the experience so I could level up more than ever if I was going to deal with Elder Thalassa and her ilk.

Unaware of my decision, everyone with a ranged ability joined in. Chuck and Frank each pulled out handguns, waving

machetes in their off hands—looking as much like pirates as our foes who poured out of their hiding places to surprise us did.

**Bandit Thug (level 12)**

**Bandit Executioner (Level 14)**

**Bandit Assassin (Level 15)**

I spotted around thirty people, all similar classes as the first three and all of whom were over level 10—though none were over level 25. These bandits should have stayed in hiding. They were completely outmatched.

Frank leveled his weapon and fired twice in quick succession. Both bullets were headshots. His bullets cracked skulls and sent the bandits staggering, though they were not defeated quite so easily. Chuck followed up Frank, emptying his revolver while shooting from the hip. He shouldn't have been able to hit the broad side of a barn door aiming like that, but the bullets unerringly struck vulnerable eyes and throats anyway.

Bandits dropped one after another, especially when Kyle and Marcus jumped in front of Kerrie and the ranged attackers, sword and spear bared. Chuck and Frank rushed forward after emptying their guns and scaled the building the snipers had been hiding on, climbing the building, arm over arm. The Bandit Assassins panicked and pointed their guns down at the new threat, forcing Frank to swing for cover.

Chuck was a lot more direct in his approach. He was shot three times in a row. And though the rounds knocked him back, he didn't lose his grip on the brick. His wounds closed in moments, and the Bandit Assassins weren't able to stop him before he grabbed them by the hem of their shirts and yanked them bodily over the balcony railing.

“Snipers on the other side too!” Kerrie shouted.

I turned and saw Rick charging the opposite building, his axe held high overhead.

“I've got this!” he grunted as he brought his axe down, smacking the flat of it against one of the metal columns

holding the front of the building up. He took it out with one swing, then sliced clean through the other with his follow-up attack. The whole facade of that building came tumbling down, dumping the Bandit Assassins taking cover on top of it out into the street. There, lower-leveled members of my impromptu army dealt with them.

I threw a few spells here and there, as I was able, but all in all I was impressed with the quality of Crownhill's militia. We'd certainly come a long way from back when we'd struggled to battle cockroaches and fire-breathing squirrels. Given how outclassed the bandits were, this soon turned from a battle to a slaughter. It only came to a halt when the few remaining bandits began surrendering.

"Stop! Stop! We give up!" a dirty man cried.

"I don't think any of your victims had the chance to surrender before you turned them into levels!" Kerrie spat.

My blood boiled as hot as Kerrie's, and something primal in me demanded I finish them all off. I was in a grim mood—especially after what Elder Thalassa had put me through.

"It's your call, Carter..." Terrance said. He glanced at me, waiting.

I sighed. "Do we have room in your prison complex? And time for a few more trials?"

"Yeah. I made sure we had enough room to process as many people as we need." Terrance glared at the terrified prisoners. "Odds are we have more criminals now than we did before the integration. Lots of those guys were desperate fools clinging to anything they could find resembling a leader. Too bad for them, just like this group, they chose poorly."

He scratched at the stubble along his jaw. "Maybe some can be redeemed... likely that some can't. But we won't find out if we slaughter them in the streets."

"Fine... then make your arrests"—I raised my voice loud enough for everyone to hear—"but if any of them give you any trouble at all, put them out of their misery."

Disarming, handcuffing, and rounding up the prisoners for Terrance took more time than the battle did. There were a few troublemakers who suddenly changed their minds when the cuffs came out. I dealt with those idiots myself—swiftly and decisively.

I knew the attitude in the prison. They all thought the civilians in the shelters were soft and easy to trick. But I was in no mood for games. Anyone who continued to believe that after today would either be dead, or hunted.

As for what we'd do with the prisoners... I was already coming up with a few ideas. There would be lots of dangerous tasks in the world, and my militia were important to me. I wasn't about to throw them at whatever the System put us up against just to test the strength of new enemies.

But these former inmates had already proven themselves deadly and resourceful against trolls. It might be smart for me to build a legion of warriors a little more disposable than what I had now. For that, these people would be perfect.

Chuck revealed a surprising new trick while treating the wounded. He took out a cheese grater from his back pocket, along with one of those blue troll orbs. He shaved some fine slices off the blue orb with the cheese grater and sprinkled them on the wounded. The downed militia he healed were on their feet a lot quicker than those relying on their Vitality stat alone.

“Huh. That really works?” I asked.

“Sure does! Not sure where I picked that trick up, but my hands just started moving at one point and...” Chuck shrugged.

I reached into my bag of holding and tossed him a few more blue troll orbs. I had plenty, after all. I'd been planning on crafting a regeneration potion or making some kind of restorative with them, but this worked just as well.

I would have to check in with the survivors of Martin's orb-addicted troll killers after the Three Kings were dealt with. His group would be the last remnants of Crownhill County

Prison by the time I was done. Every civilization needed a place for its less savory elements to gather. Perhaps that was where ours would end up.

I'd also have to see who was in charge these days, since Martin was now ashes floating in a bog. If they were someone I could work with, that'd be great. If not, another corpse would soon join Martin's.

With our wounds healed, prisoners dealt with, and determination burning brighter than ever, we regrouped and carried on. This time, however, with a bit more caution.

"I need people with high Perception on all sides," I called out.

I wished I had Bridget at my side. She would have been good at this. I waved to Kerrie and a few of the other archer types. My volunteer scouts took up position toward the sides of our forces, eyes scanning the area as they kept pace with the rest of us.

It soon proved a very good idea, because there was another ambush just a few blocks ahead of our present location. Kerrie was the one to spot it.

"Carter! I see about forty people! They're hiding over that way," Kerrie hissed in a hushed whisper.

The people near me heard her, and a few of them started drawing their weapons.

"Stop that!" I growled. "You want them to spring their ambush early? Because making it obvious that we've spotted their ambush will do just that. No, we want to ambush the ambushers."

After receiving a few nods of understanding, I sent out a few hushed orders that broke us into groups to encircle the enemy. Last time, I'd noticed a few had slipped away. But every foe we dealt with permanently here was one less that we wouldn't have to face again later.

"How will we know when to attack?" asked Frank.

I shot a grim glance toward our enemies. “The battle cry to follow is... Nom Nom.”

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-ONE

“Nom nom?” Chuck asked, head tilted askance. “That’s an odd one. You sure?”

I nodded. “Don’t worry, you won’t miss it.”

While I waited for everyone to get into position, I pulled out my car shade wire hoop and made a circle. Then, I entered the first level of Mania.

**Your Mania has increased to level 1: Dissonance.**

**The world grows distant, and your mind fills with the allure of forbidden knowledge. The effectiveness of all Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge spells and abilities is increased by 20%.**

“You’re up, Sharky,” I whispered.

Shadows swirled within the circle as the enormous ghostly form of Sharky, complete with mouth tentacles, took shape. When he came roaring out of the circle, I jumped on his back, my spells circling overhead as my summons flew me into battle.

“NOM NOM!” Sharky bellowed.

His voice shook the nearby building, drawing heads out of hiding to see what had made such a tremendous noise. The people of Crownhill weren’t soldiers. That was true for both my militia and for the people of Crownhill County Prison. Poking your head out of cover to look around was generally a bad idea anywhere bullets might be flying. Or in this case, spells.

I scored six head shots with that opening barrage of Mana Bolts—most of which were kills.

**You have killed 4 x Bandit Snipers (Level 21)**

**Your One Versus Many proficiency has increased to Level 23!**

**Your Spell Sniper proficiency has increased to Level 5!**

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level!**

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

I swiped aside the kill, skill, and level notifications.

“They’re here! Shoot him!” shouted one of the bandits from where he hid. They turned, heads sticking out of doors as they reorganized themselves from lying in wait to getting ready for a fight.

Jumping off Sharky’s back, I took cover as soon as I felt Deflect activate. While I could survive getting shot just fine, I enjoyed getting poked full of holes about as much as the next guy—which was to say, not at all.

Sharky, on the other hand, didn’t mind the incoming bullets in the slightest. As a tentacle-mouthed ghost shark that devoured the souls of the living, he was perfectly happy to soak up some lead if it meant getting a snack.

“NOM NOM!”

Sharky flew right over the balcony our enemies were using as cover, phasing straight through the wall as he did so. Screams followed, though that only served to tell Sharky exactly where they were hiding. Tentacles lashed out, grabbing wrists and ankles and dragging them toward the ghost shark’s waiting maw.

“Oh god! Monster attack!”

“Kill it! Kill it! Kill it now!”

“Aaaaaaarghhh!” someone screamed as phantom teeth gnawed them to shreds.



Back here on Earth, my level was quite a bit higher than most people's, so Sharky was correspondingly stronger, as well. He'd been a menace back on Themyscira, but now he was a ghostly juggernaut of destruction and terror. With him soaking up all the bullets and my Deflect spell active, I jumped out from hiding to join the fray—just as the other teams attacked from all sides.

I fired off a few more spells, though I held myself back to support our flanks. I wanted to be ready to step in and reinforce my allies so that I wouldn't risk losing any militia. Our last fight had been surprisingly casualty-free thus far, and I wanted things to stay that way.

The other teams were making steady progress off to either side. I spotted Rick exchanging wary blows with a tall brute wielding a tire rim on a chain. Chuck had three new bullet holes in his chest, but he stood over a dead, scar-faced sniper all the same. I spotted six more bandits all sporting arrows sticking out of their chests. Most of the arrows looked like the ones Kerrie kept in her quiver.

Frank and Terrance fought back-to-back on the other side, each providing cover for the other as they smashed open a window and made a second entrance. Marcus and Kyle dove through it, rolling to their feet inside the building before they attacked the suddenly besieged bandits.

Sharky was a whirlwind of death and destruction—or at least I assumed he was, because I got another level-up notification.

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

I debated following them inside when I heard a roar even louder than Sharky's battle cry. Someone managed to shove my summoned specter back and was on the verge of dispelling him entirely. Anyone who could do that couldn't be an ordinary person. I suspected it was time for me to meet one of the other Three Kings.

I turned as a figure jumped down from the second-story window, cracking the pavement as he did. He was a big man,

head and shoulders taller than the other bandits I was fighting. His expression was as cold as ice, and he held a long steel rod in one hand. It was a little longer than he was tall and looked to have been torn from a prison cell wall, then sharpened by dragging it along concrete walls and floors until it came to a point. It was a crude way to make a spear, and the result had to be incredibly heavy.

Apparently it worked well enough for the wielder.

The man himself had copper skin, with a short-trimmed beard that might once have been neat. Tattoos crawled along his muscled arms and over his clean-shaven head. I examined him.

### **Bandit Flame Spear Master (Level 42)**

His level settled it. This had to be one of the Three Kings. The only one higher level than them on this shard was me.

“Are you Knuckles or Caesar?” I called out.

The man turned to me robotically, hand still wrapped around his makeshift spear. He didn’t reply, remaining silent.

“Not going to answer?” I asked as I glanced behind him. “Your people are dying. Mine are wiping them out. Surrender and we can end this.”

He still refused to speak. Fortunately, some of his subordinates were shouting to one another.

“Caesar’s got him! Let’s get out of here while he buys us time to escape!” one of the bandits said.

I smiled. “You’re Caesar, right? I’ve got to say, there are lots of rumors floating around about you. You’re supposedly the most mysterious of the Three Kings.” I paused. “You know, I couldn’t even get a proper description of you.”

I looked him up and down. “You don’t seem so mysterious to me.”

The man called Caesar remained silent.

I found that odd. Was he mute... or just dense? If either were true, he’d have had a hard time amassing much of a

following no matter his level. Something about his eyes seemed off to me, too. They were cold and distant, like he was staring straight through me.

Between dense and mute, I was now guessing dense. That didn't stop him from lunging at me, though, and he was fast—very fast. His spear flicked forward in a flash of crimson energy. He might have gotten me, if I hadn't been prepared to Warp Step away.

Activating Arcane Blade, I extended the reach of my sword and kept it between me and my opponent, raising it like a shield to keep him at bay.

Caesar was clearly a melee class and, while I wasn't too shabby with a sword, I'd learned during my recent training that I didn't want to bet my life on beating a melee specialist in a melee fight unless I absolutely had to. With Eldritch Augmentation, I might be able to manage it, but the sword for me was more of a way to survive an engagement long enough to get clear again and cast more spells.

I had ten levels on Caesar. I should win this fairly straightforward fight. I was surprised Caesar had chosen to take it, at all. I had thought I'd have to fight both him and Knuckles at once. Something was going on here that I wasn't seeing. But at the same time, this was too good an opportunity to pass up. If I eliminated Caesar, taking care of Knuckles would be a simple matter, and this shard would be as good as won.

I dodged his next charge as his heels churned the pavement beneath him. The man sparked small fires in his wake as he zipped forward as fast as a lightning bolt. I jumped aside once more, and our end of the battlefield went up in flames. We engaged twice more, him sweeping his spear wide and me staying out of range while peppering him with a number of spells.

I spared some attention for the battlefield, where my allies were cutting down the rest of the bandits. Some of them fought and screamed, but a curious few stood their ground despite the forces arrayed against them. Their faces were as

expressionless as Caesar's, and—like him—they fought silently and just as fearlessly. I watched one get his arm sliced clean off by Kyle, only to keep hacking away at Chuck with the other arm.

I activated Soulchain Nexus. The extra Corrupting Marks and resulting Lifesteal would make handling Caesar far safer, while also keeping my companions out of danger. I ducked and wove between buildings while Caesar attempted to chase me down. Soulchain Nexus took some time to activate, but by jumping from one building to another I confused Caesar long enough to channel it.

He was surprisingly bad at predicting where I was going to turn up next—sort of like an NPC driven by a primitive decision matrix and an inability to find his target without direct line of sight.

Sharky took out the first person I'd marked with Soulchain Nexus, assisted by a few of my Mana Bolts. Three similar kills later, the rush of temporary stat points was exhilarating. Blood rushed through my veins and power filled my limbs. I was stronger than ever—strong enough to take on the world.

Or, at the very least, one taciturn spear man.

I jumped from the top of one building to another, all the while firing off spells and truly taking Caesar's measure. He was fast and good with his spear, but that was it. His class seemed pretty straightforward—I could guess just about everything it gave him from the name.

He had fire, a spear, and he was dangerous with both.

When he swung that metal bar around, I had to ensure I stayed well clear of it. Fire would sprout from its tip and spray down everything in all directions. The area-of-effect class skill gave him an effective combination of melee and ranged attacks.

I'd already seen his movement ability, made apparent by a flash of crimson and then a huge lunge. He had several defensive abilities, as well, primarily centered around spinning his spear in front of him so fast it formed an impenetrable steel

shield. But he couldn't block from two directions at once, which was how I kept layering on Corrupting Marks.

My fancy new staff trailed behind me in the air as I suspended it with telekinesis. That new ability was a job skill, so it wasn't useful in direct combat—but it worked just fine for keeping my hands free. The ebony, eye-covered tree was awkward to hold, so I found it much easier just to leave it dangling in the air behind me like an ominous portent of doom.

Unless Caesar was holding something back or keeping an ace up his sleeves that I hadn't seen yet, I had him on the ropes. I had plenty of mana left, but he was starting to move slower. The man was slowing enough that soon I'd be able to cripple him and end the fight the next time I saw an opening.

When I activated Exploit Weakness, it highlighted Caesar's shoulder joints. They were exposed the moment he lunged forward, and already wounded from previous spells. A few more Mana Bolts in the same location and I could cripple his arm. Being down a limb would make wielding that heavy steel spear considerably harder, and the fight would probably be over for him. I could even finish him off with my Arcane Blade, if I wanted to.

I summoned five Mana Bolts and they struck all at once. The five Mana Bolts each burned thin holes into Caesar's arm, but it was the Eldritch Blast I followed them up with that shattered his humerus. His right arm dangled at his side, broken and useless.

"You're finished!" I shouted at Caesar. "If you've got any last words, say them now! I won't—" I didn't have time to finish before Caesar was on top of me.

He kept ahold of his spear with his left hand, only guiding its point with his nearly useless right. The man threw himself forward with reckless abandon.

I was shocked. The pain he had to be feeling from his right arm had to be excruciating. Broken shards of bone would be scraping together within his flesh with every movement. How was he even still on his feet?

Then I remembered what I'd learned from Cromwell. The reason Knuckles and Caesar weren't under Cromwell's thumb, was because they could both resist Cromwell's favorite pain spell. With a pain tolerance like the one on display, it was no wonder Caesar had shrugged off Cromwell's power. The silent spearman looked like he couldn't even feel his right arm.

I was surprised enough by Caesar's apparent immunity to pain that I had to jump clear of his next spear thrust. I'd been ready with Arcane Blade to finish him off, so while leaping backwards, I activated Eldritch Augmentation to deflect his spear.

"Okay, you're tougher than I thought..."

"Carter, should we—?" Frank began, but I waved him off.

"Stay back! This guy is level 42! Let me take care of him."

My allies were nearly finished, having killed off or in the process of arresting the survivors from our counter-ambush. If I needed the help, they could no doubt swarm Caesar and bring him down with raw numbers. But doing that would guarantee casualties, as fighting with numbers often did.

No, Caesar was my opponent. And a tough fight or not, I would finish him off. After all, so far he hadn't done more than singe my clothing. I danced around him a little longer, this time disabling a leg.

He stumbled to one knee, temporarily disabled.

Sensing my chance when I saw this, I activated Eldritch Augmentation once again. This time, I dove within his reach while he was crippled and swung my magically enhanced and lengthened blade before using Warp Step to blink back to safety.

Caesar lurched forward, the foot of his good leg now just a bloody stump.

But even that didn't stop him. He turned to face me, standing on his ragged and bloody stump. His broken arm, crippled leg, maimed stump, and dozens of spell wounds didn't seem to matter to him in the slightest.

“Alright, now that’s just creepy...” I muttered before raising my voice and calling out to him. “What are you? Some sort of living zombie?”

Like before, Caesar did not respond. Standing there bloody and maimed, he seemed that much creepier. Earlier, I’d admired his pain tolerance, but now I wasn’t really sure what to make of him.

It hardly even felt like I was fighting a man at all at this point. This felt more like battling a robot. Or a puppet on invisible strings.

Everyone else had finished their part of the fight, and the ambushes had been countered. I needed to deal with Caesar—and quick—before my subordinates decided to lend me a hand, despite my orders.

“You’re dead. If you don’t want to blow apart into a million little pieces, you’d better start talking and give me a reason not to.”

I waited a moment for a response, but even facing death Caesar didn’t respond. This was more than a man with a reputation for silence. Something strange was going on, but despite my probing I couldn’t figure out what. I wanted to interrogate him, but it would be hard to do if I couldn’t make him speak at all.

I waited as he slowly climbed back to his feet to attack me again. He truly wasn’t going to give up, and he remained silent to the end. He wouldn’t be much use as a prisoner. And with his immunity to pain I doubted handcuffs would stop him. In other words, I had no further use for him.

I clenched my fist and detonated my Corrupting Marks. Enormous amounts of damage wracked Caesar’s body, and he was on the verge of coming apart at the seams. Even then, he continued to move.

But I had just the spell for that.

I cast Disassemble. What little innate mana Caesar had left wasn’t enough to resist the spell, and I pulled him apart. Bones flew into one pile, flesh, muscle, and organs into another. Soon

his remains had been torn asunder, sorted, and neatly organized just like any monster's. It was an ignoble end for what had been one of the fiercest human fighters on the shard.

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

“Whoa! Carter, you took him down!” Kyle clapped and cheered. “And hardly even got a scratch, too!”

It seems I'd gathered a bit of a crowd towards the end of the fight.

“Three Kings?” Marcus scoffed. “There's only one King in Crownhill, and he sure as hell isn't that Knuckles guy.”

I chuckled and wiped my hands clean on a cloth from my bag of holding. Taking off Caesar's leg had splashed my arms with a bit of blood. “Alright, alright... this isn't a show.” I waved the gawkers off.

To them, the fight had probably happened faster than they could follow. Caesar had been a higher level than anyone here except me. Most of these people had never seen a fight at our level before, and were understandably impressed.

During my stay on Themyscira, I'd forgotten what watching a high-leveled fight had felt like. Kyrina had seemed amazing to me not that long ago. I doubted I had her effortless grace and blinding speed, but it was nice to see how impressed the others were with me. Still, one can only be stared at for so long.

After cleaning myself up, I made my way over to where the militia had lined up our new prisoners. “Terrance, I see you have some new prisoners... I've got a few questions to ask them.”



## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-TWO

Apparently some of the people my allies had fought had been just as nutty as Caesar, though fortunately at a much lower level. None of those men had allowed themselves to be captured alive. In fact, those who had surrendered disproportionately considered themselves Knuckles' followers.

That was perfect, since he was the one I really wanted to know about. It would have taken time to figure out who here was highest in his chain of command, if Terrance hadn't done the work for me already.

"Terrance tells me you're in charge?" I asked the man.

I loomed over a rough-looking man with ragged black hair. He was heavy set, which was likely what had saved him from a few bullet wounds to the gut. He looked tough, but not in the crazed lethal way Caesar or his die-hards had. He seemed like the kind of guy you might find as the bouncer at a night club in a rough part of town.

"I knew Knuckles before he made it big, if that's what you mean." The man shrugged, then shot Terrance a glance. "Talking to this guy will give me credit, right?"

Terrance nodded. "Cooperate now, and I'll make sure it is noted when your case goes to trial."

"Good." The man shrugged his shoulders, adjusting his handcuffed arms. "What a pain..." He snorted. "I thought I'd never have to see a damn lawyer again."

I chuckled, thinking of all the survivors from the law office next to where Sakura, Bridget, and I worked. “The lawyers are back. And this time, they’re armed. I’d watch out if I were you. Anyhow, I’ve got a few questions about Knuckles and your crew. What happened here? What is Knuckles up to? What’s going on in the prison? Spill the beans... give me everything.”

“Yeah, well, things were going alright until about a week ago. The Three Kings held each other in check. Cromwell ruled the mobsters, Caesar got all the crazy psychos, and Knuckles banded together the normal line and file types who were in for selling weed and other bullshit.”

“Small-timers... got it.”

“Well, everything was fine until some asshole killed Cromwell. He was the one who kept the mobsters organized and his connections and influence were the only thing keeping Caesar and his crazy assholes in check.” He snorted. “Now, they’re running the whole prison.”

“Were running the whole prison,” I corrected. “Caesar is dead. He’s not going to be running anything anymore.”

The man grimaced. “Bet he’s not.”

“Big guy with a spear? Level 42? He’s right back over there.” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder at the bloody pile of bones and flesh. “Look.”

The man glanced at the bleeding pile. “Doesn’t look like Caesar to me.”

I sighed. “Just... trust me, alright? He’s dead.”

The man still looked doubtful. “Maybe... he’s died before. There’ll be a new one, soon enough.”

I perked up at that. Had Caesar found a way to come back to life, too? I had my doubts about that. Lyra had mentioned it had been done elsewhere, but she seemed to imply it was a rare trick few figured out before the System patched the bugs. She would have mentioned somebody else coming back from the dead.

Unless it was part of some intended skill?

“Oh, yeah, all the time.” The man nodded. “It happened a lot in the early days. We’ve gone through like... eight Caesars.” He shot another glance at the pile of human flesh. “I guess nine Caesars, now.”

“Are these different people? Or are they the same person coming back to life?”

“Uh... I don’t know, man. They all wield a fiery spear and are a high level. I don’t really know. I try and steer clear of him, to be honest. I wouldn’t have been here at all if Knuckles hadn’t been forced to give Caesar some of us for support. His people are psychotic and not that great at ambushes. Cromwell’s people had to come, too. Their leader was the one with the rooftop snipers.”

I quizzed him some more about Caesar’s potential resurrection ability. Unfortunately, he didn’t know much—at least not any real details.

“All I know is that part of being Caesar has been passing down a fancy laurel crown. Well, that and a free sexy slave girl to keep it polished and shiny when he’s not wearing it.”

“Slave girl?” I asked.

The man shrugged. “Yeah, all the Caesars inherited the same sexy slave girl. A real looker, that one... or so I’ve heard. I don’t think anybody except the Caesars have actually seen her.” He hung his head. “And I never had plans to break into Caesar’s private quarters to confirm the rumors.”

After that, I quizzed him about Knuckles.

His former boss was a pugilist, apparently, just like Martin. It made sense, considering the nickname. He’d apparently been an aspiring rapper, but his mixtape had been so bad it had gotten him and all his friends arrested. Or at least, that was what the rumors said.

From the look on Terrance’s face, it was probably just a story Knuckles spread to cover for an actual crime. Either that, or it really had been *that* terrible.

“Alright, Terrance. Take him away and note that he gave us some good info.” I waved Terrance away as he scribbled down a note in his pad of paper.

Terrance and some of our wounded rounded up the prisoners. There were fewer prisoners than I’d have liked. In a perfect world, we would have been able to round every one of them up, put them on trial, and do things the proper way. Alas, the apocalypse meant there wasn’t as much to go around as there used to be.

Fortunately, those who were willing to surrender were those most likely to be rehabilitated. If Caesar’s subordinates were as messed up as the man himself, there was no way we would have been able to make use of them back in Crownhill.

We ate, rested, and prepared to move on to the main prison. I debated waiting for Bridget and Sakura, but this would be bloody work, and going through Shadefall was burden enough for them to carry. It was only right that my other subordinates, here in town, take a turn.

If Caesar was dead, then finishing off Knuckles shouldn’t be too tough. Maybe Bridget and Sakura would be waiting for me back at the obelisk when this was all done. With all the work I’d had them doing, they hadn’t been able to join in the victory celebrations in Shadefall.

I’d let them rest and whoop it up after I’d won and mastered this shard. Decision made, I raised everyone from where they’d been resting. Thanks to Chuck’s cheese grater and troll orbs, those with minor wounds were mostly healed. They’d be in near-peak condition by the time we needed them again to storm the prison.

Sharky had been wounded enough that I’d let him disperse into Mana, but the time limit to summon him again was nearly up. He’d be at our side again for the final fight.



The air seemed to grow thicker as I led our crew through the streets. Signs of battle marked these buildings, and as we came closer to the main prison complex there were fewer buildings

and more piles of rubble. Humans had fought here, and the fighting had been far more intense than any battle against monsters.

I spotted wrecked cars left and right, all strafed with bullet holes. A few of them had caught fire and burned, or plowed straight into the sides of buildings and then done the same. Scorch marks covered the brickwork, and wooden structures had been reduced to charred ruins.

Closer to the prison itself, we jumped over the shredded remains of tall wire fences. Clearly, the prisoners who now ran this place were here of their own volition. I'd been skeptical before about why anyone would want to stick around somewhere they'd been a prisoner, but when I saw the thick brick walls and sturdy guard towers of the prison, I understood.

With a few modifications, this place might very well be the most defensible place in Crownhill.

"This is it," Rick said and hefted his axe as we approached the looming structure ahead. "Almost got a job here once, back before the System. Feels like another life, at this point."

"Agreed." Frank gave a grim nod.

I threw down my wire circle, then I summoned Sharky to join us. He'd been quite good at flushing enemies out of cover before, and I hoped he could do that for us again. The prison's battle-scarred walls cast long shadows in the afternoon sun. I held up my hand so the others would stay back while I approached.

There was little use in trying to take them by surprise. If they were at all organized, they would have had some of the people who'd escaped the first counter-ambush return to report to them. Caesar's people might have been too crazy to do that, but Knuckles' crew seemed to have their heads screwed on a little straighter.

I called up to the walls and the people keeping watch at the top of the tower. They had been playing cards until a moment ago, but now they set their game down and watched us

carefully. One of them said something to his two friends, unslung his rifle, leveled it at me, and pulled the trigger. It was a good shot, but my Deflect spell was active—so no matter how good a shot he was, he wouldn't hit me.

“Bullets will be of no use against me,” I shouted up at them. He had to know he should have hit me, and yet his bullets did nothing. That was worth something in a negotiation. Deflect had a modest cooldown as well, so it'd be best to put some time between now and getting shot again.

“What, are you supposed to be some sort of wizard?” the man on the walls demanded as he slowly lowered his gun.

I held up my hand and Mana Bolts danced between my fingertips. “Not just some sort of wizard. I am one. Now put that gun down and listen to my demands or I'll turn you into a newt.”

The man put his gun down.

Behind him, one of the other two guards stood to speak. He spat over the side of the wall in my direction. “Go back to your little town and play pretend. The old world is gone! Might makes right, now and the rule of law is dead and gone.”

He reached for his own gun, but a held up a hand. One of my Mana Bolts zipped past his head.

“Not so fast. If anybody grabs their weapons before I'm finished speaking, they'd best be ready to face a little magic. And not the entertaining stage kind.”

He stopped reaching for his gun. The third man eyed his rifle and his fingers reached for it, but he didn't quite grab it.

Sensing I had their attention for the moment, I continued. “Good. As for the old world being gone, I agree. And so now we must build laws and order anew. Here are our demands. You will all leave this place and present yourself for trial by jury, and then serve sentences in accordance with your crimes. Tell your remaining leader, Knuckles, that he must present himself first.”

The third man who'd remained seated until now bent over double in laughter.

I scowled. “Do this, and you will receive the most lenient sentences justice allows. We’ll need all the hands we can get for whatever the System throws at us next—meaning there will be plenty of chances to earn a pardon.”

The third man finally grabbed his rifle and stood to join his friends looming over the wall. Apparently he’d been less intimidated by my threats than his companions. He reached for his own rifle, picked it up, and pointed it at me “Yeah? Well how about this!”

He pointed his rifle at me, but it was useless. Deflect had come off its cooldown while I was talking and the bullet bounced off into the air and back towards the prison.

“I told you I’d shoot back if you did that again.” With a wave of my hand, the three Mana Bolts I had charged up in my hands shot out and skewered the guard. He tumbled from his perch on the wall and fell, face-first, to the pavement in front of the gate two stories below. His head cracked against the concrete like a melon thrown out a window.

“Shit! Shoot him!” one of the two remaining guards said.

I threw the rest of the Mana Bolts I had gathered their way, along with a single Eldritch Blast. That provided cover fire for me to scamper back out of sight to a nearby building where the rest of my forces had camped out.

I received a pair of kill notifications, but behind me I could hear other guards rushing to the walls at the sign of conflict. I ducked out of sight just in time.

“It was worth a shot, Sir!” Kyle said.

“Looks like we’re going to have to do this the hard way...”

Scanning our surroundings, I noted a large stone column nearby. Most of these state buildings favored an ancient Roman aesthetic, so there were plenty of them around.

“Kyle, Marcus, Frank, and Rick... I want you to help me with that pillar. We’re going to use it to breach the gate. Kerrie, I want you and the other ranged throwing arrows, spells, and bullets at the walls to suppress enemy fire.”

I smirked. “I doubt these guys have any idea how to defend against a siege like this, but just in case they do, I want you forcing their heads down. Michael...” I frowned at the former pest control worker. “Just help any way you can.”

Michael shrugged. “I have a few things I can throw—little homebrewed water balloons of things that will be nasty to breathe, especially when combined with my class.”

I slapped him on the shoulder and then headed towards the concrete pillar. On the way there, I entered the first level of Mania: Dissonance. When I got to the pillar, Kyle, Marcus, Frank, and Rick helped me wrench the pillar from the ground. Not for the first time, I wished I’d had Cyra or Myrina here. The two of them would have been perfect for this.

Tearing the pillar free, we hoisted it over our shoulders. I’d picked the five of us because we were all reasonably strong and, more importantly, we were all about the same height. The five of us hoisted the pillar and ran at the gates as quick as we could.

The gates were tough and meant to withstand a prison riot, but they’d never prepared for something like this. Given our stats, we charged at the gates with the speed of a car traveling a downtown street, though we packed the combined force of a runaway semi-truck.

All that force concentrated in the broken stone pillar we were carrying made short work of the gates. Hinges snapped. Steel bent and twisted. Bricks shattered. The watch tower off to the side of the prison crumbled as the pillar knocked out half of its lower level.

The five of us jumped clear as the tower toppled sideways, raining debris in every direction. “Now! Charge!” I yelled as I jumped to the top of the pile of debris that had just been a massive section of wall and guard tower.

I drew my short sword and cast Arcane Blade. The guards at the top of the wall were still half-buried in the rubble, and I put them out of their misery with a few swift jabs. More criminals started streaming out of the prison in twos and



threes. They'd heard the sound of us shattering the gates and reacted accordingly, but it was already too late.

They might have had a chance, fending us off from the walls, but it was too late for that. We were already inside. They'd lost their defensible wall and we were already streaming past it.

**Bandit Thug (Level 14) x 13**

**Bandit Brigand (Level 18) x 10**

**Bandit Enforcer (Level 21) x 5**

**Bandit Taskmaster (Level 25) x 2**

Enemies poured out of the prison in a continuous stream, most of them below level 25. Unlike the guards, or Knuckles' men, these bandits all had the dull and lifeless eyes of Caesar's die-hards. It was a scary sight, but not something I hadn't seen before.

My elites could handle them, especially Kerrie and the four by my side.

I dove in with Arcane Blade. I had enough of a level differential on these foes that hacking through them with Arcane Blade was faster than spellwork. The others joined me as I took out the two Bandit Taskmasters first.

There were a lot of former prisoners, and more coming through with every passing moment. But by being decisive and ruthless, we made the fighting much easier for the people following us.

I sliced one arm clean off a Bandit Taskmaster, then split his side wide open with my blade. I was almost caught off guard when he tried to trip me up with his whip. He still held the weapon in his good arm and wasn't shy about using it. I'd seen the similarities in his expression to those of Caesar and his die-hards, and I'd heard the stories of my men.

