

“... A HILARIOUS BALLS-TO-THE-WALL HEAVY METAL STAKE FEST.”  
— MATT DINNIMAN, AUTHOR OF DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL



# BRAD

BOOK ONE

# THE IMPALER



# PAUL SATING

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**BRAD THE IMPALER**

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# CONTENTS

## [Also in Series](#)

### [Free Fantasy from Paul Sating!](#)

1. [What it's Like When Worlds Collide](#)
2. [Man in the Box?](#)
3. [Give the Dog a Bone](#)
4. [Chase Like a Beast](#)
5. [Not so Home Sweet Home](#)
6. [Games People Play](#)
7. [Play the Game Tonight](#)
8. [Redneck Games](#)
9. [Learn to Fly](#)
10. [Every Rose has Their Thorn](#)
11. [Raspberry Berets](#)
12. [Dilemmas](#)
13. [No One Gets Out \(A\)Live](#)
14. [Wherever We May Roam](#)
15. [Into the Fire](#)
16. [Feel Like a Monster](#)
17. [Mountains](#)
18. [Survive](#)
19. [How to Save a Life](#)
20. [Blanket on the Ground](#)
21. [Bat Outta Hell](#)
22. [Here's to the Farmer](#)
23. [The Price](#)
24. [Free Bird](#)
25. [Knock on Wood](#)
26. [Rattlesnake Shake](#)
27. [Dude, Where's My House?](#)
28. [Modern Caveman... and Dog](#)
29. [Been Caught Stealing](#)
30. [Fight For Your Rights](#)
31. [Snake Bite Love... Sorta](#)
32. [Mostly the Good Die Young](#)
33. [Zombie](#)

34. [Why Can't We be Friends?](#)
35. [Hard Bargain](#)
36. [Strangers in a Really Strange Land](#)
37. [Your Beast of Burden](#)
38. [Fear of the Dark](#)
39. [Man With a Mission](#)
40. [Talk That Talk](#)
41. [First Day of the Rest of Our Lives](#)
42. [Playing with Fire](#)
43. [2 Minutes to Chaos](#)
44. [Kill 'Em All](#)
45. [In the House of the Mountain King](#)
46. [Let it Rain](#)
47. [Nothin' but a Good Time](#)
48. [Five O'clock Somewhere in the Real World](#)
49. [Treasure](#)
50. [Jump Then Fall](#)
51. [We Don't Need Another Hero... Or Two](#)
52. [Dark Masquerade](#)
53. [The Toxic Waltz](#)
54. [Run to the Hills](#)
55. [Hail to the King](#)
56. [Call to Arms](#)
57. [Dancing Queen](#)
58. [The Final Countdown](#)
59. [Home Sweet Home](#)

[Thank you for reading Brad the Impaler](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

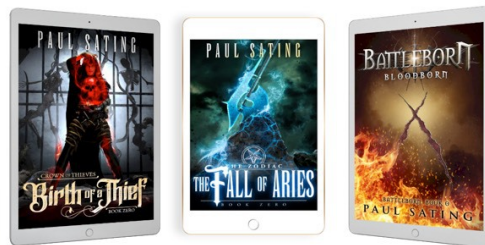
# ALSO IN SERIES

[Book 1 – Brad the Impaler](#)

[Book 2 – Into the Pit](#)

# FREE FANTASY FROM PAUL SATING!

**Free Fantasy!**



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*To all the dogs of the world for being better residents of this  
rock than the humans who've claimed it as their own.*



# I

## WHAT IT'S LIKE WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE



Looking back, I had to question if I should have chased my puppy. If I hadn't, all the madness that followed might have never happened. My world wouldn't have turned upside down, and I wouldn't have been thrust into the middle of a strange realm straight out of a fantasy video game.

But I *had* gone after the damn dog. That damn. Adorable. Lovable. Seven-pounds-of-stubborn-attitude-Chihuahua. And at that point, I was in for the fight of my life that would drive even the staunchest Puritan to hit the bottle.



"Don't even think about it," I said, yanking Slash's leash. He was absorbed by the bush he was investigating. The Chihuahua weighed less than the twelve-pack of microbrew I'd brought home before heading out for the walk. I gave the leash another tug, this time slighter. "Come on. It's cold and I've had a shitty day."

Night had fallen, doing little to highlight the tiny dog's black coat. The only parts of the small body not covered in

black fur were his undercarriage and two dots of tan above his eyes. Halfway under the bush, none of that was evident. When Slash investigated, nothing stopped him except for his stifling fear. Of everything.

I took in the night sky, thinking of all the heat the planet was losing into that vast emptiness above and ignored the urge to rush the walk to beat the worst of the coming chill. But Slash needed this time. Deserved it. He'd sat at home all day, alone, while I worked my dead-end job. He'd waited for me. Suffered through hours of bad nineties grunge I'd left playing on my speaker to keep him company. I didn't have the money, room, or energy for another dog, even one of Slash's size, which meant he was alone every day.

No, I wouldn't win any fur-baby parent-of-the-year awards any time soon.

A drizzle misted my face. Typical Pacific Northwest weather eleven months of the year, of which I was smack dab in the middle of. Still buried in the bush, Slash growled, yelped, and scurried to no avail. A flapping in the darkness above the yellow glow of the park's lights briefly distracted me from my munchkin's efforts to free himself of the bush.

"What is it, buddy?" I asked, bending to peer under the bush, knowing damn well he most likely didn't even see anything. The Chihuahua had a habit of freaking out over everything. "See something?"

Slash's teeny dark eyes were rimmed with a seal of wet tears. He shook, but Slash, like all Chihuahuas, always shook. All. The. Time.

"Nope. You have to go pee first. Not picking you up."

One fang became exposed because his muzzle always dries out and his lips constantly snag a tooth. The shiver moved down to his hind legs. He sat.

"Put that away," I said, glimpsing his tiny manhood, standing proudly. "Whatever you think you saw under that bush isn't worth getting that excited about."

Slash just blinked, the two spots of tan fur above each of his eyes flicking up and down amidst his shivering.

In my hand, my phone's screen brightened with the notification of a new message. From Tess. My most recent ex-girlfriend in a long line of coulda-woulda-shoulda beens. Tess was different, though. She was one of the few who didn't hate me for my inability to commit to a life filled with knick-knack shopping.

Tess was good people. Just because we didn't work out changed none of that. The relationship disintegrated, not because of anything she did. Nor me, for that matter. We didn't work because we were two people at different points in our lives when things went to crap. The cool thing? Both of us understood that. Which went a long way toward explaining how we could be the envy of all failed relationships in town. Well, at least within our own circles, small as they were.

Sup, Cowboy?

I shook my head, smirking.

Sup.

Plans?

Walking the pup.

Awww, how's my wee man?

MY wee man is doing well. Though, I swear, I don't know how something his size can piss so much.

Because you're always feeding him booze.

Lies.

I chuckled. Maybe she got me there.

Anyway. Give him a belly rub for me.

You got it. What's up?

Don't know. Just wanted to check on you.

Everything okay?

My gut. Something's weird.

Like?

Don't know. Just creeped. Didn't help that I saw a bat when I was trying to get into the apartment. I haven't run that fast in a long time.

I snorted. I've seen Tess run. It's not pretty.

Must have been a sight.

Don't laugh. It's not funny. You'd appreciate that if you had hair.

I have hair.

Ha! You got out of the military two years ago and could still pass inspection with that high and tight you're sporting.

Touche.

Can you imagine getting a bat tangled in the nest I'm sporting?

Humidity get to you today?

You know it.

Well, I promise, I'm good and safe. Heading home after he finds a place to shit.

You can't rush perfection. One must poo only in the perfect spot.

Obviously.

Check in when you get home?

I squinted at the luminous screen. This was odd for Tess. She was sweet and caring and considerate. If she needed five seconds of my time when I got home just to let her know I'd made it safe, I'd give it to her.

Promise. I'll check in the minute I get in the door and get the wee man's leash off.

Thanks. Be safe.

Roger.

Don't do that. I'm not your drill sergeant.

We didn't have drill sergeants in the Air Force.

Home. Check in. Got it? Over n out.  
#ListenToYourEx. #SheKnows #WomenRRight  
#DontPlay

Yes, ma'am! Bye.

Bye.

Tapping the screen, the phone went dark as I slid it into my pocket.

Slash loosed a series of high-pitched barks in rapid-fire mode, pulling toward the bushes on the far side of the park. He might be little, but his sudden movement coupled with the fact I was still sliding my phone in my pocket and only half paying attention, was the perfect opportunity for his liberation.

The retractable leash housing smacked the gray concrete sidewalk and bounced up into Slash's tail. The little dog yelped and pulled his hind legs up to avoid the rear attack. Spooked, he burst across the park, giving me the wonderful opportunity to get in an evening workout after ten hours of sitting in a cubicle answering customer complaints.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. "Stop!"

The transition from concrete to slick grass was hardly glorious. My right foot hit the grass and slid out from underneath me. My weight shifted before I was ready, and I met a cruel, humiliating, and chilling fate when I crashed to the turf.

Slash's yaps filled the night air, along with the distinct flapping of bat wings. His already diminutive form bounced away with a briskness that stopped my heart. Call me possessive—I'm not, unless it comes to my pup—but I couldn't stop the thumping in my chest.

Life was rough enough right now. After eight years in the military, I walked away without my college degree or competitive job skills that translated into the civilian world. Tess aside, my recent relationships could have made for good true-crime fodder. What woman wanted a guy staring down his thirtieth loop around the sun without a degree? One who lived in a ridiculously small apartment with an even more ridiculously high rent? One with a savings account with too many zeroes on the wrong side of the decimal? A guy with a job that offered long hours, crap pay, and an unscrupulous boss? The last thing I needed was to lose my pup.

I grunted and was on my feet. Slash was faster. He floated across the park, disappearing behind a row of trees which

served as the line of demarcation between the park and the spot where the city of Olympia inserted itself in everyone's face like an obnoxious, drunken uncle at a holiday gathering.

This was it. I was really going to lose the little dude. Sure, I had him micro-chipped, but trusting strangers to do the right thing was a fool's folly.

Those thoughts fired my momentum. I was just warming up as I raced across the open park toward the trees.

In the distance, Slash's barks cut through the night. Aggressive. Pitched.

Scared.

My thighs burned, but damn, I felt like I was flying across the grass. The trees rushed toward me instead of the other way around.

A flapping sound. Wings. Far larger than any bat I'd ever heard whizzed above in the blanket of the night sky.

The misting rain lashed at my face. Houses and buildings, rising above the tree line, blurred into malformed squares of light. The screech of the nighttime airborne creatures morphed with the power of the Doppler effect.

I could have barreled through a wall if it meant getting to Slash and cutting off whatever had him so scared. My fists clenched, pushing to a sprint through the last third of the park and into the trees. "I'm coming, little buddy. Hang on."

I'd broken past the tree line. The park stood behind me, as silent and cold as my mother's disapproval when I told her I was joining the military. Before me, my tiny Chihuahua stood with his four legs forming the widest base six inches of sinew, ligaments, fur, and bone could. A quarter-sized tuft of hair stood at his withers.

"What do you see, buddy?" I leaned slightly, not reaching out to calm him. Laying a hand on his scrawny back would likely send him shooting into the bush he was now flexing on like a twenty-something with failed professional sports aspirations.