The psychos who served under Caesar were like living zombies. They fought on, regardless of how severe their wounds were. It was a scary sight to behold, and it did quite a bit to close the level gap between my people and these

criminals. Fortunately, I was able to deal with the two greatest threats before even my elites engaged.

**Your sword proficiency has increased to Level 50!**

Had both our groups been at a similar level, I would have been forced to call a retreat. As it was, dispatching these criminals took longer than it should have. My people were both careful and thorough, though, which was a combination which wore down our enemies.

But we also had Sharky.

“NOM NOM!” Sharky gobbled up people two or three at a time.

They could have as much psychotic drive as they wanted, but a very determined corpse was still a corpse after it had been thoroughly chewed to bits. I wish I’d had Sharky at my side when I’d had to fight real zombies. He would have made clearing out that supermarket far easier than it had been.

We fought our way to the door to the main prison complex, where I’d thought we’d be facing the entire population of the prisons pouring out to attack us. If that was the case, this would be long and bloody work. But almost as soon as it began, the flow of bodies into the courtyard inside the gates came to a halt.

Someone had called for a retreat within the prison. Was that Knuckles? Or someone else? And why hadn’t they shown themselves?

“All clear here...” Marcus said.

He had a wide-eyed expression, and I tossed him a clean cloth. I’d learned the hard way always to keep a few towels and clean cloths handy. It had been one of Myrina’s tips when we’d gone monster hunting. You never knew when you’d wind up covered in blood.

“Looks like they want us to follow them into the prison.” I grimaced. This was exactly the scenario I wasn’t looking forward to. I didn’t want to fight room to room, or door to door.

Rick apparently agreed with my assessment. “Seems like a massive pain in the ass. Why don’t we just ignore the doors and enter the same way we came through the gates? We’ll make our own entrance.” He waved one hand at the building the former prisoners had retreated into. “Just put a big hole in the wall.”

“That’s... a damn good idea, Rick. Everybody, clean up, patch your wounds, and get ready to move. We’ll make another entrance for ourselves in five minutes.”

Then, maybe Knuckles and whoever else might be running the show in here would reveal themselves. When they did, I could seize control of the shard.

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-THREE

With the help of our trusty stone column, we reduced one of the walls to the prison to rubble. It was nice to know that if I was ever locked up, all I needed to break free was a couple friends and few thousand pounds of steel reinforced concrete pillar. We smashed straight through several cells.

Much to my surprise, the cells were still in use. I would have thought the escaped prisoners would free everyone else locked up, but apparently not.

“Ahhh!” a man screamed as we shattered his wall.

His eyes were bloodshot, and his hair stuck out in every direction. There was a bloody smear on the wall which matched the bloody smear on his face and his broken nose. It looked like he’d been bashing his head against the wall for a good long while.

“Hey there. What are you in here for? This may or may not be a rescue,” I said as I shouted to him over the sound of the crumbling debris.

“Ahhh! Angry titties! Scary titties! The titties will not break me!” the man screamed.

“Uh... that was not the answer I was expecting. Do you want to be saved or not?” I asked.

The man bashed his face against one of the still-standing walls.

“Guys?” I turned to my companions.

Kerrie was the first to approach, a look of concern on her face. “Hey there... I’m Kerrie. What’s the—” Kerrie began to ask, but never finished.

The man took one look at Kerrie’s chest and started screaming at the top of his lungs. He sounded like he was trying to rip his own vocal cords out without using any words. If people hadn’t heard our grand entrance with our improvised battering ram, they knew we were here now.

I held my hands over my ears, and Kerrie was doing the same. Our high Perception stats weren’t doing either of us any good right now. Before any of us could do anything, the man reached for his own face. Fingers curled into claws, he poked at his own eyes and gouged them out. Far from done, he started tearing at his own face until he was little more than a mutilated, bloody husk.

“Good fucking god!” Kyle jumped back, face horrified.

I shared his sentiment. Pulling a hand from off my ear, I jabbed a finger at the crazed man and fired a Mana Bolt right through his empty eye socket and into his brain. The man flopped down like a pile of limp meat, fingers and legs still twitching, but otherwise dead.

“Hmf. What was so scary about me?” Kerrie adjusted the armor over her chest with a grumpy frown on her face.

“Okay, note to everyone. Don’t bother trying to rescue the prisoners still locked in a cell. They’re even crazier than the rest,” I warned my companions.

Breaking through the cell door on the other side of the room only took one solid swing with our trusty stone column. After that, my forces fanned out inside the heart of the prison complex. Behind us was a row of cells filled with other prisoners, although none of them seemed all there. Those who were speaking muttered to themselves incoherently.

“I didn’t think this was an insane asylum...” I muttered.

“It wasn’t,” Rick replied when he overheard me. “Most of the prisoners here were supposed to be fairly cooperative. Whatever has gotten into these guys... it’s fairly recent.”

“Recent enough that it might have something to do with why the people we fought up front were so crazy?” I wondered.

Rick just nodded.

Looking left and right and seeing no real answers, I realized the only thing was to carry on. “Alright, I have no idea how to get around in this complex... and frankly, I don’t care. Guys, grab the pillar. We’re making a few more holes until we either find Knuckles or bring this whole place crashing down on top of our heads.”

Pillar over our shoulders once more, we plowed through several more walls, burrowing deeper into the facility. We knew there were more people here—Knuckles, especially. What could they all be doing?

I wished they’d just come out and make themselves known. Actually, that was a question worth considering. Why *weren’t* they coming out so we could finish them off and end this once and for all?

Had the psychos we’d slaughtered at the front gates really been it? There was something more going on, and I didn’t like it. Not having a clue what it might be made me nervous.

Who was planning something? And what were they planning?

We came across what I suspected was the warden’s office. The placard on the ground was gone, and the door bore a large ‘C’ carved into it with something sharp.

“Caesar or Cromwell, you think?” I asked my companions.

“Could be Knuckles spelling his name weirdly,” Kyle suggested.

“Well, we won’t find any answers out here. Everybody, behind me.” This door was lighter than the others, so we didn’t need the pillar. One swift kick splintered wood, and I stormed in with a fistful of Mana Bolts charged and ready to unleash on whatever was inside.

It turned out there was someone inside, and the moment she saw me she started screaming.

“Ahhh!” the woman yelled in terror.

My hand whipped forward out of instinct, and I threw my Mana Bolts forward. Only then did I realize I wasn't hearing a battle cry. I used examine on her.

### **Lisette Walton (Entertainer – Level 8)**

I nudged my Mana Bolts to either side of the woman so they wouldn't kill her. They splattered on either side of the woman's head. She pulled her arms in and shrank in on herself as she tugged the blanket beneath her up over her body.

“You—what's your name?” I asked. Demanded, really. I realized the harshness of my tone a bit belatedly and worked to soften it. “Please tell me who you are.”

“L-Lisette...” the woman stuttered, which matched her description.

“Is there anyone in the room with you, Lisette? And are you armed?” I asked, focusing on being gentler this time.

“N-no. I'm alone and harmless, I swear! There's a light switch by the door you can turn on.”

I fumbled around and eventually found the switch. I flipped it and soon soft yellow light filled the room. The overhead light and fan seemed a little too fancy to be in a prison office. In fact, the entire room seemed a little too fancy for what it was.

Plush cushions covered just about every surface, with curtains hanging on walls to dampen the noise. There was a small kitchen to one side with a private bathroom nearby. It wasn't large, but someone had gone through the trouble of installing a bath. Rose petals still floated in the water there, along with a faint floral scent filling the room.

All in all, this office had been heavily retrofitted to be a living space. It was quite a bit of carpentry to do in an age when the apocalypse had destroyed most home improvement stores.

My gaze shifted back to Lisette. The centerpiece of the room was a large bed, and she lay atop it, scantily dressed and blushing. A long metal chain stretching from the bedpost to a metal loop around her neck jingled as she shivered.

Despite her obvious fear, there was something intoxicating about looking at her. It was more than the lust of so much exposed flesh. She seemed hurt and pained and deserved to be rescued and protected even if I had to abandon my current mission.

I shook my head to clear it. No! Bad. Two women was plenty. Three, if I counted Myrina. Many men struggled with just one, and my life was complicated enough as it was. No more for me.

Apparently, I hadn't been the only red-blooded man to stop and stare at the sight of the beauty before us. She resembled the captive of a barbarian warlord. In fact, I was certain the outfit she was wearing was the slave Leia outfit I'd seen hanging on a rack in a nearby costume shop.

"Oh, you poor dear..." Kerrie rushed forward first. She grabbed Lisette's chin in hand and tilted her head back and forth as she looked for bruises. "Huh, you're in far better shape than most. No bruises?"

"I-I'm a little sore," Lisette complained as she adjusted herself. The blanket covering her legs slid out of her grip, revealing long shapely thighs. Nearby, Marcus and Kyle were drooling. Even Kerrie stopped for a moment to get an eyeful.

"There's got to be a key to this collar," Kerrie said when she snapped back to her senses. "Help me find it guys. Guys?"

"Pretty..." Kyle drooled.

"Guys? What's wrong?" Kerrie asked again.

I reached out for Kyle's shoulder and gave him a shake. He blinked before returning to his senses.

"Ah, to be eighteen again," I chuckled as I gave Kyle a pat on the back. "Marcus, you too. Don't stare, it's rude."

"Sorry sir!" Marcus said as he snapped out of it.



We searched the room for the key Kerrie wanted, not turning up anything for nearly a minute before Lisette spoke up again.

“I think the key is in that corner over there. Near the television.”

Lisette pointed, I bent over and sure enough the key was right where she said it would be. I picked it up and handed it to Kerrie. Lisette let out a sigh of relief at the sight of the key.

It was clear to me now that Lisette had been the favorite girl of someone very important at the prisoner. Hopefully she'd know something useful. At the very least, she'd know where any other women were being kept.

“Now, Lisette, you said your name was? Do you think you could—” I cut myself off before I could finish asking my question. I heard something happening outside. It was the sound of feet pounding down the hall. “—Shit. Grab the girl. Looks like we've got a fight on our hands.”

Kyle and Marcus were particularly quick to obey that order. The two of them grabbed the woman by either arm while she still struggled to recover her bearings. They hauled her to our rear line while we advanced.

The hallway was full of criminals, all of them with the same glassy-eyed and crazed look as Caesar and his die-hards. I heard the woman behind us scream, and then as one, the crazed madmen charged forward.

Swords flashed and spells flew. I threw out most of my gathered Mana Bolts and called for reinforcements.

“Sharky! Now!” I yelled.

“Nom Nom...” Sharky replied, flowing up behind us.

He slid through the hole we'd made in the prison walls, circling around to strike at the rear of the group of criminals we were fighting. His flanking maneuver would draw off the crazed killers pouring into the hallway, which would be good for us. Neither of us had chosen this room as our battlefield, but if we could push to the entrance and hold it with two of

our strongest melee fighters, our ranged could attack with impunity from behind them.

Rick and Frank took the front, while Kerrie and I stood just behind them. We threw out spells and arrows as fast as we could. In moments, I pushed myself to the second layer of Mania and in the distance, I heard Sharky roar with fury. The next few seconds felt like an eternity as the four of us smashed through the enemy's line before it could form. Behind us, our allies were still getting their bearings.

Rick sliced a level 20 bandit thug in half with one mighty cleave of his axe. Frank took two strokes to dispatch his opponent, but with the help of an Eldritch Blast from me, the way was cleared. We took the doorway and were prepared to hold it against all foes.

That's when I realized we weren't the only ones smart enough to make our own entrance.

A fist as big around as my head shot right through the wall beside me. Wallboard flaked to the ground, revealing the concrete blocks behind it and, eventually, the copper-colored skin of a truly enormous man behind it. His other fist followed the first, making a hole large enough to reveal a dull face full of icy coldness. And, much to my growing nervousness, the same distant and uncaring expression of all the psychos I'd come to hate battling my way through this prison.

"Grrr..." the man practically growled as he tore the concrete wall asunder and muscled his way through it, no concrete pillar needed.

Just looking at the man, I could tell that most of his stats had gone into Strength, possibly followed by Vitality. He had blue painted tribal tattoos down his shoulders and arms to his fists. These flowed in a sunburst pattern around his skin, focusing around his knuckles. That was all the look I got at him before he shouldered his way through the wall and stepped into the room, letting loose a wordless battle cry.

"Crap. Stay on the door!" I told my companions, waving some of the rest of my forces forward to reinforce Frank, Rick, and Kerrie while I peeled off to confront this new foe myself.

From the sheer weight of his presence, I could tell this was no ordinary psychotic killer.

### **Bandit Master Brawler (Level 45)**

Given his level, there was only one person he could be.

“Knuckles, I presume?”

“Graaaaaaaar!” the man roared wordlessly.

He charged me, fists glowing with crimson light.

The room we were fighting in was spacious, but not nearly spacious enough for my typical fighting style. I was used to having plenty of room to maneuver, so this was less than ideal—especially when I had to be careful not to accidentally hit my allies. Friendly fire, after all, wasn’t friendly at all.

And neither was this behemoth. With this enormous thug’s level, he’d make short work of any of my companions.

But fighting under poor conditions was just part of being ready for battle. And besides, if this guy had made one hole, maybe he could make a few more for me? This place could do with a renovation... I was more in favor of an open floorplan.

I ran toward the far side of the wall, snapping off the occasional spell to keep his attention. This drew Knuckles to the far wall and away from my friends who were having a hard enough time repelling the crazed psychos who refused to die. Even with Sharky’s help, Rick and company were in for a tough fight.

“This way, big guy!” I waved at him.

Knuckles seemed a bit more vocal than Caesar had been, but he still seemed to be decisively on the crazed killer side of the spectrum.

If I hadn’t already spoken with one of his subordinates, I wouldn’t have thought anything of it—just one more crazed killer in the prison complex. But I had spoken to one of the prisoners, one of this man’s chief subordinates. He’d described Knuckles as the one sane man amongst the Three Kings. The moderate option for small-time crooks.

The person before me didn't look like he was capable of organizing anything more complicated than a beatdown. Just what had happened to the people in this prison?

Before I could truly consider that thought, Knuckles swung his fist at my head. I ducked at the last moment, dodging the golden light swirling around his knuckles just before they struck the concrete wall behind where I'd been standing with explosive force. The wall evaporated like it had never been there.

Knuckles waited for the dust to settle, staring at his own hand as though wondering if he'd destroyed me so completely, he couldn't see any traces... which was because I'd warp stepped out of his way at the last moment.

I corrected his mistake by jabbing an Arcane Blade through his kidney from behind.

Knuckles turned, stepping back and sweeping his open palm in my direction. But I crouched low and used Warp Step again to slide between his knees, holding my sword up all the while. It was a trick I'd attempted against the ogres, though I hadn't ever landed the move.

Now, though, Knuckles required some serious medical attention if he ever planned to have kids. I jumped to my feet in front of him again. When he turned his head, I struck his cheek with an Eldritch Blast that knocked him back like a punch to the jaw.

Looking to my left and right, I was surprised to see the afternoon sky overhead. It looked like I was standing in the middle of a basketball court. I'd seen the basket through the window, which was why I'd chosen this wall. This wide-open battlefield was much more to my taste.

"It's just you and me, big guy..." I said, preparing my spells.

Once I took care of Knuckles, I'd double back and aid my companions, finishing things off once and for all. This was the last of the Three Kings, and when he was dead I'd be able to—

I froze as a bad feeling crawled up my spine. The Luck stat did that sometimes, so I'd learned to pay attention to it. Not a second later, another wall that made up the courtyard of the basketball court burst open. Through it, a tall and lean man wielding an iron spear appeared. Flames trailed along the ground behind him.

I Examined him.

**Bandit Spear Master (Level 42)**

“Wait.... What?! Caesar? Again?” I cursed inwardly. This battle had just gotten a whole lot harder.

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-FOUR

My first thought was that Caesar had some class or skill-based form of resurrection. But if Caesar had found a way to bring himself back to life, it had to be something a hell of a lot better than what I'd come up with. I'd brought myself back to life by increasing my stats to the point that I should have survived what killed me, and then regenerating the hard way.

The fact that I'd come back to life that way was exactly the reason I was so thorough with my kills. It should be impossible to come back to life when your former body was completely unrecognizable. Caesar's flesh and bones lay in a heap, separated into their individual components.

I would have noticed muscle and sinew slithering back onto his bones. Even trolls couldn't manage that level of regeneration. But when I looked closer, I noticed that this couldn't be the same man.

The previous Caesar had darker skin than this one, and not just a darker tan. This one lacked the tats I'd seen on the other, too. He was also shorter, tending towards stocky rather than being lanky and long-limbed.

No, this Caesar was different from the previous one. Maybe I'd fought an imposter and this was the true Caesar. But then this new Caesar leveled his spear and charged it with crimson energy, exactly as the previous Caesar had done. Apparently, this new guy had the same abilities of the last Caesar. He rushed forward at me with his spear, while Knuckles did the same from the other side with his golden, glowing fists.

While I was confident I could take either of these guys on one at a time, both at the same time made things exponentially more difficult. But worst of all was that I had a feeling neither of them would mind taking a wound, not if it meant they could give me one in exchange. The psychotic idiots I'd been fighting lately made my life more difficult than it needed to be.

I'd take Thalassa's warriors any day over these prison psychos. At least the Amazonians fought logically, and with some care for their own lives.

I hurried out of the way, putting some distance between myself and my two melee assailants. This let me generate a few Mana Bolts as I did so. As long as I kept my distance, I was in control of the fight. I could whittle both of them down with ranged attacks and avoid getting up close and personal with Arcane Blade unless absolutely necessary.

And I'd make good use of Soulchain Nexus, too.

I'd placed some of those down on our enemies in the hallway before luring Knuckles away, and Sharky was definitely stacking up Corrupting Marks. Normally, I'd wait a little longer for those to spread, but I could really use a boost in stats right now.

When I detonated the Corrupting Marks, I felt a rush of power as several of my enemies one room over died, contributing some portion of their stats to me as a temporary buff. With new power flowing through me, my spells flew faster than ever. My staff hovered over the basketball court, and I drew on it to supplement my mana.

The elements of my Mana Bolts shifted, and I used the same combinations that had been effective against Caesar before. Bit by bit, I claimed the upper hand—despite being outnumbered. I almost wished three lower-leveled bandits would show up so I could take full advantage of my One Versus Many proficiency bonus.

But these weren't normal foes, so it was probably better there weren't more adds. Normal foes would have cut their losses and fled, by now. Even monsters usually realized they

were outmatched and started fighting conservatively. But their ghastly wounds only made this pair coming at me fight all the harder.

And eventually they forced an opening.

Knuckles charged at me, soaking up an Eldritch Blast and two Mana Bolts. I had just used Warp Step and needed a moment before I could use it again. Unfortunately, my enemies didn't plan on giving me that moment.

Caesar, who'd taken cover behind Knuckles, leaped out of hiding and lunged in my direction. His spear smoldered with a fire that burned a deeper, bloodier red color than I remembered.

I should have been able to duck beneath the spear strike. I should have had the speed for it. But then Knuckles used an ability of his own.

His fists grew brighter than the sun for just a moment, blinding me. I had to close my eyes, moving to block with Arcane Blade going from nothing but memory... and I was off by just a hair. While I managed to shove Caesar's burning spear aside and kept it from skewering me through the chest, it still sliced a deep gash along my ribcage. The smell of my own burned flesh filled the air.

Warp Step activated, and I quickly extricated myself before either of my foes could launch a counterattack. It was a good thing I did, too, since an instant later Knuckles followed up his flashbang fist with another disintegrating punch that turned the metal post holding up the basketball hoop to dust.

The two of them didn't make it out of their attacks unscathed. In retaliation for the wound, I'd struck them both with more spells. I'd also followed up my block of the flaming spear with a slice of my own with Arcane Blade across Caesar's stomach. The Corrupting Marks were stacking ever higher. The lifesteal they provided me was literally a life saver; it would soon heal my wounds.

But Caesar didn't seem to mind the damage to his chest in the least. Combined with the other wounds I'd given him, a



flap of his stomach now hung wide open, putting his intestines on display. This wasn't the sort of fight where I could afford to pull my punches.

I was fighting madmen, and I needed overwhelming force if I wanted to put them down. I called on the third level of Mania, Blood Frenzy. As I did, off in the distance I heard Sharky chomp down with delight.

**Your Mania level has increased to level 3: Blood Frenzy.**

**Your grip on sanity grows looser, and your lust for battle grows. The effectiveness of all Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge abilities is increased by 80%.**

The fighting reached a fever pitch, growing ever more fierce. I found the idea of trading wounds with my opponents not nearly as abhorrent as it had been before. What was pain, if it might lead me to victory?

Soon, there were not two madmen on that basketball court, but three. I fought just as wildly as they did.

Just then, Caesar displayed a new ability. I wasn't sure if I hadn't given him the chance to use it before, or if this new body granted him a new power, but when he cocked his arm back and thrust his spear forward, I discovered he could shoot a lance of fire from its tip.

That had been a painful lesson, but one Knuckles paid dearly for.

I switched to Eldritch Augmentation, activating Arcane Blade as Knuckles tried to punch me again. That blow would have disintegrated me as surely as it had disintegrated concrete walls and steel posts, but I slid beneath it fearlessly, dodging his golden fist by a hair as I brought my blade into his arm.

I sliced Knuckles' hand clean off, just past the wrist. It tumbled across the ground with a meaty *thud*. He'd have a much harder time punching me without that. Then I used Warp Step to limp away once more.

My leg had taken the brunt of that burst of flame, and I was pretty sure his fire lance had burned all the way to the

bone. But trading one of my limbs for Knuckles' arm was a good swap, especially since I could hop around just fine thanks to Power Jump and Warp Step.

Besides, I only needed to keep out of range long enough for Lifesteal to heal my wound. Unlike Knuckles, my extremity was only wounded, not cut clean off. I expected another furious roar of outrage and anger at me after taking one of his limbs, but Knuckles just stared dumbfounded at his stump.

This was the first time I'd seen anything besides mindless rage from either of my foes.

Looking closer, Knuckles seemed to regain a moment of clarity through the pain. His eyes grew more focused, and his brows drew together—whereas before they'd been unmoving. As much as I would have liked to study the changes, my blood was still pounding hot in my veins, and disabling Knuckles for a moment meant that I had the perfect opportunity to deal with Caesar.

The spearman lunged at me, leaving a burning trail of fire behind him with each stride. Just before he reached me, I jumped straight upwards. Soaring overhead, I fired a Mana Bolt and an Eldritch Blast from either hand as I did so. When I landed behind Caesar, I drew my sword and in one fluid motion, threw it end over end.

My Arcane Blade slammed into Caesar's back, cutting into his spine. Caesar collapsed, his legs paralyzed until some portion of his nervous system could regenerate. He reached around to tear the blade free and restore his movement, but the weapon was right in the center of his back, behind his heart and out of reach.

It was an impossible place for a human body to reach, though that didn't stop him from trying.

I picked up his spear. It had toppled to the ground when he fell, so I picked it up. It was solid steel, which meant it was damn heavy. I had little skill with a spear, but I was strong enough to jam it into Caesar's shoulder with Eldritch Augmentation.

The spear went straight through Caesar's back, out through his chest, and into the pavement of the basketball court. Between the sword and the spear, he'd have a hard time getting up—no matter how motivated he was to kill me.

I'd barely finished immobilizing Caesar before Knuckles came at me again, swinging at me with his remaining hand. Now, however, he seemed slower than before and the confusion in his eyes had grown. It was enough of a weakness that I slid around his other arm, slicing with one swift motion to take his remaining hand. I sliced this one off a little higher, just above the elbow.

Thrown off balance by the loss of a second extremity, Knuckles toppled face-first to the pavement. Behind me, Caesar still squirmed where I'd pinned him to the basketball court. Flames burned around him, especially along the length of his spear.

His flesh blackened and blistered until he was able to shift around on the steel spear until he tore his body free of his weapon. Rolling, he twisted, using his arms to pry the short sword out of his back with his body weight. The motions tore chunks out of his already-battered flesh.

It had to be excruciatingly painful. No ordinary human could free themselves in such a way. Such wounds were a death sentence—even with high Vitality and regeneration. To do this was to kill oneself in the most agonizing way possible, just for the chance to strike one last blow before dying.

Caesar lurched to his feet, blood leaking from a hundred open wounds. He stumbled forward, teeth bared with a plan to tear my throat out with his mouth.

“Oh no you don't!”

I shot him in the face with an Eldritch Blast, shattering his teeth. Then I detonated his Corrupting Marks. The blood oozing from his wounds turned into fountains, spraying in all directions as the last bits of Caesar's life fled, pooling on the ground around him.

The damage was just the thing I needed to fuel Lifesteal to heal my burned leg. Soon, I was both breathing and standing easier.

Releasing Blood Frenzy, I realized I felt weary enough that I no longer cared about ensuring I could follow up on my kills. From the sounds behind me and the faint impressions I got from Sharky, my allies had finished fighting as well.

Unfortunately, the detonation of my Corrupting Marks did not kill Caesar. It did stagger him, though. They slowed him down enough that I wearily picked up my survival sword. Detonating my Corrupting Marks had popped his eyes out of his head and sent them flying elsewhere. His ears oozed a steady stream of pink—a mixture of blood and some clear fluid.

Still, he lunged forward, blind and deaf.

With one final swipe of my Arcane Blade, I put him out of his misery at last. I cast Disassemble on him again, just to make sure, and then destroyed the remains. But considering that had already failed once, I wasn't so sure it would work the way I was used to.

Finished with Caesar—hopefully for good, or at least until his next incarnation arrived—I turned to Knuckles. He was in much better shape than his fellow King, though he lay groaning in a puddle of his own blood. His two stumps rested on his chest as his eyes stared up at the sky.

As I watched, he blinked. I got the feeling that there was something there again behind those eyes—something more than had been in Caesar's eyes, at the very least. Since killing Caesar hadn't stopped me from having to fight him again, I decided a different approach was needed.

“Surrender,” I demanded, sword drawn and pointed at Knuckles' neck.

Knuckles made a sound, choking it out between bloody teeth.

I couldn't make it out. “What was that?” I asked, coming closer to the dying man. I had to lean in close to hear him

speak.

Knuckles lunged up at me, wrapping his forearms around my shoulders with his bloody stumps.

“Run...”

All the strength left Knuckles' body, and I found myself holding him up by the shoulders. When I let go, he collapsed to the ground, limp and unmoving.

**Your race, Homo Acceleratus, has gained a level!**

I stared down at him, one question on my mind.

“Run from what?”

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-FIVE

Going through my notifications, the level turned out to be from Caesar's death rather than Knuckles. That gave me a little hope for getting a proper answer out of Knuckles. But try as I might to nudge him, he wouldn't wake up.

Knuckles should have had quite a bit more life in him. Slicing off both his hands was a grievous injury, but for a man of his strength and vitality, it should have been survivable. The fact that he was down meant something more was going on.

Perhaps my quest updates and notifications would reveal the answer.

**You have claimed Crownhill County Prison, a major fortress on this shard.**

**As the victor, the fate of the defeated is yours to determine.**

As before, the System ran me through several policy choices. My selection would inform the quests given to everyone in Crownhill when it came to interacting with the survivors from Crownhill County Prison. I could put a bounty on their heads, like I had for the Wolfmen. I could subjugate them completely and force them to work for me, like I had the goblins. Or any number of things in between.

I ended up doing a combination of the two. So long as they cooperated with Terrance and the justice system we were putting together, they wouldn't have a bounty on their heads. Nor would they be killed out of hand. But if that ever changed, so would their status in Crownhill.

They'd used up their only second chance and would have no one to blame but themselves for their fate.

When I finished going through my victory notification, I was surprised that was it. I kept looking for, but couldn't find, a notification about uniting the shard and completing the System's main quest. I looked through my windows to find my quest page and looked for a status update on the quest.

**You now control more of this shard than any other leader.**

**All but one major leader has submitted to your rule!**

**Assert your dominance by consolidating power across this shard to complete this quest and crown yourself and your followers as the leader of this shard!**

One more foe, huh?

I shot a glance at Knuckles.

I hadn't needed to actually slay every single ogre, goblin, or wolfman in order to claim my victory over them. I just needed to destroy their forces beyond any obvious capacity to contend for the shard. I was pretty sure I'd already achieved that.

So why hadn't I completed the System's quest? The thought nagged at me. As did Caesar's remains. I'd killed him twice now. Would I have to kill him a third time? And how many times after that?

I shot a glance at Knuckles. He was the only one who might know Caesar's secrets. But at the same time, he was just as likely to be the person I needed to kill to finish this quest. I rubbed my temples. Not long ago I'd been an ordinary office worker. Increasingly, I'd found myself having to decide who to kill and then both when and how to do it.

I decided to wait on Knuckles. If he woke up, then I'd be able to ask him questions about Caesar. If I still needed to, I'd just kill him after that.

All the abilities he'd used against me had involved his fists. I couldn't imagine a pugilist class would be particularly useful without their hands, so he'd likely be safe to handle—despite his high level. Decision made, I jumped up through the man-sized hole we'd punched in the wall to reunite with my allies.

As I entered the room, I got a chance to examine it a little closer than I had when we'd first arrived.

The bed Lisette had been bound to was large enough that Bridget, Sakura, Myrina, and I could all sleep in it at the same time and be comfortable—assuming I had a room back at the farmhouse big enough to contain it. I suppose that was fitting if the man who claimed it planned on enjoying his personal fictional princess on it every night.

Something about the bed bothered me though. Why did it have pink sheets? I certainly couldn't imagine any of the Three King's I'd fought projecting anything but masculine strength, and the rest of the room seemed well-appointed.

Perhaps I was overthinking things though. One couldn't be choosy in the Apocalypse. Maybe this was all they could find.

I had dawdled enough. There was one woman who could give me answers, and she was waiting right there. She'd probably heard plenty of rumors. Many men liked to talk in bed. Maybe she'd even heard Caesar speak. If there was anything Lisette knew, I needed her to share.

Both Kyle and Marcus loomed over her while she held a blanket tight around herself, looking nervous. She looked exactly like I imagined a terrified survivor would look. I felt bad demanding anything of her with just one glance. But a small sacrifice from her would save many others.

“Guys, give her some space. I want to talk to her,” I told them.

Marcus and Kyle both seemed eager to comfort the scantily clad woman. I suppose that it was only natural, considering how young they were. But the two of them were



behaving a bit like creepers. Having Bridget or Margaret here would have been nice.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Lisette,” she replied in a soft, quiet voice. “I... I...” She choked back a sobbing cry, like she was on the verge of tears. Despite her apparent state, her eyes were completely dry.

“Hey there, Lisette, mind if I ask you a few questions?” I asked as gently as I could.

“Sorry, I’d rather not talk. I am emotionally traumatized by —b-by recent events,” she stammered.

I blinked in surprise. I had not been expecting that response. “I suppose that’s reasonable. I will keep the questions brief, then.”

She eyed me from over the edge of a blanket. “So that wasn’t really a question, was it? You were going to interrogate me anyway.” Her voice returned to normal a moment faster than it should have. I shouldn’t have been able to catch something like that, but perhaps my high Charisma stat was cluing me in on something I should have missed.

“There are things I need to know, namely if there are others like you and where I might find them,” I explained. “Their lives are at risk.”

“Okay. Fine, ask.”

“First, whose room was it?”

Lisette shrugged her shoulders. “I was taken by Cromwell, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Cromwell’s been dead for more than a week,” I replied.

“Well, I wasn’t Cromwell’s for long. He captured me. I was a psychologist, you see. He captured my whole office and thought it might be good for morale to have me sooth his recruits. It was alright at first, though the men here were pushy in ways my degree didn’t prepare me for.”

Lisette grabbed her shoulders, shaking herself by the elbows so it looked like she was trembling.

“You don’t have to go into those details. What happened next?”

“Well, I ended up in the hands of the first Caesar. He took a liking to me and ended up putting me in here. I’ve been here ever since.” Lisette gave me another shrug.

“So you were Caesar’s girl then? The one I keep hearing about?”

Lisette nodded. “I’ve been with the Caesars a while now.”

“Did you know the one outside is dead?” I asked. “I killed him.”

Lisette held a hand over her mouth. Whatever expression she held was hidden from me.

“That’s good,” Lisette replied after a moment that stretched a hair too long.

My eyes gazed into hers in silence, hoping she would fill the silence with answers. But she was comfortable with the quiet. As we sat there staring at one another, her fingers inched closer to my hand on the couch next to her. I pulled my hand away.

“I know there are other women are prisoners here. Maybe they aren’t held captive like you were, but they probably would like the option to leave. Do you know where they are?”

“All the captured women and the families of new recruits were moved into nearby apartments,” Lisette pointed to a distant wall, and I gauged the approximate directions. “Or at least, that’s what I’ve heard. I’ve never seen the place.”

She shifted the blanket she was holding a little lower, revealing quite a bit of bare skin. Though, to be honest, not revealing herself would have been difficult, considering the skimpy outfit she was wearing. I did my best to keep my gaze locked on her eyes.

“That will be a big help, Lisette. Now, I’m sure you’re wondering what’s going to happen to you going forward. You have my word you’ll be safe. I’ll make sure you have food and a place to live until you get on your feet.”

“And protection?” Lisette asked, head suddenly jerking upward.

Kyle cleared his throat. “Um, Carter, Sir. I volunteer to watch over her. I’ll keep her safe, and all that.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “Had enough of fighting for the day, have you?”

“Me, too, Carter! I’ll stay behind and help Kyle guard Miss Lisette,” Marcus chimed in.

For the second time in as many minutes, I blinked in surprise. The two of them looked fresh-faced and young, but they’d seen and shed more blood than most of the rest of my militia. I didn’t expect the two of them to back down—especially from a rescue mission. I thought the two of them liked playing the hero, especially to damsels in distress.