A rumble of a growl sounded from Slash's gut. Adorable, if only the air didn't hold an unnerving feeling. Cursing Tess for freaking me out, I peered into the dark shadows of the large bush. The park lights touched only the top leaves.

"Maybe we should just go?"

Braced and ready to bolt if something came out of the bush, it was like he hadn't heard me.

"There's nothing in there." Even my glib laugh didn't ease him. I slowly reached down for his leash. "Come on, wee man. Let's get home."

My hand was almost at the leash grip when Slash dashed sideways, freaked out by my movement. He yipped and yapped, his tiny eyes wide and his hackles raised as he vocally assaulted the bush. His leash's cumbersome grip and housing bounced along behind him as he tried to avoid it, the bush, and my intrusive hand. Once it bounced against his leg, there was no catching him.

When Slash gets like this, I learned the only way to get back in his good graces was by posing as a non-threat. I'm six-one and two hundred and ten pounds of relatively decent muscle. My presence had to be intimidating, especially to a dog already intimidated by most of life. So I did the one thing that would calm him enough to slink back within my reach. I sat down.

"Happy?" I asked my pup.

Slash had stopped darting all over the place, even though he continued snapping his head around to ensure he wouldn't fall victim to another attack by his retractable leash.

A wet ass was a small price to pay to comfort the little guy. "I really want to get home. I'm cold. I'm hungry. I'm..." Well, I didn't want to tell him I was starting to freak out about the strange night. Oddly quiet. Bats flitting about. Even the cloud cover seemed stilled, as if painted on the sky. "What do you say we get home and get a beefy treat?"

Slash bowed his head and sniffed at the grass, slinking forward. He was almost within reach when he stopped again,



his head snapping up at the cracking of a branch.

My head flashed around and prickles rose on my arms.

Slash yapped, growled, and hunkered lower at the hidden presence.

“It’s okay, buddy. We’re going to go home and get a nice, meaty snack. Maybe two. Okay?”

I jumped at a sudden crash and snapping of branches. The sound of fifty water bottles being crushed simultaneously. The bush shook. I bolted upright. Slash yipped and shuffled away from me and the shrubbery.

“Tonight’s not the night,” I said, scanning the long row for any signs of movement. “I’m serious, dude. Just let me get my dog.”

Watching the shrubbery, I felt a slight nudge against my calf. Slash cuddled against me. He looked up, his eyes shimmering as he shivered.

I smiled. “You’ve got to be freezing, wee man. Let’s head home?”

He snapped his head at the bush, showing his developing perpetual hatred. His ears, never the sharply angled type of domineering dogs, flopped forward, bent in half. He raised one, but it only peaked for a second before flopping over again. His front paws, recently planted in the wet earth like he planned on pinning it down, convulsed. His growl sounded like a road roller smoothing out blacktop on a highway project.

Just as I was about to snap him up, a burst of light knocked me backward. So powerful it set the entire area alight, like someone had turned on stadium lights. And we don’t have stadiums in Olympia.

## MAN IN THE BOX?



Shielding my eyes from the overwhelming brilliance of the burst of light, I searched for Slash. He wasn't at my feet. Out of sight, but definitely not out of mind. He couldn't be, not with the racket he was making.

"Slash!" I hated sharing the panic in my voice. It'd do nothing to comfort him and betrayed my lack of an ability to do so. I couldn't see a damned thing. Not only did I not know where he was, but he was beyond freaked out. "Come here, boy! Come on. Want a snack?"

Keeping my hand up in front of my eyes, I stumbled forward, telling myself this wasn't a runaway car that'd hopped the sidewalk, set on a collision course with me and my pup. The light wasn't white and bright like a car's headlights. More yellowish than anything. The same warm radiance I remember a lot of the younger Germans decking out their tiny sport GTIs with when I was stationed in Kaiserslautern.

The light was steady. It didn't bob or rock like a vehicle that'd hopped the curb. No racing engine either. Just a slight, steady hum. And it came from behind the leafy green barrier.

When I found him, Slash didn't notice me. He was too busy barking at the light in a series of 'ruffs' followed by something that sounded like a 'rah-roo.'

I shuffled closer. "Come here, boy."

The world burst open with yellow intensity. Good god on an ice cream cone. I winced. The invasion of light was intense.

I shot my hand back up, my eyelids burning. Blindly, I reached out for Slash. I don't think I breathed until I felt the softness of his coat in my palm.

Whatever caused the light was still humming. A low, rhythmic sound. Close, but shrouded in the blinding gleam.

My hand wrapped around Slash's abdomen. He didn't fight me when I lifted him into my crooked elbow. His stomach vibrated as he continued to growl.

"Me too, buddy. Me too." I bobbed him, pulling him closer, hoping enough of my body heat would radiate through my jacket and warm him a little.

We stood there for a mesmerized moment. Slash's growl deepened. I kept my hand up to shield the light. For some reason, I didn't feel like backing away. Curiosity? Piqued interest? A strange sense of the macabre? Something else? Something external.

My foot slid forward. What the hell was I doing?

Another step. Closer to the light.

The humming pulsed inside my head, varying slightly. It sounded like someone talking to me underwater.

*No. That's crazy.*

*Thwump. Thwump.* The pulse continued, just marginally over the undertones of what could have been the voice my imagination created.

Another unwilling step.

I slowly lowered my hand from my eyes. With each step closer to the light, the dimmer it grew. Another step, softer still.

"What the hell?"

The glow was still strong, stretching thirty feet in every direction. Though the brightness had diminished from its

moment of inception, the humming remained just as constant, never wavering.

Approaching the bushes, I noticed something curious. With my free hand, I brushed aside the front branches, separating them as if opening a curtain.

The shrubbery was tall and manicured, well maintained by the city. At shoulder height, they effectively shielded the park from the street and buildings beyond. The central point of light remained steadily luminous. I couldn't make out the item. A meteor? No way. Would have seen and heard that falling from the sky. A streetlight that somehow fell off its pole? One of the new solar ones? That would explain how it could remain lit if it'd detached from the pole, but it wouldn't explain how it'd gotten under this bush. Nothing explained why I was hearing voices.

Slash's growl deepened. He's pulled his lips back, his snout crinkling and exposing his small canine fangs.

The interior of the bush was free of branches, like the light had burned away the vegetation. The ground was bare dirt. Dust hung heavy in the air, even though I didn't see any flitting about in the light. It was as if someone had scooped the inside of the bush out, creating a natural cave of sorts.

Slash yipped when I took another step forward. He barked once when I took the next. By my third step, he fidgeted and squirmed, trying everything in his seven-pound power to free himself from my grip. At my fourth step, he gave my hand puppy kisses between whimpers.

I looked down at him. "It's okay, boy."

I was too driven by curiosity, too focused on answering the call of the mysterious voice, to stop.

*Whoomp. Thwump. Whoomp-wharmp.* The light called. Pulsed dully at first. Almost unnoticeable. Slow, intoxicating.

Slash yipped and laid his tiny head on my forearm.

The light palpitated faster. With another step, it picked up the pace. Yellow light brightened and dulled, brightened and dulled. Faster and faster. By the time I made out details, the

light throbbed with power, blinding me to what hid behind this strange power.

Something big lay on the ground where the root of the bush should have been. Something I needed to see for myself.

Slash shifted, pushing back into the crook of my arm. If he could have burrowed into my skin, I'm sure he would have. This time, his shaking had nothing to do with the Chihuahua's high metabolism.

“Shhh. Shhhh.”

This close to the mystery, I had to see what it was. Had to. I'd been drawn, called to it. I couldn't walk away now.

I started to squat, and was halfway down when the yellow beacon vanished with a sucking sound. The shock of the sudden absence knocked me back. I fell for the second time.

A chest straight out of Game of Thrones sat cockeyed in the wet dirt as if a giant hand had wedged it so it wouldn't slide away in the next Pacific Northwest downpour. Though the light was gone, the humming hadn't stopped.

And it was coming from inside the chest.

The wood was a rich brown. Maybe teak. Four bands of black iron plating ran over the lid from back to front, nearly as wide as Slash's frame. The iron plating was broken up by an iron button design that almost looked like flattened garlic cloves. The chest was almost six feet long. Peering over the back, I was surprised to see it was half again as deep. This was one big son of a bitch. The lock and latch plates were flat and black, shaped like mirror images of a spade. There was no lock.

I reached for the latch. Slash yipped and snapped like he was trying to snatch a mosquito out of the air.

“It's okay, buddy.”

My hand hovered. The design made it look a thousand years old, but the condition of the wood made that revelation problematic. It could have just rolled off the assembly line in a Detroit or Tokyo chest-making plant.

I'd never forgive myself if I didn't peek. There was always the chance this was a legitimate chest filled with goodies that might make the national news. Something this size piled with ancient Portuguese gold? My crappy apartment in the low-end district of Olympia would be a thing of the past. I could quit my lousy, non-benefit-paying customer service job. I wouldn't even give my two weeks' notice.

The black iron was cool to the touch. I put a knuckle under the curled lip of the spade-shaped latch. I almost dropped Slash when he attempted to wiggle free.

"No way, dude," I said, squeezing him against my chest. "Let me see what this is, and then I'll take you home."

Slash growled, his lip getting stuck on one of his canine teeth, leaving the white bone-like dagger exposed.

I flicked the latch. It smacked against the upper plate. Blowing out a breath that was far too shaky for my liking, I said, "Here goes nothing."

I grabbed the side of the lid and lifted. A beam of yellow light burst skyward. The light was blinding, forcing me to shield my eyes again.

Slash went ballistic in my arm. Squirring, yipping, and yapping, snapping at the air with his tiny snout.

The humming deepened. The subliminal voice I thought I heard all along drilled deeper into my psyche, making me question whether any of this shit was real. The *whoomping*, *wharmping*, *thwumping* grew louder. Thicker. Thumping in my ear canal. At one point, I swear my brain vibrated.

I winced from the brightness and the invasion of the indistinguishable humming and mysterious voice.

I was just about to push my way through the mud and grass, as far away from the chest as possible, when the light dissipated. The humming stopped like someone had shut off the power to the digital jukebox in an empty bar. A dim glow, so faint I couldn't tell if it was soft white or yellow, emanated from deep inside. I pushed myself forward, crawling on my knees with one free hand.

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” I asked the night when I looked inside the empty chest.

### **TERMS ACCEPTED.**

I spun at the sound of a new, cheery voice that came from all directions at once.

I was alone.

“I’m losing my mind...”

I checked my six—nothing out of the ordinary except the night being suddenly colder. The air was crisp. I sniffed instinctively, feeling the chill of winter but not smelling the familiar aroma of my favorite time of year. I ignored it and examined my disappointing find.

The strong box was void of anything. Not even a damned dust ball. Just plain, though finely crafted, teak as clean as if a master carpenter had just finished this design and tossed the chest into the line of shrubbery out of disgust from a perceived obscure imperfection.

I was so distracted I didn’t notice how damn cold I was getting. My nipples were hard, and that never happened except when I was—

I looked down at my bare chest. My bare arms. My bare legs. Only a fur and leather loincloth covered me from being cited for indecent exposure.

Slash nearly got dropped in my scramble to cover myself. I scanned the ground. My jacket, slacks, shoes; all gone. I couldn’t even find my socks.

I was losing my mind. That had to be the answer. The years of stress in the Air Force. The constant deployments, war-games, the moves every few years, the inability to focus on getting my degree, a grim future. All of it had become too much.