I shot a glance at Lisette lying on the bed. Perhaps a certain damsel had already caught both of their eyes.

No wonder the various Caesars of the prison had passed her down as a prize every bit as valuable as the crown—assuming they were different people. She made an excellent sultry princess, locked away like this, just waiting to be rescued. I shook my head.

I wasn’t surprised Kyle and Marcus were smitten. The way she batted her eyelashes at me was enough to make most men’s hearts race. But these days, my tastes bent more toward warrior princesses than sultry, captive princess. After all, that was how Myrina had once described herself.

I kept a healthy distance, returning none of her subtle advances. “Alright, Lisette, you’ll be in Kyle and Marcus’ care. You two... be gentlemen.”

“Understood, Sir!” Kyle replied.

“Everybody else, we’ve got a rescue operation! Oh, and tell Terrance that Knuckles, one of the remaining members of the Three Kings, is in the other room. Arrest him and bring him back to Crownhill for questioning.”

“Uh... Carter, isn't he super dangerous and really high leveled? Can Terrance and his people handle someone like that?” Frank asked.

I chuckled. “Don't worry, he's been *disarmed*.”



We found the building full of women exactly where Lisette said it would be. The women inside were surprisingly comfortable where they were—as Cromwell's better-off captives had been.

The stories of how a bunch of prisoners starved for feminine attention had busted down their prison cells and gone raiding and pillaging as soon as the integration hit made me fear the worst. But it seemed most of the women were either living in a large bunkhouse, or in their own private—if tiny—rooms. Someone had even gotten the plumbing back online, and a generator ran the in background providing limited power. Lisette had actually been the worst off out of everyone dressed in a sexy outfit and chained to a bedpost. The other women were being put to work, but not abused.

The delineation between the women who got their own rooms and those who were forced to bunk with others was pretty obvious, just from asking a few questions. It was very similar to the model used by Cromwell's men. The women either doing a job for Caesar or Knuckles, or attached to a man who was doing a job for them, received their own accommodations. The ones bunking together were all single.

“To be honest, I figured we'd find something more like a brothel with unwilling participants tied to their beds. This all seems a bit...” Frank waggled his hand back and forth uncertainly.

“Too... fair?” I offered.

“When we saw it in Cromwell's place,” he continued, “I was surprised. But Caesar didn't seem the kind of guy to care about treating women ethically. He had that Lisette woman, his own personal slave girl! I don't get it. You'd think she'd be the best treated out of everyone. Not the worst.”

“It seems like every man who mattered back at the prison had his own woman he could come visit, even if they weren’t paired up before the integration. It’s strange.”

“Very strange,” Kerrie agreed. “But let’s not look a gift horse in the mouth. We’d be in trouble if we had the entire female population of the city dealing with lifelong trauma. Let’s count ourselves lucky.”

“Agreed.”

I shook my head in wonder. Maybe Knuckles would turn out to be a staunch feminist when I finally had the chance to interrogate him. Somehow, I doubted the answer was that simple. No, there was still something I didn’t understand going on here.

The women were very grateful to be rescued. Though things had gone far better for them than I would have guessed, they were still locked up in an apartment complex against their will. At least they were happier to be rescued than some of Cromwell’s kept women had been.

“We’re saved? We’re saved!” a woman said, smile spreading wide across her face.

She might have been in her late thirties, but the physical enhancements everyone received from the free stats the System gave us made it hard to tell. Everyone was in the best shape of their lives.

“Yes, that’s right, you’re saved. Though, to be honest, this apartment complex is nicer than the one we’ve got set up for you back in the center of town.” I gave them a shrug. “But you’re certainly not under guard or house arrest anymore. You are free to leave whenever you wish.”

Several of them paused at the news that freedom might bring with it a lower quality of life.

“I recommend you pack up your things,” I continued, “and head toward the large black obelisk downtown. Business is booming, and if you set yourself up with a trade or a job, you should be able to regain some semblance of your old life.”

The women talked it out amongst themselves. In the end, some would be staying and some would be going. It was mostly those who'd all been thrown together in a few big bunk rooms who would be leaving for greener pastures, whereas those with private rooms who appeared to have settled in here would be staying—albeit with greatly expanded freedom to roam.

I bid them farewell so they could pack and sort things out. Kerrie stayed behind, along with a few other officers in the militia, to help them while the rest of us returned to the prison complex.

Terrance waved me over as he struggled to handcuff Knuckles' still sleeping form.

"You alright there, Terrance?" I asked.

"Maybe." Terrance grunted. "Next time you disarm someone, maybe be a little less thorough?" He ended up snapping a set of cuffs around Knuckles' ankles. They were more symbolic than anything. I'd cut Knuckle's hands off at the wrists, rendering the handcuffs rather pointless.

Frank, Rick, and the others helped Terrance haul Knuckles back to the settlement on a makeshift stretcher. He was big enough that it took all three of them. Something about him was exceptionally dense, so even heightened strength wasn't sufficient to haul him off.

The rest of our wounded would return with them and we'd gather back at the settlement in Crownhill to celebrate our victory. I had a few loose ends to tie off before following them. I ducked back into the building to fetch Kyle, Marcus, and Lisette. I had a lot of questions, and she still seemed like the best person to ask. Traumatized or not, I would get my answers out of her.

"Kyle! Marcus! Get your rears in gear... we're headed back," I called out. "The rescue mission was a success."

I received no answer.

"Kyle? Marcus?"

My voice echoed throughout the empty building. Rounding the corner and entering Caesar's room, I found the three of them had left. They were nowhere to be found.

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-SIX

Marcus, Kyle, and Lisette were gone. I looked around the prison compound, but they were nowhere to be seen.

“Any of you guys seen Kyle and Marcus?” I asked.

I was greeted by uncertain shrugs. Many of the militia were new, and though most knew the names of their fellow team members, not all of them knew the names of everybody else. I had to give a brief description of what they looked like, but nobody recalled seeing the two men. I didn’t have a breakthrough until I tried giving them Lisette’s description instead.

“What about a beautiful woman, with reddish-hair? She was wearing a costume store slave girl outfit.”

“Yeah, we did see someone like that!” one of the militia said. “She took off that way with two guys. Seemed like they were in a big hurry, too...”

I frowned, following where his hand pointed. He was pointing away from Crownhill.

“Alright, thanks.”

I quickly took off into the wilderness outside the city. A few monsters appeared, trying to bother me, but all of them were low-leveled. Wiping them out actually helped clear my head a bit.

Something was off with Lisette. I couldn’t name what. I’d examined her and found nothing. To everyone else she seemed



like just another victim. But there was a feeling deep in my gut that I needed to watch her.

And now Kyle and Marcus had vanished on me. That feeling was growing stronger by the minute.

I shook my head. She'd no doubt been through something awful. I'd examined her, and so far her story checked out. It would be bad for my reputation back in town if I were to press her after what she'd gone through, no matter what my paranoid guts might be implying. But that didn't mean I couldn't have people keep an eye on her. For her own safety, of course.

I remembered the smitten looks on Kyle's and Marcus' faces when they'd looked at her... fawned over her, actually. And then how strangely Caesar, Knuckles, and all the mindless psychos populating the prison had acted. It was all connected somehow.

And Lisette was at the center of it—of that, I was growing increasingly certain.

The forest outside of Crownhill bore no signs of the passage of three people. I could look further into the woods, but there was so much area to search that I'd have more luck picking a needle out of a haystack. This would bear investigation and research. If I still had access to Myrina, I might be able to pick her brain.

I cursed inwardly at that thought.

Elder Thalassa couldn't have picked a worse time to spring her little plot. Who knew what she was doing back on Themyscira? Myrina was probably lying low to avoid exposing my business ventures. I wondered when, or even how, I'd get in touch with her again.

I spent several hours outside the city looking for Lisette and my two subordinates. I started to worry about Kyle and Marcus. I'd taken the two young men under my wing. What if something happened to them? Frustrated, I headed back to the settlement. With no luck picking up their trail near the prison,

my hopes of finding them as the light started to fade went from slim to none.

Which was why I was surprised to find they'd returned to Crownhill for the victory celebration while I was out looking for them. Side by side with Lisette.

"Yeah, that Lisette woman's a real looker," the militia who I asked about them shook his head, letting out a low whistle. "Anyway, Kyle and Marcus said she'd hired them as her private bodyguards. I think I heard someone say they were helping her move her stuff into Kyle's apartment... over that way."

"They're leaving the militia?" I asked worriedly. "I thought we were paying pretty well for shifts on the walls? Flexible hours, and maybe even retirement benefits. What's not to love?"

The militia man shrugged. "It's better than the gigs most people have, I'll give you that, Sir. As for why Marcus and Kyle are leaving? I think that has more to do with the pretty lady they're caring for. With a smile like that, she could turn any man in the settlement into a drooling simp. Seems like she got her hooks into those poor boys."

He sighed, scratched his cheek, and then spat to the side. "Ah, well. They will be remembered fondly."

"What's the address? I want to talk to them... to Lisette in particular."

When the militiaman gave me Kyle's address, I made my way through the city. The closer I got to the obelisk, the more often I had to stop and accept congratulations on a successful mission. Cheers of 'Carter!' followed me through the settlement. I tried not to let my troubled thoughts show on my face. The System hadn't granted me victory yet.

A celebration had broken out in the courtyard—actually, there were two celebrations. One was an open air trial where members of the Three Kings' people were being publicly tried for their crimes. Margaret served as the judge, while a group of citizens stood nearby as the jury.

The prisoners looked particularly nervous as they glanced to their left where Frank and Rick were in the middle of erecting a large guillotine.

The other half of the celebration was welcoming Knuckles' and Caesar's former captives. They would join the people we'd freed from Cromwell the week before. Most of them were women, but there were a few children, too. There were even a few tearful reunions, as people who'd been caught at home by the integration ran into loved ones who'd been stuck at work during the apocalypse.

I made my way to Kyle's apartment. It was in one of the nicer areas of the growing city. I wasn't sure when he'd moved in, but Kyle had good tastes for a bachelor. When I was young and single like him, I'd been content with a mattress, a folding stool, and a microwave.

Kyle's place was the penthouse suite of what had formerly been a classy apartment complex. When I entered, I was even greeted by building maintenance and room service.

"Hello there! Are you looking to purchase an apartment or placing a pre-integration items claim?" a woman asked.

I was impressed. Looking at her and at the desk she was sitting behind, alongside the functional cellphone she'd been holding a moment ago, I might have thought the integration had never happened.

"Actually, I'm here to visit someone."

"Oh?" The woman perked up. "Who?"

"Kyle."

"Mister Kyle? Well, if it was anyone else, you'd need an appointment. For you, though, I can make an exception. Still... I should probably buzz him and let him know you're on your way up." She reached over her counter to activate a microphone, but I stopped her hand.

"That's alright. This is more of a surprise visit. Just let me drop in on him unannounced, alright?"

She seemed hesitant, but when I smiled at her, she relented. “Oh, alright... I suppose if anyone is trustworthy in this town anymore, it’s you, Sir.”

The woman went back to fiddling with her cellphone, and soon I was on the elevator headed upward. I was surprised they’d gotten this thing working again. We may have restored power, but power wasn’t cheap.

Come to think of it, the streetlights had been on when I’d entered this part of the city. Someone must have figured out how to get some power out of the old power plant and fixed the breaks in the lines leading from there to here.

That would have been a tough job to pull off. Especially with scavengers out stripping copper wire for me anywhere they could find it. I’d have to warn them not to steal anything with voltage running through it.

The elevator took me to the top floor. There was only one suite up here, anyway, so Kyle’s door wasn’t hard to find. I rapped on it twice and waited for an answer.

“Who is it?” a woman’s voice asked—Lisette’s voice, not Kyle’s.

Good. I was hoping I’d find her here. “Kyle? Marcus?” I called out. “Are you two in there?”

“I asked who it was!” Lisette on the other side of the door shouted back at me.

“It’s Carter. Open up, please. I need to talk to Kyle and Marcus... And you as well, Lisette.”

I heard her swearing faintly on the other side of the door. Her muttered curses were followed by a lot of scrambling, as well as the sound of Lisette clearing her throat and sitting down. I stood before the closed door for a while, listening to them not-so-silently scrambling to do... something. Cloth ruffled and metal clinked.

They were taking long enough that I tested the lock. The knob was, unfortunately, locked. But I knew I could force it open with an Eldritch Blast. It would wreck the lock, but it

should be easy enough for Kyle to replace. Just when I'd decided to break the lock, the door swung open.

Marcus was on the other side.

"Marcus, there you are. I was looking for you and Kyle, you know. You really shouldn't have run off on me like that," I told him.

Marcus said nothing in reply. He was silent and then went still as a statue after he backed up to where Kyle was already standing on the other side of a large couch. I turned my attention to Kyle, who now wielded a familiar-looking spear—a bar of sharpened metal ground down to a point. I'd seen this very spear sitting in the corner of the room he and Marcus had been supposed to guard Lisette in.

"Kyle. I see you got some loot from our recent adventure. Is that spear better than your old one? It looks damn heavy. I imagine the blacksmiths in town could craft you something better."

Kyle stared back at me, his face blank and his eyes distant.

"Guys?" I glanced between Marcus and Kyle, both standing behind and to either side of Lisette with expressionless faces.

The two of them weren't acting normally. And I was starting to think I should trust my gut a little more often in the future.

Lisette cleared her throat to catch my attention. She was lounging across the couch lighting a stick of what looked to be homemade incense. The smell that flooded the room was sickly sweet enough to make me cough—it smelled more like medicine than anything burned for its scent or ambiance.

She lay back on the plush couch, relaxing as she lounged propped up on one elbow. She was wearing some thin undergarments now—something that looked to have come from Frederick's of Hollywood. Her hair was still wet from a recent shower.

It looked like she'd taken the time to put on some lipstick, though. Otherwise, she lacked the makeup I'd seen her

wearing before. Though, to be honest, the flawless clarity of her skin meant she hardly needed any to begin with.

“Hi.” She smiled at me, showing off a row of perfect white teeth. She had a slightly shy and nervous flush to her face. She looked like a perfectly cute and innocent young woman—which, given her skimpy lingerie, was incredibly provocative.

“We didn’t meet under the best circumstances before. Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Lisette. Kyle and Marcus have told me so much about you.”

I scanned the room. Kyle’s apartment still bore the traces of the luxury residence it had been before the integration, but someone had worked awfully hard to give it a custom, homey touch... someone with a penchant for pink curtains.

“Have they?” I took a step forward.

Kyle and Marcus reacted immediately. The two of them stepped around the ends of the couch, placing themselves between me and Lisette.

“No, no! Down, both of you!” Lisette swung her legs around to sit on the edge of the couch, breaking away from her seductive lounging pose she’d been holding since I’d entered the room.

Kyle and Marcus took a step back and relaxed a bit, but I could tell from their postures that they’d step forward again if I came any closer.

“I’m sorry,” Lisette apologized. “Men tend to get protective around me. It’s not something I can help.”

I hit Lisette with Examine again, this time with suspicions firm in my mind.

### **Lisette (Courtesan – Level 52)**

Then something happened I’d never seen before. My stat screen blurred and fuzzed for a moment before settling down. When it did, something entirely different showed up.

### **Lisette (Entertainer – Level 8)**

The original class and level were gone, but I'd seen them clear as day. Was this how it felt like when I blocked someone else's Examine? No, this was something more than that.

Lisette wasn't just blocking me; she was actively fooling me. But she probably didn't expect me to have such high mastery of the same proficiency. That was probably the only reason I'd caught a brief glimpse of her true Class and level.

But what was a Courtesan? I added the question to the list I wanted to ask Myrina when I finally got back to her.

Lisette frowned at the open air, presumably receiving a notification of her own. She glanced at the incense stick next to her. Apparently, it wasn't spewing enough foul-smelling smoke for her liking, because she quickly lit another one.

I scowled as I stared back at Kyle's and Marcus' faces. "Whatever you've done, release them."

"I haven't done anything!" Lisette insisted. "Well, nothing other than being myself."

Lisette shrugged her bare shoulders, inching closer to me. She sat straighter now, placing her arms on her elbows as she stared up at me through her long lashes.

Unlike when I'd stepped closer to her, this time Kyle and Marcus didn't move.

"Care for some wine?"

She waved to Kyle, who turned and grabbed a bottle before swiftly pouring two glasses. Kyle silently handed her one of the glasses and Lisette shot him a smile. When he held the other glass out to me, she glanced at me expectantly.

I held up a hand. "I recently decided to give up drinking. Now, however you're controlling the two of them, I want you to undo it."

Lisette sighed. "I told you, I'm not doing anything. Whatever they're doing now is their own idea. I just sit here and hope they listen to me."

"Bullshit. Why aren't they talking? This is just like the people back at the prison." I scowled at Kyle and Marcus.

Lisette gave me a noncommittal shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe they all think I have a thing for the strong and silent type.”

I crossed my arms. “I came here to ask you some questions about Knuckles, Caesar, and the prison. I’m starting to find some answers, and I don’t like what they are. Here’s the deal... the way I see it, you’re already in deep trouble.”

She jerked back in surprise.

I waved my hand at Kyle’s apartment. “This isn’t right, and I’m arresting you and bringing you up on charges. You’ll stand trial alongside Knuckles and everyone else from the prison unless you explain what’s happening and how to undo it, right now.”

Lisette stood, dropping her innocent girl act. “I’ve been locked away by strange men enough for one lifetime, thank you very much!” she snapped. “You want these two minions of yours back? Fine, if you can convince them to come with you, they’re yours.”

She smirked, eyeing Kyle’s and Marcus’ blank faces. Her meaning was clear—she was certain they’d rather stay with her than leave with me. Whatever spell or ability she’d cast over them wasn’t something I’d be able to break.

“What—exactly—have you done to them? This is your one and only chance to come clean.”

Lisette smiled, looking me up and down. Instead of answering my question, she smiled coyly and asked a question of her own. “I’ve heard you’re the strongest man on this shard by far—strong enough to beat everyone else.”

She licked her lips. “I think the two of us would make a great team. You leading in the light, and me supporting you from the shadows. You’d be in charge, of course... I’d just be there to offer advice and support on occasion. I could bring anyone who wasn’t following you in line, that sort of thing...”

She picked up her stick of incense and blew on it, sending out another burst of sickly-sweet smelling smoke. It had been



pungent enough to make me gag before, but suddenly it smelled rather good. I wondered what it was.

Lisette shifted closer. “This isn’t how I wanted this to go, but you showing up here before I was ready made this a bit of a rush job...”

She placed a hand on my shoulder, pressing herself against me.

“Come on, I saw you had tons of people back there helping you out. If these two want to spend time with me, why not let them?” she asked. “I can give you anything you want in exchange.”

“Anything?” I raised an eyebrow.

She smiled like a shark as she reached for the clip on her back holding her lingerie top together. She pulled the clip and tossed the bra to the side as she smiled at me while biting her lower lip coyly.

My eyes darted to my notifications.

**You have been struck with the skill Seduction!**

**Thanks to your high Charisma, you have detected and resisted this affliction.**

**You have been struck with the item effect, Induced Arousal!**

**Thanks to your Fabulous Phallus skill, you have detected and resisted this status effect.**

More notifications followed the first two. I was surprised to see just how many there were. I was growing increasingly certain that this was something like what had happened to Kyle and Marcus.

I let Lisette get a little handsy with me. I needed to see what abilities she had. She was dangerous, but not in a way I’d been prepared for. I’d fought monsters with swords, fangs, teeth, and claws. But never a gentle caress.

She ran her fingers up my thigh as she pressed her perky breasts into my side. When I only blinked at her in response,

she sank to her knees, delicate fingers reaching for my belt. Was this what every one of the Caesars had experienced during their last moments of clear thought? Was it what Marcus and Kyle had experienced?

I reached down, having seen enough of Lisette's plan. It was time to arrest her and end this before one of her skills worked on me for real. I grabbed her hair, with the plan to twist her around and haul her out of here with her wrists behind her back—preferably after putting her clothes back on. Otherwise, it might give the wrong impression to the people in the streets.

Before I could finish the thought, the front door burst open, revealing Sakura. Her horn burned with crimson energy and she wore a furious scowl.

“Carter!”

She hefted her bat over her shoulder, then in one fluid motion leaped across half the room to swat Lisette in the side of her head with her club. The blow knocked Lisette across the room, where she sprawled, nearly naked before one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Far from finished, Sakura smashed the glass of the window and grabbed Lisette by the hair. Pulling the stunned young woman up by her hair, she threw Lisette bodily out of the window before the beautiful and mostly naked woman could so much as blink in surprise.

I heard a fleshy *thud* impact the ground a few seconds later.

Still scowling, Sakura turned to me, her arms crossed. “You’ve got some explaining to do, mister!”

“Uh...” I rubbed one hand along the back of my neck.

Of all the times over the past day for Sakura and Bridget to finally come back to Earth, she had to show up at the single worst time imaginable. All I could do was sigh and shrug helplessly.

“Uh... it wasn't what it looked like? Just ask Marcus and Kyle here.” I waved at the two frozen young men standing off

to one side of the room. Both stared back at me with blank expressions.

Sakura glared at them and then turned back to me with fierce eyes.

I looked to the smashed window, where Sakura had just picked up a grown woman and hurled her to the ground below. Mentally, I was very glad I'd cleared Bridget with her first—and that Myrina was strong enough to take care of herself.

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-SEVEN

“And what—exactly—did I just walk in on, Carter?” Sakura demanded, hands on her hips.

“Well...” I shrugged sheepishly. “I wasn’t cheating on you... though that’s probably what it looked like.”

“Or Bridget?” Sakura asked. “You weren’t cheating on Bridget, either?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Not cheating on you, and not cheating on Bridget, either.”

“Or Myrina?!” Sakura poked me in the chest with a finger. “You weren’t cheating on Myrina either, right?”

I shook my head, this time stifling a laugh. My life sure had gotten complicated. “Nope. Not on Myrina, either.”

My Oni frowned, looking straight into my eyes for a long moment. Then, her lips parted in an impish grin and she planted a kiss on my lips. “I believe you. That woman wasn’t your type.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled, wiping relieved sweat from my brow. “I’m only into honest, hardworking, and capable women. There’s no place in my heart for tricksters.”

“No, not that.” Sakura slapped my butt playfully, then lifted her arm and flexed her bicep. “You’re only into tough, athletic, warrior women!”

“What?! Where’d you hear that?”

Sakura giggled. “Two’s a coincidence. Three’s a pattern, Carter. I’ve seen Myrina in the bath. Besides, weren’t you the one who made it so that every human woman who reaches D-Grade automatically ends up with an ass as firm as leather and is unable to be anything other than toned and athletic, no matter how many pastries Bridget feeds her? It’s pretty obvious you’re inflicting your taste in women on the rest of humanity...”

“That was completely by accident!” I protested. “I was just picking out the right fit for me, and... well... I forgot there was another tab for females. It just... it ended being implemented for everyone... including women.”

“Excuses, excuses...” Sakura waved me off. “That’s what we thought you might say.”

“You haven’t been talking about this with everyone else, have you?” My voice cracked on the last part of my question. If that was the case, I was sure I’d break out into a cold sweat. “Please tell me this isn’t a thing...”

Sakura’s laugh was all the answer I needed. I let out a shaky sigh.

With Sakura happy with me once more, the two of us turned to study Kyle and Marcus. Without Lisette nearby, the two of them became completely unresponsive.

“Crap. This is bad,” I said as I pushed Marcus and Kyle each to sit down so they wouldn’t be standing for who knew how long.

“What’s wrong with them?” Sakura asked.

I sighed. “I don’t know. Whatever Lisette did to them, it seems to be permanent. I had hoped just talking to the two of them, beyond her presence, would fix it. But apparently that’s not the case.”

I massaged my temples as I took a few deep breaths. “And it looks like killing her didn’t work, either. If she wasn’t dead, maybe we could force her to release them or something, but that fall had to have killed her...”

With Sakura throwing her out of a seven-story window and putting her out of my misery, once and for all, that was no longer an option.

“I hope she was worth a good deal of experience—she should have been, for a level 52,” I told Sakura.

Sakura glanced at her notifications. “Uh... Carter... I didn’t get anything for her?”

“What?!”

Sakura shared her screen with me. Sure enough, she’d received no experience points for killing Lisette. Which meant Lisette wasn’t dead.

Suddenly, I realized why I hadn’t gotten a notification for defeating the Three Kings and uniting this shard once and for all by completing the System’s main quest. I hadn’t united the shard because I hadn’t killed the last of the Three Kings.

The men I’d killed had never been the real Caesar. They were just puppets forced into action on invisible strings pulled by the woman behind the curtain. Lisette had been the final member of the Three Kings, all along.

It was the perfect cover, really. If anyone were to challenge Caesar, they’d end up fighting one of Lisette’s puppets. If they won, she simply claimed them as her new, upgraded puppet. That was probably how she’d survived as long as she had.

Had she even been captured by Cromwell, or was that a lie as well? She was in this far deeper than I could have ever imagined. Only luck and a gut feeling had prevented her from doing whatever she had in the prison here in Crownhill. I could hardly imagine what trouble she could have made if I hadn’t caught her early.

“Crap!” I stuck my head out the window, expecting to see a red smear on the ground roughly in the shape of a woman. “We need to go after her.”

The two of us raced down the stairs two or three at a time, breaking out onto the open street in the midst of the celebration, which was still ongoing. I couldn’t see Lisette or her body anywhere nearby, but there were plenty of people. So

long as she didn't have an invisibility ability or one that helped her remain unnoticed, there would have to be some witnesses.

“Did any of you see someone fall out of a window around here?” I asked.

“Of course we saw her! Who misses a gorgeous woman like that running naked through the streets!” A man selling skewers of meat clutched his belly and laughed heartily. “It was quite an entrance, and an even better exit!”

“Fantastic! Which way did she go?” My grin slipped from my lips as I watched the smile on the face of the meat seller fade.

“Uh... maybe that way?” He pointed off to his left. “Or that way?” He pointed the opposite direction, to his right. “I'm not really sure.” He gave me a helpless shrug.

I asked several more people. All of them had seen Lisette scramble to her feet and take off running, but nobody could agree on what direction she'd run off to. It was like everyone had seen different versions of the event. To me, that suggested she had some sort of escape skill after all.

“I'll help,” Sakura promised.

“Thanks,” I said, “let's party up.”

I sent her the request and when she accepted, we decided to split up and search different nearby buildings—though we planned to stay close enough to respond to a shout if we found her. The two of us spent the next few minutes attempting to hunt down Lisette ourselves, even entering various apartment complexes and scoping them out from room to room. Perhaps with Terrance's help we could have been more thorough, but this was going to be hard. Very hard.

Lisette had proven remarkably adept at keeping me from following her. She could be anywhere... and she could be recruiting any red-blooded man to become her accomplice. She'd be impossible to find and even harder to trap. And for all I knew, she could seduce women as well—which would make her impossible to contain.

After searching with Sakura for more than an hour and coming up empty, we talked things over and decided we needed more information. Myrina would hopefully know something about Lisette's odd class. I only hoped she was still receiving our messages through our teleportation network.

I alerted Terrance to the problem, and warned him and his men to be on the watch. I also gave a warning to the council. Of course, I had to bring Frank and Margaret up to see the state Kyle and Marcus were still in.

"Bizarre. It's like they're frozen..." Frank said as he poked Kyle in the chest. "Freaky. Well, if I see any strange women, I'm not going to let them blow me—no matter how pretty they are."

"You might not have a choice," I replied. "She's got a powerful seduction skill. We think women might be immune, or at the very least resistant, but everyone should keep their distance, in either case. Maybe stick close to Margaret."

"I'll keep an eye on him." Margaret nudged Frank. Her eyes flickered over Kyle and Marcus with a sad motherly expression. "Come on, Frank. You can guest star on my radio show today."

With our friends suitably warned, Sakura and I returned to the farmhouse. Bridget was in the kitchen busy cooking up a victory feast. I felt bad that I'd have to disappoint her.

"So, how is my glorious Shardlord feeling after his final victory? I hear you went and conquered the place without us." Bridget's smile slowly faded when she saw my expression.

"I'm afraid not, Bridget. I beat Knuckles and the guy I thought was Caesar. But it turns out Caesar was mysterious for a reason—he wasn't a guy at all. The slave girl every Caesar kept behind the curtains was the real power in the shadows, all along." I grimaced. "Her name is Lisette, and she's big trouble. Until we deal with her, we won't be able to complete the System's quest and unite the Shard under one banner."

Bridget pulled off her oven mitts and picked up a pen and paper. "Tell me everything, and I'll bring Myrina up to speed."



“Let me add you to the party, first, before I forget.” I sent her a party invite. “Then I’ll tell you everything I know.”

After Bridget accepted the invite, I dictated a brief summary of events here on Earth: the Three Kings, Knuckles, Caesar, the strange behavior of the people at the prison, and the brief glimpse I’d gotten of Lisette’s true level and class.

“She was a Courtesan, and a high-leveled one at that,” I concluded. “Hopefully Myrina’s got that in her book on classes...”

I shrugged. If she didn’t, I didn’t know what to do.

“If she doesn’t, then Marol the Theory Crafter will know about it,” Bridget replied with confidence.

I hoped she was right.

Dinner was a quick and somber affair. Most of Bridget’s feast ended up going to Gobgob and her goblins. They scarfed it all down in short order. Maybe there were more in that little tribe of theirs than I thought, but it seemed to me that more of them showed up when I announced a feast than I remembered there being last time.

While they ate, between waving a hand to acknowledge their cheers of ‘Generous Chief Humie!’ and the almost sexual moans I heard from the little green women as they licked their fingers, I flicked through my various blueprints. There was probably an Artificer’s solution to this problem.

I wondered if a talisman of protection from good and evil would work? I checked my inventory. Like before, I had all the resources except one. I would need a powerful elemental core—and I’d been planning to use the core of the lava elemental between my farmhouse and town for a talisman of protection from order and chaos.

I needed that talisman to reach the fourth level of Mania safely. Did I really want to expend it for a talisman that *might* be able to deal with Lisette, instead? It wasn’t like I had the materials to make more than one. Still, if there was even half a chance I could use it to cure Kyle and Marcus, I had to make the attempt.

Just as I was debating whether or not my companions and I were strong enough to take out the Lava Elemental as we were, the teleporter chimed. Myrina had gotten back to me even faster than I'd hoped. This was good news—not just because she might have an answer for us, but also because it meant she'd found the time to slip away from Elder Thalassa, check in with Misa, and then read and write out a response.

“Bridget! Sakura!” I called out. “We've got mail!”

The two of them rushed into the room as I practically jumped across the entire room to the teleporter and tore open the scroll I found sitting there. Myrina's cramped and messy handwriting was barely legible, but about halfway through, she must have asked Misa to finish writing the message for her. That part was written in a far neater hand.

We all crowded together to read the note.

*“Bridget, Sakura, don't let Carter and his magic dick out of your sight! I had to talk this one over with Marol the Theory Crafter after getting your note. Courtesan is a rare class, and not one usually seen on Themyscira. It wasn't in my book at all, but Marol had it.*

*“It's a Charisma-focused class. The same way Sakura focuses on Strength or how Carter focuses on Intelligence, this woman focuses on Charisma. The class isn't good in a fight, and even someone half their level can usually beat them. What they are good at, is forcing others to follow them and fight for them through various types of mind control.*

*“Carter having a Charisma-focused skill is bad enough. The class is even more restricted than necromancy classes, and is considered highly dangerous. If she were on Themyscira, this Lisette would probably get a C-Grade imperial enforcer on her ass the moment knowledge of her class went public. But on a newly integrated world, you guys have no such recourse.*

*“Carter's already high Charisma should protect him, but if he's seduced there's no telling what could happen. He could end up draining all of the woman's levels, or she could wind*

*up with his magic cock at her disposal. It all depends on what abilities she's picked up since the integration began.*

*"As for me, things are looking rough. Elder Thalassa should be punished for going against a vote from the Matriarch and the other elders, but Mother's hold on the Samhain Clan is tenuous at best right now. She only has a bit more time here at home before she has to leave. Between that and the fact that the main family's forces were devastated by the recent rebellion, we don't have the political capital to force Elder Thalassa to do anything while also stabilizing things enough for Cyra to take over.*

*"Worse, apparently she made some new friends while the rest of us were off fighting, and she's already promised something to them. And I think that something is... well... me.*

*"I don't know what's going to happen, but if Mother goes, I'm going to need to hide out with Cyra. Maybe... no, I suppose it's too much to ask. Just secure your shard so maybe I can visit? At least for a little while."*

*Your loyal companion, Myrina.*

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-EIGHT

We returned to Crownhill the following morning. Terrance's police and the guards had heeded my warning and my instructions to be on the lookout for the dangerous woman, so guards were posted everywhere scanning for Lisette. Now that the sun was up and the night's monsters gobbled up by Sharky, my companions and I returned to the city center to search for her once again.

"Sharky, you know the drill. Patrol the area around the city and eat any monsters you see coming our way."

Sharky soon split off from us, while Sakura, Bridget and I continued on our way. I greeted the militia on the walls and Terrance's policemen in the streets as I entered settlement. Everyone seemed a little more on their guard than usual. Perhaps word was getting around that Lisette was on the loose and what she could do. A few men eyed Bridget and Sakura warily as we entered the settlement.

Bridget turned to me and whispered. "Why are they all looking at us like that?"

I shrugged. "They are probably wondering if you are Lisette. Be flattered, she was quite beautiful. And based on what Myrina said, her high Charisma has made her impossibly so. She likely has skills that allow her to appear as whatever is most desirable to the man looking at her."

"But not you, right?" Bridget eyed me out of the corner of her eye.

I chuckled. “You’ve always been beautiful, Bridget... in a very different way from Lisette. Hers is a raw, System-enhanced sexuality. Yours is the beauty of a lovely soul.” I brushed her hair aside while she tried to hide her blushing cheeks behind it.

I certainly wasn’t about to admit that Lisette had appeared to me looking a lot like Myrina.

That mollified Bridget a little, though she still stuck close to me. I figured I would step in and clarify to our voyeurs that Bridget was not Lisette. Nor was Sakura.

The next man I caught eyeing them warily, I stepped up to and confronted. “These are my companions, Bridget and Sakura. They’ve been with me since the start, and are helping me hunt down Lisette.”

“Yes, that would make sense, Sir.” The militia man nodded sagely. “The woman we’re hunting is apparently an exhibitionist. She would be running around naked—or at least as near to naked as she could get.”

I frowned. “I’m not so sure that’s right. She probably would’ve found clothes by now.”

Then again, I’d never seen her wearing much of anything. Perhaps that wasn’t a coincidence. If her abilities revolved around lust, odds were good that she intentionally kept her outfits as revealing as possible. The provocative outfits probably gave her some sort of bonus.

“Forgive my presumption, Sir, but the militia had several encounters with a naked woman late last night offering to fulfill their hearts’ greatest desires in exchange for somewhere to hide. It’s why so many men are wary, or out looking for her right now.”

The dumb goofy smile on the militia man’s face told me I hadn’t been as thorough with my explanation as I would need to be. People were out looking for Lisette—but for all the wrong reasons.

I sighed, suddenly realizing that perhaps I hadn’t done quite so good a job at clarifying the foe we faced after all. “All

right, send me all of the spare people in both the militia and the police force that are not currently on duty. I think I need to brief you guys about what we are facing.”

A few minutes later, I stood in the center of a large group of men. We were the first problem, really. We didn’t know whether or not women were immune to Lisette’s abilities, but we knew for certain that men were vulnerable.

“Okay, everybody. Listen up! When I passed along word yesterday that the naked woman you all saw running through the streets was dangerous, I wasn’t kidding. Yes, she is very pretty. Yes, she may offer to do things with you that sound like a lot of fun... but you do not want to agree to them. If you do, she will turn you into a mindless zombie.”

There was a chorus of groans and boos around me.

“Do you remember the mindless, crazy people we fought yesterday? Everybody at the prison who fought like a madman—ignoring pain and mortal wounds to keep on fighting? The reason they did that is her. As far as we can tell, Caesar was just a puppet—or rather, this woman was the real Caesar all along.”

I shook my head. “Maybe that was the case for the other two Kings, as well... though to a lesser extent until recently.”

“Those guys were pretty crazy. More than just regular prison crazy,” Frank agreed.

Those who hadn’t gone with us to conquer Crownhill County prison were still skeptical. But even they had heard stories about the intense fighting there. They’d heard about the unflinching madmen who would keep on fighting, despite debilitating injuries—like getting limbs chopped off left and right.

A few still voiced their disbelief, despite the sounds of agreement their comrades in arms made. I let them say their piece. It would be best to get this out in the open ahead of time. Pointing to those who seemed most skeptical, I asked them to speak.

“A skill that can mind control a man through his dick? I find it hard to believe such a thing could happen,” one older man said. “It sounds like some sort of pervert skill. So far, I haven’t seen anything of the sort! If this System thing that’s taken over the world is like some sort of game, it’s only a PG-13 game as far as I can tell.”

This geezer must have holed up somewhere and only come out recently, when we’d restored a modicum of order. He certainly hadn’t participated in the wolfmen raid. The only monsters he’d probably seen were the bugs and squirrels.

A few people who had been raising their hands, lowered them at his PG-13 comment. I suppressed a chuckle. Apparently, I was not the only one who had—completely and entirely accidentally—chosen a skill like Fabulous Phallus.

A couple of people, both men and women, quietly edged away from the man’s curious gaze until they were out of his line of sight.

“Well, the only thing I can say to that, is that your confidence is misplaced,” I replied. “Ask around. Find someone amongst your friends who went on the wolfmen raid, or participated in the attack on the prison—this System is far from PG-13.”

“So how does this mind control work?” a policeman standing near Terrance asked. “Does she suck your brain out of your cock or something?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know for certain, but I did spend some of last night researching what little we do know. It seems to be some sort of extreme personality manipulation. Like your lust for the Charisma specialist grows so deep, that you can’t imagine anything you wouldn’t do for her.”

“Oh. So, she’s like those video game streamers...” More murmurs of agreement passed through the crowd.

After I clarified the danger Lisette posed—once again reminding everyone that she was not just a beautiful exhibitionist offering to relieve men of their sexual tension out of the goodness of her heart—we went into the details of how

this search would continue. The fact that we had not found her yet meant that she was far better at hiding herself than I'd expected. Perhaps she'd already seduced and acquired help. We would need to escalate our search efforts, if we wanted to turn up her trail.

"Is it possible she fled into the wilderness?" Terrance asked.

"Possible but unlikely," I replied. "Her class is very much a social one. Fighting off monsters in the wilderness would not be her strong suit. What we know about her does not indicate any real fighting abilities; she seems completely dependent on recruiting minions to keep herself safe."

"What makes you so sure?" someone hollered out.

I raised my voice. "The fact that she came to Crownhill after we defeated Crownhill County Prison makes me certain of this. Here, in the heart of our settlement, is probably the most dangerous place she could be. And yet she chose to come here, instead of fleeing somewhere else. She isn't confident that she can survive on her own."

I shook my head. "No, she fled to the heart of our power as soon as her existing power base collapsed."

"It sounds like we've got ourselves a deadly social schemer." Terrance sighed. "Don't worry, I will keep a careful eye on all my men. We'll let you know if any of them start acting... simp-ish."

"Me as well," Frank added. "Although, I do have to say that I'm feeling a bit understaffed at the moment. With both Kyle and Marcus out of the picture, the militia has lost much of its top-level leadership."

I grimaced. "That is another thing I wanted to talk to you about. Rick... Kerrie..."

I looked through the crowd until I spotted them. "Both of you are promoted on a provisional basis. Our militia's leadership is understaffed, so the two of you will be taking Marcus' and Kyle's positions... for the time being."



They both looked surprised. Kerrie even pointed to herself, as if to say... ‘Who, me?’

“You are both powerful and respected by the others. Kerrie, you especially will have a significant burden on your shoulders—since it appears women are not as susceptible to Lisette’s... ah... charms. I want you leading from the front on this, even more so than Frank, Rick, Terrance or any of the others. You and Margaret in particular are going to have to work together.”

Kerrie nodded. “I won’t let you down.”

I turned back to Terrance and Frank. “As for the two of you, I want you recruiting more militia and policewomen from all the ladies we rescued from the Three Kings.”

Someone groaned. “Aww. Gender quotas? Don’t tell me we’re going to start having those workplace meetings again...”

“We don’t know if women are immune to Lisette’s abilities, but we do know men are susceptible to them. We should be using every tool in our arsenal.” As I spoke, I eyed the women in the police force and the militia.

If anyone was going to catch Lisette, it would probably be one of them.



Things seemed to be working well at first. But since the current situation was something of an emergency, I ended up taking a lot more direct control than I liked to. While the daily governance of Crownhill was left to the Council, major threats like this required a firmer and more decisive touch. That meant the responsibility fell to me.

Not long ago, I would’ve hated it. The feeling of being the deciding factor in life and death for so many would have been too much for the former office worker I’d once been. But the person I had been before the integration was well and truly gone.

I had seen what poor leadership could do. And I knew that I could do better. I was no Lord or Prince raised from birth for this task. Nor had I grown up in a culture where wielding absolute power was thought to be a good thing. But right now, I was certain I could do a better job than anyone else on this shard.

It was my responsibility to put that power into action.

With most of the other factions on the shard wiped out, and Sharky diligently patrolling our surroundings, I felt this was important enough for me to risk spending the night in Crownhill. I probably would have stayed last night, as well, if I hadn't needed to consult with Myrina through the teleportation array.

Our patrols went out in force as the sun began to set. We had not had this many people on the walls and patrolling the streets since the Wolfmen's attack. Most people who had joined our settlement after that climactic siege had never seen us out in force, and it was disconcerting to them.

Word continued to spread about Lisette. And it was spreading faster than I'd like. Perhaps not all of the rumors were our doing. Was she trying to rebuild her own powerbase right under my nose?

Unfortunately, I could not round up the craftsmen and townsfolk to force them to treat Lisette like the dangerous threat she was. Hopefully word would spread through official channels like Margaret's radio show. On Myrina's world, a Lord of my level might have managed it, but my fellow Earthlings were quick to remember that they had rights.

While I got us organized again, Bridget and Sakura were busy recruiting. Both the militia and the police force needed more women on their teams to catch Lisette. So, the two of them were busy hiring as many firm-minded ladies as they could—on either a temporary or permanent basis.

I was just starting to feel confident in our approach when a scream echoed through the night. It was less a scream of pain and more the scream of someone having a damn good time. I

was about to ignore it, since Sakura, Bridget, and I were probably just as loud—if not louder—back at the farmhouse.

But then I remembered what the woman we were hunting could do. This wasn't the sort of thing we could ignore. Apparently, several other people had the same thought.

I saw Margaret sticking her head out the window of her office, peering down into the long shadows of the streets below. When I waved to her, she rushed down the stairs to join me, jumping down them three or four at a time.

“That sounded like a guy having the time of his life,” Margaret said as she looked around, her face full of worry.

“I know. Did you hear where it came from?” I asked.

Margaret didn't know, but we started asking around the militia and policemen stationed on the wall or guarding the entrances to buildings. By asking those who had heard it most loudly, we quickly zeroed in on its point of origin—the new police station.

“No...” Margaret whispered.

I grabbed the nearest officer by his uniform. “Who is in the office? Who spent the night there?”

“Uh.. Captain Terrance, Sir,” the officer answered. “He stayed late with a few people, straightening out priorities and doing paperwork. Taking on the new recruits will require a lot of administrative work, so he figured he'd stay up late and get as much of it done as he could. But the Captain isn't stupid. He would have had other people in there with him.”

The officer looked over at the police station nervously.

“Radio for backup,” I told him, “we're going in.” I led the way into the new police station.

Like most of the other buildings in the area, it hadn't been used for its current function until recently. The old station had been completely ransacked—destroyed during the last Wolfman attack. We'd had to rebuild from the ashes. Terrance and his subordinates had salvaged what they could, including the armory and some old badges and uniforms.

But the building they were operating in now had never been designed to hold prisoners. Nor was it designed to be well patrolled or lit at all hours. The place had previously been a furniture store, complete with wide, glass windows. Surprisingly, they were still intact.

I would've thought someone trying to sneak in would have shattered them. Lisette could have made her way straight through them to her target. But this was no monster we were hunting.

"Looks fine to me. Perhaps we are overthinking this?" Margaret suggested hopefully.

I shook my head. "The scream came from here. Prepare for the worst."

Mere moments after I issued my warning, someone lunged for us. His blue collared shirt and his armored vest were a telltale giveaway. This was one of Terrance's policemen. As for what he was now...

"Stop right there!" the cop behind us yelled at his comrade.

The officer drew his Taser and, when his fellow cop made no attempt to stop, he pulled the trigger. Electricity zipped along the thin wire to the two electrodes embedded in the lunging cop's nose. It was no use. Taser or not, this man didn't care in the slightest.

He was just like the living flesh zombies we'd fought at the Crownhill County prison.

"Restrain him! Use his handcuffs!" I rushed forward and grabbed both of the mind-controlled cop's wrists. Flaring Eldritch Augmentation gave me the strength to shove his hands behind his back. He tried to bite me, but I head butted him and probably broke his jaw.

My companions soon had him on the ground and handcuffed. The officer with us used his own handcuffs to attach his deranged and mindless former colleague to a heavy table, nearby. Just to be sure, I thumped him behind the ear with the hilt of my short sword.

That knocked him on his ass and took him out of the fight for good.

More reinforcements arrived by the moment. And they were just in time, too, because more of Lisette's puppets came pounding down the hall from the rear of the furniture store we'd turned into a police station.

## CHAPTER

# SEVENTY-NINE

“Terrance!” I yelled. “Terrance! Are you in there, buddy?”

There was no response. That was a bad sign, but I didn’t have long to worry about it.

My forces clashed with the now-mindless former policemen who’d been pulling a late shift with their Captain. It was one thing to fight the mindless hordes of Crownhill County Prison. It was entirely another to fight our own people.

These had been good men. Loyal men. Men who’d stay up late with their Captain because there was work that needed to be done. And now they’d paid the price for their loyalty.

“These are our friends! Restrain them if you can!” I ordered as I grabbed another mindless puppet by either arm and pinned him. He tried to bite me, but I was a much higher level than him. And with Eldritch Augmentation, my flesh was too tough for normal human teeth.

Still, we found it surprisingly difficult to handcuff a man when he’s desperate to get at you, one way or another. Doubly so if he didn’t mind breaking his wrists in the process. Even unarmed and restrained, he still thrashed and bit. But that sort of damage could be fixed, in time.

My people heeded my orders a little too well, so I had to throw out a small correction. “Don’t be shy about breaking some bones, though. Doctor Roswell can fix them up later.”

With increased aggression on our part and a few blows with a hammer, victory was ours. Even living zombies have a

hard time biting you with a broken jaw. Or clawing your eyes out with broken arms or mangled fingers.

The additional people streaming through the door that reinforced us were also a big help. I saw Sakura among them. Good. I doubted anyone else could strategically break bones like she could.

Outnumbering the living zombies thirty to five meant everyone could grab a limb and keep them pinned until someone else used every handcuff and zip tie we had on hand. We had everyone secured in under a minute. But a minute is an awful long time when you are trying to catch someone.

As soon as my allies had things in hand, I rushed deeper into the station. I realized I didn't know my way around, so I doubled back to grab one of the uniformed officers and brought him with me. Sakura jumped to her feet from where she'd been pinning someone to the ground to be handcuffed and was soon hot on my heels.

"Which door?" I yelled to the policeman I was practically dragging behind me.

The officer pointed. "There! That's the captain's office!"

I followed his gesture and came to the door. It was locked, of course, so I blasted the door knob with Eldritch Blast. Unfortunately, the lock was made of sturdy stuff and my spell didn't break it.

"Let me try." Sakura hefted her bat and swung. Crimson light streamed along the edge of her club, and it sheared clean through the metal knob.

"Uh... I think I hear someone behind the door!" the officer said as he nervously fingered his service pistol.

I doubted it would be much use. Even someone like Lisette, who focused primarily on her Charisma stat, would have enough Vitality to shrug off a full magazine of bullets.

Sakura's second blow shattered the wood of the door itself, and she shoved the broken chunks aside as we clambered through the hole she'd made. She came to a stop just past the entrance.

“Terrance? Terrance!” I called through the opening. There was no response.

I forced my way in behind Sakura, my eyes going wide. Terrance was here alright, but he sat there, face slack and completely unresponsive—just like Kyle and Marcus.

“Carter...” Sakura placed a comforting hand on my shoulder.

I sank to my knees. “Damn it! We were too late.” I slammed my fist into the ground, cracking the faux marble tiles of the office. “First Kyle and Marcus, now Terrance, too...”

The man had always seemed so sturdy and reliable. I hadn’t known him before the integration, but he seemed like the sort of guy I could always count on when the going got tough. It was getting tough now, but he was one of the casualties.

He sat in his chair, vacant eyes staring up at the ceiling. His pants lay around his ankles and his arms were splayed out on the chair’s armrests. If not for his still throbbing erection, I might have thought he’d gotten his soul sucked out and died.

“Lisette got to him,” Sakura surmised. “Looks like she didn’t finish whatever she was doing, but she got far enough that Terrance won’t be much help until we figure out how to cure him... and the others.”

I stuck my head out the window. Even now, the curtains flapped with the last remnants of recent movement. It seemed we’d missed Lisette by only a few seconds.

Fury boiled in my heart. If Lisette had agreed to reverse what she’d done to Kyle and Marcus, we could have come to an arrangement that would leave her alive. Not anymore. Now I understood why Charisma abilities were considered taboo—why Charisma Classes like Lisette’s would be kill on sight on Themyscira.

Our only saving grace was the fact that we had gotten to Terrance before she could finish whatever it was she did to turn people into mindless puppets. I suspected it took her



longer to manipulate higher-level people. Either that, or she wanted them to retain more of their abilities, so as to be more useful to her.

Whatever it was she did, I was glad she had failed. And I didn't plan to give her another chance to get to my friends.

I turned to Sakura. "Call the militia to action... all of them. I want the entire militia on the streets searching for that bitch. We won't let her get away with this."



The guards just did what they were taught to do by their predecessors. There wasn't any need for them to find Lisette as, per my orders, all our other forces were already out looking for her. The trouble was the same as it usually was for these sorts of manhunts.

Lisette didn't want to be found. She was very good at hiding. No wonder she'd been so confident that she could build her powerbase right under my nose.

I remained in the police station with Terrance until Frank, Rick, and Margaret came to take him away. They took him to Doctor Roswell's clinic, along with Kyle and Marcus. All were staying in the same room we'd kept the Wolfman pups in.

I wasn't sure if Lisette would try to return to finish whatever she'd been doing to Terrance, but I didn't want to find out. Like Kyle and Marcus, his level was high enough to cause serious problems for us—especially if he fell fully under Lisette's sway, like the people back at the prison had.

I made sure Doctor Roswell's clinic was well guarded, and guarded mostly by women, at that. So far all of Lisette's victims had been men. The same had been true at the Crownhill County Prison. I was growing increasingly certain that Lisette was powerless against her fellow women.

It was the only edge we had right now. So, we made as much use out of that as we could. It was nearly morning by the time my militia finally brought me a lead.

Kerrie was the one to come share the news. “Sir, some of the militia have noticed a few guys in the shelter acting strangely. They suddenly pooled all their points together to rent a small apartment in one of the nicer areas.”

She frowned. “None of them knew each other before yesterday. Until very recently, they were all layabouts, but suddenly they’ve decided to do scavenging runs in a desperate bid for points.”

“A change like that doesn’t come so suddenly without a reason. Are they like the psychos we fought?” I asked.

“Not quite. They can still talk, for one. At first glance, they seem normal. But the things they say *aren’t* normal.” Kerrie shook her head. “At first, we thought they were just weirdos. But they were all weird in the same way.”

“If they can talk, they’re worth interrogating. Bring them in,” I ordered.

“I figured you’d say that. The first one is already waiting in the interrogation room. We’re softening him up now.” Kerrie nodded toward the door.

“Fantastic. I want to be there for the questioning.”

Kerrie led the way. Sure enough, there was a man handcuffed to a chair before a table in an otherwise empty room. His skin was pale and pasty. He had bags under his eyes and messy, grease-slickened hair. He looked like he hadn’t showered in weeks. While most people hadn’t bathed much since the integration, their higher stats kept them clean.

But this guy *looked* like he’d been through an apocalypse. And using Examine, I saw he was still level 2. How had someone managed to live this long and gain only a single level? Perhaps that was the secret why Lisette had been able to do more with this guy. His low level meant her skills removed less of his mind?

“Lisette is my goddess! I would never betray her!” the man shouted as soon as Kerrie entered the interrogation chamber.

His eyes were wide and feverish, his expression full of adoration. He seemed desperate to please, and not all that

bright. I got the impression that the desperation was new—though the lack of smarts was not. Kerrie asked a few questions, to no avail.

Frustrated, I took the time to step out of the room and look at the other people waiting to be interrogated. Like the one in the room, all of them had pathetically low levels. And they all shared the same desperate to please look.

There was a pattern here. None of these people had been winners. Maybe they'd done alright before the integration, but they hadn't made anything of themselves since then. They'd simply eaten the free food I was still giving away out of my own funds and lounged about while others protected them and toiled to rebuild the society that cared for them.

They were underachievers and completely lacking in motivation. Lisette had stepped in and, since they had no willpower to fight her, she was able to completely supplant their lack of goals and desires with her own objectives.

Stepping back into the interrogation room, I realized Kerrie had figured out the same thing I had. She'd also come to another realization. These men were weak-willed and easily influenced by a pretty woman's requests. That had worked well for Lisette... but did Lisette have to be the pretty woman making the request?

Kerrie decided to try her luck.

She batted her eyes at the person she was interrogating. "It would make me very, very happy if you would just talk to me. Is that so bad, talking to me?"

"N-no... I'm... loyal..." the man replied hesitatingly.

Kerrie flexed her chest, snapping the top button on her uniform open with the subtle motion. The man she was interrogating was absolutely transfixed by the cleavage that suddenly appeared before him.

"Come on. Tell me where your apartment is. Who else do you know who works with Lisette? Where are her other safe houses?" Kerrie asked, pushing her chest closer to the man's face.

“I... no! No! I won’t...” The man struggled against temptation for a while, then finally broke. “I’ll talk if I can touch them. Okay?”

Kerrie laughed, looking smug. “Not so scary after all, huh?”

As soon as I had an address, I left Kerrie to interrogate the remaining prisoners. She seemed to have a working system in place, and there was little need for me to remain in the room for it. I found the apartment quickly enough.

It was a serious downgrade from staying with Kyle, but it functioned well enough in a pinch, I supposed, especially as an emergency safe house. As Kerrie had explained, these guys weren’t particularly high leveled, nor particularly motivated to thrive after the apocalypse. They’d turned into layabouts following the integration, and in any place less defended than the area around the obelisk, they would have long since perished.

The small, cramped apartment they’d acquired occupied the upper floor of what had previously been a coffee shop—before the System had done a shitty job duplicating it, that is. This was one of the copies.

It seems somebody had gone to the trouble of straightening the sagging walls and reinforcing the foundation. That was probably why it was being rented out, now. The council had worked out a way to give legal ownership of buildings to whoever got them functional.

There weren’t any telltale signs of Lisette’s presence here. I knew she was fond of pink curtains, but these windows remained bare. She probably hadn’t had time to touch up the place. Either that, or she had a better safehouse elsewhere in the city and didn’t plan on staying here much, using it as backup.

I did smell a familiar scent shortly after entering the apartment, though. It was that sickly sweet medicinal incense she’d burned when she’d tried to control me. I looked around the room until I hunted the incense sticks down.

I stuck them in my bag of holding. I wasn't sure if they'd be any use, but maybe Myrina could figure out what they were... and what they were supposed to do. Anything would help, at this point.

That done, after searching the place I met briefly with Frank and told him to have people keeping an eye on that apartment. If Lisette showed up, I wanted to be ready to spring an ambush and grab her. I rejoined Kerrie just as she was finishing up her last interrogation. By the end, she'd grown extremely skilled at drawing confessions and information out of these particularly weak-willed and less than impressive specimens of masculinity.

"It's as we suspected," Kerrie explained as she put a new jacket on. The old one had run out of buttons after she kept popping it wide.

"Lisette has assembled several cells of guys like these idiots, who are all willing to hide her. They are low-leveled and weak willed, but have just enough resources that she can pool what they've got and blend in amongst the lower rungs of society. Based on what I'm hearing, though, she isn't exactly happy about that."

Kerrie smirked. "The girl's got a taste for luxury and has all of her new minions working overtime to improve her lot as fast as possible. That might be the mistake to exploit. Such drastic changes in behavior are a telltale sign. Talking to them is the proof."

"Think you can identify these guys out in the field?" I asked. "It isn't realistic to interrogate everyone in the settlement, but we might be able to swing a few hundred cretins like these into a room like this one."

Kerrie shrugged. "I'm not sure if the guys can... but me and the girls? Yeah, we know this type of guy. I think we'll be able to figure it out just talking to people. It will be a good way to bring the new recruits into this without waiting for them to get fully trained up."

I hadn't thought about that. "Will they be safe?"

She shrugged. “They don’t need to know how to fight, but most of them already know how to talk to people—and almost all women can spot a creepy, weird guy from a mile away.”

“Excellent. I want every one of Lisette’s secret bases identified. Detain a few from every group and get as much information from them as we can. We’ll just pretend they died on a scavenging expedition or something.”

She nodded.

“I want you monitoring the rest. As soon as Lisette picks somewhere to rest her head, I want us to know where she is so that we can grab her when the moment is right.”

“This might cause some trouble with the new residents,” Kerrie warned. “We won’t exactly be respecting people’s privacy.”

I shook my head. “Desperate times call for desperate measures. They’ll either understand... or they won’t. At this point, it’s time to do whatever needs to be done.”

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY

Later the following day, I received news that our trap had been sprung. Rick's group was the lucky band to catch Lisette heading home after a long day of skulking about and sewing trouble. I wasn't sure how we hadn't caught her out in the streets with so many people on patrol, but here she was.

This was our chance.

"We need to get there quickly!" I told Sakura and Bridget.

The two of them had been waiting with me. They'd taken it upon themselves to make sure I was as immune to Lisette's abilities as much as possible. My hips ached a bit and I may have walked a little funny, but there was no way she'd be doing to me what she'd done to Terrance. I hadn't drained them at all, but they'd certainly drained me.

Rick finding her was a bit of bad luck on our part. He was a man, as was the rest of his team.

I'd strategically placed Kerrie and her subordinates around the nicest and easiest apartment to get into, figuring that would be the place we'd be most likely to catch her. Maybe we'd spooked her just enough that she decided to downsize for the night, since the place Rick was guarding was a tiny and drafty place on the edge of town.

Only a single, creepy guy lived there amid what could generously be called piles of trash. Apparently, he'd lived there since before the integration and hadn't changed his lifestyle in the slightest following it. Lisette couldn't be looking forward to staying under his roof.

But she was going there anyway, which meant Rick had radioed it in. His orders were to watch and prevent her escape, not to spring the trap. Clearly, though, something had gone wrong.

As Bridget, Sakura, and I approached, we heard the sound of fighting. We were first on the scene. That was just as planned, and the whole reason I'd kept Bridget and Sakura in reserve. They were my answer to the unexpected—and it looked like the unexpected happened.

Lisette hadn't come alone. Rick's forces were outnumbered by a large group of civilians. They vastly outleveled the civilians they were fighting, but the civilians weren't pulling their punches. Rick's people were.

Sakura had just the solution. "If any of you can think straight, lie face down on the ground unless you want your arms and legs broken!" she shouted.

Lisette's minions glanced at one another. A few of them were thinking about doing just that, but Sakura didn't wait for them to get over their indecision. One quick sweep of her club behind the knee shattered femurs and knocked people on their backs in the same motion. Her follow-up blow broke elbows and wrists.

With Lisette's minions so ruthlessly and efficiently dealt with, the three of us headed inside the building. Lisette herself had to be somewhere nearby. The small apartment was every bit as dirty and cramped as promised. I carefully nudged open a full trash bag. Loads of particularly sticky tissue paper spilled out, and the air smelled salty.

"Uh... Carter?" Bridget nudged me. She didn't sound happy with whatever she had found and was pointing at.

I feared the worst.

We turned the corner and found Rick lying on the ground. His pants had been ripped wide open at the crotch, like he'd been mauled by a ferocious beast. His rear was in the air and his face was planted on the wooden planks beneath him. It was



a particularly ignoble way to be defeated for such a proud and fearless warrior.

“God dammit!” I cursed to the sky. “We were too slow again. Rick, I’m so sorry.”

Rick let out a weak groan. Apparently there was enough of him left in there to hear his name, but not enough for him to climb back to his feet. We were lucky that we got to him before Lisette did anything more than this. Any longer and he could have easily ended up obeying her orders, like Kyle and Marcus.

Lisette was gone. We’d missed by mere seconds, yet again.

Hearing footsteps outside, I opened the door to see who it was. Meanwhile, Bridget and Sakura checked the other room in the faint hope that Lisette had decided to hide, rather than run. Kerrie was at the door, along with her all-women squad, who had been guarding what we’d thought would be the most likely location for Lisette to hide in.

“Rick...” Kerrie shook her head as she saw the latest casualty in our one-woman war.

“First Kyle and Marcus... then Terrance... and now Rick?” I hung my head.

Who was left among my male allies and friends? Only Frank, and perhaps Doctor Roswell, though the doctor was unlikely to take on any administrative roles in the city. He greatly preferred his clinic and the medical experimentation he could get away with now that he didn’t have a license to maintain.

Chuck and Michael were still around too, but they were more acquaintances than friends. I still didn’t fully trust Michael, and Chuck was a low-level grunt. I couldn’t promote either of them.

No, thanks to Lisette, our leadership had been gutted. And I wasn’t naive enough to think it was accidental. She was targeting men in positions of power in Crownhill. She knew she wouldn’t have enough time to turn them into her minions, but she would have enough time to mess them up beyond any

hope of leading the search for her. It was all part of a ploy to destabilize the city and take resources out of my hands.

Lisette was every bit as clever as she was pretty. She was dangerous. Very dangerous. And not in the way I was used to.

“So what are we going to do now?” Kerrie asked.

“The only thing we can do. We have to get more aggressive.” I shrugged. “It’s clear that Lisette is trying to erode our systems of governance and bring about some sort of collapse. We’re lucky we have Margaret, otherwise she might have a chance at succeeding.”

I turned to my former boss. “Sakura, you’ll have to quit combat duty and help Margaret with administration. Bridget, you stick with me. I’ll take over Rick’s duties and manage his subordinates myself, then pass them off to you when you’re ready. It’ll be good for you to have more hands-on leadership experience. Besides, this mission needs more women in command who are immune to Lisette’s tricks.”

“What about Frank?” Bridget asked as she shot another glance at Rick. “If the pattern you’ve identified holds true, then he’ll be the next target.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah. He probably is. Which is why I’m taking a little hunting trip with him tomorrow. While you girls search the city for Lisette, the guys and I are going on a hunting trip. Maybe if we bag an elemental, I can make a little something that will take Lisette by surprise...”

It was time to finally craft that talisman.



We grouped up and formed a small army, organized after the fashion I’d observed on Themyscira with the Amazonians. I had my main party, populated with the party leaders of their own, smaller parties. I figured I’d be doing the bulk of the damage, so those I wanted getting most of the experience points would be in my immediate party.

That meant Bridget, Chuck, Margaret, and Frank. Bridget had Rick’s team under her command, while Margaret and

Frank each had their own subordinates. I was watching Chuck to see if he was worth giving a leadership role—eventually.

Margaret was the one who needed the experience points the most, though. She was essential to Crownhill, and with all her administrative duties, she wasn't leveling fast enough. She'd never quite caught up to the top of the power curve, where she'd been shortly after Ben's death. I wanted to give her a boost.

She needed to remain at a respectable level of power. I couldn't imagine running Crownhill without her—even if she had to take an extended leave of absence in the future to level. That was another thing my time on Themyscira taught me. Anyone in a position of authority in the Arcadia Multiverse was expected to have a higher level than your average civilian.

Our objective was to kill the Lava Elemental that had eaten Sakura's car and harvest its core. It was a shame she wouldn't get to fight the thing herself like she'd wanted, but she was needed back in town. With Margaret beside me, I didn't think it wise to leave the town completely without leadership, even for just a few hours. Someone needed to be in charge in case Lisette tried to pull something.

Chuck had the bright idea to bring one of the station's fire trucks. Armed with a water cannon, it seemed like the perfect tool for taking on a Lava Elemental. There was also more than enough room for all of us to ride it to the chasm in the road where the Lava Elemental lived.

When we got there, I was the one to peer over the edge. The Lava Elemental lay dormant. Perhaps it was hiding, now that it no longer had as much of a level advantage over us. I wondered what level it was these days.

“Maybe it hasn't detected us?” someone asked.

“Maybe it's playing dead?” Frank offered.

“Whatever is happening,” I replied, “it is giving us time to prepare our attack. Everyone, use this time well.”

Looking around, I saw everyone was bracing themselves for a tough fight. I already had a modest Mana Barrage

floating above my head, but now I made more. I channeled dozens of Mana Bolts until the sky over my head resembled a swirling cosmos.

Even with my staff offsetting mana costs, maintaining all the Mana Bolts I had hovering overhead started dipping into my mana reserves. I made still more Mana Bolts—enough that I wouldn't be able to sustain them for more than half an hour without draining myself dry.

That was alright, though. I wouldn't need to hold on to them for that long.

“It was only level 47 the first time Sakura and you saw it, right?” Bridget asked. “If that's still true, you should be more than a match for it on your own.”

I shook my head. “I've been keeping an eye on it. I don't know what level it is now, but it's been getting bigger. The question is, how much bigger?”

Humans, wolves, trolls, and monsters had all been leveling up as the integration went on. This thing had to be leveling up, too. The only question was whether we'd been leveling faster than it had.

I pushed myself to the second level of Mania. Sharky probably felt the effect all the way back in Crownhill. I would have liked to have him here with me, but I didn't think Lava Elementals were a good match for him. Besides, I wanted him with Sakura—in case she needed backup.

I highly doubted Lisette could do anything to seduce Sharky. Perhaps she could convince him she'd be a tasty snack? But that wasn't the sort of thing she could offer more than once.

“Stand back. I'll be the one to get its attention,” I called out.

I waved everyone behind me. If we were particularly lucky, I'd be able to end this fight before it even began. Then I waited until Bridget gave me the nod. Everyone was clear.

I activated Exploit Weakness, drew my wand for a bit of additional damage and accuracy, and then scanned the lava for

anything that was part of the Lava Elemental. The little patches of molten rock that made up a part of its body would have been impossible to spot without my unique ability.

There was a great gurgling sound as my spells struck home, one after another.

Something squirmed beneath the molten lava. There was no scream, but a bubble the size of a car rose from the molten stone and released a burst of sulphur-smelling gas that filled the entire area.

Nearby, Bridget pinched her nose. “Was that it? Did you kill it already?”