Medieval chests didn’t pop out of thin air, shredding people’s minds with subliminal messages just to tempt them into a bush for a voyeuristic game of “Strip the Idiot.”

I looked at Slash. Slash looked at me. We both looked down at my near-nakedness. We looked at each other again.

My seven-pound Chihuahua opened his mouth like he was about to dish out more pup attitude with another yip. Instead, in a high-pitched voice sounding a lot like a pre-pubescent boy, he simply said, "Fuck."



## GIVE THE DOG A BONE



“Wait. What did you just say?” I stared at my adopted dog, sure my mind was as blown as any lead the Dallas Cowboys ever had in any playoff game.

“I said, ‘fuck,’” Slash repeated in that same youthful voice.

I shook my head, blinking to clear the mental cobwebs. Slash was speaking. My freaking Chihuahua could talk?

“How? Why? What?” My brain raced in a vain attempt to figure out what I’d ever done to the universe to deserve it shitting on me before I hit thirty.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Slash said, stretching his neck in the medieval chest’s direction and wiggling his nose, which was smaller than the head of a quarter-teaspoon measuring cup. “But I think it has something to do with that. It was dumb to open that. I tried to warn you.”

“You did?” I still couldn’t believe what I was seeing each time his short snout opened and a very human voice emitted from it. “When?”

“What do you think I was doing the entire time?” he asked, as if mine was the dumbest question in the world. “While you insisted on getting closer, I was warning you. When you wouldn’t leave that chest alone, I was warning you.”

“You were barking and yipping and whining.”

“I also didn’t have the vocal capacity I have now.” He sniffed at the chest again. “Fuck, this is way more convenient now that we understand each other. I like it.”

I ignored my dog’s vulgarity to look at the chest, which now sat as dead as my social life. “If that’s responsible for... whatever has happened to us, we’re not getting any answers from it.” I was sitting on the wet ground in a loincloth that fell to mid-thigh, split on both sides and exposing plenty of leg, while having a two-way discussion with my Chihuahua.

Oh, wouldn’t the guys I served with, at least those I still talked to, love to find out about this? Or the couple of guys I still hung out with from my school days. Thankfully, their lives in Seattle with actual careers and real incomes kept me from having to worry about them witnessing this atrocity. “I’m going to shower and sleep, and when I wake up, this will have been a bad dream.”

Slash shook. “I’m all for that. It’s fucking cold. Let’s go home. Will you turn on my heating blanket before you get in the shower? You take way too long in there. I shouldn’t have to wait for my blanket when we get home just so you can hump your hand while cleaning yourself.”

I curled him in, unsure how effectively direct skin-to-fur contact would be in warming him. “Yes, I’ll turn on your blanket right away. After I dry you first. Don’t need the entire place smelling like wet dog.”

A faint rumbling came from Slash’s gut. “Like your ass smells any better. Especially on taco night. Oh, hey,” he said excitedly, like he’d just had a revelation, “now that you can actually understand me, can we have pizza? Real pizza. Not that out-of-a-box stuff you get at the grocery store. I want the meat lovers one.” His small, pink tongue flicked at the side of his snout. “Pepperoni. Salami. None of that pineapple, though. That’s just not right.”

Pizza after showering and putting on warm clothes sounded like the perfect anecdote to a strange night of seeing and hearing things. “You bet. Feel like walking?”

Slash scrunched his eyes. “I’m cold and wet. I’ve been out in this shitty weather far longer than any warm-blooded creature my size should have to be. What do you think?”

“Fair enough.” I stood. “I could eat an entire pizza by my —” The rest of my comment about pizza dropped away.

The world was dark. Not a streetlight, illuminated porch, or living room lamp to be seen. Only the empty chest radiated light. Worse, the buildings surrounding the city park had vanished.

No cars parked for the evening while their owners hunkered down inside their cozy condos or apartments. No coffee shops, antique places. My favorite bakery, the one that made the best German cheese pretzels in the world, wasn’t where it should be. Up and down the row where blacktop should have stretched north-to-south, there was nothing but empty night. The shadows of trees hung in the murkiness like silent stalkers.

Slash whined. “This isn’t good.”

“What the hell is going on?”

**LOADING...**

**STANDBY...**

I turned to the park, searching for the person the cheery voice belonged to. It still looked like it should. The line of maples running its length stood where they were before the evening flashed into weird mode. Where was the teeter-tauter? The swings? The massive playground system with the turret, curly pole, slides, and the bouncy bridge?

Something large flapped its wings overhead. I ducked out of instinct and self-preservation. Way too big to be a bat. Way too early in the evening for bats, though I swore a few passed over. But that? The deep thump of each beat was too large for any bat. Hell, it was too large for an eagle.

Drifting through the thin veneer of the bush, we made our way into the park. Above, a series of squeaking chirps and gargles let me know I was right and that Olympia’s bats were still present and accounted for.

“Where’s the softball field?” Slash asked from the crook of my arm. “It’s not there.”

“You can see that far?” My Chihuahua looked at me like I was a complete idiot. “Yeah, I guess you can.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t know what’s going on, but we need to get home. I don’t feel right. We’ll figure it out there. Maybe the local news will have something. I’d check my phone, but...”

We both looked down at my pocketless loincloth.

“You really should think about going naked,” Slash said. “It’s not as warm as when you put me in those terrible sweaters, but it’s much more liberating.”

“Yeah. Somehow I don’t think that’d fly with the cops.”

“I’ve seen you in the shower. There’s nothing offensive about your junk, Brad. In fact, I doubt a cop would notice.”

“You’re one to talk. You’re lucky to see the right side of two inches.”

“I’m twenty inches long and weigh seven pounds. Relatively speaking, two inches would turn plenty of heads at the dog park. What’s your excuse?”

I pulled him in closer and wrapped my free arm around him as another bat passed far too close for comfort. “Come on. Let’s get home and get warm.”

“I’m good with that. But can you go to the right?”

“Uh, sure. Why?”

Slash’s tiny nostrils flexed as he sniffed the air. “I don’t like what I’m smelling from over there.” He lifted a black and tan paw and pointed off into the distance. “Plus, I thought I saw something.”

“Okay.” I took us to the right, adding a few minutes to the walk. But this strange new lightless, building-less world stretched on. “Dear God.”

The farther we walked, the more open land we covered, each step reinforced my worry about the continuation of the disappearance of the city.

“Careful.” Slash’s head perked up as his ears tried their best to stand at attention. “There’s something over there.”

I peered into the black of the night, seeing nothing. “What? Where?”

Slash lifted a scrawny leg. “Over there. Can’t you—oh, never mind. Incredible that your species took over this planet.”

“If it wasn’t for us, you’d still be chasing down deer and rabbits and fighting for scraps.” I gave a long, skeptical look up and down his frame. “And I don’t think you’d do so well in that fight.”

“If it weren’t for humans,” he said that last word like it left an oily taste in his mouth, “I’d be a wolf and not weigh less than some poops you take.”

“Fair.”

Slash barked, jumping in my arms and pushing back against my elbow. “Shit.”

“What?” My skin flushed warm with an instinctual fight-or-flight reaction.

“Over there. That’s where it is. Behind those trees. Something is following us.”

Slash pointed to a spot nearly perpendicular to our location. Continuing toward where I hoped my apartment would be, would also put whoever lurked in the shadows to our backs. Not a great prospect, but I wasn’t sure what else to do. I didn’t have my clothes or my phone. I couldn’t call Tess or any of my friends for a ride. At home, I had a few swords I’d picked up from Renaissance festivals over the past decade and my pistol. None of that did us any good here.

“We need to head home, regroup, and figure out what the hell just happened to the world.”

“Just do it as fast as you used to hump Tess,” Slash said. “That thing is creeping me out.”

“Oka—wait. What about me and Tess? Did you watch us?”

“Didn’t have to, even though you almost always forgot to close the door. Every time you humped her, you made more noise than a starving fatty eating at his first buffet. No wonder she left. Who wants a boar to grind on them?”

“I don’t hump like a boar.”

Slash yipped. “Sure. Now hurry up. I’m cold.”

I scanned our surroundings for the lurker while we started off. We didn’t get far. I stopped when I heard a distinct *click* under my foot.

“Shit.” I didn’t dare move.

Slash went stiff, his head sweeping back and forth. “What?”

“I just stepped on something. I don’t like what my gut is telling me.”

“Well, just jump off it.”

I looked down, seeing nothing out of sorts. “I don’t think it’s that easy.”

I was Air Force, not Army or Marines. I didn’t do unexploded ordinances. Sure, I’d seen all the action movies and how the hero stepped on a land mine, skirting away only through pure luck and Hollywood’s ridiculous ignorance of the laws of physics. That shit didn’t work in real-life.

I slowly bent.

“What are you doing?” Slash asked.

“Here. Jump.”

“Jump? Are you crazy? I’m not jumping. The grass is wet and I’m cold.”

“And you’re being high-maintenance,” I said, extending my arms toward the ground so his fall wasn’t so drastic. “Now, go or you’re going to wind up as dead as me if I screw this up.”

“You’re not allowed to dieeeeeeeeeee,” he said, howling with a yip. “I’m too young to be an orphaned adoptee.”

“Stop being dramatic. Go. Now.”

Slash’s thin legs quivered, and he hopped from my arms. He landed silently and turned, blinking up at me.

I flipped my hand at him. “Move away.”

“How far?”

I didn’t have a set number in mind because I’d never had to defy death on this level before. The closest I ever came was in Baghdad when insurgents lobbed Hail Marys from ten miles away, missing constantly and doing no significant damage to an installation the size of a small city. “I don’t know. Fifty feet.”

“Okay.” He moved away with his head hung low and tail tucked. When he sat, his voice sounding even tinier, he said, “What now?”

“Stay where you are.” I was looking at my feet but talking to him.

I blew out a breath, having no idea what else to do but make a jump for it. I squatted. “Here goes nothing.”

“Wait!”

My arms were in mid-swing, but I managed to halt my launch. Just barely. It was a close call. “What?”

“If this goes ass-backward,” Slash said, and I swear he was smirking, “I just want you to know you’re the best human pet I’ve ever had.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, for a dog. Now, be quiet, and let me focus.”

I was about to swing my arms when he interrupted once more. “It’s just that, no matter how much crap I’ll give you now that I can talk, I want you to know that I really, really appreciate you adopting me. I like being your family.”

“And I like you being mine,” I said, trying to focus on what I was about to do. “Now, please. Seriously. Let. Me. Concentrate.”

I drew a deep breath and settled myself. Squatting and swinging my arms back and forth in sync with my quad extensions, I built up momentum. Every direction around me was open grass. Once I built up enough, I pushed.

The instant I left the ground, I wondered if it was my last moment of existence. My thighs fired. My arms thrust up. My body left the surface of the planet.

I was in the air.

An explosion.

Roaring.

Bright flames.

Something invisible hit me, tossing me sideways while airborne.

The ground flared up. After a moment of concussive fortune, I realized nothing was broken. I was whole and freaking alive.

**BOOM! LITERALLY.**

I tried to clear the fog in my brain. Great, the voice was back.

**YOU'VE GOT THE MOVES!**

**+1 XP**

**CONGRATS. YOU'RE NOT DEAD!**

I shook my head. A concussion. Battered and bruised, maybe, but at least I didn't smell singed flesh, and everything seemed to work.

Sounding murky, like an underwater voice, my Chihuahua called to me, "Brad? Brad!"