I shook my head without taking my focus from the pool of lava. “I would have gotten a notification. And you would have gotten experience points. It’s probably just—”

Before I could finish my sentence, the elemental revealed itself. It rose from the crevice like a great heaping mound, roughly in the shape of a man. It was a blob, with two more shapeless lumps on either side dangling from something approximating shoulders.

It seemed smaller than I remembered. The Lava Elemental that had nearly killed Sakura and I had effortlessly swallowed her car in one big gulp. This one was only roughly the size of a minivan. Perhaps it had decided to get a little smaller? Or perhaps the intense fear of the moment had made it seem larger than life last time.

It roared, and molten magma poured from its mouth. The cooler bits of rock roughly outlining its body dribbled more molten lava, festering like open wounds. Perhaps those were the places my spell had dealt serious damage to the monster.

### **Lava Elemental — Level 52**

From the looks of things, the elemental had hardly leveled up at all.

That was strange. But so long as it was high enough level to craft my talisman, I didn’t care. Perhaps I really could have taken this thing out on my own. Since we were all here, I wasn’t going to put the opportunity to waste.

“Look alive!” I yelled to everyone. “Fire those range attacks!”

Everyone with a gun, spell, or some sort of range attack opened fire. I was amused to note Frank had brought a water gun instead of his usual pistol—against this particular monster, a water gun was probably more effective. He was also a remarkably good shot as he put out both the glowing orange spots that were what passed for the Lava Elemental’s eyes.

That didn’t seem to bother the monster, though. I suspected the two glowing spots were purely cosmetic. At least putting out the monster’s eyes didn’t appear to hinder it—not in the slightest. It did, however, succeed in annoying it.

Both Frank and I had to dodge its next attack. It whipped its long, molten arms around, forcing me to jump over one of them before using Warp Step to put some range between it and me.

“Chuck, you’re up!” I shouted. “Let’s see that fire hose!”

Chuck jumped off the rear of the firetruck, hose ready. Margaret pulled a lever and soon a burst of water as thick around as my arm shot out, striking the Lava Elemental. Frank’s squirt gun may have annoyed it, but this pressurized stream of water did some real damage.

The burst of water cooled the molten stone, and the Lava Elemental’s body hissed as steam filled the air. One of its arms cracked as it suddenly turned hard as stone. It broke clean off, shattering into little flakes of obsidian before dropping to the ground.

I shielded my eyes as razor-sharp chunks of stone shot in all directions, then followed up with a few more spells. Chuck kept the powerful stream of water going, with Margaret’s help. Between the two of them, they were most of the way toward taking the Lava Elemental’s other arm off. It was just a matter of time before we put the thing down for good.

The elemental let out a sharp howl, like gas escaping from deep beneath the Earth. Noxious sulphuric gasses filled the air again. Just when I thought our victory was assured, the

unexpected I'd feared finally occurred—I sensed another presence pulling itself up from deep within the crevice.

I realized I'd miscalculated. I'd assumed there was only one Lava Elemental.

No wonder the Lava Elemental had seemed weaker and smaller than I thought it should have been. It wasn't the same Lava Elemental. The second Lava Elemental that rose from the crevice was as tall as a building. Its voice was like chunks of granite grinding together, several times louder than its smaller kin.

The air vibrated with the noise, signifying that most of its scream was beyond the range of even my enhanced human hearing. I felt the sound waves shoot through my body. And just because I couldn't hear it, didn't mean it didn't have an effect—my ears and nose bled from the reverberations.

All around me, my companions were clapping their hands to the sides of their heads.

“Get out of there, Chuck!” I yelled as the big Lava Elemental raised its fists overhead to smash the fire truck that had given its smaller kin so much trouble.

Chuck couldn't hear me over the noise. I Warp Stepped to his side, then switched to Power Jump as soon as I had my arms around him, pulling him clear with all my might. The helmet I'd given him wouldn't save him from a punch like the one that smashed the fire truck a moment later.

Where once had been a truck, now there was only a pile of molten slag.

When I set Chuck down, I took in the larger Lava Elemental.

### **Lava Elemental (Level 102)**

“By my aching nuts!” I cursed.

Moments ago I thought I'd overestimated the Lava Elemental's ability to level. Now I realize how badly I'd underestimated it. The thing was already C-Grade. Just what had it been up to underground?

Now that I had the chance to take it in, it seemed better formed than the weaker and smaller Elemental beside it. That one was a shapeless blob. This one, on the other hand, looked more like a hulking brute of a man, surging from the waist up out of the lava. Where the little one had only a faint impression of eyes and a lump for a head, the big one had a clearly defined neck, shoulders, and jaw. Its arms were too long and thick to be human, but they had definite shape to them.

Perhaps the Lava Elemental had gone through a racial evolution of its own when it reached C-Grade.

Two emotions filled me in that moment. Fear, of course, led the way... but excitement was there, too. I'd feared that I'd have to sacrifice building my Talisman of Protection from Order and Chaos in order to build the Talisman of Protection from Good and Evil. The latter would save Frank when Lisette came for him, but the former would protect me from the Chaos Wolf.

Now, I could do both.

A C-rank core would make my protective talisman that much stronger when the mangy lupine divine being who'd tried to turn me into a puppet came for me again. But, at the same time, my companions were entirely unprepared to take on a C-Grade monster. For something like this, I would need a team of exceptionally skilled D-Grade warriors, at the least.

These weren't them. In all honesty, I wasn't sure I was up to the task, either.

Calling for a retreat would have been the safest move. The fire truck had been our best weapon, and losing it was a heavy blow. But if we did, I'd have to throw the budding plan I'd been forming away. Lisette would come for Frank, and I'd have no way of stopping her, other than placing him under constant all-female guard. And somehow, I doubted that would work.

No. I needed this talisman. C-Grade Elemental or not.



I eyed the weaker Elemental. I didn't need to kill the big one. I just needed to stay out of its reach while I claimed our prize and took what we came here for.

I activated Soulchain Nexus. There weren't enough enemies here to make full use of the effect, but the big elemental would feel the spell and know something strange was going on. I hoped that fear would slow it down—if only just a little.

The big elemental cocked back its arm and swung. As it did, globs of molten stone sped toward me with frightening accuracy. This would be a tough battle. I'd have to be both fast *and* cunning. Fortunately, that was exactly the way I preferred fighting.

I pulled more mana from my staff, this time focusing on water, and then on ice. The firetruck had been effective. Maybe I could grab a little extra elemental bonus damage as well?

“Back!” I ordered the others. “Help from a distance if you can, but if not, stay back!”

This would take speed and strength beyond what any of them possessed. Bridget was the only one with the levels to help me, but her fighting style was up close and personal. That might have worked well against most foes—but not so much against an enormous pile of molten stone.

She remained in the rear, making use of her quick reflexes to pull others out of danger whenever they attracted the big Lava Elemental's attention. That was good, because every moment it spent attacking them was another opportunity for me to target its little brother.

Mana Bolts filled with water mana worked, and ice bolts worked even better. My spells were dealing as much elemental weakness damage as I could manage, but the little elemental had one last trick up its sleeve. With time to itself, it could turn still as a statue and channel fresh lava up from the depths beneath it. That lava slowly started thawing its chilled and hardened body.

Given time, it would remelt itself and then escape into the molten pool beneath it. If that happened, its core would be forever beyond our reach. I needed to kill it fast. The trouble was that the big elemental seemed keen on preventing just that. Perhaps this really was the big elemental's little brother—or whatever Lava Elementals had that passed for kin. Or perhaps they merely enjoyed a shared hatred for the cold things that walked the surface of the world.

Whatever it was, this thing had picked the wrong fight when it decided to try and eat me, then call the main road into Crownhill its personal domain. One of them would die today—the other would die in the near future.

I searched my bag of holding. Was there anything I had that would help? My hands found Mana Bombs. I had plenty of them, now that they were not in demand on Themyscira. I flung a fistful out and was surprised to see them take the arm off the big Lava Elemental.

It wasn't as good as the fire hose. That could freeze the limb entirely and render it immobile. This merely made the arm fall apart, as though whatever was holding it together had been dispersed. The Lava Elemental's limb, for just a moment, returned to regular lava.

I could work with that.

The monster healed and formed a new arm moments later, but those were moments I was free to attack the smaller Elemental. I threw out another fistful of Mana Bombs. Then another. Anyone from the Samhain Clan would likely weep at the sight of so many of these precious bombs being thrown out, one wave after another, without a care. They'd spent a fortune and a half for every fistful I carelessly chucked at the elementals.

The Lava Elemental roared. Mana surged all around me, and I felt the air grow hotter. The world turned a deeper orange, like it was twilight—despite the fact that we had several hours to go before sunset. It was fire mana.

The large elemental was suppressing the effects of my Mana Bombs by expending ten times the energy it had been

before. The mana, previously dispersed as easily as dye in water, was now thick as tar.

I had no other tricks to try, which meant I had to end this now. Instead of distracting the big elemental, I threw my remaining Mana Bombs at the small one. Its body, barely remelted around its core, began to sag and fall apart. Then, I detonated all my Corrupting Marks.

It wouldn't be enough to kill this thing with its enormous health pool, but the explosive energy should be enough to force the lava away from the core. The moment the lava cleared, I spotted something deep orange and glittering in the sun. Holding my arms up over my face, I took a breath, and jumped forward.

I darted in and grabbed it.

It was even hotter than I thought it would be, and I screamed as my hand burned straight down to the bone as I scooped it into my bag of holding. My clothes caught fire as I jumped clear, and I barely managed to dodge the huge glob of molten lava thrown at me by the larger elemental.

Behind me, the smaller one crumbled to dust. Without its core, it was already dead.

“I got it! Everybody back!”

We retreated, prize in hand, as experience points started flooding in. Behind us, the larger elemental howled in rage.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-ONE

I returned to the farmhouse that evening, since all my tools were out at my place. If I wanted to craft the talisman I had to leave Crown Hill. Sakura stayed in town, helping Margaret, but Bridget came back with me, just in case Lisette followed me home.

The evening was uninterrupted, though, and I was able to work in peace. Crafting the Talisman of Protection from Good and Evil was fairly straightforward, though as I finished it, I realized the quality of the Lava Elemental's core would play a large role in how strong the talisman was. I was glad I'd be saving my Chaos Talisman for the larger elemental.

I tried to exchange more messages with Myrina. Things were happening back on Themyscira, and not for the better. Time seemed an increasingly precious resource these days, with so much to do across multiple worlds. Bridget and I were both surprised when, despite waiting the entire night, we received no response.

Something was wrong, but what? I didn't like it, not one bit.

What would happen if I was cut off from her completely? Without a teleporter on Themyscira, I was pretty much stranded on Earth. We didn't have the skills to teleport across the multiverse—and wouldn't for many years.

I had plans in motion that required access to other worlds. I refused to lose that to Elder Thalassa's scheming. But until

things were finished here on Earth and I'd spent enough time at home, there was little else I could do.

Thankfully, my plan for Lisette had shaped up nicely—at least in my mind. I *would* capture her, sooner or later. Preferably before she caused more trouble than she'd already given me. I glanced at the talisman in my hands. This would be the key.

I spent the night curled up with Bridget. The bed seemed oversized with just the two of us, but perhaps that was because I'd gotten used to getting cozy with two women.

Morning came the following day, and we returned to Crownhill. Sharky spent the entire night patrolling around the farmhouse, so we rode on his back all the way to Crownhill. We had to take the long way, though. After yesterday's fight, the Lava Elemental was out for blood.

We made our way to the city gates, where I was swiftly greeted by Frank, along with some bad news.

"What's with the grim look, Frank?" I asked. He'd been the one we were worried about, so seeing him up and about was a relief.

"It's Chuck..." Frank shook his head. "She must have gotten to him sometime after the mission last night when we were celebrating our victory over that Lava Elemental. We each had a few drinks and he wandered off for a moment, but never came back. When we found him again, Lisette had gotten to him. It looked like she'd been working on him for a while, too."

Frank scowled. "By then, Chuck was closer to a living zombie than a vegetable, like the others."

"Dammit..." I cursed.

Chuck wasn't particularly high on the totem pole of authority here in Crownhill, but he had a fairly high level and was good to have around. Apparently, that was enough to make him a target in Lisette's eyes.

"Were you able to secure him? I know he's pretty durable."

Frank nodded. “With Sakura’s help, yeah. That helmet you gave him made it a real pain in the ass, though. Sakura had to bash it real good before his head was ringing enough for us to tie him up. The guy broke his wrists three times to escape the cuffs.”

He snorted. “Somebody who heals as fast as he does is tough to keep down for long. Thankfully, Doctor Roswell had the perfect setup for completely restraining a humanoid subject for vivisection. It worked well enough on Chuck.”

“I’m glad Doc was able to help.”

“Oh, the Doctor was overjoyed. He was very... uh... very interested in Chuck’s regeneration abilities. And since he isn’t exactly in his right mind... we may have given the doctor the impression that it would be okay to study Chuck in the hopes of finding a cure for whatever it is Lisette is doing.”

Frank shuddered. “But just to be safe, we want to find a cure before the doctor goes all mad scientist on us.”

Hopefully, Chuck wouldn’t remember anything about whatever was going on right now.

“With Chuck gone, this is even more urgent. Come on, Frank, let’s have a chat.” I steered Frank away from prying eyes.

I wasn’t sure how closely Lisette was watching me, but having her overhear this next bit would ruin everything. I made it look like we were just grabbing coffee. Someone had taken over the old coffee shop, which made it easy. She was a former barista who had done a remarkably good job so far, though once we started running out of oat milk and coffee beans, she’d need to get creative with the drinks she was serving.

Hot morning coffee in hand, Frank and I stepped to the side outside the barricade at the edge of town. The buildings here had been stripped by scavengers, but they had yet to be reclaimed. Being this far outside the barricades would be dangerous for anyone below level 10, but with the militia patrolling everything from here to the Crownhill County

Prison, the area was safe enough that people above level 10 could wander around freely and begin reconstruction efforts.

It wouldn't seem strange for Frank and me to survey the area.

“What’s all this about? Why are we out here, Carter?” Frank eyed me warily as he sipped his cup of Joe. “And what’s with all the cloak and dagger?”

I took a sip from my own cup. “I’m looking out for you, Frank, that’s what. I don’t want you to get your brain sucked out your dick.”

Frank held back an involuntary shiver. “Yeah. I’m still holding out hope the guys will come to their senses... in time. Doc says it’s probable that the effects of whatever Lisette did will wear off with time. It’s a pain in the ass running the militia without them.”

“Which is why I made you this.” I reached into my pocket and withdrew the Talisman of Protection from Good and Evil that I’d crafted.

It looked like an ancient piece of artwork from a long-gone Meso-American civilization. It was roughly the size of a soldier’s dogtag, but the bulk of the material was solid gold. Pure ruby would have been better, but I had plenty of gold and not many rubies—certainly none large enough. Several unique patterns were inscribed along the length of the talisman. In its center sat the core of the Lava Elemental we’d slain yesterday.

“Is that the Lava Elemental core?” Frank asked. “How’d you shrink it down so small?”

“Very carefully.” I chuckled. “It took a bit of shadow and space mana to pull it off. That talisman was ten times the size and weight when I was crafting it. The gold in that thing alone is worth more than either of us made in a decade before the System.”

“And this will protect the wearer from Lisette’s tricks?” Frank asked.

“It will.”

He held it back out to me. “Then you should keep it. If Lisette gets to you, this whole shelter is done for.”

I shook my head. “I’m resistant to Lisette’s abilities already. I’m not sure how much that’s my doing and how much that’s thanks to Bridget and Sakura’s help, but I think the talisman would be wasted on me.” I poked him in the chest. “No. You are Lisette’s next logical target. I want you to have it.”

Frank fingered the talisman. “I’ve never gotten a gift like this before.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I would have preferred a beautiful woman gift it to me, but I guess I don’t have your luck.” He smirked at me.

I chuckled. “Well, hold on there. I didn’t say this was completely free. The best way to make use of that talisman would be offensively.”

“Of course there’s a catch. Now I don’t feel so bad about taking this thing.” Frank sighed as he placed the talisman around his neck. He tucked it beneath his shirt, where it couldn’t be seen—the same place I liked to keep Myrina’s token.

I laughed. “Isn’t there always? Now, here’s my plan...”



By the time we were done, Frank knew the part I needed him to play and had reluctantly agreed to do so. I didn’t want things happening too quickly, and my return to the city was bound to have Lisette on edge. So, per my instructions, we’d begin Operation ‘Capture the Courtesan’ tomorrow evening.

That would ensure Frank was at the top of his game, and let us properly bait and set the hook. Tonight, Frank would stick close to Kerrie and some of her new trainees. They’d be enough to make it look like I was desperate to guard Frank, to keep him out of her clutches.

That was exactly the impression we wanted to give her. Any gap in our defenses would be left by design. At least, that



was the plan. It was simple enough to be sound, and while something would no doubt go wrong, I hoped the general idea was flexible enough for us to fix it as needed.

I retired to my apartment in the city again, this time with both Bridget and Sakura. The three of us got comfortable, and the two of them spent a considerable amount of time ‘Lisette-proofing’ me, as the two of them liked to call it. We were just finishing up when my bag of holding started vibrating.

“Carter, did you stick a cellphone in there or something?” Bridget asked as she picked up my bag of holding. “It almost feels like you’re getting a call.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” I tried to stand, but Sakura held me tight in her arms. She was feeling particularly needy since I’d spent the previous evening with Bridget, and she’d been on her lonesome.

Bridget tossed me my bag of holding and I went through it on the bed. I shoved my whole arm inside and rummaged around until I finally found what was vibrating. It was a thin, rod-shaped piece of metal. When I pulled it out, I saw a light flash on one end.

“Oh, Carter, why didn’t you tell me you brought toys? We could have put this to good use a few minutes ago...” Sakura said as she reached for the vibrating metal rod.

I laughed and pushed her hand away. “It’s not that kind of toy, Sakura. It’s a communication device. Galbatorix the wizard gave it to me to communicate with him and the Dragon Lodge. He wanted a private line, in case he and his people wanted to place a special order and my normal teleportation network wasn’t sufficient.”

I sat up straighter. Galbatorix had been right to worry, because that was exactly what was happening now. Communications were down and I couldn’t get through to Thulga—and through her, Myrina, Cyra, Misa, or any of my people on Themyscira.

I looked at the flashing light, then remembered how the whole system was supposed to work.

“Quick! Read off the long blinks and the short blinks. I need to decode the message...” I stood, and this time Sakura let me go. She and Bridget watched the vibrating and blinking rod and called out the message to me, one blink at a time.

I had to grab the key for decoding the message out of my bag of holding. After taking a brief glance at it, I handed it to Bridget. “Sakura,” I ordered, “you write down the order of the blinks—long and slow. Bridget, you translate those into symbols. I’ll translate the symbols into English.” The three of us quickly got to work.

This was exactly what I needed! Whatever had happened to Myrina and Thulga, it was stopping me from communicating with them. But Thalassa wouldn’t know about my deal with Galbatorix and his lodge. The wizard had always seemed a bit aloof, like him staying in town was doing a big favor for the Samhain Clan.

I wasn’t sure how powerful the Dragon Lodge was, but I was willing to bet it was strong enough that Elder Thalassa wouldn’t bust down the door to Galbatorix’s shop on a whim. No, this was perfect.

He might have given me this device to talk about his purchase orders, but if I could get him to check on Myrina for me, I would have a secret line of communication that would let me know what was happening on Themyscira. It might even be possible for Galbatorix to arrange for my return, whether Elder Thalassa wanted it or not.

Transcribing the message would have been a lot easier if it was just Morse code. This was similar, but required an extra step. Bridget and Sakura called the code, which I had to match to a symbol from Galbatorix’s language, of which there were apparently hundreds. Only after writing down the symbol could I use my Forerunner title to translate the text into something I could understand.

“Green bird of seven feathers swallowing the sun. Face of a man with two horns. Rat wielding a spear and shield. The atomic structure of hydrogen...” Bridget called out the symbols one after another.

I felt like we were deciphering hieroglyphics while being timed. I shouldn't have been able to manage the feat, but perhaps all those points I'd put into Intelligence were showing their worth. I only had a moment to glance at the key, yet when Bridget listed out the symbols one after the other, I recalled their shape and form with effortless ease.

As we translated the message, I realized why this form of communication wasn't popular. It turned what might have been a paragraph-long email into an hour-long event.

“Okay, so he's saying hello. He mentioned some trouble getting through to me via the channels I left him. Apparently Thulga isn't in Valkyrie's Watch any more. There's some trouble with the Samhain Clan. Also, he wants more copper wire...”

The message went on and on. Apparently Galbatorix didn't consider the translation and decoding process that big of a deal. No doubt he and his peers had put considerable effort into mastering the skill of using these devices.

I drummed my fingers against the table. “Alright, you two, I want to send a message back to Galbatorix. Sakura, there should be a button on that thing you're holding. It should transmit the message back to the device's twin.”

“Okay, going in reverse now.... I swear, I feel like I'm back in college with all this frantic writing.” Bridget swept her hair aside.

“I'll keep it short and simple: Please send current state of Amazonian Clan.”

I forced myself to think a little harder. Whatever language Galbatorix was using didn't make names easy. There was certainly no direct translation for Myrina or Cyra's names. I had to talk my way around it, referring to the two of them as clan princesses. Hopefully Galbatorix would understand what I was asking about.

Sakura was nearly through translating the first line into button presses when a frantic knock came at the door.

“Crap. What is it now?” I grumbled.

I stood and found a nervous woman on the other side of the door. I didn't recognize her, other than the fact that I remembered Kerrie had been giving her orders the other day. She was probably one of the new recruits we'd saved from the apartments near the prison.

“Um... uh... Sir. T-that is, Mr. Carter? Or no, Mr. Smith? It's just that...”

She seemed terribly nervous, wringing her dress in her hands.

I was more than a little annoyed at being interrupted just when I finally had a way to catch up with Myrina again, so the angry expression on my face wasn't doing her nerves any favors. I grabbed her wrist to stop her fidgeting, then forced my expression to settle, so she would calm down.

“What is it?” I asked. “You can tell me.”

She was really nervous about something. “It's the clinic, Sir! The prisoners have escaped, and now Frank is nowhere to be found! Kerrie ran off after him, and now we can't find her, either.”

“What?!” I jumped to my feet.

Apparently, while I'd been preparing my trap, Lisette had been planning moves of her own.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-TWO

If Lisette had waited just another day... I cursed. There was no point in crying over spilled milk. Or in this case, ruined plans. I'd just have to adapt.

First, we had to get to the clinic. Nobody in town could hope to keep so many of Crownhill's elites down. If we didn't deal with them swiftly, who knew what Lisette might do with the rest of us occupied?

The three of us quickly threw on some clothes and rushed out into the hall. We jumped down the stairs all the way to the bottom and swiftly made our way to the door. Hectic noises greeted us the moment we emerged, growing louder with each passing moment.

I smelled smoke in the air, and instantly realized what had happened. We'd spared a few minutes of concentration to translate and respond to Galbatorix's message, and in that short period of inattention, Lisette had lit several fires across the city.

The fires had to be a distraction, meant to pull resources away from whatever she was doing at the clinic. Knowing something and being able to act on that knowledge was two different things. What was worse, it was working.

Two men bickered while a growing and increasingly confused crowd gathered.

"Fire! Fire! We need help putting out the fire on North Street!" one man said.

“There’s a fire on South Street, too! Half of everybody needs to come this way,” another spat back.

“My fire’s bigger. This way!” The first man grabbed the second by the collar and gave him a shove.

This wouldn’t have been nearly as big of a problem if Lisette hadn’t already gutted the city’s leadership. The people here didn’t know who to listen to, and organizing them would take precious time we didn’t have. They needed a familiar face to start issuing orders and get people moving in the right direction.

I turned to Sakura, and she gave me a nod. “I’ll get them taken care of, while you go to the clinic. I’ll catch up with you in a few minutes.” Sakura waved as she grabbed both men by their shirts and tossed them out of the way before taking command of the situation herself.

Bridget and I ran at top speed to the clinic. The two of us were quite familiar with the route from all the times I’d gone to visit her while she healed up, and from all the times she’d gone to visit the wolf pup she was connected to.

I’d never learned what Bridget had finally decided to do with the pup, but judging from the increasingly wolf-like tufts of blonde hair sticking up from the corners of her head, I suspected she had chosen to absorb its soul, after all.

Margaret and Michael were trying to contain the damage at the clinic. Margaret worked frantically to hold a door closed, while others piled up debris against it to hold it shut. Michael had a few scrapes on him and was moving slowly, like he’d been hit in the head and wasn’t all there.

A woman at his side kept shaking his shoulder to get his attention.

“What happened here?” I asked as I skidded to a stop.

“We’re trying to keep them inside the clinic!” Margaret shouted as she gritted her teeth to hold the door shut.

I joined her in holding it shut, while Bridget started piling up chunks of concrete at our feet to barricade the entrance.

“And Michael?” I asked as someone thumped against the door from the other side.

I flared Eldritch Augmentation and shoved the door shut before any hands or fingers could slip through the small crack. “What happened to him?”

Margaret jerked her chin toward the dazed and confused man. “Lisette blew a kiss at him. He didn’t take it well... better than the others, but not well.”

“What about Frank and Kerrie?” I asked. “Where are they?”

Margaret shook her head. “We don’t know. Lisette might have gotten to Frank, if she drove Kerrie off. If they were around, they’d be here.”

That didn’t sound right. Frank had the talisman and Kerrie was a woman and should be immune to Lisette’s tricks. The two of them had to be somewhere. But where?

I only hoped they revealed themselves when we needed it most.

“Stop that, you idiots!” Lisette’s normally sensual voice lost some of its lusty overtones as she barked orders. “They’ve barricaded the door. Just smash open the window!”

There was a brief moment of confusion as Lisette’s brainwashed puppets on the other side of the door switched from one task to another. I backed away from the door just as the window to the clinic shattered and Chuck’s helmeted head came through like a battering ram.

His helmet had a crease running down the center in the shape of Sakura’s club, bending it around his skull to the point that it had probably been impossible to remove. Chuck landed on the ground at my feet and I kicked him aside. Rick had been the one to throw him, and he jumped through the broken window next. He was soon followed by Marcus and Kyle, with Terrance behind them.

“Surprised to see me again?” Lisette asked, standing with a hand on her cocked hip and a coy smile on her face.

“I know you missed me,” she purred. “You should have taken my first offer of partnership, Carter. I’ll still make good use of you, but there might not be quite as much left in your head when I’m done as I would have liked.”

“You tricked us,” I snapped at her. “You made us think that you didn’t have enough time to finish doing whatever it is you do to take control of a man. In actuality, you did—you just didn’t leave any orders for them.”

Lisette laughed girlishly. “Smart *and* handsome. I was going to make Kyle my new Caesar, but you would be a better catch.”

Bridget jumped in front of me. “Stay behind me, Carter. I’ll guard you from any magic kisses.”

“Go on, my dears,” the courtesan chortled, “grab him for me.” Lisette pointed one pink, polished fingernail in my direction.

Terrance, Rick, Kyle, Marcus, and even Chuck who I’d kicked aside all turned to stare at me. As one, they rushed forward.

My instincts were to lash out. With Arcane Blade, I could keep my foes at bay. And with a few spells, I could continuously fall back while bombarding them with attacks. Sharky was outside the city, and I knew I could call him back—he’d make short work of this fight.

After all, I still had a good twenty levels on most of them. It wouldn’t even be that hard. But I couldn’t do that. These were my friends and allies.

Worse, I couldn’t even threaten to do that because none of them were in their right mind. If I held my Arcane Blade to force them to keep their distance, they would just rush forward and be impaled.

If I hit them with Soulchain Nexus, I would need to kill one of them to make the marks spread. The same was true for detonating my Corrupting Marks. Even my Mana Bolts and Eldritch Blasts were meant to deal serious damage.



I didn't have much in my arsenal in the way of non-lethal abilities. That was bad when I was fighting enemies I couldn't kill—especially since they would sacrifice anything and everything to follow the order Lisette gave them.

I was in a bind, and from the look of triumph on Lisette's face, she knew it. The sultry bitch was quite smug about having put me in a pickle. My fingers curled, nails digging into my palms as I grit my teeth in frustration.

This kind of maneuvering wasn't something that had come up when I was fighting the goblins, trolls, ogres, or even the Wolfmen. All of them were violent and direct and could be overcome through the sheer force of superior levels, higher stats, and overwhelming damage. But such a strategy was counterproductive for this challenge.

Lisette was too crafty by half; she knew my stats alone would not grant me victory here.

“Just surrender to me,” Lisette called out in a sing-song tone. “Many strong men have. There's no shame in giving up. In fact, losing to me will be the best thing that ever happened to you.”

She placed her fingers over her lips and started to blow me a kiss. I didn't see the end of it though, because Bridget spun me around as she jumped in front of me.

“You wouldn't even know how to handle Carter!” Bridget shot back at Lisette.

“Honey,” Lisette barked a laugh, “I was your age once. First boyfriends always seem special, but once you get to know enough, you'll learn that all men are the same. None of them are special.”

Her eyes flicked back to me as she took a step to the side and locked gazes with me again. “So... what's it going to be? Are you going to surrender to me and be one of my good little darlings? Or are you going to be a naughty little pet, one I have to leave with an empty head when I'm done with you?”

She probably expected me to curse at her. Instead, I smiled because I'd just realized something. The sudden grin threw her

off, which only made me smile wider.

“What are you smiling about?” Lisette demanded.

“I won’t kill my friends, but don’t think for a moment that you are safe!” I leveled the wand that Myrina had given me, pointing it right at Lisette’s face, and then shot off a fireball.

Lisette’s face went pale at the incoming attack. “D-defend me!”

Marcus jumped in front of the fireball. It struck him in the chest and burned clean through his shirt. He was hurt, but he’d live. Behind him, Lisette was already running.

But I was in close pursuit.

Marcus took off after me, as did Kyle, Chuck, and Terrance.

“Oh no you don’t!” Bridget said as she jumped forward, dropping to all fours.

With one swift jab she slammed one of her daggers straight through one of Chuck’s feet, pinning him to the pavement. Then, she tackled Terrance from behind.

I spent the next minute chasing Lisette around the area. She was perhaps the highest-level human I’d fought on Earth, and if she actually turned to face me, I had the feeling that she would likely be a match for Elder Thalassa’s people—especially with some minions supporting her. But she knew as well as I did that her class wasn’t meant for direct combat.

She was eager to make her escape rather than fight me. Her movement skill was an odd one, and for all the world it looked like she was casually walking away. Every step carried her much further than it should have; it was similar to Warp Step in that way. But instead of the strange and unnatural cadence of tearing through space, her ability had a simple and quiet elegance that made it practically unnoticeable.

No wonder none of my people had ever caught her. With an ability like this one, she could slip effortlessly through a crowd. The moment she thought she was in danger, she could simply turn and after a few steps she’d disappear without so

much as a ripple. It was slower than Warp Step, and would do her little good in the wilderness fighting monsters, but in an urban environment it was perfect.

It was perhaps a little ironic to think that Lisette would have been defeated had I not built a faction large enough for someone like her to rebuild her powerbase. Had Crownhill fallen to the Wolfmen, she and the prisoners would have been left to face them down, and then all the other factions after them.

Between the battles and all the infighting of the Three Kings, I doubted that would have left enough humans on this shard to make a village, let alone a city. Lisette's skills would have been all but useless then, and she'd have held a tiny fraction of her current strength. It seemed my success had fueled the power and ambition of my last and greatest rival.

"My turn to tell you to surrender!" I shouted as I hounded Lisette through the outskirts of town just outside Crownhill's city limits.

It was difficult to keep track of her. Every time she moved, I had to refocus my vision on her. If not for Iron Will, she probably would have slipped away already. She tried to steer back toward the city where people were frantically battling the fires she'd set as a distraction, but I pushed her deeper into the abandoned portion of the city.

I had to kill or capture her before she could get away from me again.

She had no intention of making the fight easy on me, though. Bridget had slowed Chuck down, but was still struggling with Terrance when Marcus and Kyle finally caught up to me.

"Stab him or something!" Lisette shouted as she waved at the two men and then at me.

Kyle and Marcus were on top of me in an instant. Marcus' abilities seemed the same as usual, but Kyle seemed to have picked up a few new tricks. Mainly, he now wielded a flaming

spear—the same chunk of sharpened steel as the previous Caesars I’d fought. His level was also a bit higher than before.

Lisette must have had an ability that allowed her to empower whoever was her favorite pawn at the moment. It explained how she was able to create so many powerful Caesars. If one died, she could ensure his powers carried over to his replacement.

I slipped aside Kyle’s charge, placed my palm on his chest, and then switched to Eldritch Augmentation before giving him a big shove. He went flying forward, head over heels, into a nearby building.

Marcus charged at me with sword in hand. When he lunged at me, I dodged. Instead of swinging his blade, he lunged again. Apparently he took Lisette’s orders to stab me quite literally and had no intention of doing anything else.

I could use that to my advantage.

I jumped on top of a nearby building and Marcus hauled himself up after me. He lunged, and this time, I ducked below his strike. I grabbed his sword arm and pried his weapon from his grasp. In the same motion, I slipped beneath him and shoved with my feet, flinging him into the air with even greater force than I’d flung Kyle. Marcus went flying off the roof to slam into a nearby tree.

By getting the two of them off my immediate trail, and with Bridget slowing Terrance down, it hopefully took the two of them out of the picture—at least for a minute or more. I hoped that was enough time to deal with Lisette.

“Wait!” Lisette shouted when she realized I’d dealt with her two defenders.

She wasn’t looking so pleased with herself anymore. “Time out! Parlay! Parsley! Parley—or whatever the pirate pause button is... Let’s talk this out!”

My response was a hot, fist-sized ball of fire. Lisette yelped as my fireball struck her in the ass. The flames burned away her clothes, revealing charred and blistered skin beneath. But her skin remained blistered and raw for only a moment.

She had a healing factor better even than Chuck's, though I wasn't sure how well she could deal with head wounds or missing limbs.

In moments, the blisters were gone and her skin looked cleaner and healthier than was possible for a human before the System. I suspected it was less a factor of her Vitality stat and more something her immense Charisma facilitated. With stats like hers, she simply wasn't allowed to look anything less than her best.

Lisette started running even faster. That fireball must have given her an extra spurt of energy, because she now led me out of the city and we raced past destroyed and desolate buildings. I heard monsters skitter around in the darkness, drawn to me by my Death Curse. I'd called Sharky back to the city center to join the fight there, but now I called him to my side once more.

I needed someone to keep these bugs and rodents off me.

Lisette seemed fearless as she headed into the dark outskirts and I wondered what she thought she was doing. Had she grown desperate? Running away from Crown Hill and her minions seemed a reckless move on her part.

I grew increasingly wary. It might be wiser to wait for Bridget and Sakura, in case this was a trap—which I was feeling increasingly certain that is what this was.

“Ha! You're finished!” Lisette declared as she skidded to a stop before an empty and desolate clearing far outside Crownhill. “All of you, get him!”

As I had feared, a group of rag-tag men jumped out at me from the shadows. These were survivors from Crownhill County Prison, all far beyond saving. It looked like I was outnumbered, forty or fifty to one.

The tension in my shoulders eased. If this was all Lisette had to surprise me, she was in for a shock. Unlike my friends, I had no compunctions about killing these guys. And One Versus Many would give me bonus experience for killing

them. In fact, Soulchain Nexus would boost my stats with each of their deaths.

That would make dealing with Lisette that much easier. She didn't understand my powers. Not even to the same extent I'd come to understand hers. Calling her allies had dug her own grave.

I twisted, dodging right as one of the psychos rushed forward with a rusty blade. I placed Soulchain Nexus on him, then cut him down with a karate chop empowered by Arcane Blade.

His arm fell off, but he was still chugging. An Eldrich Blast to the forehead cracked his skull and put him down for good. The others rushed forward, and I put distance between them and me.

"More of you! This way!" Lisette yelled as she called over more forces. They were just more fuel for my stats.

I used Warp Step to maneuver myself clear, then fired off a quick barrage of spells to soften up my targets. I cast more instances of Soulchain Nexus, and when one of them was finally weak I darted in close and skewered him with Arcane Blade. That spread his debuffs to all the others nearby.

From there, my spells snowballed and power flowed through me. My attacks came with greater ferocity as I cut down the last vestiges of Lisette's forces. My spells came faster and harder. Soon, instead of searing flesh, my Mana Bolts shot straight through them as easily as bullets.

Eldrich Blasts tore off limbs and cracked spines. Arcane Blade tore through flesh and bone alike.

Eventually, my might became so much greater than theirs that for the last few all I had to do was target the weakest one.

"Disassemble." I pronounced with finality. The man I was pointing at exploded. His Corrupting Marks spread to the three men nearby, bringing them over the threshold enough that another snap of my fingers made them all explode.

**Your class, Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge, has gained a level!**

**Your race, Human, has gained a level!**

Throughout all this, Lisette had been trying to slip away.

*Not this time.*

In a flash, I was on top of her.

“Get off me!” Lisette shoved me with surprising strength. It must have been a temporary ability, because even in my heightened state I felt myself get pushed back a bit.

She rolled clear, reaching to her hair bun. She pulled a pin from her hair, and I saw it came to a needle point. She jumped forward and thrust at me, but I reached forward and grabbed her hands.

“Get off me!” Lisette shouted again. She thrust her free hand toward me just as before, and I felt myself get shoved back once again. Definitely an ability.

I rolled back to my feet.

“You can’t win, Lisette,” I said, buying myself a moment to prepare more spells.

“I’ve beaten lots of men like you!” Lisette panted. “You’re just one more asshole in my way!”

“No, I’m the end of the line.” I conjured two more Mana Bolts. She was already afflicted with quite a few Corrupting Marks from killing her minions. Now was my chance to either end her or capture her.

This was our final showdown. Our climactic battle. The one that would decide who would rule this shard.

Lisette smiled at my words, and then she revealed her final card.

“Think you’ve won? Well how about this?” Lisette waved her hand forward, and a blur shot out of the nearby building to land beside Lisette. Dust filled the air from his landing. When it finally cleared, I saw who it was.

There, standing at her side, was Frank, with three more psychos flanking him. The remaining three were all over level

25, but it was clear Frank and his level was the star of the show. He was Lisette's secret weapon.

**Frank (Weapons master – Level 46)**

His face was expressionless and his eyes dull. He wore the same vacant expression as all the others, like there was nothing going on in his head except his need to wait for orders from the woman beside him.

I nearly stopped in my tracks. How had she gotten to him? Wasn't he wearing the talisman?

Then, while Lisette wasn't looking, Frank blinked at me... blinked at me with just one eye. It was so quick and subtle that I was hardly certain I'd seen it at all.

But I was pretty sure Frank had just shot me a wink.



## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-THREE

**K**illing Lisette was a decent, if not the preferred outcome. She wouldn't be able to do what she did to any more of my people. But there was no guarantee that Doctor Roswell, Myrina, or anyone else could find a cure to undo what she had done to the others. There was a chance that the only one who could fix them was the woman who'd done whatever it was to them in the first place.

For that reason, I wanted to capture Lisette alive—if possible. Before, I'd dismissed the idea as beyond my abilities. But now? Maybe it wasn't such a far-fetched idea.

I feigned exhaustion when in truth more power flowed through me than ever. I staggered forward on clumsy feet, and Lisette took up a defensive pose by Frank's side. She must have thought she could take me with Frank's help after her minions softened me up.

After I sensed her growing confident, I decided it was time to hit her with my own surprise.

"Wait!" I held up my hand. "You asked to parley... said you wanted to talk?"

Lisette smiled like a cat who'd spotted a mouse to play with. "Yes, I did. Dears, put your weapons down. Carter is finally ready to chat. I take it my newest warrior here finally knocked some sense into you?"

She trailed her fingers down Frank's chest, and he didn't even twitch. "He's nearly as high leveled as you, you know.

You can't possibly fight him, me, and the rest of my minions at once!"

I nodded. Frank had gotten quite strong lately; his level was in the mid-forties. If he were from the Crownhill County Prison, he'd have been one of the Three Kings.

"What was your previous offer? I want to hear it again." I sheathed my sword as I eyed the armed psychos around me warily.

Lisette laughed. "Oh, no... you don't get that deal anymore. You had your chance and missed it. I have an alternative bargain for you, now."

"And what kind of bargain is that?" I didn't fight to keep the unhappiness out of my voice.

"Think of it this way. If Crownhill were a company, I would be the venture capitalist swooping in and claiming the majority share. You'd still have a piece of the action, but the final say on any big ideas would be mine."

Her grin twisted into a sneer. "I won't wave that power around, and to everyone else you'll still be the founder—the guy who has to look good for all the press statements and make sad speeches over a video call before we lay people off."

She fluffed her hair. "I'll be a distant figure sitting comfortably in her penthouse suite, but at the end of the day, you'll come home to me and tell me all about the city and its progress."

"Basically, I would do all the work, and you would reap all the rewards?" I raised an eyebrow.

Shamelessly, Lisette nodded. "Yes, exactly that! Besides, being the beloved, darling wife of the city's reigning Lord seems much better than being the city lord myself—that just seems like too much work."

She tapped a pink nail on her cheek, then shook her head. "No forcing people to respect you, or having to deal with their stress and baggage every day... just planning the occasional party while tending to a few spoiled and overly pampered children. Ahhh, that will be the life for me!"

Lisette seemed increasingly certain of her victory the more she spoke. Her bright eyes and red lips were intoxicating to watch, and any man who didn't already have two wonderful women of his own would surely be smitten by them. Fortunately, I wasn't one of those men. I wasn't sure I could have resisted, had Bridget and Sakura not been fresh in my mind.

The image of the two of them swept away any dreams of a future family coaxed forth by Lisette's powers. No. If I was going to have a family in the future, I knew who my children's mothers would be.

"I don't like it..." I began, "but if you promise to release my friends, then I'll agree." I let my shoulders sag, as if in defeat.

"Release them?"

Lisette ran her fingers through her hair. She wore a frown, and I could tell she didn't like the idea. But she hadn't said it was impossible.

That lit a beacon of hope in my heart. "It's possible, right?" I took another step forward. "If it isn't, then there's little point in us talking anymore."

Lisette sighed. "I suppose you're more valuable to me than any of them. Yes, I can release your friends... undoing what I've done to them. I've gone back and forth about building a little harem for myself, but men seem like a lot of work. Perhaps if those two cute little things of yours come in a package deal with you, I'll be happier with them—and the idea of free babysitters when the time comes *is* appealing."

"Fix Frank first," I demanded.

Lisette waggled her finger. "Not so fast. I need a show of trust from you before I lift a finger."

"I'm a man of my word," I growled. "I'm sure you've asked around. I keep all the promises I give." I made no mention of the fact that I'd promised Lisette nothing.

"I think I'd much rather have a kiss." Lisette smiled seductively at me. "Yes. A kiss, and then you put on this nice

little hat. It's the same one I had the various Caesar's wear. After the kiss, I think you'll be feeling much better about any bargains we make. Come on now, stop looking so grumpy and tense. It's just a smooch."

She reached into her pocket and withdrew a golden circlet. I'd seen something much like it on Caesar's brow both times I'd fought him. I didn't have to be an Artificer to know that putting that thing on would be very bad. It was likely some sort of willpower suppression item that would turn any man, no matter how strong willed, into Lisette's puppet.

She batted long eyelashes at me. "I promise I don't have cooties."

I shot a glance at Frank. He seemed blank faced and unmoving, just as before. Though when Lisette took a step forward, he did too.

Lisette didn't seem to notice.

I was laying my cards on the table here. Was Frank really on my side? I had no idea what Lisette could do with a kiss, but given what she'd done to my friends, I figured it wouldn't end well for me. If I hadn't seen that wink earlier, I would think he was under Lisette's spell—despite my talisman.

I could be sealing my own fate, stepping so close to this dangerously seductive woman. But I trusted Frank. I'd known him longer than just about anybody else in this town. And, most importantly, he was my friend.

So, I slowly approached and did as Lisette demanded. She reached out and took both my hands in hers. Looking up into my eyes, she leaned forward for a kiss.

I held my breath.

"There you are..." Lisette cooed. She held her hands out toward me and closed her eyes.

Then, just before her lips touched mine, Frank's hands came out of his pocket holding open a plain white trash bag—which he promptly pulled over her head.

"Ha! Got her!" Frank yelled.

Lisette tried to pull her hands away to tear the bag off her head, but she'd forgotten she'd placed her hands in mine—and I wasn't about to let go of her.

“What?! How!” she yelped.

I chuckled as I tore the laurel circlet out of her hands and snapped it in half. In the same motion, I activated Arcane Blade and cut one of her level twenty fives in half. Frank took care of another one, and the third died to a barrage of spell from my palm. Supporting Frank, they would have been a pain in my ass. But with Frank on my side and them caught off guard, they were nothing.

“Well done, Frank. We should probably gag her. Hiding her pretty face might not be enough.”

I popped a small hole in the bag for her nose and then, with Frank pinning her arms, I reached up under the bag and stuffed one of my socks in her mouth as an improvised gag. A bit of duct tape later over her mouth, and we had ourselves a prisoner.

She tried to shove me a few times, but I had a feel for that ability now. She couldn't activate it when her hands were bound behind her back.

Lisette had been perhaps the toughest of all the foes I'd faced. And yet now she was helpless in my grasp.

After fighting ferocious upright wolves, ogres, trolls, and Amazonians, it was strange to face a clever human foe. She'd been perhaps my most terrifying opponent ever, not thanks to her stats, but thanks to her intelligence. She'd schemed better than anyone else I'd met.

But now I'd beaten her. Just as her surprise attack had spoiled my trap, my plans had ruined her final trick. She thought claiming Frank would give her what she needed to defeat me, but in the end it sealed her fate.

Restraining Lisette went a lot faster when someone else arrived. She wasn't shy about getting in close, since she wasn't worried about Lisette being able to give us a magic kiss with more than just her lips.

“You boys sure took your time,” Kerrie said as she emerged from the shadows. “For a second there I thought she’d really gotten to the both of you. I was ready to put an arrow into her.”

“Kerrie was plan B.” Frank nodded at the archer, who was redoing my crude knots so that Lisette’s wrists couldn’t so much as twitch. “If things started to go south, she had orders to open fire.”

I turned to her. “Well, I appreciate your efforts. Thankfully, they weren’t needed today.”



Bridget met up with us on the walk back and we showed off our captive to her. With all four of us watching Lisette, I felt a lot more secure. She wasn’t escaping alive on my watch, but now I didn’t think she was escaping at all.

Kerrie waved down a few of her recruits and had them fetch a couple of handcuffs. We used them on both Lisette’s wrists and ankles, making doubly sure to keep her secure. This squad of guards was also all women. We’d learned our lesson on that front all too well.

I tossed the troublesome tramp over Frank’s shoulder and walked back with him to camp, surrounded by a full guard the entire time.

Sakura joined us, looking tired and worn. “You grabbed her already?” Sakura wiped sweat from her brow. “Damn. Wrestling Rick into handcuffs slowed me down. I wanted to get another hit in.”

Lisette must have sensed the presence of the woman who’d thrown her out a window and started squirming. I held her firmly in place on Frank’s shoulder.

Sakura offered to take her, and Frank and I accepted.

While I could overpower Lisette, it wasn’t by much. Though Sakura was a much lower level than the Courtesan, she had a far higher base Strength stat. She also didn’t have to worry about any tricks from Lisette’s class.

I'd been a bit worried about how Frank's talisman was holding up, hanging on to Lisette as he was. She'd tried to squirm out of her clothes more than once, and to press her skin against his, which suggested she thought that would give her an advantage.

"I think people are still having trouble with Kyle." Bridget nodded back toward Crownhill. "Why don't you let us take her in?"

I nodded, then turned to Lisette one final time. "Lisette, make this easy on yourself and fix whatever you did to Kyle. Take away those fire powers of his and I might consider pulling that gag out of your mouth."

Lisette didn't make so much as a peep, which I took for a no.

"Fine then.... the hard way it is. Bridget, Sakura, you have my leave to interrogate her however you see fit." I shook my head and departed.

Sakura smiled wide as she tapped her bat against the woman's thighs. "Hear that, bitch? Looks like we're going to have a little girls' time. I wouldn't be looking forward to it if I were you."



Chasing down Kyle proved difficult. He was faster than I remembered—and also on fire. No wonder everyone was having a hard time dealing with him. He turned on me the moment I approached, though, which meant he was still trying to follow Lisette's last order to get me.

Unfortunately for him, he'd lost the numerical advantage. I was also no longer dividing my attention between him and Lisette and several other minions. Looking Kyle up and down, I realized he'd done well for himself.

### **Kyle (Flame Spear Master — Level 39)**

His level wasn't quite as high as the two previous Caesars I'd fought, but his class was the same, and he was a considerably higher level than he'd been before. Whatever

Lisette did to him had added about ten levels and granted him a new class.

Hopefully it didn't override what he'd been before.

Kyle was just as fast as the previous Flame Spear Masters, leaving a trail of burning road tar in his wake whenever he lunged at me. This meant it might have been an extended fight, if Sharky hadn't returned just as it was starting. Also, I'd killed two Caesars already, so I was pretty familiar with his abilities—long before he had the chance to use them.

Still, I had to grab him and wrestle him to the ground so the people hovering around me could handcuff and disarm him. That was next to impossible to do if he was on fire. But that could be fixed.

I used my staff to fill a few Mana Bolts with water mana, then flung them one after another at Kyle. The flames lining his back, arms, and shoulders slowly sputtered out. Unlike with the Lava Elemental, water worked better than ice—I didn't want to run Kyle through with magical flying icicles like I'd done the Lava Elemental. And as a bonus, the water made a big splash when it landed, which helped smother errant flames.

I discovered working ice into a dash of air worked best, though, especially when Kyle was already cold and wet. He started slowing down—like a snake caught outside on a cold night. Soon, his abilities stopped working entirely.

“Put down the spear, Kyle...” I pointed at the ground.

Kyle didn't listen, but that was normal for teens. And presumably normal for teens who'd been mind-controlled by a woman with supernatural seduction powers. I had to tear the spear from his hands and pin him to the ground. Thanks to my spells, he was as cold as ice; a thin layer of frost covered much of his body.

“Lock him up with the others. But not with Lisette, please. I don't know where Bridget and Sakura are keeping her, so be sure to check who is in the room first. Okay?”



“Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir! We couldn’t have done it without you,” a man said.

I didn’t recognize him, but he threw me a surprisingly decent salute. I kept an eye on them for a while to make sure Kyle wasn’t about to break free, but they seemed to have him well in hand. The fight had gone out of Kyle, especially once I was out of sight.

His orders were to grab me, after all—not to escape a pair of handcuffs and the armed guard surrounding him.

I spent a few minutes shooting a few additional water mana-filled Mana Bolts at the fires around us. That was a big help to the fire brigade who’d been hauling buckets from where the hose stopped. Soon, the fires were under control. While there were still smoldering embers to deal with, none of the nearby structures were in danger of coming down.

What was left would be a lengthy process of finding shelter for the people who’d just lost their homes, as well as providing them with the basic necessities like blankets and clothing. Thankfully, there was still plenty of room in Crownhill and I knew they’d find new apartments quickly. The bureaucratic process wasn’t something they needed my help for, though, so I headed back to my own apartment in the city.

Margaret seemed to have things well in hand, so I headed back to my desk. Hopefully Galbatorix was still on the line.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-FOUR

After a few minutes struggling with the wizard's communication device, I was finally able to click away and send a message. In total, it was an apology for disappearing, a brief explanation that something had come up, and a polite request that he repeat his last message.

After sending it out, I sat and waited. And waited. And waited.

There was no response.

"Dammit!" I cursed as I tossed the device down on the bed. I'd missed Galbatorix's reply to my question thanks to Lisette, and now it looked like I'd missed him completely. My chance to get in contact with Myrina had vanished.

I paced the floor, figuring maybe if I jumped down and helped with the fires, it would ease my nerves. I was about to do just that when the device started buzzing again. Racing over to it, I scooped it up, and sat back down to begin translating the short and long flashes into symbols, and the symbols into words.

This message was far shorter than the others, and I quickly got the sense that I wasn't talking to Galbatorix. I finished the translation, which came much slower than previous messages because the girls weren't here to help me.

When I did, I stared at the message sitting on the page before me.

*It's me. I need your help.*

There was only one person that could be. Myrina.

“Myrina, what’s happening over there?” I muttered to myself.

I translated that line of thought and sent it back to her. Her reply came agonizingly slowly over the next minute.

*Check teleporter.*

Apparently, Myrina had as much trouble sending messages through the devices as I did. Shipping letters back and forth had seemed slow to me before, but it was light-years ahead of this method. Whatever had stopped Thulga from shipping our letters back and forth before must have been fixed on her end.

But what had happened?

I didn’t plan on leaving myself in suspense. I wasted no more time in my room and opened the window. A second later, I’d slipped through it. Catching myself on several window ledges on the way down made for a rapid descent. Moments later, I was racing through the streets on my way back to my farmhouse.

“Sharky, keep an eye on things back in town for me, alright?” I yelled to my spectral ghost shark as I passed him.

“Nom nom,” Sharky replied, hungrily. Presumably, that meant I could trust him to look out for any threats to the city as long as those threats were edible.

When I finally returned home, I threw open the door to my farmhouse and found a sealed scroll sitting waiting for me on the teleportation pad. The letter I had left on it before was gone. Sometime over the past few hours, Myrina must have finally gotten my message.

I unsealed the scroll and read.

*Carter,*

*Sorry for being out of communication for a while. The wizard in Valkyrie’s Watch said you were asking about me and went to Mother, who passed along the message to me. I had no idea you already had a sneaky private*

*channel with the Dragon Lodge! Not even Mother has one of those. The wizards must really like you.*

*Mother brought Thulga to me here in Shadefall. Mother knows some stuff now, but I promise I kept as much hidden as I could! She knows a few of the warehouses in Shadefall are connected to you somehow, but I'm trying to keep the full scope of what you've been up to under wraps.*

*Anyway, officially, I went drinking with Cyra to celebrate her getting a city and passed out in an alley somewhere. Unofficially, I'm camped out in one of your warehouses.*

*Misa showed it to me. You did a good job with this place! I hope you don't mind me taking a room. Your new employees are eager to work. You left so unexpectedly that Misa wasn't sure what you wanted them to be working on.*

*I know you got my last letter about what happened after Elder Thalassa banished you back to Earth. Mother attempted to have her formally censured, but that didn't go as well with the other elders as we'd hoped. She ended up returning home, only to show her face again with some representatives of a rather powerful spellcaster family—the same one she wants me to forge ties with... Ties of marriage, if that wasn't clear. Hence the reason why I'm making myself scarce.*

*I need to ask a favor from you, Carter. A big favor. Please.*

*I don't want to pressure you, but it isn't the kind of thing that I can put in a letter. By my measure, your time limit should be up sometime today. Send the exact time through with your reply and I'll ask Thulga to bring you over so that we can talk face to face.*

*I hope to see you again soon,*

*Myrina*

I flipped the scroll over and hastily penned a reply. Looking through my stat menus, I found my System-enforced cooldown for going off-planet was set to expire in just a few hours. At that point, I'd be free to return to Themyscira. Whatever Myrina wanted to talk to me sounded extremely important, so I wrote down the first second I would become available.

I was willing to help her however she needed it. I wasn't sure what kind of favor she wanted from me, but whatever it was, I planned to move Heaven and Earth to make it happen.

After returning the scroll, I spent a considerable amount of time pacing back and forth across the living room. Sometimes I could be patient. This wasn't one of those times.

I ended up passing the remaining hours of my System-enforced cooldown crafting more Mana Swords and a few other odds and ends late into the night. Since I'd be taking a trip to Themyscira, I figured I should bring over the raw materials and item templates I had been planning to have my workers there craft.

I also packed up much of the stuff Gobgob and her goblins had been working on. She was great for physically assembling the items I was enchanting, but not very good at adding in those final enchantments. From everything I'd heard, putting on those final enchantments was what Shadefall excelled at.

It seemed like a perfect match to get both groups working toward the same end, especially when pairing them with high-end component materials from Earth. If Misa had continued our work in my absence, those workshops would be just about ready by now. It would be good to have their first real project ready for them.

I had a dozen bags of holding all over me stuffed to the brim with semi-finished enchantments. I'd practically emptied the obelisk shortly after arriving in Crownhill last time, so I could keep Gobgob and the others busy. Now, those goods had been turned almost all the way into merchandisable products.

I also had a lot of the rare raw materials Galbatorix and his friends were interested in.

All the stuff I was prepared to sell would be enough to buy another chunk of Shadefall in its current war-torn state. I would have been excited—and should have been—if Myrina’s request and current situation hadn’t weighed heavily on my mind.

Eventually, though, my System cooldown ran out. I was standing on the teleportation pad when the timer counted down to zero. Two seconds later, I felt the spatial magic around me react. Apparently Myrina and Thulga were just as eager to see me as I was to see them.

I let the familiar process sweep me away. I’d left a brief note on the kitchen table for Sakura and Bridget—though I didn’t think I would be staying in Themyscira long enough to run out of time. I just needed to hear Myrina out.

“Carter!” Myrina wrapped her arms around me.

In one swift and sudden motion, she pulled me right off the teleportation platform and into the air. She was taller than me again and looked different from before. A quick glance told me her recent changes were intentional. She had a cloak draped around her shoulders and her fiery hair pulled back into a tight bun. She also sported a ridiculous-looking, bushy, fake mustache.

It was an overdone attempt at a disguise, and I had to hide a snicker behind my hand. It was black, in stark contrast to her cherry-red hair.

“Welcome back,” Thulga said, hands on her hips and faint smile on her face.

I nodded in her direction, then turned back to Myrina and her disguise. “Hey! Who are you and what have you done with Myrina?” I demanded, fighting to keep a chuckle out of my voice.

Myrina tore off her fake mustache. “Ha! Fooled you. It was me all along!”

We shared a smile for a moment, though Myrina’s joyful expression soon faded and returned to a concerned frown.

I looked around the room. It was roughly the size of my living room back home and rather plain with its lack of decorations. The walls were made of rough wood, and there was only a single, small window in the upper corner. As Myrina had said in her letter, we were back in one of the warehouses we'd built in Shadefall.

There was no sheathing on the inside of the structure, just bare walls with external planks to keep out the weather. Myrina had made herself comfortable anyway with a bedroll and camping stove in one corner, but the place looked like a construction site. It was a big step down for a member of the main family of this area's ruling clan.

We shared a smile for a moment, though Myrina's joyful expression soon turned to a concerned frown. She tried to force her face back into smiling, but it was too late. I'd already seen her true feelings beneath the mask.

"Alright, I'm here." I waved around us. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Myrina turned and I moved to join her. Thulga sensed she wasn't needed at the moment and made her way quietly to the door.

"Carter, there's something I need to tell you." As Myrina began to speak, her voice tinged with a seriousness I hadn't heard before.

I listened, sensing the gravity in her words. The shift from her normally enthusiastic and determined demeanor belied the seriousness of what she was about to say.

"It's about my family. And the whole of the Samhain Clan." She took a deep breath, eyes fixed on something on the other side of the wall before us. We stopped by an open window. It was the only source of light in this dim attic space.

"And?" I pressed. "I've been privy to more secrets of the Samhain Clan than most. And I've got a tattoo to prove it." I gestured to my shoulder, where the mark of the Samhain Clan slowly faded into existence.

“Well... it’s just...” Myrina took a deep breath and pushed a strand of hair back over her shoulder.

I reached out and took her hand in my own. “Just what?”

She suddenly looked embarrassed. “...about that...” She scuffed one sandal along the floor, drawing a circle with her toe. “Carter, I need a place to hide out for a bit. Your warehouse is good and all, and I’m sorry for borrowing it without asking, but it paints a target on Cyra’s back. I don’t want to be a burden to my sister... or to my mother. I need someplace further away.”

She sighed. “The trouble is that all the worlds I know of would be even more dangerous for me than this one—all the worlds but yours, that is.”

“So you’re in hiding from your family?” I asked with raised brows.

Myrina wrung her hands together in front of her. “It’s complicated, but... well, you were there when Elder Thalassa explained most of it. Mother’s going away. Cyra’s going to have to lead the Samhain Clan. Elder Thalassa’s made some new friends with a lot of power and who place a lot of value on a Samhain bride.”

A pit of fury started simmering in my gut.

“I don’t know who they’re going to send for me, but he’s bound to be strong. That ritual of ours works both ways, you know? I can reject any man who can’t beat me, but any man who can? Well, unless Cyra or Mother is willing to challenge and kill him for me right after he wins, saying no isn’t really an option. But Mother’s going to be gone soon, and as for Cyra... well, I can’t burden her with that. I need to make myself scarce.” She looked down at me, hopefully. “Just for a little while, mind you.”

I crossed my arms and raised my eyebrows. “Really?”

“Just for a little bit!” Myrina held up her hands. “I promise I won’t be a bother. And if Elder Thalassa’s new friends are somehow powerful enough to track me to Earth, they’re bound



to be dramatically weakened by the System if they come calling.”

I stared Myrina up and down.

She waved her hands again, fearing the worst from my angry frown. “Foreign visitors like me won’t even be able to visit until you unite your shard. And even after that, communication with the rest of the Multiverse will still be cut off. It’s the perfect place to hide, but if I bring any danger to your settlement I promise I’ll hike off into the woods and—”

I held a finger up to her lips. “I thought you were going to ask me to move a mountain stone by stone or craft ten million Mana Bombs—and I was prepared to say yes to either or even both of those requests. You just want a place to stay? Myrina, you didn’t even need to ask.”

Myrina let out a long sigh. “Honestly, I wasn’t sure where I’d turn if not to you, Carter.”

I chuckled. “Well, I hope you never doubt me again. The only issue you raise is that now I have twice as much reason to deal with Lisette as quickly as possible. You can’t cross over until things are finished back on Earth and the System is preparing us for the next stage of the integration.”

“It’ll be good to visit Earth again. I miss those magic moving picture boxes. Remember those?” Myrina asked fondly. “I’m looking forward to seeing our old stomping grounds.”

“Televisions. And I remember. We’ve gotten some of them working again, though I’m sorry to say there’s no programming on them—just what DVDs we can scrounge up to play in a DVD player. And I’m afraid Crownhill is nowhere near where we grew up. I’ll be happy to show you around the city, though.”

Myrina wrapped her arms around me and didn’t let go.

“Thank you, Carter...” Her fingers slipped beneath my shirt and caressed the small of my back. “But now I need to ask for another favor.”

“Already?” I laughed.

“Already...” Myrina muttered, pressing her body against mine. She wasn’t wearing any armor. Nor much of anything besides a thin silk shirt. I could feel two hard nipples poking against my chest. And I was pretty sure I was poking her with something below the belt in return.

“Since when have you gotten so needy?” I chuckled, expecting a joke in reply. But Myrina met me with an intense gaze.

“Since you showed up in my life again.” Myrina chewed on her lips for a moment. “You know, I used to be jealous of Cyra. Back when Mother told me she would run the Samhain Clan and I would marry off to forge ties for the family, I mean. I didn’t want to give up on fun and adventures to be part of some stuffy old planetary ruler’s harem of ten thousand wives. Then I thought back to you and realized marrying out of the family might not be so bad, depending on the person.”

“Do you still think that way?” I returned her serious expression with one of my own. “A newly integrated world isn’t like Themyscira. Your mother and family name won’t protect you back on Earth. Nor will you enjoy the kinds of luxuries you’re used to. You won’t find a single servant in my home.”

Myrina shrugged. “I’ll lose some stuff... but I’ll gain so much more.” Then she leaned closer to me and closed her eyes. Her lips brushed up against mine, feather soft and warm to the touch.

She held that pose for a long breath. It was an invitation, should I choose to accept it.

And of course, I did.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-FIVE

My lips locked with hers, and the moment I did so Myrina flung into action.

To say that Myrina was an active kisser would be like saying Sharky was a bit hungry. I felt her tongue slide past mine as she grabbed the back of my head.

She pulled herself up my torso, locking her legs behind my back.

I stumbled backward and eventually fell on my ass with Myrina on top of me. We held that position for several long moments, locked in a deep kiss.

Myrina finally let me up, now crouched over me with her legs on either side of my chest. She leaned close, then whispered huskily into my ear. “I’m going to ride you until we crack the floor beams beneath us.”

I laughed. Myrina was joking. The floor was held up by the massive wooden pillars originally cut to make my giant trebuchets. Cracking them would take even more force than hurtling a ninety-kilogram projectile over three hundred meters.

“You’re joking, right?” I smiled, laugh still in my lips.

Myrina’s expression was dead serious as she grabbed my shirt and ripped it in two with nothing but her bare hands. Her expression was that of a lioness with her prey in sight.

I wriggled my way out of my pants before she tore those apart as well. It was hard to get good jeans after the

apocalypse.

Myrina grabbed my cock with even more ferocity than I'd remembered from Sakura and Bridget during our first times. I was already hard for her, and she wrapped her fingers around my length and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Your real magic wand," Myrina giggled. "Bridget and Sakura told me all about it."

"Careful with that," I chuckled in reply. "That thing's a dangerous weapon."

"I defeated a one-eyed serpent of the forest before. But a one-eyed serpent of the trousers is new to me." She gave me another squeeze. "But I'm up for the challenge."

In one smooth motion, Myrina reached for her clothes. The thin silk dress she was wearing tore in her grip. Suddenly she was naked, as though she always had been. I suddenly realized my Amazonian warrior hadn't been wearing any underwear.

Still holding my cock in her free hand, she positioned it at her opening and slid it in.

"Oh System..." Myrina moaned as I slid inside her.

"Holy fuck..." My fingers dug into Myrina's thighs. The walls of her pussy were even tighter than her balled fist. Apparently superhuman strength applied to every part of the body.

I was suddenly very glad the two of us had waited. If I'd accepted Myrina's advances when I first arrived on Themyscira, her Strength stat probably would have been enough to burst a blood vessel in my cock.

Myrina rocked herself back and forth. It was an unfamiliar motion for her, at first it felt more like she was riding me like a pillow than bouncing up and down on my cock.

I grabbed her hips to give her a hand. I shifted my weight and thrust upward with each rocking motion until she started getting the hang of things. Her breaths came faster and faster by the moment.

She reached for my hands on her thighs and placed her hands on top of them. She stared me intently with an expression of loving adoration. Hers was an obvious and unabashed affection that made no attempt to hide itself. She'd been waiting for this for a long time.

And, I realized in that moment, so had I.

I felt her start to tremble deep in her core. She bit her lip and then suddenly let out a lengthy moan as she climaxed on top of me.

**You have drained a level from Myrina Samhain!**

**You have gained 3 levels.**

The notification surprised me. Normally, I was on the other end of this relationship, with a level for me taking multiple levels from Bridget or Sakura. But that was because I was higher leveled than either of them.

Here, it was the opposite. Myrina was higher leveled than I was, and so just one level from her meant multiple levels for me.

**You have drained 3 levels from Myrina Samhain!**

**You have gained 5 levels.**

**You have drained 2 levels from Myrina Samhain!**

**You have gained 3 levels.**

When we started, Myrina had been level 73, and I had been level 59 in each my race and class. I'd leveled far faster than she had, and the gap had been narrowing rapidly. But in one swoop, now it was gone entirely.