"Slash?" My voice sounded foreign.

The grass was wet and cold. The evening sky, black and chilled. A miserable, yet glorious thing to wake to, because I felt the unique sensation of a flat dog's tongue raking over my skin. He could have licked me forever for all I cared.



I pulled the itsy-bitsy hound into my arms and held him against my chest. This time, he didn't fight me. Instead, he continued giving me dog kisses. "I love you, Brad."

"I love you too, wee man."

We lay there a moment longer.

"What was that voice?" my pooch asked. "Did you hear it? What's an XP?"

"I did, and I have no idea. Well, except for when it said 'XP.' That's like a gaming term. Don't worry. We're just sharing a brain meltdown." I thought it'd just been an aftereffect of the explosive trap. Maybe a lingering sound my brain had somehow morphed and assigned meaning to by translating it as a human voice. But if Slash had heard it too, then we were sharing the delusion. The alternative being that we'd both actually heard someone's voice. Something I'd rather not think about after almost dying.

I sat up and glanced around the park, past the newly formed hole in the soil and toward the tree line. I couldn't make out anything in the dark. "Did you see anyone?"

"No. I was too busy watching you." He pressed himself against me. "Then the explosion scared the piss out of me, and you went flying. I was too worried about you."

"Maybe it was part of the device? Some psychopath's idea of fun. Who knows? Either way. I'm done. Let's see if there's anything left of Olympia."

## CHASE LIKE A BEAST



“This is incredibly creepy,” my pup said, ears bent in half as he surveyed our new surroundings. “Nothing’s the same.”

“I don’t even recognize this place.”

He raised a black and tan paw. “That’s where Mitzy pees. Her piss always smells like tuna. What kind of Collie, or dog for that matter, eats tuna? Over there, Roland scratches his back every time the possum visits. And that,” he said emphatically, “is where Muffin poops.”

“Muffin, huh?” I said, squeezing him tenderly. “Didn’t think you liked her.”

Slash yipped. “She’s aloof. But if I had the chance, I’d give her a good hump. She’d chill then.”

I winced, giving him a head shake. “You know there’s more to it than that, right?”

“What?”

“Humping.”

“Oh, now you profess to speak for all dogs?”

My tiny tot genuinely seemed offended, and I realized that I truly couldn’t. Not for humans, and definitely not all dog-kind. “Well... Actually. I take it back. Does that really work?”

“How the hell do I know?” Slash said, settling back in the crook of my arm. “I’m not even two in human years, and you keep me cooped up in the apartment all day. I only get to see other dogs at the dog park or when you can be bothered to walk me.”

“I walk you often enough.”

“You don’t remotely walk me *enough*. My point is,” he said after a sigh, “I don’t know if that’s what Muffin would like, but I’m down for trying.”

I just couldn’t. Instead of entertaining my juvenile Chihuahua about the ways of attraction for his species, I checked my six. Whatever Slash saw on the periphery, I missed. Not that I doubted my boy. Slash was the best dog I’d ever had. But the little guy once lost it when a stick he’d stepped on popped up and smacked him in the snout. More than a thin stream of piss proved how alarming that’d been for him. When it came to threats and warnings of said threats from Slash, I took it all with a wheelbarrow full of salt. One day, I’d teach him about the inner workings of attraction between and within the sexes. Today wasn’t the day for those types of dad-son chats.

Slash squirmed in my arms. Seven pounds shouldn’t be hard to wrangle, but he seemed determined. He barked rapidly in typical little dog pitch. “Brad, pay attention!” Then he started growling and stomping his front paws.

When I looked behind me, a nightmare came out of the dark.

A hairless creature, about four feet tall, ran at us with a bent posture. Its scrawny arms were bent twice like each had two elbows. With horror, I noticed its fingers. Fingers? Those were more like pale eagle claws, distorted to a ridiculous length. It wore a roughly cut brown leather loincloth, not unlike mine. Bare legs, without ripples of muscles, propelled the bare-footed beast across the grass at an alarming speed.

Without a word or asking permission from my pup, I spun and scampered away.

Behind me, the creature made a series of raspy bellows. I glanced over my shoulder, sure I was within its reach based on the volume of the ghastly sound.

Once I was convinced we were out of its reach, I turned forward again.

“What the fuck is that?” Slash asked between whines.

“Don’t know,” I said. Breath was difficult to draw between the sprint from a cold start and the fear that collapsed my lungs in panic.

My panting, Slash’s yaps and whimpers, and passing air filled my ears. Over all that, came the ravenous grunting of the creature in hot pursuit. I stretched my stride. Slash bobbed precariously in my arms, yelping in between his whimpers.

“Run, Brad! Run!”

“Trying!”

The beast’s maw slathered as it closed.

We wouldn’t make it to safety before this thing ripped open my Achilles. Shit, I didn’t even know where ‘safety’ was.

“Feeling fast?” I asked my pooch.

“What are you thinking?” Slash said with a yelp.

“Tossing you,” I said between pants. “Race around it. Keep. Distracted.”

“No way.”

“Only way we’ll make it.” I hefted him. “Ready?”

“Brad. Don’t!”

His tone broke my heart, but I couldn’t outrun this thing. If I fell, we both died. “Keep running, buddy. Bark. Snarl. Just don’t let it get too close.”

I wish I could lean on my military training to overcome alien babies, but the Air Force didn’t teach us things like that. I’m pretty sure even the Marines didn’t, and they trained for every contingency.

“Trust me, buddy. Only option.”

Without another wasted step, I shifted my weight just enough to give Slash a fair jump to the ground.

“Brad, nooooooo!”

Behind me, the creature grunted and slobbered. It made a surprised noise, like I’d shocked it by tossing my dog.

I dodged to the left, taking it hard. My feet almost slid out from underneath me when a static cloud made the near horizon fizzle. For a flash, it looked like the world beyond me was nothing more than a projected image that almost went haywire.

The creature loosed a nasally grunt. A quick check told me it still followed me, leaving my pooch to escape or come through on his end of the plan I’d developed that he hadn’t agreed to. A small matter we’d iron out later if we lived to fight about it.

The creature’s turn was wider than mine.

I zigzagged as it slathered and grunted like a pack of hyenas devouring a carcass.

Slash’s barking and yapping kept pace with me, just thirty yards to the side like I’d asked. Smart boy.

Something thumped against the soft ground. I turned to see the strange alien-baby tumbling.

I skidded to a halt. Slash stopped much more quickly. He stood about fifteen feet from the creature, off to the side, bouncing back every time he barked. Within five yaps, he was twenty feet away, an impressive feat considering how small of a stride he had with those little legs. Behind him, the gray static lines streaked the sky again. In the distance, something glowed low on the horizon. It...

It almost looked like a video game map marker.

When the creature slipped, it made a high-pitched sound that might have meant it’d hurt itself. A factor I couldn’t worry about. I prioritized me and Slash. Without buildings to lock ourselves in, no cops to flag down, or good Samaritans

armed with cell phones, saving our necks came down to me and my next decision.

Though I abhorred violence at this point in my life, that didn't mean I'd forgo when needed.

I sprinted at the prone creature, still trying to right itself. Its long, clawed fingers, three on each hand, were pale as the matte gray paint I used to use on my model cars. One swipe with them and I'd be a goner. Luckily, everything told me it was as clumsy as a newborn.

The alien-baby was bracing with one arm and swiped at Slash, even though he was four times removed from the beast's reach. It looked up at me with slitted eyes that didn't widen as I closed in.

I'd watched enough professional wrestling to know that a two-footed diving attack was an effective tactic against a prone enemy. I'd seen guys receive nasty injuries, taking them out of competition for months because of an accidental strike, and that stuff is choreographed.

Time to play copy-cat.

I launched myself, bare feet flat, and aimed at the creature's elbow. Unfortunately for it, the joint bent in the wrong direction for my strike.

Bone snapped when my feet struck true. The joint buckled. The slobbering alien-baby opened its mouth, full of broad, flat teeth, and howled. This close, I got a lungful of its moldy aroma. The damn thing smelled like it'd just strolled out of the Budd Inlet and chased us out of boredom.

I rolled away before its fat head fell on my legs, ignoring the cold, wet grass. On my feet, I backed away, unable to comprehend what I saw.

Above its head, I hadn't noticed the two words that floated in the air in yellow letters.

**BABY VAMP**

**LOOT?**

**YET8#^A#SS/NXXXXXXXXZZZZZZZZ**

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

The words floating in the air almost looked like game commands.

“Slash?” I called out into the dark, not taking my eyes off the pale insanity howling in pain.

I heard my wee man coming before I saw him. He gave the baby vampire a wide berth, barking and yapping throughout his looping approach. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, scooping him up and giving the creature another glance to make sure it didn’t pull off another miracle and suddenly regrow an arm to replace the shattered one. Hey, crazier things had happened in the last ten minutes. “Let’s get home.”

My Chihuahua licked my cheek. “Finally, something you’ve said that makes sense.”

## NOT SO HOME SWEET HOME



Block after block, Olympia faded into the realm of memories. I'm down with nature. If I wasn't, I wouldn't have moved to this part of the country after leaving the service. Give me an open sky and almost as open land, and I can find happiness. Set in that comfortable mindset, the world's sudden missing concrete, steel, glass, and rebar still disturbed me. Where were the meth addicts kick-dancing on street corners? The older couples walking elbow-to-elbow with nowhere in particular to go? The busy businesspeople trying to snag a forgotten anniversary present before rushing home to their significant other before taking them to a dinner they'd scheduled only hours earlier? I missed that shit, now like never before.

The only features in the night that stood out was the periodic static adding gray light to the blackened sky, and the strange arrow-shaped light that reminded me of a map marker.

"We're in trouble, buddy."

Slash loosed a slight whimper. "I know."

"I don't like this."

"Neither do I."

We walked the next quarter of a mile or so—it was so hard to tell without city blocks to gauge the distance—to where our



apartment building should be. The entire walk from the park was absent of anything that hinted at the familiar. Why would I expect our building to stand where it had for decades? Though I didn't, my pup did.

My feet were rooted. On the spot where the three-story structure should have stood was nothing but empty landscape.

“Brad?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“Where's home?”

I wished I had answers. Wished I had something for him more than the arbitrary, yet completely significant comment I was about to make. “I don't know.”

“Is it gone?”

“It's gone.”

My seven-pound Chihuahua whimpered. “Where?”

“I don't know.”

“But if our home is gone...”

“Everything we owned is too.”

“Do something,” he said as he quivered. His eyes fluttered too quickly to call what he was doing blinking. The little guy was straight-up decompensating in my arms.

“Slash, I don't know—”

“Don't,” he said so harshly he stopped me. “Do you not know what this means?”

I wanted to point at the missing apartment and mention that my safe with all my essential documents was gone. My laptop, with all my work and hopeful dreams, was gone. My wallet. My credit cards. I was essentially naked in the middle of the darkened field where my building had stood. Helpless and moneyless. Only the intervention of family or friends could help, but how in the hell would I be able to find them?

Getting to the apartment was easy enough. On plenty of weekends since moving back to the Pacific Northwest, I'd

taken to the Cascade Mountains for long hikes. It was nothing to put twelve or thirteen miles on my knees. But that differed from facing the prospect of crossing Olympia, or what was left of it, without signs to point me in the right direction or warn me against going in the wrong one. Daylight would help, but at this time of year, that was another ten hours away.

I tried not to panic. Panicking did nothing for anyone in trouble except make the situation worse.