**Carter Smith (Human, Rank D)**

**Race: Homo Acceleratus (Rare – Level 65)**

**Class: Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge (Epic – Level 64)**

At some point, Myrina must have shared her status screen with me, because her stats lay right next to mine.

**Myrina Samhain (Amazonian, Rank D)**

**Race: Amazonian Matriarch (Mythic – Level 65)**

**Class: Amazonian Warchief (Epic – Level 66)**

Suddenly, Myrina and I were closing in on each other in levels. Pretty soon we'd be equals in that respect, with the two of us standing on equal footing.

“More!” Myrina demanded.

“Myrina, you worked hard for these levels...” I cautioned. “And we're finished. We're already almost equal.”

“More! Must...not...win...” Myrina panted.

Myrina's pussy clamped down tight around me, and I felt for all the world like she was trying to wring me out. I groaned, back arching and eyes closing. I felt pressure build inside me, and I exploded deep within Myrina.

She threw back her head, hair tumbling free over her shoulders as she did so. We held hands for a long moment as I felt myself pump a hot and sticky load deep inside her.

“Damn.” I chuckled. “Myrina, you really know how... to... ah...” I sucked in a breath as Myrina started rocking back and forth again. She wasn't done with me.

“More!” Myrina demanded. Her voice was tired now, and she seemed exhausted. But exhausted didn't mean she was ready to give up. The building swayed beneath us and some of the joints holding the floor to the pillars supporting the walls started to buckle.

Either I wasn't as good a carpenter as I thought, or we'd been going at it with a lot more force than I realized. I didn't realize until then that I'd been using the full might of my stats. And so had Myrina. Maybe we really would bring my nice new warehouse crashing down if this went on much longer.

“Ahh, Myrina, I need a minute,” I pleaded. Even with the help of Fabulous Phallus, I needed a little while to recharge. But Myrina seemed like she didn't have that kind of patience. She was intent on milking me dry as quickly as possible.

By now, she'd no doubt, she'd probably gotten my Fabulous Phallus' unique titles and afflictions. Namely, the

Nymphomaniac and cock addiction traits. And from what was happening right now, she deserved both. Between that and her own iron-willed determination, she wasn't going to let up unless I made her.

Fortunately, I had some experience with women who knew what they wanted and how to get it. The key was turning the tables on them in a way that still got them what they wanted. That way, they wouldn't resist the sudden shift.

"Myrina," I said, voice turning stern. That caught her attention again, though she continued to bounce on my hips riding the lingering waves of her last series of orgasms.

My stern words drew her gaze, and I used the opportunity to reach up and grab her shoulder. I leaned up and pulled her toward me, locking her into a kiss. She resisted for a moment, but when my lips brushed against hers she went still. For a moment she went limp in my arms, and I used that moment to roll my hips.

Now I was on top, and she was beneath me. She didn't notice the change of position in the slightest.

As we kissed, I reached down to her dripping slit. I'd been inside there moments ago, and a bit of my seed was leaking out of her.

I flicked my fingers across her sensitive clit. She was doing something similar to me, so she should get a taste of her own medicine.

She tilted her head back and moaned, but I merely went faster and faster. My pointer finger probed her entrance and teased at her most sensitive regions. Had I been in this situation a few months ago, I wouldn't have been able to manage this with the skill and speed necessary to keep Myrina from tackling me again.

But since then, I'd had a lot of practice with Sakura and Bridget. Myrina's legs kicked and bucked, but I pushed them wide again. She bit her lip to stifle her own moans as my fingers drove her wild.

And even still, she continued to murmur one word.

“More...”

I shook my head. She definitely had the Nymphomaniac title now, assuming she didn't have it already. Good. While it made Bridget and Sakura a bit of a handful on occasion, the increased regeneration it granted them to stamina and health was a valuable asset. I only hoped I could eventually upgrade Fabulous Phallus so I could keep up with three Nymphomaniacs. Two were hard enough on my hips. Three was liable to land me in a walker by the time I hit fifty.

Nonetheless, as soon as I was ready to perform, I went back to giving Myrina what she'd been not-so-patiently waiting for. I spread her legs wide and pushed myself back inside her. She was warm, wet, tight, and as full of passion as she'd been when we started.

**You have drained 1 level from Myrina Samhain!**

**You have gained 1 level.**

As my overall level rose and Myrina's fell, the level exchange came closer to one to one. I slowed my pace down. Both our bodies were shiny with a thin film of sweat, and I unloaded myself a second time deep within Myrina.

“Mhommm...” Myrina mumbled, now face-down in a pillow. She was lucky I'd kept my bag of holding well stocked for Sakura and Bridget. Myrina had expected us to rut on the bare wooden floor like a pair of savages. Fortunately I had blankets and cushions aplenty.

She sounded like she might still be begging for more, but our levels were much closer to equal now. And I was more in the mood to hold her than to fuck her again.

“Maybe in a bit...” I muttered as I flopped down on the pillow next to her and wrapped my arm around her naked shoulder.

It felt good. Natural, even. This was something I hadn't realized how badly I'd been looking forward to. And from the way Myrina snuggled up against my chest, she'd been looking forward to it as well.



We lay there a while as a few minutes passed. I felt like drifting off into a nap, but I felt Myrina stirring in my arms. Was she up by the door? I heard a creaking noise, but when I opened my eyes Myrina was still in my arms.

“Ahem. I see the two of you had fun. But I hope you’re both prepared for the consequences of what you just did.”

I whirled, standing up straighter to see who’d just spoken. Standing in the doorway I saw Myrina’s mother, Kyrina Samhain. The matriarch of the Samhain Clan.

“Ah crap.” I moved to straighten my clothes, then remembered I wasn’t wearing any.

Kyrina looked me up and down, nodding appreciatively. “You’re better built than most spellcaster types. My daughter chose well. I hope she wasn’t too rough with you.”

I coughed as I awkwardly put on my pants in front of the mother of the woman I’d just fucked.

“Sorry, I didn’t—”

Kyrina held up a hand. “Save it. This was Myrina’s choice. I’m not here to chide you over it. I am however here for what you humans from Earth call a ‘Shotgun Wedding.’”

“Come again?” I asked, surprise filling my voice as I pulled up my zipper.

“Myrina will soon be yours. Or you’ll be hers, as we Amazonians prefer to look at it. But hiding out on your world will be a lot more effective if we make it known that she’s yours officially. That requires a duel. A real duel, not the practice one you just fought. That was the reason Myrina came to you. Didn’t she explain all this?” Kyrina raised an eyebrow at her daughter, who was naked and lying face-down in the sheets.

“Ah... we may have gotten a little ahead of ourselves back there...” I shrugged sheepishly. “But I’m not one to have my fun and flee. I’ll take responsibility for my actions.”

“Good. Technically, that was supposed to happen before all of this, but with your particular talent, we switched things

around a bit.” Kyrina wrapped an arm around my shoulder. Meanwhile, Cyra loomed over Myrina with her arms on her hips.

She poked Myrina in the side with the toe of her boot. A bit of my seed drizzled out of Myrina’s perky ass.

“Get up, little sis. This is supposed to be your big day...” Cyra said. To me, she sounded like there was just a tiny bit of jealousy in there. “You’ve got a duel to lose.”

Myrina rose shakily to her feet. I reached down and helped her up. She pulled me close to her side and planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Carter, remember. Don’t hold back.”

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-SIX

**B**efore I knew it, I was on the warehouse's lower floors. It was still empty since I'd built several and didn't yet have enough workers to fill them all out.

This was one of the few private buildings in Shadefall that would be large enough for a match between D-grades. No wonder Myrina had called me here. She and her family had been planning on us having this duel from the beginning.

There were only four people in attendance. Cyra, Kyrina, Elder Elara the massive shieldmaiden, and Elder Caelia the woman with a sword on either hip.

These were the two elders who hadn't voted to support Elder Thalassa's decision to cast me out. Though our audience was lacking in quantity, they made up for it in quality. As far as the Samhain Clan went, I couldn't ask for more esteemed witnesses.

"There's our aspiring couple." Elder Elara crossed her arms, glancing between Myrina and me with a raised eyebrow. "I hope the two of you didn't do anything you weren't supposed to..."

"Uh, what? No, never! I'm... uh... an extremely diligent and traditional girl!" Myrina hastily insisted. "Not that I have any idea about what you might be implying because I'm both innocent and fully dedicated to Amazonian traditions. Completely and without fail!"

Elder Elara laughed and shook her head. "I might have believed that an hour ago. But I know the wobble walk when I

see it.”

Myrina’s face flushed crimson.

Elder Elara turned to me. “You better not die, hear me? The honor of the Samhain main family is at stake here.”

“I understand.” I reached out and took Myrina’s hand in my own. “I won’t lose.”

Elder Elara nodded in approval. “Well, just in case it seems like you’re not going to win, you should know that a potential lover running away from a losing duel is a thing that happens from time to time. As long as you get away before Myrina pops your head between her thighs, you’ll live to challenge her again a few years down the line.”

I returned her easy smile, showing confidence. “Don’t worry. I won’t need a second attempt.”

Despite Elder Elara’s doubts, I couldn’t afford a second attempt. Doing so would leave Myrina stranded here for who knew what Elder Thalassa had planned for her.

No, I had to win here and now, then take Myrina back home to Earth with me. That was what I decided, and that was what I was going to make happen.

“Ready?” Kyrina asked as Myrina and I squared off against one another.

The two of us met in the center of the warehouse room. Our audience stood off to the side, giving us the majority of the warehouse’s open central floor to fight. I glanced around the room. Less than an hour ago Myrina and I had been in the throes of passion just above our present location.

I glanced at the beam closest to us. Was that a crack running through it? Damn. Myrina had kept her promise after all.

“Whatever weapons you want are right here.” Cyra waved to a rack she’d just finished setting up. She wore a frown on her face as she saw Myrina and I squaring up, and there was a heavy slump to her shoulders.

Myrina picked up a shield, spear, and shortsword. I grabbed only a shortsword but would be sticking with my own wand and staff for the rest of it. When I'd made my selection, I signaled to Kyrina that I was ready, and she gestured to me to the center of the chamber, where Myrina had her eyes closed and was resting with her spear on her shoulder at attention.

"Remember, Carter." Myrina gave me a loving smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes this time. "Don't hold back."

"Begin!" Kyrina brought her hand down, and in the blink of an eye the fighting began.

Myrina struck fast as lightning. Her level hadn't been reduced by any item this time. But it had been reduced to match my own level.

Though she was faster, so was I. The net result was that these conditions were exactly the same as those when I'd beaten Myrina in the sparring arena. The time the System had given me the Amazonian Conqueror title.

I'd already done this once. Now I was doing it with an audience. No big deal. Not even worth stressing about, really. Soon Myrina would be face down on the ground, toned and perky rear firmly under my boot. Kyrina would call the match over, and then I'd take her home with me.

All I had to do was fight exactly as I had last time when I'd beaten her. I opened with Mana Barrage, spewing out a half dozen Mana Bolts. Last time, I'd overwhelmed Myrina's defenses by attacking from multiple directions at once.

No matter how good she was at keeping her shield in front of her, she couldn't use it to block from both the front and the back at once.

Or at least, she hadn't been able to block from the front and the back at once. The Mana Bolts rained down on her... and struck a bubble of energy surrounding her. The bubble glowed crimson for a moment as it absorbed my Mana Bolts, then faded back into invisibility.

"Defensive Talisman!" Myrina shouted by way of explanation. "Now that Shadefall is under our control again

we didn't waste time hunting down our usual armory. Turns out most of it was in storage right in the city!"

Crap. Of course Myrina was now armed with anti-spellcaster weaponry. Her family's lack of tools for combating spellcasters was the whole reason they'd been having so much trouble before. Normally, they'd have enchanted items to make up for the lack of magical abilities.

A Defensive Talisman like the one Myrina now sported was an expensive but highly versatile item for a melee combatant. I'd been looking at several artificer blueprints for them. Apparently, they sold extremely well, and for good reason.

While they were pricy single-use items, they performed an invaluable role in every fighter's arsenal. Mainly, absorbing one unique type of damage before being destroyed. Having one could mean the difference between a swordsman reaching the front lines in perfect condition ready for a fight or arriving already riddled with arrows and missing an arm.

This particular talisman was made to absorb ranged spellfire. In other words, the bulk of the damage I was capable of dealing.

Soulchain Nexus probably could have slipped by it, but without any lesser enemies to slay, I couldn't use that to apply stacks of Corrupting Mark. Sharky could have ignored the barrier, but Sharky was back on Earth.

I could try flinging Mana Bolts of non-neutral aspects at Myrina's barrier. There was a good chance one or more elements would slip through. No Defensive Talisman could protect against everything, and this one was probably tuned toward my Neutral Mana. But instead of pulling out my staff, I switched to another plan.

There was only one ability I had that could slip past the barrier without activating it. And both she and I knew exactly what it was.

"Arcane Blade." I raised my borrowed shortsword, extending it half its own length. Only an eyeblink had passed

since my Mana Barrage failed, but Myrina had used that time to close the distance with me.

I could sense a trace of disappointment in her eyes beneath her helmet as she rushed in my direction. She wasn't happy that I'd tried the same trick as before. I should have guessed that she'd have prepared countermeasures for me. It's what any good warrior would do, and Myrina was certainly a good warrior.

Sword met spear a moment later. We locked weapons and I flared Eldritch Augmentation to match her.

"I know all your sword moves, Carter. You won't win with that," Myrina said as she shoved me backward. "Have you forgotten what happened last time you got up close like this?"

I smiled wide. "Have you forgotten what I enchant?"

If Myrina could use disposable magical items, then so could I. Her family might be rich, but I was an Artificer. This was a game she wasn't going to win.

I produced a fistful of Mana Bombs. Each of them was loaded to the brim with Neutral Mana and would release large quantities of it when expelled. More than enough to overload a certain talisman Myrina was wearing.

Myrina's eyes went wide as she suddenly realized getting so close and personal with me had been a mistake. She shoved her shield forward to knock me back, but I used Warp Step to shift behind her. She spun, but despite her speed it took her too long to bring her lengthy spear around. She had to drop it and draw her sword.

Her sword clashed against my Arcane Blade. Our weapons had been the same length, but the spell coating mine gave me a reach advantage that made up for her having a shield. She tried to pull back and disengage, but that was when I threw the bombs.

They exploded one after another, throwing splinters up from the floorboards and widening the crack in the beam nearby.

Myrina yelped as a gemstone hanging around her neck exploded. Her skin hissed like water coming to a boil. Overloading her talisman so fast had made it turn hot enough to burn. She tore the broken talisman free and tossed it aside.

“Not bad! But how about—” Myrina didn’t get another word out before a barrage of Mana Bolts struck her.

The moment my first barrage failed, I’d been charging another. I’d only managed to make six of them in the brief time since Myrina had first charged me, but six was enough. Myrina could only catch two on her shield; the others struck home.

“Ugh!” she helped, lurching forward with the force of the attack.

I held my sword level. “I beat you before, Myrina! Just fight as long as you have to for honor’s sake. Don’t hurt yourself over this.”

Myrina grit her teeth and straightened her helmet. Her lip was bleeding, but she ignored it as she charged me again.

“You want me to give up?” Myrina asked.

“That’d be helpful, yeah.” I shrugged.

She dropped her weapons at her sides and approached slowly, looking like she might surrender.

I glanced at Kyrina. “So, how about we—”

Before I could finish, Myrina lashed out with a kick directly between my legs. She’d unfortunately seen my whole package less than an hour ago, and so she was quite familiar with what and how to kick. I doubled over as a sharp lance of pain shot through my guts.

“Don’t hold back!” Myrina shouted as she dashed back to where she’d dropped her weapons.

That was what Myrina had said to me at the beginning of the fight. I hadn’t listened to her and paid the price. I wasn’t about to make that mistake twice.

I activated Mania to the first level, Dissonance.



Immediately, the pain in my groin faded to the back of my mind. It wasn't important. My reluctance to hurt Myrina faded away as well. Yes, I cared about her, but right now my objective was to defeat her. Pulling my punches wouldn't help.

With renewed clarity, the fight began again, this time faster paced and even more intense than before.

Myrina was still better than me with a sword. Even with the enhanced speed I learned at, melee weapons were always nothing but a sidearm for me. But for her they were the heart and soul of her class.

But I wasn't forced to fight her up close and personal anymore. Now, she was the one being forced to come after me. Now that her talisman was destroyed, allowing me to disengage would only end up one way. With her getting hit by spell after spell until she was exhausted and unable to fight. All she could do was hound and hope to break through my defenses.

I was making no effort to strike her with a sword, and my blade was purely defensive. I threw off the occasional Eldritch Blast to force her to keep her shield up, blocking her own line of sight and slowing her down. Whenever Warp Step was up, I retreated and put a little more distance between me and her.

With our levels equalized, my titles should have been enough to overwhelm her with raw stats. The only reason Myrina could keep up with me was because of one particular lonely and potent bonus. Ironically, I'd been the one to give it to her just an hour prior. I still remembered the details from when Sakura had shown it to me.

**You have received an affliction!**

**You are addicted to [Carter Smith's Cock] – while 'suffering' from this affliction, you receive a +20% bonus to all stats.**

**Note: While under its effects, Carter Smith's Charisma stat will be 30% more effective on you.**

**This affliction will wear off in 3 hours and can be cured by any common-grade rejuvenation potion.**

I hadn't seen Myrina drink anything, so she hadn't removed the affliction. And from her strength and speed, she was enjoying the boost to her stats. Come to think of it, I'd leveled quite a bit since Sakura shared that status screen with me, so it was entirely possible that the current version of the affliction was even more powerful.

At the end of the day, that meant the main power boost keeping Myrina in this fight was the one I'd given her. A 20% boost was a massive boon, comparable to getting an extra legendary title. Such a thing wasn't possible beneath the System without drawbacks.

So what were the limitations here? Mainly the time limit. It wore off in just three hours, which meant it wouldn't even last a full day of hunting monsters without being refreshed. That was less time than many buffs or potions.

But if I tried to drag this fight out for three hours, Myrina's Tempo of Battle would have long since boosted her stats to the point that losing the bonus wouldn't matter. That meant there was only one obvious weakness to exploit. Myrina's vulnerability to my Charisma.

However, unlike Lisette, I had no direct Charisma abilities. I'd always used the stat as a passive ability. It had no impact on my fighting prowess.

But perhaps it could impact Myrina's?

An idea slowly formed in my mind as I disengaged. A smile slowly spread across my face. I wasn't sure I would have had the nerve to come up with a plan like this in my normal mental state, but Dissonance was helping me now.

"What's that smile for?" Myrina panted. "Keep this up, and sooner or later I'm going to get a lucky hit in!"

I pulled my staff from my bag of holding and set it in the air beside me. It hovered there as I suspended it with telekinetic power from my Artificer job. Then, I started filling the Mana Bolts hovering around me with wind-aspect mana.

I'd tried these kinds of bolts before. They turned into little blade-like gusts of wind. They were good at cutting weak

things, but with her levels in Vitality Myrina's skin would be enough to resist them. At most she might get a paper cut. But that was alright. After all, I wasn't targeting her, I was targeting her armor.

I lined up the wand Myrina had given me. I was already wearing the bracelet as well. Between the two of them, my accuracy with spells increased several fold. I'd need pinpoint precision for this.

Six cutting air blades in the form of Mana Bolts shot out at Myrina. Like before, she intercepted two of them. But two more cut at the cloth around her shoulders and waist, weakening it at strategic points.

"I didn't feel a thing, and now you've wasted all your Mana Bolts!" Myrina shouted.

I merely kept grinning in reply.

We danced around the arena, her chasing me and me throwing off a few cutting blades of wind. I could see the elders watching the fight with mixed looks on their faces, and Cyra's hands had turned knuckle white as she balled her hands at her side.

Whether they were worried for me, Myrina, or the Samhain Clan's honor I wasn't sure. But their fears were entirely misplaced.

"It's over for you, Myrina!" I laughed as I cut the last strategic loop and knot.

"What are you on about, Carter?" Myrina demanded, looking none the worse for wear despite all my Mana Bolts.

I drew on my staff again, this time drawing on water and earth. Mud was not a particularly useful aspect of mana under most circumstances. It didn't pack the same punch as pure earth, and it didn't move as well as pure water. But it did a good job of grabbing onto what it struck and passing that momentum to its target.

Naturally, I targeted Myrina's strategically weakened clothes. Six mud mana bolts struck her. The few remaining threads tore all at once. Her armor fell to the ground and her

dress beneath it whipped off her body like a sheet caught in the wind. Suddenly, Myrina was as naked as she'd been an hour earlier.

“Eeep!” She let out a sharp embarrassed yelp. “Carter, really?”

Her cheeks flushed red, and she held her sword hand over her chest.

“Gotta say, the fact that you still didn't put on any underwear was what made this strategy viable.” I smiled serenely. That only made Myrina even more embarrassed. Without the effects of Dissonance, I probably wouldn't have dared embark on such a cunning and devious plan as this.

Off to the side, Kyrina slapped her palm to her face as she realized what I was doing. Elder Elara looked intrigued, Elder Caelia seemed scandalized, and Cyra looked embarrassed on her sister's behalf as she shot a glance toward the elders.

“I like you better this way than in armor,” I said, loud enough for everyone to hear me. The taunts were purely for Myrina's sake, since at the moment I felt nothing.

If I had been feeling anything, I probably wouldn't have been able to keep my face from turning red at my own words. But the power of my Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge class had granted me true shamelessness.

Myrina's face flushed an even deeper shade of red, dropping her guard a little more as she covered herself up.

My words were having an effect. Even under normal circumstances, being caught naked in what was supposed to be the most important duel of her life had to be embarrassing. But thanks to the affliction on her, my Charisma stat was making it exponentially worse.

How much harder would it be for her to focus on fighting with this on her mind? Quite a bit, I figured. Especially if she was going to keep using her weapon hand to hold her well-endowed chest in place.

I used Warp Step to dart to the other side of her, then snatched her clothes from the air.

“I’ll hang on to these, Myrina. You’ll need to start a new wardrobe after you move in with me.” I tucked the torn and muddy scraps into my bag of holding.

“This kind of thing is why we Samhains hate magic casters!” Myrina shouted back at me, looking equal parts humiliated for herself and proud of my creative solution. It was an odd combination.

We clashed once more, but this time I had a decisive advantage. Myrina was still a better swordsman than me, but with all the blood rushing away from her brain she wasn’t as fast as before. She made several crucial mistakes, one of which left a perfect opening for me.

I used Warp Step again to circle around her and swung my sword in a wide arc. At the last moment, I twisted it to strike with the weapon’s flat.

*Crack!*

A tremendous fleshy smack sounded out through the air as I hit Myrina’s naked ass with the flat of my weapon. She fell face forward and landed with her cheek on the floor beneath us. Her sword and shield flung free from her grasp and landed on the ground in front of her.

“That could have been a crippling blow had I not turned my sword.” I shot a glance toward Kyrina and the elders. They glanced at one another at the blow. I gave them a moment, but they didn’t motion to end the duel.

I slammed my Arcane Blade into the wood by Myrina’s side before she could get up, then I pounced on top of her.

“Mhm!?” Myrina helped in surprise, biting her lip as my chest pressed against her naked back.

“I’ve won, just admit it,” I whispered in Myrina’s ear.

Myrina choked back a breath as I shoved my knee between her legs and brushed up against her womanhood.

Instantly, I felt her wetness soak through my jeans. No wonder Myrina was so good at fighting. She enjoyed it a little too much.

“I... won’t... give up so... easily!” Myrina said as she tried to crawl for her weapons. In doing so, she pushed herself up off the ground.

I grabbed one of her nipples and pinched it between my fingers. I probably didn’t need to be quite so rough, but a little revenge from before seemed suitable at the moment.

“Ah!” Myrina let out a loud moan that didn’t sound at all like she was in pain. Nonetheless, it stopped Myrina right in her tracks.

Sensing weakness, I dropped my wand and grabbed her other nipple. I squeezed that one too, then shifted my knee up closer against her crotch. Her arms went limp, no longer reaching for her weapons.

Somewhere in the background, I heard the elders talking among themselves. But I didn’t hear anybody ending the match, so I kept at it.

“Never... give... up... mmmm... I...” Myrina moaned. “Fuck...”

“We can do that,” I offered. “All day every day, in fact. But only if you surrender to me.”

Myrina bit her lip, forcing herself not to shout. But she wasn’t trying to crawl to her weapons anymore.

“Ahem...” Kyrina coughed again.

I kept squeezing Myrina’s nipples and gently rubbing against her clit. This combination would bring her Nymphomaniac trait to the fore. Victory would soon be mine.

“Carter?” Cyra called me.

“I’ve heard of wedding duels getting heated. But never this heated...” Elder Elara laughed.

“Hurry. Finish this!” Myrina pleaded.

“Oh, I plan to.” I smirked. “I’m going to run you through with my sword. But it’s up to you to choose which one.”

Myrina’s heart beat faster. “C-cock!” she pleaded. “Give! Now!”

“Carter!” Cyra called, louder this time. “Myrina! It’s over. You can stop now.”

I looked up to find the elders standing around us, much closer than before. They glanced at one another.

Kyrina pinched her brows. “My fault. I guess I didn’t shout loud enough. But this match is over. Carter wins.”

“Ha! If only all wedding duels were so entertaining! Good show.” Elder Elara congratulated me. Then she slapped Cyra on the back. “No wonder you wanted to get hitched so badly, Cyra! Ha!”

Elder Caelia shook her head. “You are fortunate this was such a small crowd. A duel won so... decisively in a public setting would be a bit of an embarrassment for the Samhain Clan. The main family already deals with enough rumors about being secret nymphomaniacs...”

I chuckled. Hopefully Myrina hadn’t shown Elder Caelia her new title.

“Just...” Kyrina shook her head and sighed. “Carter, well done. I’m glad to have such a *clever* son-in-law. Myrina, this isn’t the parting I imagined, but I hope you stay safe with Carter for the next few years. I will contact you again when it’s safe for you to return to Themyscira. In the meantime, I’m sure you can keep yourself busy with your new husband.”

“C-congratulations...” Cyra muttered, almost under her breath.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-SEVEN

The elders congratulated Myrina on finding a husband, and Kyrina promised to record it in the family records as officially as possible.

“With this, Elder Thalassa won’t be able to scheme against you in my absence.” Kyrina nudged Myrina in the side with her elbow.

Cyra nodded, eyes glassy and distant.

“As for you, Myrina. You’re getting married, not dying.” Kyrina held a finger up to Myrina. “While you no longer have any responsibilities to the Samhain family, I do expect you to lend a hand to your sister. You’re not in the C-Grade, so there are no restrictions on your presence here, unlike the Ancestors.”

“Right! Big sis, if you need any help I’ll come by and kick ass with you again!” Myrina pumped her fist in the air.

Cyra gave a dull nod.

“And me too. I’m happy to help as well,” I added. Cyra finally roused a little at my words.

“Well, don’t be quite so eager. I’d say give it a few months at least for news to spread and any schemes Elder Thalassa had of marrying you off to one of her allies to fall apart. Then you can help your sister. Cyra, I expect you to hold the family together. I won’t be around much longer, but I will come back as soon as I can. It depends on how much help your brother needs.” Kyrina shot a glance between her two daughters.



“I’ll stand strong,” Cyra promised her mother.

“As for you.” Kyrina turned to me. “I haven’t forgotten my promise of a few warriors to help you build an empire worthy of my daughter on your new world. As soon as you can set up a teleportation array, you are free to call on our warriors. Just please... use restraint. Things are not as stable as I would have liked, and it would not do to have too many of our forces out of position until Cyra has any rebellious elders firmly in hand or I’ve returned.”

“I understand. I won’t abuse your promise.” I smiled and shook my new mother-in-law’s hand. It was a strange feeling. It had been years since my parents died, so I wasn’t used to having any sort of maternal figure at all.

Fortunately, Kyrina didn’t make things awkward. She shot a glance at Myrina, who was squirming by my side. She was gently tugging on my arm.

“I think my daughter has something to tell you in private.” Kyrina jerked her head up the stairs. “Try not to be too loud. The rest of us will be filling out paperwork.”

Myrina practically dragged me back up the stairs and soon exacted her revenge for all my teasing during the duel.

When we finally finished, both of us were feeling much better. After our earlier exertions, we took some time around to relax in each other’s arms and talk a bit. Myrina filled in some of the missing details about what had been happening on Themyscira. Her last week had been just as eventful as mine.

Eventually, we came to the topic of what was going on back on Earth. Bringing her in the loop was especially important now that she’d be hiding out on Earth with me away from her family.

“So, Carter! Tell us what’s happening on Earth. You’re winning, right? Who’s left to wipe out?” Myrina asked.

“I was in a bit of trouble there for a while, but things took a turn for the best recently.” I smiled as I quickly brought Myrina up to speed on recent events in Crownhill. Chiefly, my

recent victory over Lisette, the last and greatest of my enemies.

“She was the last and trickiest of the Three Kings to beat. But now that she’s finished, there aren’t any major factions left on the shard. The trolls, ogres, Wolfmen, goblins, and now my fellow humans have all been crushed. We have peace at last—at least until the System decides to throw another shard at us.”

“I don’t know, but as soon as the System lets me, I plan on kicking your enemies’ asses!” Myrina grinned. “I’ll chop their heads off faster than you can blink, just watch me! Bad guys like that Alpha Wolfman you mentioned won’t be able to sneak away on my watch. They’ll show up and then *bam!* Dead. You can count on me.”

I chuckled. “I know I can, Myrina. I’m sure you’ll be a big help.”

Eventually, the pair of us headed downstairs again to find the elders gone, but Kyrina and Cyra both sitting at a table. They were making several copies of an official-looking piece of paper with both mine and Myrina’s names on it in elegant script.

Back home, it would have been easy to make as many copies as needed with a photocopier, but here on Themyscira, making copies was a lot more laborious a process, and the two of them had ink-splattered fingers as they did their best to write the same couple passages in a neat and elegant manner.

“There you two are. One of these copies is for you.” Kyrina pushed one of the papers toward us. It was a thick and heavy parchment with our names in the center of a heart. It seemed like this was our marriage certificate.

I picked it up off the table and tucked it into my bag of holding.

“Myrina can’t leave with me quite yet though. I’ve got one little issue to take care of. An issue named Lisette. I’ve mentioned her to Myrina, but not to you two yet.” I quickly filled Kyrina and Cyra in with what I knew of Lisette.

Kyrina held her chin in her hands, staring at me intently. “Carter, if things were finished back on Earth, you’d know. Actually, testing to see whether you’d laid claim to your shard was the first thing I tried with Thulga when Galbatorix pointed her out to me. I tried with my own teleporters too, but no luck. Your shard is still sealed off.”

I frowned. “Now that you mention it, I haven’t received any notification like I did for defeating Crownhill County Prison. That’s what happened after some of the other factions were defeated...”

Kyrina cast me a look of deep concern. “Carter, I’m certain of one thing. There should have been some sort of System notification. This was a System-mandated quest, and one of the most important area-wide quests the System ever gives. You would have gotten a notification that it concluded, along with the Shardlord title—since you would be the leader of the winning factions. That’s an extremely rare and highly coveted title.”

I flipped through my System menus. No title. No notification. Looking further back, the quest was still listed as ‘in progress.’

Kyrina was right. If the System was going to recognize my victory, it would have by now.

“What do I need to do?” I asked.

Kyrina sat up, leaning on her elbow as she spoke with me. “The simplest thing to do would be to kill Lisette or any other enemy leaders you have in custody. That would grant you a victory.”

I shook my head. “I can do that, but not until she fixes Kyle, Marcus, Terrance, Rick, and Chuck.”

Kyrina frowned and ran her fingers through her hair, pulling some of it out of the tight bun on the back of her head. “In that case, you should try the next best thing. Get her to speak a verbal surrender—have her make an admission of defeat. You can have her sign something, too, if you want. Either is usually enough for the System to recognize that she

lost. The surrender can be drawn out of her by any means necessary.”

The matriarch of the Samhain clan tapped a finger against her lips. “The System probably thinks there is a chance she could escape. Maybe she has some extra minions outside the city planning to break her out. Or maybe it considers your brainwashed friends to be those very minions.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But if you get Lisette to say out loud that she gives up, the System should hand you the title and declare the shard-war over.”

I nodded. “Done. I will take care of it first thing when I get back. And then I’ll come back for you, Myrina.”

“Not if I chase you down on Earth first!” Myrina poked me in the shoulder. “Hurry, add me to your party. I’ll scan your notifications to see when something happens. And it’ll let me hunt you down on Earth if you take too long to bring me back.”

I chuckled, then did as she asked. A moment later Myrina was in my party.

“You should take care of this Lisette person right away,” Cyra said. She’d been shifting awkwardly as she played third wheel to the playful banter between Myrina and me. “If the System thinks she still has a chance, then she might be planning something. Anything you need taken care of here? I don’t want to delay you on your trip back. The matter of getting Myrina to safety is urgent.”

“Yes, actually.” I ran upstairs quickly to fetch some of the bags of holding I’d brought from Earth and then discarded along with the rest of my clothes. When I returned, I handed half of them to Cyra. “Here. Food and basic hand tools from my homeworld. I wanted to sell them here in Shadefall. They should help with your current crisis.”

Cyra’s eyes lit up. “The people will owe you for this, whether they thank you or not.”

“Ha, well, they can thank me by buying them. I’m not giving them away. I am, however, willing to sell them cheaply.

It'll be good to get coin circulating again and get Shadefall's economy off the ground."

Cyra shrugged. "If you think it'll work, then it has my blessings and aid."

Cyra took the bags of holding from me. Myrina leaned over her shoulder as though trying to peek into them.

"What about me, Carter?" Myrina asked. "What do you need me to do?"