Easier said than done.

Slash whimpered, possibly picking up on my unease. I bobbed him slightly, trying to comfort. “It’ll be okay, buddy. We’ll figure out what’s going on. But we have to find shelter.”

I turned.

Slash twitched. “Wh-where are we going?”

I was about to explain my plan when he twisted and turned to free himself. I tried to catch him, but he was too squirmy. He hit the ground, did a face-plant, and sprinted toward where our apartment should have been.

“Slash!”

He didn’t stop. For such a tiny dude, he was fast. Without footwear, I couldn’t get enough grip to have a prayer of catching him. I didn’t give up the chase, even as he pulled farther and farther away.

I sprinted after Slash, covering more ground, quicker once my legs warmed and muscles burned. The wind created by the sprint pushed by my ears. My eyes watered at my speed and the chilly air. My blurred vision didn’t help me keep track of the small black dog disappearing into the dark night. Only his yipping and whimpering helped me keep tabs on him.

Then the chase abruptly ended. Slash pulled up, his head bent to the ground, nose prying at the wet grass.

My breath was heavy. “What are you doing, wee man?”

Slash sniffed so aggressively I could easily hear him from ten feet away. Simultaneously, he whimpered while searching.

“What are you looking for?”

His head snapped up, ears flopping in half. “Brad,” he yipped in a high-pitched voice strained with stress, “she’s gooooooone! I have to find her.”

This was crazy. Whatever he was searching for was most definitely gone. Everything was. “Whatever it is, it’s not here. We can come back in the morning and look for it in the light, but there’s nothing left. We won’t find anything. Whatever you’re looking for—”

He rounded on me, his scrawny legs spread. “Pussy is gone, Brad! I can’t find my Pussy.”

“What?” Ignoring the fact that my eighteen-month-old Chihuahua could speak and liked to swear, I didn’t expect this level of vulgarity. Maybe I should have been more careful about what movies I watched around him. “Your what?”

“My Pussy, Brad,” he said with such attitude I swear, if he could have, he would have stood on his hind legs and planted his front paws on his hips. “I can’t find her.”

“Your...” God, I really didn’t want to encourage this. “Your pussy?”

“Just Pussy. My cat, dummy. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Ah, his *cat*. The adorable fluffy stuffed animal that was his size. Bigger, maybe. It was the first toy I’d bought, even before I adopted him. It was there in the truck in his travel crate when I’d gone to pick him up from the agency. He’d taken to it right away. The poor stuffed animal had taken more than its fair share of beatings when I’d come home from work, especially after a long shift, when Slash was exceptionally stressed. One time, when he’d grabbed it by the nose and flipped it around, shaking his head so viciously I thought he’d snap his own neck, he ripped its pink button nose off. I tried to throw it out when he’d started pulling out the stuffing, but each time, I’d come home to see it back in his bed. The one time I had the courage to take it to the dumpster outside the

apartment, Slash shit on the floor. The stuffed cat was untouchable, and now it was missing.

“Help find my Pussy.” He resumed his search, nose to the ground.

“Slash,” I said, trying to be patient. “It’s dark. It’s raining. Everything is gone.”

“Exactly.”

“Which is why we can’t stay out here all night looking for her.” I squatted, getting as low to his level as possible. “We can’t keep looking. She’s gone.”

“Noooooooooooo!” He threw his head up to the sky and howled. Like a tiny version of nature’s first canines, he cried the song of his people. Coming from that tiny throat, it was heartbreaking.

Howl after howl, Slash’s voice rose into the dark, chilly night. I gave him his moment of mourning while keeping an eye on our surroundings. We didn’t need any surprises coming out of hiding, drawn by the sound of my dog’s pain. No more baby vamps.

Besides my pained pup, though, the night was quiet. I squat-walked closer until he was within arm’s reach and stroked his soaked back.

By the time he’d gone hoarse, I had him in my arms and we were headed toward the bridge in search of shelter to provide a temporary reprieve from this madness.

We didn’t get far.

Navigating my way through the darkness, trying to be careful to not slip down an embankment or trip into a hole, a box suddenly blocked a quarter of my vision.

Slash yelped. “What the fuck is that?”

“You see it too?” I tried not to drop him as I adjusted his weight on my arm so I could rub my eye.

“Yes. What is it?”

I rotated my head from left to right, raised it to the sky, and lowered it to the ground. The rectangular obstruction followed wherever I looked. “A box.”

An asinine comment, but that was exactly what I was looking at. A brown rectangular box, trimmed with a twisted rope of gold. I squinted and blinked, hoping to alleviate myself of this shared delusion and already knowing it wouldn't work. A red banner flapped in the top-right corner as if blown by a breeze. The word “Darkworld” was written in swirling letters, like someone had taken a quill to the banner.

“I can't get it to go away,” Slash said, still squirming.

I pinched him tighter against my chest, keeping one eye open while blinking my left to try to clear the fancy box. “Stop moving. I'm going to drop you.”

“Don't. I can't see!”

“Yes, you can.” I held him firmly, squeezing my eye shut. That did nothing to hide or remove the box. I told him what I was seeing. “Is that what you're seeing, too?”

His voice quivered when he said, “Yes.”

“What the hell?”

Just then, a figure popped up from behind the box. She had a cartoonish look to her, like some fancy AI had drawn her into this corner of my vision. She wore a green dress with an open neck that didn't reveal much more than a few inches of skin. The necklace wrapping around her neck was at least four inches thick and gold. In the middle was a sunburst surrounded by what looked to be layered flower petals. Her relative size in the corner of my eye made deeper details impossible to make out. “Hi, sir. My name is Fortune. Welcome to Darkworld.”

## GAMES PEOPLE PLAY



“What is Darkworld?” Slash said.

I didn’t expect the tiny, cartoonish woman in my vision to answer, but she did. “Why, kind Little Sir, Darkworld is the realm into which you’ve entered. I am to be your humble guide.”

“Our guide?” I asked, feeling like an idiot for talking out loud to the small manifestation of my mental collapse. But when you’re already talking to your Chihuahua, what’s a little more craziness?

“Yes, sir,” Fortune the Guide said. “Your guide to the game.”

“The game? What game?”

Standing just behind and above the empty rectangle I assumed was a chat box, Fortune spread her arms. “Darkworld, of course.”

“This is a game? Like the ones Brad wastes his lonely weekends and nights playing?”

“Alas, I am not aware of anything outside of Darkworld. I am here to advise you on the game, help with your questions, and to guide you in the appropriate direction, should you find yourself astray.”

“Oh,” Slash said, settling back in the crook of my arm. “Okay then. Trust me. I don’t know what’s sadder. How bad he is at games or the fact most of his social interactions come from playing them and talking to himself while he does.”

“I don’t talk to myself. The headset? Remember? I’m talking to other people who I’m playing with or against.”

“And you think that’s better?” the tiny dog said, raising his eyelid, which made the small brown dot above his eye lift.

I narrowed my eyes, unable to entertain my dog while also talking to the floating image in my eye. “Fortune, I’m sure I’ve lost my mind, but what are you talking about? This game? What is it? How are we in a game? That’s...” I threw my free hand up. “That’s nuts.”

Her tiny AI-inspired cartoonish face scrunched. “I’m not sure I understand that colloquialism, but I assure you Darkworld is a massive game unto which you have entered.”

“How?”

She lifted a hand, and a chest appeared on my mindscreen. The chest looked ancient and way too familiar. Like a prop I’d see in an episode of—

“Wait a minute,” Slash said. “That looks just like the chest I told you not to open.”

“You didn’t tell me not to open it. And you’re right, it does.”

“I *did* tell you. You’re just too stupid to understand canine speech.”

“Fortune? Is that your name?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That looks like something I found a bit ago. In the park. There was a strange light.”

She nodded. “Yes. That is the beacon signal. The game masters, Electors, we call them, use it to help potential entrants find the gateway.”

My mind swirled. “Gateway? Entrants?”

“You are officially an entrant, sir,” she said as if this was the most normal conversation in the world. “Upon opening the gateway, the chest, you announced your intention to enter Darkworld.”

“I didn’t mean to. I just didn’t want a kid tripping across that thing and getting hurt.”

She waved a tiny cartoon hand. “Oh, sir, worry not. No one under the legal age of your realm may play Darkworld. I believe your realm’s requirement is eighteen years of age. Something the Electors call ‘undeveloped prefrontal lobes.’ The magic behind it is a mystery to me, but they tell us it makes the game more realistic, reasonable, and safer.”

“Who?” Slash asked.

“Game guides such as myself,” Fortune said. Her digitally drawn green eyes sparkled. “Each entrant has one to guide them through the game, such as I will guide Brad.”

“You know my name?”

“Of course. By opening the chest, you signed your consent for Darkworld to collect information about you. I know much about your player profile.”

“This is bullshit.”

Slash yipped. “What about me? Do I get a guide too?”

Fortune shook her head. “No. Guides are only for players.”

Slash growled. “I’m in the game too.”

“Yes, you are,” Fortune said, not unkindly. “But only humans can be entrants.”

“Why? I found the chest too. Hell, I’m the one who actually found it.”

Slash sounded like he was upset not getting to be a player. But we didn’t understand what that meant. I was inclined to believe it was a positive to not be considered an entrant, even if he was in the game with me. “What does it mean to be an entrant?”



“You will play Darkworld. The decisions you make will alter your path. I will further explain along the way.”

“This won’t be the only time we chat, then?”

“No.” Fortune shook her head. “I am available should you need my services. Just call me—Paging, I believe your time calls it.”

“How do we do that?” Slash asked.

Fortune’s hands disappeared behind the menu box. When she lifted them again, she extended her hands in front of the box and opened her palms. Each held a small, black stick of wood that was as wide as a paint stick. A red jewel was mounted in the middle of the stick that was no longer than Fortune’s palms.

“Put these in your Inventory first,” she said. “Then I will show you how to equip them.”

“Our Inventory?” I said, looking down at my loincloth-covered privates. The only form of clothing I had. “I don’t have a lot of space to carry stuff, even something that small.”

Fortune put a cartoonish hand to her mouth. Her hand bobbed as she giggled. “No, sir, your Inventory is not a physical space, but one inside the game. Here, let me show you.”

She lifted her hand. Another box popped up in the middle of my field of vision. This one was a very large rectangle filled with smaller, empty boxes.

“You call up your Inventory by rubbing the jewel on your Conjuror’s Cane.”

Slash made a sound I think was supposed to be a laugh. “My what?”

“Easy, buddy,” I mumbled. “We have company. At least try to be polite.”

“You are fine, sirs,” Fortune said, her arm still horizontal as if frozen in place. “I have spent plenty of time in the taverns to hear far worse language than that. Yours does not bring offense.”

“Good,” Slash said, settling down in my arms, crossing his paws. “Because I’m finally allowed to share my thoughts, and I don’t plan on restricting myself.”

“Swearing is not very thoughtful,” I said with a wink.

“Spend your entire life trying to stop a dummy from doing dumb things like I have with you, Brad, and then come talk to me.”

“Fair enough.”

With her open palm still holding the two Conjurer Canes, Fortune said, “Once you rub the jewel, you say a command. Once activated, this will permanently be equipped. There are plenty of commands to give. Too many to go through now. For this tutorial, let us just cover the Inventory. Once you rub the jewel and command your Inventory to open, this will appear.” Her frozen arm finally moved alongside the box blocking most of my view, rising and falling like some eighties game show model. “This is your Inventory. A place for you to store items you will find throughout the game.”

I gave the Inventory a closer examination. There were eight empty boxes, which I assumed could be assigned to a single item. A limited Inventory, for sure. Along the top of the window, were tabs for distinct Inventory types. On the left was Armor. Next to it was a tab labeled Herbs, Potions, and Ointments. Next to that: Items. A tab called Miscellaneous was the last. Others I couldn’t read were grayed out.

Well, four tabs would most definitely help me carry a bunch of stuff. Not a substantial amount, with only eight slots per tab. I could only carry thirty-two items. I’d have to be selective about what I picked up.

“Here. Let me show you,” Fortune said.

One second, both the Conjurer Canes were in her palm and the next the Inventory window switched to the Miscellaneous tab. The box in the top-left suddenly held one of the canes.

“This is your Inventory. Slash, yours works exactly the same.”

“So, I can have an Inventory and magical sticks, but I’m not considered an entrant? That’s dumber than getting a cat when dogs are obviously superior.”

I gave him a squeeze. “Let it go.”

Slash turned his head away. “I will not. I’m as sentient as you are. Why can’t I be an entrant?”

“Little Sir,” Fortune said from behind the menu box, “Brad opened the chest. Therefore, he is the entrant.”

Slash huffed. “But he’s here and apparently has the same in-game capabilities I do.”

“Alas, he does not. We will cover that in time. For now, understand that humans, not animals, can be entrants.”

“Animal,” Slash said with disgust, his head still turned. “As if humans aren’t animals. They’re the worst kind.”

I wasn’t going to argue. “If he’s not an entrant, but he’s in the game, what is he then?”

“A mascot,” Fortune said. “Around the world, players are still registering and going through their tutorial introductions such as we are. Some have been here for days, weeks, months already. Unfortunately, I do not have the final registration information yet, but I am aware of thousands of mascots in the game already.”

“Thousands?” Slash and I said simultaneously.

“Yes, sirs. Thousands. With a few thousand more, I expect.” She gave us a shrug. “Shall we finish this introduction and get back to the purpose of your quest?”

“Yes.”

“Now, if you click on the slot for the Conjurer’s Cane, you will activate it. Doing so will automatically equip it. Go ahead. Try it.”

“I... I...” My eyes shifted side to side, as if I’d find an answer on the periphery. “I don’t know how to click on anything. This is—” I stopped myself from telling this digital guide how crazy all of this was.

“Just focus on the item you want to use,” Fortune said kindly. “A small amount of focus will activate it. You will see you have succeeded when a white thread highlights the square.”

“Okay.” I tried to ignore the tiny digital woman in the corner of my vision. I attempted to push from my mind the fact that I was standing in the middle of an open field where buildings that were part of downtown Olympia had risen skyward moments ago. I tried to ignore the butt-hurt Chihuahua who kept rocketing his gaze all over the place as he tried to lock on his new item.

It probably took far too long, but I finally ignored all the distractions and disruptions and everything that wasn't the small Conjuror's Cane out of my mind. A thread rimmed the box that held my one and only item. The cane flashed away. I didn't feel any different.

A moment later, Slash yipped. “Mine is gone. Brad, is yours?”

“I don't see it.”

**BOOM!**

**ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED.**

**YOU HAVE NOW EQUIPPED YOUR FIRST ITEM.  
CONJURER'S CANE.**

**1 ABILITY POINT.**

**+1 XP.**

**NOW WOULD BE A GOOD TIME TO START MAKING  
YOURSELF TOUGHER THAN YOU ARE, BECAUSE  
CURRENTLY, YOU'RE ABOUT AS INTIMIDATING AS  
A FLY CAUGHT ON ONE OF THOSE GLUE TRAPS  
YOUR GRANDMA USED TO HANG ALL OVER HER  
HOUSE.**

“Do you see that too, Slash?”

He sat still in my arm. “Yes. But I don't know what any of it means.”

“Neither do I.”

“Why not? Everyone knows you wasted enough weekends sitting on your ass, playing games. How do you not know what to do?”

“Update. I’ve never played this game.”

“Still. Shouldn’t be that hard.”

“I don’t hear you making any suggestions.”

Fortune raised a hand, one slim digital finger pointed upward. “Sirs, if I may make a suggestion?”

“Sure.”

“Please help. Brad is clueless.”

“You are now equipped with the Conjurer’s Cane, so you can give commands to the game. You might want to pull up your Character Profile sheet. I can best guide you on how to disperse that Ability Point and familiarize you with the menu.”

I didn’t want to be curt, but I was tired and cold. My nipples were as stiff as an introverted religious Conservative’s personality, and I didn’t want to be doing any of this. My question might have been a little harsher than intended. “How do I just save and exit the game?”

Fortune shook her head, her dark locks swaying. “Oh, you cannot.”

“At all?”

“We will get to that, I promise.”

“Fine. How do we pull up our profiles?”

Slash rolled his eyes. “She already told us. Watch.” The dog lifted his chin, wiggled slightly, and said, “Profile.” After a brief pause, he said, “Ah, Fortune. You’re epic! I see mine. Brad, do what I did. It’s simple. You shouldn’t need me to show you. Humans. I swear. How your species ever took over the planet is beyond me.”

I scanned my vision for the Conjurer’s Cane. After a moment of fruitless effort, I glanced at Fortune.

She looked like she was champing at the bit to help. She released a heavy breath. “Oh, how I never thought you would ask,” she said, confirming my suspicions. “Now that you have equipped the cane, it is but a passive item, and will work by your command, sir. All you have to do is speak it.”

“So Slash was right?”

“He is.”

“Great.” I rubbed my hand against my side. “Profile.”

As soon as I spoke the command, the Inventory menu switched to a screen filled with more stats. Too many of them were valued at one or two points. An image of a man with a high and tight haircut, at the right height, and with a decent build for someone who didn’t have a dietitian and personal trainer on his payroll stood on a circular, black platform. He wore a loincloth. “Wait. Is that supposed to be me?”

“It is,” Fortune said. “The game provides it so you have a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of your person, equipment, and the like. I fear it is not very practical at the moment, but trust me. Later on in the game, your profile and character build is essential to survival. Now, if you will look along the top of your character box, you will see tabs such as those you found with your Inventory. Select the tab for Ability Points.”

“Got it!” Slash said before I found my tab.

Though it took me a second longer, I focused on it like when trying to select the Conjuror’s Cane. The menu switched over to the Ability Points. Most of the screen was black. Faded into a dull gray, were diamond-shaped icons I couldn’t quite make out.

“Me too,” I said, not mentioning to Fortune that it looked pretty pointless from what I could tell.

“Now, select the icon in the middle of your screen to activate your Ability Points.”

“Okay.” Just as I had before, I focused on the grayed-out diamond.

A box popped up over the shape.

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACTIVATE YOUR ABILITY  
POINTS?**

**YES OR NO?**

“Uh... Yes?”

In the corner of my vision, Fortune nodded.

**ABILITY POINTS ACTIVATED.**

**CURRENT ABILITY POINTS-ZERO.**

**YOU HAVE NO ABILITY POINTS TO SPEND.**

“Well, that was pointless,” Slash said with a slight growl. “We literally had to use our only Ability Point to activate the Ability Points. See? This is why humans shouldn’t be in charge of things.”

“I don’t disagree,” I said. “But it’s not like we did a lot of work to get that point. We literally did probably the easiest thing in the game.”

Fortune smiled. “The good news, Little Sir, is that you now have an active Ability Tree and you should be able to see the beginning of your pathway.”

“Ohhh. I do,” Slash said, nearly howling with delight.

I did as well. The first faded diamond was now illuminated and simply said ABILITIES. Underneath it, two lines split in diagonals away from each other, each leading to a new diamond-shaped icon. One said FIGHTER and the other said HARVESTER.

“Am I supposed to know which to choose?” I asked my guide.

She smiled. Instantly, I knew I didn’t want to hear her response. “This, kind sir, is where things get interesting.”

## PLAY THE GAME TONIGHT



“I ’m not sure I like the sounds of that,” I said as honestly as I could.

Fortune’s face scrunched. “Sir, it is imperative you learn and embrace the Ability system if you want to survive the game.”

“Survive?” Slash and I said simultaneously.

I cleared my throat, far more concerned about what I’d unleashed by opening the medieval chest. “What do you mean ‘if we want to survive the game’? That implies we could die.”

“That is so,” Fortune said as if agreeing that water was wet.

“Metaphorically, right?”

She looked at me unblinkingly for so long I thought the game had frozen. Finally, she said, “Alas, sir, no. There is the potential, a very high one, that you could perish. Both of you.” Her hand shot in the air again, finger extended. “But I will not allow that to happen. Not on my watch. If you listen to my guidance, you should remain safe. Though the road ahead is treacherous, I believe I can safely see you through it.”

“You only *believe* you can help us not die?” Slash asked.

“Darkworld is designed to be challenging.”



I held up a hand. God, how crazy I'd look to anyone seeing this. "Wait. What?"

"Darkworld is a new game. This is the first true cycle."

Slash whimpered. "No one has ever played the game before?"

"No. Not outside the testing phases."

"How are you supposed to help us?"

I raised my finger in front of his nose like I used to when I was teaching him how to sit. "Don't be rude."

Slash narrowed his tiny eyes. "Don't you think it's concerning that our lives depend on her guidance, according to her, but this is a new game?"

I was, but I didn't want to make a snap judgment about Fortune, her ability to assist us, or the game itself. More information was needed. I just hoped my pooch's gut was wrong. Instead of addressing his very fair question, I said, "Fortune, since this is a new game, how many times has it been tested?"

"To my knowledge? Three times, at least."

"You don't know for sure?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot be sure. My database is incomplete."

"Seriously? You don't know how many tests were run?"  
Slash asked skeptically.

I noticed he'd started quivering again. Was it a reaction from the night growing colder the later it got, or from learning we were about to become living experiments?

"No, I fear," she finally answered.

I groaned. "This is the first full run-through?"

"Yes."

That meant Darkworld was probably full of bugs. Was that the reason behind the staticky sky over Olympia? I'd been lucky enough to beta test a game before, and it wasn't pretty.

Glitches, plot holes, terrible graphics. Any problem a half-serious gamer could think of, the beta version had it. It was reasonable to assume Darkworld would, too. And if so, then maybe death wasn't necessarily a threat, maybe it was an unevenly balanced one, where it was nearly impossible to die. Or worse, far too easy to find that fate. Of course, Fortune could also be wrong. There was only one way to find out. We were going to have to play the game and do everything within our power to stay alive. Not that we had a choice.

“So we're going to have to be careful about which Ability we start with, because the skills we acquire later are dependent on that choice?” This Abilities Tree was like so many others I'd played before.

“Yes. Whichever you choose will determine your path. Later, you will have further choices, which also depend on the Ability you choose. As you can imagine, it gets quite complex as you journey through the game.”

“Choices multiplying atop choices?”

“Yes, sir.”

I looked at my dog. “What are yours?”

He narrowed his eyes again, making three small wrinkles appear on his forehead. “Sentinel and Sleuth. What about you?”

“Fighter and Harvester.”

He sneezed, his head whipping violently. “Well, those aren't very exciting.”

As someone who could handle himself, who spent way too many hours in the gym because I had no money for entertainment, and there was only so much beer I could drink before I prematurely earned my “dad bod,” I wasn't excited about the prospect of being a Fighter. But Harvester hardly sounded thrilling either.