I handed Myrina several more bags of holding. "Here. These are templates and unenchanted materials for the workers here to start replicating. The people of this city are probably eager to get to work and earn some money to rebuild their lives after we destroyed their city. I'd like to give them that opportunity as soon as possible."

I smiled, leaned forward and got up on my tiptoes to plant a kiss on Myrina's cheek. "See you soon."

I turned to bid goodbye to Cyra, but she was already briskly walking toward the door.

We hunted down Thulga again for a teleport back home and I hugged Myrina one last time, though if all went well, we would see each other again that very evening.

Thulga waved her hand, and a moment later I was headed back to Earth.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTY-EIGHT

My return to Earth was swift, but my return to Crownhill even swifter. I had been in quite a rush to deal with things back home before, but now that Myrina was counting on me I had a fire in my chest. My only concern was how quickly I could get her here.

Was Lisette the last of my foes on this shard? I certainly hoped so. Because if there was anyone else the System still considered a contender for the title of Shardlord, I planned to cut a bloody swath through their forces before the sun set.

I crossed the barricade to find things slowly returning to normal. The fires had been contained shortly after I'd finished fighting Kyle, and now they were out entirely. I saw an entire work crew busy repairing Doctor Roswell's clinic.

That was good. I'd originally thought I'd need to assign a work team to that, but it seemed the good doctor had commandeered a team himself. They'd stolen a spare window from one of the malformed System-generated copies of the clinic next door and were using it to replace the shattered one.

"Hey, I'm back," I called out when I saw Frank assisting with the efforts. "Sakura and Bridget?"

Frank nodded back toward the city, dusting his hands off as he stood. "They're in the new council office. They've got you-know-who down in the basement. But don't spread that around. The exact location where they're keeping her is supposed to be a secret."

I nodded. "Smart."

I left Frank and the others to their repair job and headed straight for the new council chambers. There were more guards at the door than I remembered, but that wasn't that much of a surprise, considering this was the heart of our local government and we'd just experienced an attack.

They let me through without a word though, with one of them pointing me to a set of stairs leading downward. Hearing the familiar voices of Sakura and Bridget, I followed the stairs down.

In the basement of the new council building, I found Lisette in what could best be described as an improvised dungeon. It was complete with dank atmosphere and a few large metal poles that held up the building. Lisette was thoroughly bound, with handcuffs around both her wrists and ankles, and a rope wrapped several times around a pole as well as her throat.

She rested on her knees while Bridget and Sakura both loomed over her.

Lisette wasn't looking her best right now. She wasn't bruised or wounded in any way that I could tell. With how fast she healed, though, would I even be able to tell? She was, however, absolutely filthy. Her clothes were covered in dust, her hair was a mess, and she smelled a little funky.

It was amazing how much a little body odor did to ruin the femme fatale impression she worked hard to give off most of the time.

"It's you again..." Lisette said, voice not sounding quite so sweet. She wasn't happy with her captivity.

"Hello, Lisette. I trust Sakura and Bridget have been taking good care of you?" I asked.

Lisette stared at me with hard eyes. She was dirty and helpless, but judging how she'd ended up in Crownhill County Prison, that wasn't anything new. And despite her appearance, she was unbowed and unbroken. Somehow, she still thought she could win. No wonder the System didn't think she'd given up yet.

But I knew better. Her star had fallen, and claiming this shard was beyond her now. My people would not let her slip away easily now that we'd caught her, and my level would grow while she remained stagnant.

Worst of all, one way or another Myrina would be here soon enough. If Lisette lived to see that, she'd be truly finished then. What made this woman dangerous was her strange and unique abilities.

Abilities Myrina had just spent a considerable time researching for me. We'd know secrets to her class not even she had discovered yet.

In short, our fight was over whether she'd admitted defeat or not. We'd already had our climactic battle, and I'd won.

When I met her eyes, she spoke with a confident tilt to her chin, meeting my gaze with a glare. "I'm prepared to negotiate."

I shook my head. "That's not how this works. You're our prisoner. You should look a lot more worried than you are right now. In case you hadn't noticed, we just went through an apocalypse. Who knows what us savage barbarians are capable of?"

Lisette rolled her eyes. "Oh, please... I know restoring law and order is your whole thing. It's the reason you have all these followers and why so many people are flocking to you. They all think you're the closest thing around to getting back the lives they lost."

Her lips twisted up in a grimace. "I never would have guessed simply trying to make things be just like the way they used to be would work so well. I didn't think you could beat a ruthless hierarchical society where the strong consume the weak for levels."

I smiled. "Was that what you were going for in Crownhill County Prison? Forcing humans to fight one another until the strongest emerged?"

"That's what the System is doing to us, isn't it?" Lisette replied. "The System shoves all of us together on one little



shard, all starving and hungry for levels, where the only option is to kill one another. In theory, the System would be left with the strongest faction it could find when all is said and done.”

She shrugged, “That’s why I decided to do it myself, just on a smaller scale. It’s like that old East Asian black magic myth, where a hundred insects were left in a box to devour one another so that their poison might concentrate in the survivor. That’s what the System is doing to us. It’s concentrating all our levels in a select few.”

I had little to say to that. That was, after all, what the System had done.

“There’s more to building a powerful faction than just pushing yourself to a high level,” I replied. “If I’d done as you had, you probably would have succeeded in taking over just by controlling the minds of my elites. But instead, people of all levels work together to rebuild—and though your powers allowed you to dominate the strongest of my people, others stepped up to fill their shoes.”

“I almost got away with it,” Lisette insisted. “And I will get away with it next time.”

I frowned. “What makes you think there’ll be a next time?”

Lisette’s smile grew from ear to ear. “You can’t torture me down here. It would go against everything you stand for. You’re going to have to make a deal with me. And a deal is just what I’m offering.”

I crossed my arms. “You’re in no position to bargain. But sure... let’s hear it.”

“A month,” Lisette said. “Give me a month to get clear of the city and promise you won’t attack me before then. Do that, and...”

“Nope,” I interrupted her. “A month is too long.”

“Fine”—she sneered—“less than a month, then. I’ll give you my surrender. The System will declare you the winner of its little game and it’ll throw us at who knows what, next.”

A sour look twisted her still-pretty features. “Maybe I’ll have more luck with one of them than I had with you. I’ll even promise to go after them instead. I won’t be seducing an ogre or troll, but there’s got to be something handsome among the races of the multiverse.”

From what I’d seen of Themyscira, a surprising number of races were close enough in appearance to humans to be sexually compatible, at least as far as Lisette’s abilities went. If I were to point her at my foes, she could probably do considerable damage.

It was a good play, mostly because I could sense it was true. When she said she’d use her tricks to weaken one of whatever race the System threw at us next, she wasn’t lying. My gut told me that much.

Lashing out in anger would win me little, while turning Lisette into a tool that worked for me would be a tremendous boon. It was an appeal to reason, and I was glad she respected me enough to give it. With any other man, she probably would have just batted her pretty lashes and smiled to get her way.

“And if I agree,” I pressed, “you’ll fix Marcus, Kyle, Rick, Terrance, and Chuck?”

Lisette nodded. “And all the others I might have influenced, as well. I can fix all of them. Just agree to a week where I can make myself scarce, and I’ll not bother you.”

I turned and paced the floor a few times.

This woman was dangerous. On the one hand, her offer was genuine. On the other, letting her go could be like letting loose a snake in my room before going to bed. I might spend the next few years dreading when she’d turn up again, knowing the trouble she’d cause. Lisette was a disaster waiting to happen.

Or was she?

I had crafted a Talisman of Protection from Good and Evil for Frank. What if I crafted one for Kyle, Marcus, Terrance, Chuck, and all the others? I didn’t have the elemental cores right now, but perhaps in time I could make them so numerous

and so cheap on the streets of Crownhill that everyone could buy one for pennies.

Lisette might spend years planning her revenge only to discover her powers had been rendered obsolete. Myrina, no doubt, knew a dozen ways to deal with people like her. If there weren't ways to deal with Charisma classes, they'd be running the entire Multiverse by now. From what I'd seen, that wasn't the case.

Yes, this was doable. If I played my cards right, Lisette wouldn't have any choice *but* to target my enemies.

I just had to drive a hard bargain and let her think she'd escaped by the skin of her teeth. That should put some real fear into her. Fear enough to force her to keep her distance until I'd prepared enough countermeasures.

Having her out in the shadows gaining levels and causing trouble would be a thorn in the back of my mind, but maybe I needed that. If she was loose, my men would train harder, knowing what happened today could happen again. Heck, I would train harder, knowing she was out there.

How did that old saying go? If there is a scorpion in the room, I should like to know where it is?

Something like that. Lisette would be my scorpion. My fearsome foe to strike terror into my own heart and those of my allies. A foe that would keep our weapons sharp and our eyes keen. Otherwise, I feared what sort of enemy the System would throw at us should we ever let down our guard.

"Three days," I finally replied. "Fix everyone you've damaged, and you'll have three days to make yourself scarce."

"That's not enough time to gather supplies or new followers!" Lisette replied, cheeks flushed with anger. "I'm no survivalist. I'll need help if I'm to survive in the wilderness until the System finishes whatever it is that it's doing. Besides, I'm wounded. I barely have a tenth of my full health points. It'll take me three days just to recover!"

"No." I shook my head. "The moment I find a single one of your puppets, I'm hunting you down and finishing you off."

You're going out of town alone, or not at all. Wounded or not."

Lisette met my gaze and found it hard and unflinching. Sparing her life was the most she could bargain for. No more.

"Fine..." Lisette sighed, shoulders slumping as she recognized her defeat at last. "I recognize that I've lost. You've won."

The reaction from the System was instantaneous.

**Congratulations! You have achieved victory over all factions on your shard, uniting it under one banner and forging a powerful faction. As a reward for your efforts, you have been granted the title Shardlord (Legendary)**

**This title grants:**

- **+25% to all resource stats (such as vitality, stamina, rage, or mana) when defending your own territory.**
- **Access to additional exclusive territory management features intended for regional lords.**
- **+15 Charisma.**

**This shard has been fully consolidated, and all its territories now belong to a single faction! Celebrate your victory, for in three days the next stage of the integration begins.**

"I trust you are satisfied with that?" Lisette stared up at me with a displeased look on her face. Clearly, she'd gotten some kind of defeat notification.

I swept the notification away. "I am. But now it's time for you to fulfill the second half of your promise."

I pulled out Galbatorix's communication device. Myrina would want to know the moment she could come to Earth. Hopefully the wizard would be willing to pass along one more message for me.

*It's done. See you soon.*

I stuffed the communication device back in my bag right around the same time Kerrie and some of her new girls hauled Chuck down the stairs. Due to Lisette's powers, I was the only man allowed near her. Frank probably could have handled her thanks to his new talisman, but I wanted to save that surprise for the future.

No need to give Lisette extra hints if we didn't have to.

We started with Chuck because we assumed that he was the most durable of all of Lisette's victims. That meant we could get aggressive with containing him if Lisette was foolish enough to use him to attempt an escape.

For that scenario, the room was well armed. Kerrie stood in one corner with her bow drawn and ready. Sakura and Bridget held either of Chuck's arms. I even had a couple of Mana Bolts hovering over my palm.

Still handcuffed, we presented Chuck to Lisette. When she placed her hand on his forehead and concentrated, we all tensed.

After a moment, Chuck gasped.

"Ugh... man... my pants feel really tight..." Chuck said while he shook his head, as if clearing his mind of the fog that had settled over it.

"Chuck?" I asked.

I approached the man as Bridget handcuffed Lisette again. "How do you feel?"

"I... uh... damn. I've been up to some crazy stuff. For..." He whirled on Lisette, anger plain on his face. "It was you! You controlled me!"

"You remember all that?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. It's like the worst post-nut clarity of my life." Chuck shook his head again. "Also, remind me never willingly to visit Doctor Roswell's clinic unless I absolutely have to." The man shivered.

I chatted with him for a while longer, but he seemed to be the same man I remembered. Granted, I didn't know Chuck as

well as the others, but Lisette hadn't shown herself to be too adept at making her minions talk—at least not to hold a proper conversation. I was pretty certain after talking to him that she really had removed whatever it was she'd done.

With Chuck cured, we brought in Rick next. Like Chuck, Rick became angry at Lisette as soon as he woke up.

“Damn it! I'm married!” Rick clutched his temples between his fingers. “When I find my wife, how the hell am I supposed to explain this to her?”

I gave Rick a pat on the back. The sad truth was that if Rick hadn't found his wife by now, I doubted he was going to. But I wasn't about to take away his hope.

Marcus came in, and when he was cured, he went red as a beet the moment he saw Lisette. Spinning on his heel, he walked away without a word. Kerrie pointed to one of her subordinates to catch up to him and get him talking to prove he wasn't under Lisette's control anymore, but I could tell his face had held far more expression than it did when he was her puppet.

Kyle was equally embarrassed, though a little more talkative. “That was my first kiss...” he muttered, cheeks red and arms crossed.

“There, there...” Kerrie said, placing a hand on Kyle's head and giving it a pat.

Her transformation at level 25 had given her a bit of extra height so she looked, if not positively motherly, at least more mature as she comforted Kyle before ushering him away.

Lisette only smirked and shook her head. “Ah... young men. Truth be told, I prefer a man with a little more experience.” She shot a glance at me, but averted her gaze when Sakura smacked her bat into her other hand. “Jeeze... Can't even flirt with this crowd,” Lisette muttered.

Terrance was last. He sighed as he reached for his pants and hiked them back into place, then fixed his button. “That's been bothering me for a while.” He met each of our eyes. “And please, Carter, Sakura, Bridget, Kerrie, Margaret... if all

of you could purge your memories of when you found me, I'd be eternally grateful." Shaking his head, Terrance slipped away.

"Well, I've held up my end of the deal." Lisette smiled. "Time to let me go."

I grimaced. "Undo her handcuffs."

"Wait!" The 'her' in question held those still-cuffed wrists up. "I know you're a man of your word. I want your oath that you're not going to come after me for three days, like you promised."

"I gave you my word before, and I give it now again," I replied. "You've bought yourself three days of peace from me and mine—make good use of them. Break your end of the deal, and my people have orders to kill on sight."

I maintained eye contact with her, narrowing my gaze to make sure my warning sank in. "And if I were you, I wouldn't show my face anywhere near Crownhill ever again."

"Right, right..." Lisette brushed my threats off.

"Are you sure about this, Carter?" Bridget asked as she held the key to Lisette's cuffs.

"I'm a man of my word," I replied.

Scowling, Bridget released the cuffs binding Lisette's hands and then her ankles and untied the knot between her neck and the pole behind her.

Lisette rose shakily to her feet. "Ah, it's good to be a free woman again..." She smiled, straightening and dusting herself off.

Despite the tattered state of her clothes, her appearance improved a thousand percent with that simple motion and change of posture. She'd gone from prisoner to a woman enviable at any fashion show with no more than that. There was still weakness in her steps, and I could tell she had yet to regain much of her health pool. But she covered up any lingering weakness beautifully.

“Oh, and Carter, dear... you’ll regret not taking my original deal someday.”

Before I could reply, Lisette stepped toward the door and vanished.

“We’ll see who regrets things...” I muttered.

The rest of us tromped up the stairs, eyeing the crowd outside the door and making sure Lisette didn’t cause any more trouble with her departure. It was just a formality, though. I was sure she wouldn’t make a scene—not when she knew I was ready to kill her.

Which was why I was extremely surprised when I heard her let out a startled yelp a few paces away from the door to the Council building.

“What was that?” I asked, voice full of surprise.

Stepping outside, I was even more surprised to see a certain familiar red-headed Amazonian warrior standing in the middle of the street. Lisette lay in a pool of blood on the ground at her feet.

“Carter! I saw your victory notification! I was waiting by the portal with Thulga and crossed over right away. Then I used the party system to track you down. And look! You’ll never guess my luck!”

Myrina grinned wide as she kicked Lisette’s body beside her on the ground. “I found that crazy Charisma-class woman who’s been giving you so much trouble. She was just walking down the middle of the street! Can you believe that? She was nine-tenths dead too, just asking to be one-shotted! Well, you don’t have to worry about her anymore. Myrina, expert justice enforcer, was here to save the day! I told you I’d be a big help.”

I ran my hand through my hair as I approached. “Well... shit.”

When I nudged Lisette’s body, her head rolled away, cleanly separated from the rest of her body at the neck. Myrina looked over at me, proud as a kitten bringing me a mouse.



“Well?” Myrina asked proudly. “Did I do a good job or what? You had an enemy who almost snuck away on you. Can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen that happen. They always pop out of hiding when it’s least convenient and make more trouble. Well, as long as I’m here, you don’t need to worry. I’m an expert at finishing off fleeing enemies!”

I sucked in a breath. “Great job, Myrina. But I kind of promised her I wouldn’t—”

“Oh, I heard that.” Myrina’s grin grew even wider. “She fell for the oldest trick in the book. That was pretty clever of you, Carter. Let me guess, you saw me coming and gave her the old, ‘I promise not to kill you’ trick!”

Myrina elbowed me in the side and threw me a big wink. “You might have promised not to come after her... but I didn’t. Easiest way to bump off enemies there is!”

So much for my scorpion. I’d guessed Myrina would be her kryptonite, but I hadn’t expected it to happen *this* fast.

Between the winking, the laughter, and the headless body in the middle of the streets, Myrina didn’t appear entirely sane at the moment. Granted, she could be a little much at the best of times, but this wasn’t the first impression I had in mind when I planned to bring her home and have her meet all my friends.

“Carter? Who is your crazy friend? And how armed do I need to be?” Kerrie asked warily. She had her bow drawn and looked like she’d been ready for a fight until a moment ago.

I realized she wasn’t the only curious person. Everyone wondered who Myrina was. Standing over a body in the middle of the street tended to attract a bit of attention.

I coughed into my hand. “Uh... everyone? This is Myrina. You can put your weapons down. Don’t worry... despite how this might look, she’s on our side.” I gave Myrina a gesture, hoping she would introduce herself.

“Hello, humans of Earth! I am what you might call an alien! I’m from another world, and I come in peace!” She

threw one arm around me. “I’d ask you to take me to your leader, ha-ha, but he’s right here!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Behold, a token of goodwill.” She reached down and grabbed Lisette’s head by the hair and began lifting it up to present it to everyone.

Grabbing her hand, I pushed it back down. Meanwhile, the crowd had started backing away.

“Don’t worry, she’s a friend! I promise!” I held out my hand to everyone. That didn’t stop them from backing away.

“I don’t think they’re too impressed.” Myrina looked at me and shrugged. “Oh well. Not all good deeds get rewarded. Guess I’ll just sell the loot.” She frowned. “Where do your local necromancers go to buy bodies? Ah, forget it, I’ll just sell her here.”

Myrina pointed at Frank. “You there! You look like a man who could use a corpse. Fifteen gold, take it or leave it! She’s fresh and warm, ready for all your necro-needs.”

Frank looked around, then pointed at himself. “Uh... Carter, did your new crazy girlfriend just call me a necrophiliac?”

“New?” Myrina huffed, taking offense at entirely the wrong part of Frank’s question. “I’ll have you know I’ve known Carter ever since we were kids. If anything, all of you are newer to him than me.”

Margaret put a hand on my shoulder. “Carter, I know you have an... interesting taste in women. Just make sure she doesn’t cause more damage to the city than Lisette would have.”

Frank shook his head and patted my other shoulder. “You know, there was a time I envied you. But now? Well, every man has his burdens.”

“It’s not like that,” I protested. “She’s not *that* crazy.”

The redhead looked puzzled at everyone’s response to what she obviously considered to be a generous offer.

“Myrina! We don’t sell bodies on Earth.” I sighed. I was starting to realize that keeping Myrina out of trouble was going to be a lot harder than I thought.

# EPILOGUE

At first glance, the city ruled by Elder Thalassa seemed prosperous. But that wealth came at the whim of an iron gauntlet, for within her domain, Thalassa's rule was absolute.

From the smallest farm to the largest workshop, everything within her city was owned and under her control. Trusted agents managed her assets on her behalf, but at the end of the day, from the wealthiest nobles to the poorest commoners, no one under her watch owned more than the clothes on their backs.

This method of rule had its flaws. After all, a man or woman would never work as hard for another as they would for themselves. But sufficient applications of carrots and sticks got things working in an orderly way that Elder Thalassa deemed pleasing. Far more orderly than the chaotic and disorganized manner in which the Samhain main family managed their assets.

“There would have been no Shadefall rebellion under my watch...” Elder Thalassa muttered to herself as she stared out over her city.

“T-the wine, Elder,” said a nervous servant. “It’s the same batch that we served Matriarch Kyrina when she last visited.”

Elder Thalassa picked up the glass, swirled it once, then took a small sip. A moment later, she spat it right out.

“Not this drivel! The good wine.” Elder Thalassa set the glass back down on the table and waved the servant away.

Her mood ruined, she stalked through the halls. Everything had to be perfect for the very special guest who was due to arrive in just a few hours.

“You!” She spotted one of her servants. “Find some nightshade blooms. Morgathor will prefer those. And switch out red drapes in his room for purple. The Serpent Lodge prefers a certain aesthetic. One we will strive to match to make our guests as comfortable as possible.”

The servant quickly scurried off to do as she commanded. Elder Thalassa continued her inspection of the living quarters in her fortress, even going so far as to straighten portraits with her own hands when she spotted any too crooked. After that, she went to the kitchen to ensure dinner would be of the highest quality.

With her leadership philosophy, getting things done often demanded her physical presence to ensure everything was happening exactly as she desired. Any underling she granted too much power invariably ended up cheating her or doing things wrong at some point, so she could do little other than see to things personally as much as time allowed.

She spent the next hour ensuring the proper array of intricate tapestries were on display, each depicting her many victories and those of her direct ancestors. There were a few still up representing victories of the Samhain main family from her last guest, and those had to be removed and replaced with something more appropriate.

“Milady...” a nervous servant began. Her hair was drawn back, and though she was a far larger woman than Elder Thalassa, she shrunk in on herself in the face of the powerful C-Grade elder’s aura.

“Not now...” Elder Thalassa hissed. “There’s much to do before Morgathor arrives...”

“But milady...” The servant winced as Elder Thalassa whirled on her with an angry look, but she forced herself to continue. “That’s just it. Morgathor is already here.”

“What? He wasn’t due to teleport in for hours!”

The servant took a step backward and held up her hands. “He must have arrived early.”

Elder Thalassa cursed, then waved to the tapestries. “See to this. Any mistakes and I’ll have your hide for a new purse.”

The servant looked at the tapestries in bewilderment, not sure what she was supposed to do with them. But it was too late to ask questions. Elder Thalassa disappeared down the hall in the blink of an eye.

She stopped only once before a large mirror, looking herself over briefly. Gray-streaked hair was not considered ideal on most worlds, and more than once Elder Thalassa had considered dyeing it back to the darker color it had been in her youth. But she’d heard a rumor that wizards and their ilk often preferred a more mature look.

After all, most spellcaster specialists were helpless at the lower ranks. It took far longer to learn to cast spells than it did to learn how to swing a sword, and that difference manifested itself in leveling speed through F and particularly E ranks.

While racial upgrades always extended lifespans, they didn’t completely reverse the clock. Someone who reached E-Grade as a gray-bearded old man would still be sporting a gray beard when the transformation was finished, though with a lot more vigor than before. The same was true of D-Grade and C-Grade.

As a result, youthful-looking spellcasters were rare, speaking either of tremendous talent, tremendous backing, or tremendous recklessness.

Morgathor had possessed none of those in his youth, though he was certainly well connected now. Every member of the Serpent Lodge was a force of devilish magic that could

curse a city to disease and despair. Thalassa didn't look down on spellcasters like her younger and more foolish relatives might. No, she'd seen firsthand how dangerous they could be. And how useful, if bargained with.

After brushing herself off and throwing on something more formal for her guest, she rushed to meet him. He'd already made his way through her castle and had made himself at home in her library.

Thalassa didn't mind though. Before her dealings with the Serpent Lodge, she'd owned no more than a single shelf of books. The hundreds she acquired after that had been largely to impress the very man now sitting in her library.

"I see you've been studying the ancient history of Algammar. That world had such a tragic fate..." Morgathor said as she entered. He didn't look up from the book he was holding.

"I... ahem... yes, I've been studying that one quite thoroughly." Thalassa smiled from the doorway. In an instant, she'd discarded the appearance of the iron-fisted ruler she'd been moments before in exchange for something a little more intimate. "Wine? Do you want wine? I'll have some servants bring some wine. We can move to my lounge to chat, that might be more comfortable."

Thalassa hastily glanced around for some servants, but there were none to be found.

"No need for servants. And here is fine for me." Morgathor sat down on a nearby chair and twirled his fingers. A glass of wine appeared in his hand, conjured directly without him needing to physically reach for it in his bag of holding.

He had long hair and wore a long purple robe. Both hung loose and were completely impractical for combat, in Thalassa's opinion. While Amazonians also favored long hair, they had a million ways to keep it out of the way during the fight, but Morgathor didn't even make the attempt. He looked frail, and yet Thalassa knew he could flatten the entire castle with a few words. It always made Thalassa feel strange, but such was the way of things with spellcasters.

“You like it, I hope?” Thalassa pressed. “The book, I mean.”

Morgathor shrugged without looking up. “Not really. I think this is the abridged edition republished by the empire that colonized Algamar’s former territories. They massacred the surviving locals and had to make some historical alterations to justify it. Of course, they could have been right, and my own sources might be biased. Hard to say without visiting Algamar and searching the ruins myself. Perhaps I’ll find the time to write my own book on the subject one of these days.”

Thalassa smiled, forcing the corners of her mouth to reach either ear. “If you do, your book will have a favored position on my shelf.”

Slowly, she made her way to the chair Morgathor was sitting in and squeezed in beside him. She wasn’t shy about placing her arm around his shoulders.

They weren’t exactly lovers, but the two of them had a mutually beneficial relationship. One that could see great benefits to both parties if well-tended.

“It’s good to have you back. It’s been what, three years since you last visited me?” Thalassa leaned in close to read what had caught so much of Morgathor’s attention. The page just looked like a bunch of cramped, useless scribbles to her.

“That long already? Time sure flies...” Morgathor muttered as he flipped another page.

“I must ask, how’s our boy? I miss him so. Is he still in D-Grade?” Thalassa asked.

“What? Him? Oh no, he reached C-Grade a while ago. You can ask him yourself, he’ll come over either tonight or tomorrow. His power is still a bit hollow until he gets his proficiencies back up to match his new level, so he’ll have to stay at level 100 for a few years. He’s a bit overconfident and liable to look down on his enemies, but as long as we correct that he should be a fine wizard.” Morgathor waved his hand dismissively as he kept reading.



“Good. Very good.” Thalassa combed fingers through Morgathor’s hair. “Because I have a plan for that boy. It’s past time he gain some gifts from his mother’s side of the family.”

“I thought you didn’t want him. That was the whole reason he had to come with me?” Morgathor flipped another page.

“Not quite.” Thalassa shrugged. “Our relationship with the males of our kind is... complicated. Barring special cases like the main family, the Amazonian racial trait is only passed on in its entirety to our daughters, so our sons often inherit their father’s traits. It renders them unsuitable for our training strategies. He was a fine boy growing up in a System-designated child shard, but once he was able to level it was best he leave with you. He would have only ever been a mediocre warrior under my watch.”

“But now you want him back. After the Serpent Lodge has put so much work into him. My comrades won’t be pleased,” Morgathor replied, a trace of displeasure in his voice.

“It’s for his own good, I promise,” Thalassa assured. “I have a master plan. The Samhain main family is unworthy of their position of prominence. Kyrina was never supposed to rule the Samhain Clan, that she was ever able to do so was a mistake, but the other elders and I allowed it to happen. Her frequent absence allowed the various factions under them to rule as we pleased. But now she intends to change that by passing on rule over these lands to her daughter Cyra.”

“It sounds to me like things are simply returning to normal.” Morgathor shrugged.

“Normal does not mean better.” Thalassa shook her head. “And worse, Cyra proved far more adept than she should have been at bringing order to Shadefall. I expected that city to be a bottomless pit of clan funds for years, but rumor is it is already producing enchanted weapons again. No, I need to accelerate our plans. And our secret lovechild is just the young man for the job.”

Morgathor let out a low murmur, one that neither agreed nor disagreed. “What is it you have in mind?”

“Kyrina’s daughters are the key. Myrina would be the ideal target. As our son is C-Grade and she is D-Grade, defeating her should be simple. Well, there’s a minor off-worlder who might be trouble, but either of us should be able to take care of him easily.”

“All well and good, but our boy is a resource of the Serpent Lodge now. What’s in it for us?” Morgathor asked.

“Well, I can think of something in it for you...” Thalassa purred.

Morgathor closed his book, turned, and raised an eyebrow. “I was thinking something more material.”

“Fine.” Thalassa sighed. “We will transform the Samhain Clan’s territories into a resource harvesting outpost for your experiments, would that satisfy you?”

Morgathor shook his head. “That’s not enough. How about you give the Serpent Lodge some of your kinswomen? We are in the process of creating a new army of death knights. We’ve been killing warriors of the Sandswept Plains to fill out our ranks, but Amazonian corpses should do just as well.”

Thalassa chewed on her lip for a moment. “Deal. You will have both bodies and resources in exchange for bringing in the Serpent Lodge. With your support, no one short of the Ancestors themselves can hope to intervene. And with how the Shadefall Rebellion went, I imagine they’re all off on System Quests.”

“We’re at war with two neighboring multiverses now, and all high-tier warriors are needed on the front lines. The actions of little people like us will continue to go unnoticed,” Morgathor agreed.

“Now that we’ve settled that”—Thalassa smiled wide and brushed her fingers along Morgathor’s bearded chin—“it seems we have the castle all to ourselves until our son arrives. However shall we pass the time?”

Morgathor gestured to his book. “You have plenty in your library.”

Thalassa rolled her eyes. “I was thinking of something a little more intimate...”

Morgathor finally closed his book. “I could perhaps indulge. After all, it’s been...” The wizard frowned.

“Twenty years?” Thalassa guessed, smile on her face. “When we made our son? You know, the last time I lured you into my lair?”

The wizard combed his beard. “You know, I think you’re right. But are you sure this sort of thing is alright? Don’t you Amazonians have that whole duel thing you’re supposed to go through? That’s the whole basis of how you plan to use our son to take over the main family, after all.”

Thalassa laughed. “While it’s true I’m quick to remind the Samhain main family about the importance of our traditions... what they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

**End of book 2.**

**For news, artwork, progress updates, Discord server invite, and Patreon/social media links, check out [www.MarvinKnightBooks.com](http://www.MarvinKnightBooks.com)**

# CARTER'S FINAL STATS

Name: Carter Smith

Race: Homo Accelerata (Rare – Level 65)

Class: Scholar of Forbidden Knowledge (Epic – Level 65)

Job: Master Artificer (Mythic – Level 34)

## **Racial Stats:**

Strength – 106, Agility – 76, Perception – 91, Vitality – 117, Intelligence – 189, Charisma – 70, Luck – 38

## **Class Stats:**

Insight – 65, Aberration – 65, Arcana – 65

## **Proficiencies:**

Caster, Cold Resistance, Combat Tactics, Dodge, Dual-Wielding, Examine Resistance, Exploration, Focus, Heat Resistance, Hiking, Improvised Weapons, Knife Throwing, Leadership, Meditation, Neutral Mana, One Versus Many, Pistol, Poison Resistance, Regeneration, Repair, Rifle, Running, Shield, Spear, Speech, Spell Sniper, Sword, Taunt, Tracking, Wolf Slayer

**Marks:**

Lesser Mark of the Samhain Clan (Mark of friendship)

**Racial Abilities:**

Arcane Blade, Examine, Fabulous Phallus, Iron Will, Mana Barrage, Mind over Flesh, Power Jump, Power of Nature, Share Curse, Soul Vampirism, Warp Step, Surging Strength

**Class Abilities:**

Blood Sacrifice, Corrupting Mark, Disassemble, Eldrich Augmentation, Eldrich Blast, Enlightenment, Exploit Weakness, Study, Warp Step, Summon Ghost Shark

**Titles:**

Forerunner of Earth, Integration Survivor, Gallant Guardian (Temporary, but keeps getting renewed), Mechanical Master, Death Defier, Great Ancestor, Giantslayer, First Lord, Spell Architect (Mana Barrage), Amazonian Conqueror, Shard Lord

**Inventory:**

Survival short sword, Basic Wand, Pendant of Magical Fire, Basic Bags of Holding, Spellsniper's Bangle, Boots of Agility, Wizard's Robes, Blessed Second Heart of the Troll(s), Lesser Pouch of holding, Moonshade Fox Cloak, Stylish Sunglasses.

# AFTERWORD

Thank you all for reading! As always, I appreciate your support. You can find more of my work on my author profile on Amazon. Remember to follow me to make sure you get notifications of the next book in this series!

I hope to see you again for Amazon Apocalypse 3.

Patreon: [patreon.com/MarvinKnight](https://www.patreon.com/MarvinKnight)

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMarvinKnight/>

Page:

Instagram

<https://www.instagram.com/marvinknightbooks/>

Page:

Twitter: [https://twitter.com/Marvin\\_Knight69](https://twitter.com/Marvin_Knight69)

Website: [www.marvinknightbooks.com](http://www.marvinknightbooks.com)

# LINKS

You can find all of my social media links on [www.MarvinKnightBooks.com](http://www.MarvinKnightBooks.com)

If you're uncertain about an account, refer to that website. I've been dealing with an imposter lately pretending to be me and selling stuff, and a few people have been scammed. Remember, I only sell books or Patreon subscriptions. If an account claiming to be is trying to sell you anything else, it's an imposter!