“How do we make our choice?”

“Once you earn your next Ability Point, you can spend it on an Ability. You'll unlock your first one then. Once that is

accomplished, you will have further choices from the new branches available to you.”

“We don’t have to decide yet?”

“No, sirs.”

“Good.” Too many players had no idea how rushing these early and elementary choices could impact the entirety of their game, from the first level to the maximum. I didn’t know what Darkworld’s maximums were, and I wasn’t going to fall victim to making a stupid decision that would hinder everything that came after.

“I want to be a Sentinel,” Slash yipped.

“We don’t have to choo—”

“I want to be a Sentineeeeeeeeeeeel,” he repeated, throwing his head up and howling. “There used to be that really cool Judas Priest song with that name. I always liked it. I want to be one of those.”

“First, we don’t have to choose right now,” I said, holding up a finger. I added a second. “And you’re way too young to know who Judas Priest is.”

“So are you, but you play them all the time when you’re online with those other losers. It’s a good song. I like it. I want to be a Sentinel.”

“Do you even know what that means? My menu has short descriptions, but I can’t read it when it’s grayed out.”

“I can see mine.”

“You can read it?”

“That’s what I just said.”

“No, you said you could ‘see’ it,” I said, stressing the word. “Since when have you been able to read?”

Slash blinked like he was trying to smash his eyes together. Small wet rims outlined his dark eyes. “Well, since you opened the chest when I told you not to.”

“You didn’t—” I sighed and turned my attention to our guide. Who knew how long she was available, or if this truly was the first run of a new game, she might glitch and disappear forever? If my dog and I were going to be forced to play this game, I needed to know more about it along with what the end state is. “Fortune, how much can you tell us about the game?”

She shrugged. “How much would you like to know?”

“Everything.”

“Well, sir, that is a general statement. I can do my best, but if you could narrow it further, I could be a much bigger help.”

“This is a new game that’s only been tested three times?”

“At least. Correct.”

“A game that tricks people into playing it, without their consent. One where we could die?”

Her neck flushed just above her necklace. “That is not untrue, sir.”

“So why now?”

Fortune tipped her head. “Sir?”

“Three cycles? Why only three tests before someone ran it on unwilling participants? I assume most of the players are in the same situation as me and Slash? Unaware of what was going to happen the moment we opened the chest?”

“Alas, it is true,” she said, hanging her head like a very trope-ish video game character in distress. “The Electors were only required to build consent into the program in the most subtle of ways.”

I shook my head. “Again, I never gave my consent.”

Fortune almost looked embarrassed to answer. “You did, sir. When you opened the latch. Inscribed on the striker plate were the terms and conditions you agreed to with your action. They’re quite extensive, honestly.”

“There was writing on the striker plate?”

“Very small.” Fortune held up her hand, pinching her thumb and pointer finger together. On a scale as small as hers, it was a ridiculous measurement by even the sanest mind, and if tonight was any evidence of my sanity, it was proof I had none. “And extensive, too. Of course, the company hired a wonderful team of serjeants. Lawyers, people of your day call them. The terms cover every contingency. We had to read them as part of our training. I promise you, to do so is exhausting. Thousands of words long.”

“On the striker plate? The damned thing was only five inches long.”

“The serjeants were an expensively assembled team,” she replied, as if that answered my question. “The company protected itself against litigation. Sir, every entrant in the game gave their consent and agreed to the terms and conditions.”

“And what are those?”

She gave me a look much like the one my English teacher gave me after my tenth presentation of my paper on why soccer is a superior sport to cricket. “They are far too ponderous for me to cover with you. Plus, it would be pointless, sir, if I may be so blunt. Once you opened the chest, you lost your legal recourse to your position. More important to this situation is the answer to your question about why the game has gone live with this full mode after such a relatively short time. That answer is due to the angel investors pushing the Electors to launch. They were very interested in testing the game’s capabilities, both functionally and commercially.”

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to understand what she wasn’t saying, maybe because she simply didn’t know. After all, she was nothing more than a game element. What could she know about corporate greed and the endless pursuit of greater profits? If this game, like so many others, started out in some programmer’s bedroom and attracted angel investors, then it wasn’t beyond reason that the programmer had struck gold. People didn’t get rich by luck—well, with noted exceptions.

If these Electors attracted the attention of multiple angel investors, then they were onto something good. Hardly a shock to learn they were being pushed to test it. The Almighty Dollar was the runaway train. Players were nothing more than tumbleweeds blown onto the tracks to be run over as soon as the train barreled down.

“What’s she talking about?” Slash asked.

I stroked his wet fur. “They’re trying to make money off of us, buddy.”

“Well, that’s a crock of shit.”

Rich people weren’t stupid. Rich people were also rarely nice. Calling them and their machinations “shit” was being kind.

I pulled him in tighter, trying to keep him warm. We needed to get out of this rain and under shelter. We could finish the tutorial with Fortune then. “I know. Fortune, I’m sure you’ve got a lot to cover, and I definitely want to know more about the game, but I’ve got to get him someplace warm. I’m freezing too. No player wants to be the first one to die. Can we walk and talk?”

“The game pauses at specific times, and one of those times is when I’m activated any time you’re around a game character or another entrant. We can talk while you walk, until you come across another entrant. Or you can close me for now and once you’ve found shelter and built a fire, you can open me again if you would like.”

Slash chuckled at the double entendre.

“Grow up,” I said, remembering that he was barely entering his teens in human years.

“Come on. It was funny.”

“A little.”

“I’m okay for now.” He shivered as hard as he had been since breaking loose in the park. “If you want to finish this chat first, I guess. But then I really need a fire.”

“Okay, I’ve got the gist of the game,” I said to our guide. “Can you give me the rundown on the basics while we walk, since no one else is around? Why am I in a loincloth? Oh, and where the hell is Olympia?”

“The world as you knew it is gone,” Fortune said. I don’t think she meant to sound callous, but damn, did she? “Right now, you are in the transfer area. Soon, you will see Darkworld properly. If you complete the game, you will return to your realm.”

“So, it still exists? I just can’t see it?”

“Correct.”

“Even though I’m standing in the middle of the city?”

“Not exactly. But in principle, you are correct.”

“That’s fucked up,” Slash said. “Where is everyone who isn’t playing the game?”

“Are you missing Muffin?” I ask.

“No,” he said, dragging out the word as if he was trying to convince himself he wasn’t happy to hear that the pomsky was still around. “But if she is, then that means nobody has touched my Pussy.”

I gave Fortune an apologetic look. Even though she looked like she’d fallen straight out of a historical romance novel, she might have a modern understanding of the term. “His stuffed animal.”

“You...” A mixture of confusion and repulsion crossed her face. “You *stuff* animals? With what?”

I waved my hand in the air as if she could see it. “They’re not real.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Oh, thank goodness. I have known cruelty during my age, but we would never think to stuff animals. But, yes, should you complete Darkworld, you shall return to your world and this pussy of yours.”

“Pussy is her name,” Slash said with an eagerness of dear friends, or even lovers, separated.

Though Fortune was looking directly at me, an effect of my display, I'm sure she was looking at my pup from his perspective as well. "Rest your mind, sir. All will return to the state it held once you have completed the game."

"Good," he said with a little sniff. "Because as soon as I get home, I'm going to kiss the shit out of my Pussy."

Nonplussed by his ambiguous vulgarity, Fortune got back on topic. "A condition of the game for entrants is that they are stripped of all assets that could assist them in gameplay."

"My work clothes hardly would have helped, but they would have kept me a little warmer. Not much, but anything would be better than this." I was all too aware of the chill in the air, and growing self-conscious of how erect my nipples were from the cold.

"And that is part of the game, sir," Fortune said, her eyes turning down. "Even your modern pants would have benefited you. The Electors do not want that. It would be unfair to the other entrants."

"Unfair? How?"

"Would it be fair for someone in layers of clothing for winter to come into the game with that gear while someone else opened the chest in the nude?"

"Why would someone be nude?"

"I'm nude," Slash said matter-of-factly.

"I meant a player."

"An entrant," Fortune corrected. "A chest may have appeared in their bath."

"These game masters would do that? Put a chest in someone's house?"

"Sir, please remember, this is an early version of the game. One yet to be perfected."

"Okay. Good point. So, everyone starts out on a level playing field. That's the reason for the loincloth?"

"Yes, sir."



“Women wear loincloths too?”

“They do.”

Slash raised a paw and pushed it against the open air like he was repeatedly missing a high-five. “Oh, yeah!”

Fortune’s forehead furrowed. “My programming does not allow me to understand the context of your excitement, Little Sir, but I am glad I pleased you.”

“Oh, you did.” His snout split in a full smile as the ends of his mouth curled up. “I might finally be able to hook Brad up if he gets to see nearly naked women so he’ll stop being so clingy.”

“Knock it off.”

One of the pup’s oversized ears lifted as he held his grin. “I think I’m going to like this game.”

Fortune cocked her head. “You might not think that way after you hear the rules.”

## REDNECK GAMES



Fortune was true to her word, giving me a quick rundown as we searched for shelter. That was the good news. The bad? The bridge that should have still been standing was gone. The ancient inlet that used to run under tons of rebar and concrete and steel was still there. The hillsides gently sloping toward the water before I fell into the game were now overgrown, no longer carefully manicured by human hands.

“Why isn’t the bridge here?” Slash asked, looking up hopelessly into the empty night sky.

“You remember it?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think you’d recognize this place.”

“How could I not?” He looked up at me from the cradle of my arms. I’d managed to get a fire going after we found a depression in the hillside. It cut out most of the wind, making this spot the most comfortable we were likely to find. “Or don’t you remember that time after the cookout when we had to walk home from Lisa’s because you were too drunk? Or was it Shanaye? Stephanie? Either way, I remember what you did when we got to the bridge.”

“It was Stephanie, and no, I don’t remember much about that walk. Which is exactly why I didn’t drive.”

“I’m not giving you points for that. Anyone with half a brain wouldn’t have tried to walk. You did, like a champ, I might add. Do you really not remember what you did once we got over the inlet on the bridge?”

I sighed. I did, and it was a memory I wanted to put behind me. “Can we just focus and get warm? I want to call on Fortune so she can run us through the game rules. Who knows when we’ll get out of this transfer zone. I don’t want to go into the game ignorant.”

“You pissed off the bridge,” Slash said as if he hadn’t heard me. My pooch rolled over in my arms like he wanted belly scratches, but lowered his front paws as though holding his stomach. His back legs lifted in the air. The little sonofabitch was laughing at me. His mouth was wide open, showing off his diminutive set of fangs. “Just whipped it right out. Cars zipping by as you whizzed over the edge, down onto the highway. All those cars honking at you. Remember how that old woman shouted out of her car window for you to stop making her feel sorry for you?”

“Okay. Got it. Got it. Not my proudest moment.”

“It shouldn’t be. Not after what I saw. I don’t know why Tess let you hump her all the time. I mean, what did you think you’d accomplish? Really? Anyway. It was funny. And that’s why I remember the bridge.”

“Can we call Fortune now?”

Slash still held his stomach and rolled onto his side. “Sure. Go ahead. I can’t right now.” He pawed at the air. “Too funny.”

I shook my head and called the command to bring up Fortune and the menu box. “Guide.”

She appeared as I finished the word. “Hi, sirs. Did you get settled in? Oh, that is a nice fire. A promising start.”

“Brad likes to camp,” Slash said, obviously having pulled up his menu. “He makes these things constantly. He better. I can’t be out in anything below sixty-five degrees before I get cold.”

“Well, it is encouraging just the same. Have you found game?”

“Game?” I asked.

“Yes. Sustenance. Something to eat?”

“I thought the game would provide that. At least a small starter pack?”

“Oh no,” Fortune said. “There are no bonuses or buffs given to entrants. You are tested from the very beginning.”

“So,” Slash said, dragging out the word. “No food?”

“None, I fear.”

He blinked away his doggy tears. “But I’m hungry, Brad.”

I stroked him. “I’ll see what I can do, but I’ve got to say, it’s going to be a long night. It’s too late to go out and forage.”

“Can’t you just kill a deer or something?”

“What would I hunt with?”

Slash rolled over quickly and sat up, balancing himself on my thick forearm. “How should I know? If you were a real man, you’d hunt your game mano a mano. But humans have been cheating since your species could grunt.”

“How do you know about human history?”

“Duh. You leave the television on when you go to work. Sometimes you forget to change the channel and I have to watch those boring documentaries all day. I hate it. Well, except when you leave it on that adult streaming service.” He raised a paw. “Let me tell you. You humans have no idea how to hump. I mean, with all the sweating and bad music. And the faces those men make. What is that? And the women? They’re not any better. Speaking of. Why are all the men in those videos so curious who the woman’s ‘daddy’ is if they already know the answer?”

If we’d been lucky enough to have food, I would have spit it out. “We’ll talk about that when Fortune isn’t around.”

“I am always around,” she said flatly. “So are the systems which collect data on the both of you. For game purposes, of course.”

“You listen all the time?” I asked, not liking the implications, tucking away that bit of information because I had a feeling it would come up again.

“When you opened the chest—”

“Never mind.” The weight of overwhelming responsibility was heavy. “So, we start the game with nothing except a loincloth. Literally. We have to hunt for our own food. I’m assuming we have to build our own shelters as well.”

“That is true, yes.” Fortune tipped her head. “In fact, building shelters is one of the most important things you will do in the early stages of Darkworld. We can cover it in more detail when you get to that point. I shall warn you, you will need to build something very soon after this transfer phase.”

I looked around at the dark, starless sky. In my periphery, a harsh scratching sound drew my attention and allowed me to catch the latest flicker of grainy static to blot the sky. “How long are we in this transfer zone?”

“You will be in Darkworld within the next day.”

“That soon, huh?” Rushing a decision on a shelter wasn’t the best idea. Just like choosing which Ability would be the one we ultimately decided on. I knew what these games were about. I’d seen it before when I was dumb enough to pay for games on my phone. Those types gave you just enough to entice you, kicking on dopamine shots to encourage you to spend game currency on upgrades and quick solutions. They were the digital version of the goddamn candy bar display at the check-out counter in a grocery store.

“Theoretically, you could wait, but I would not recommend it. The longer it takes to set up your shelter, only delays the next steps you will need to take to survive until the end.”

“Let’s get into that. I get that we have to build up from nothing. I’ve played plenty of games like that.” I didn’t want

to tell Fortune that I actually enjoyed those games and had no problem if Darkworld was set up in a similar fashion. That just might give me an advantage I wasn't willing to show, whether Fortune was here to help or not. Trusting her was an entirely different issue I wasn't ready to tackle just yet.

“Darkworld is built around the concept of major and minor quests.” Fortune held out her hand like she wanted to show us something. It was empty. “There are certain quests you must accomplish in order to complete a level. There are also quests you do not necessarily have to complete and you can still progress.”

“But if I skip them, I'll miss out on cool gear, buffs, and the like?”

“Yes.”

“We need to do all the quests,” Slash said. “I want treats.”

“Let's get into the game first. Then we can decide.”

“Why wouldn't you want to do everything? Imagine the cool things we'll find.”

“We don't know that yet. And we might not have time. Or there could be other circumstances that would stop us.”

“Like what?”

“Like other priorities,” I said with a shrug. “Let's not decide about anything we don't have to make a decision on. Not yet. Okay?”

Slash laid his head down, huffing. “Fine.”

“A wise decision, sir,” Fortune said. She put a finger to her lips. “Some of the main quests will take all of your attention and energy, so getting distracted by side quests too often may leave you unprepared to address them. That could have devastating effects. Especially as the game progresses.”

“Is this an open world, based on chapters, or levels, or something entirely different?”

“Once you complete the tutorial, you will enter the first level. The world is open, within limits. That is when you will

need to select a site for your settlement and build your shelter.”

“A settlement? I thought we just needed to build a shelter?”

Fortune nodded. “Yes. But you will also have to establish a settlement. How else will you grow crops to eat? Without that, you will have to spend all your time hunting. Besides Free Zones, which I will explain later, there are few safe places in Darkworld. Though you will begin by crafting the simplest tools, weapons, and accommodations, all entrants have the capacity to level up not only yourselves, but your abilities and everything you will need to succeed.”

“Like our shelter and settlement?”

She nodded again.

“So it’s one of those games? Got it. Is Darkworld a game of players against the AI, or is there a PvP component?”

“That is dependent on the entrants. If no entrant attacks another or their shelter or settlement, the player-versus-player aspect will never turn on. However, once one entrant trespasses against the autonomy of another, the game unlocks that feature.”

Figures. And if I knew people like I thought I did, it wouldn’t be long before a douche monkey took something from another player. Then we’d all be on high alert. “How long did it take for that to happen in the tests?”

“On all three occasions, the PvP feature was unlocked within the first day.”

“Of course it was.”

“Sir, that is why it is so important to find a defensible position for your settlement. One that allows you to expand your farms and shops, and maybe even include allies.”

I stifled a groan. A cooperative game with alliances. Great. It was hard enough to rely on people in the comfort of modern life. Even when I deployed with the Air Force, disparate groups drew ridiculous battle lines, whether it was American

to Iraqi or Afghani, or even within American identity, such as Air Force against Army. People were prone to ‘other’ each other all the time, and only look out for their kind. Why would players in this game be any different?

“Remember, you only have one life,” Fortune said as if she could read my thoughts. “And, sirs, remember that there are no restarts. Dead is dead in Darkworld.”

“Silly. We won’t take that chance, will we?” Slash asked.

I gave him a firm shake of my head. “No. Fortune, what else do we need to know? I’m ready to get started conquering this game so I can get back to my boring life.”

“The most important aspect, one that will become more and more prominent as you move through the game, is that all entrants are hunted by butchers.”

Fortune said that so casually, I thought I misheard her. “What? Butchers?”

“People of your realm who applied to play the game. Though a number paid a fee to play when their original application was rejected. Each approved butcher is assigned an entrant, who becomes their sole target. They also receive a personal item of the entrant’s, and their mascot if the entrant has a pet, to assist them in getting started. Their objective is to eliminate the entrant.”

“Eliminate?” Slash said, gulping.

“Destroy. Kill. Remove.” Fortune lifted her hand, finger pointed up. “But do not fret, sirs. I will guide you away from vulnerable opportunities the best I can.”

I’m sure she thought she could. But she was a game element, nothing more. And if the developers allowed people to play a game to kill others, I knew what that meant for me and my little buddy. Selected or paying, it didn’t matter where these butchers came from. They were customers. Their interests were the ones the developers and angel investors would focus on. Mine were irrelevant. Even if I did well in Darkworld, the developers would probably hand out cheat



codes like desperate entrepreneurs handed out their business cards at conferences.

The game just got significantly more difficult.

“So, that’s their entire aim for playing? To kill entrants?”

“To kill one entrant,” Fortune corrected. “Each butcher is assigned a random number when the Electors accepted their applications. That number corresponds with the numbers assigned to each chest.”

“The chest I opened had a number? That means I have a butcher hunting me?”

“Not yet, but you will once we leave the transfer zone and the tutorial finishes. A lot of it will depend on the butcher’s motivation. During the tests, a few butchers spent most of their time exploring the world. Others became distracted by doing more disturbing things.”

“Like what?” Slash asked.

“I would rather not mention,” Fortune said. “Suffice it to say, they spent more time toying with their characters and non-player characters than completing game objectives.”

“You mean killing entrants?” I said with a little too much gruffness aimed at the game guide.

“Correct.”

“Well, whatever gets their rocks off,” I said. “I’ve dealt with guys like that for a long time. They’re more bark than bite. Little men with insignificant lives who only find happiness by screwing with other people. Let them kill my character. So what? Hell, it’d be great to get out of the game earlier.”

The color drained from Fortune’s face. “Sir, I do not believe you understand the implications. If you die in Darkworld, you die for real.”

## LEARN TO FLY



“That’s not funny,” Slash said, giving our guide as low of a growl as his tiny chest could conjure.

“Little Sir, I meant no jest.”

“We could really die? In the real world? Brad, if we die in the game, I’ll never find Pussy.”

“That won’t happen, wee man. We’ll finish the game and I’ll get—” I stopped myself from using Slash’s name for his stuffed animal. Had I known he’d name it that, I would have bought him a worm or something. Though, as I thought about it, that probably would have received an inappropriate name as well. “We’ll be home soon enough.”

I squinted, examining Fortune’s expression. Frustrating. She gave me nothing to read. Instead, she wore a blank expression while waiting for us to include her. She wasn’t apathetic, uncaring, or annoyed. She was just... waiting. “When a player, sorry, an entrant, dies in the game, they die for real?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. Her face twisted with concern. “But it is much more significant than that.”

“More significant than dying? Not sure that’s possible.”

“That would depend on perspective, I imagine. When an entrant dies in Darkworld, their life thread is removed from the

metaverse.”

“What does that mean?” Slash’s eyes widened. “Brad? What does that mean?”

I stroked him. “I don’t know. Fortune?”

“The entrant’s life thread is removed from the metaverse,” Fortune said. Her eyes shifted from side to side. “The person is removed entirely. As if they never existed.”

“That’s cruel. How does that work?” I asked.

“That is beyond my knowledge.”

I scowled. Slash growled.

“My apologies, sirs. I feel as though I have upset you.”

“It’s not your fault. Just gross, that’s all.” A sudden, concerning thought came to me. “Wait. If someone’s... Uh. Um...”

“Life thread.”

“If someone’s life thread gets removed from the metaverse, what does that mean for them, exactly? I get that it’s like they never existed. But if that’s the case, it affects more than just them, right?”

“Correct. Any impact they had or would have on reality is erased,” she said, again, not apathetically. Still, the delivery was too casual for something so disturbing.

“If they had puppies?” Slash asked.

“The puppies would be removed from the metaverse as if they never were.”

Slash gulped. “Like they were never part of a litter? No little brothers or sisters?”

“Correct.”

“If they saved someone’s life years ago?” I asked, equally horrified as my innocent pup.

“That action would have never happened.”

“Fuck,” Slash said, and this time his vulgarity in the presence of Fortune didn’t bother me.

I thought about my friends and my family. I thought about the things I’d done while deployed. If I died, anything I’d accomplished in my life that affected others would evaporate like water in a heated skillet. The time I saved that guy’s life when he choked on his filet mignon in a restaurant so expensive no one else seemed bothered to interrupt their meal and help wouldn’t have happened. That meal would have been his last. The time that guy stole a woman’s purse right outside the hospital and I’d chased him down, talking him into giving it up. Everything returned without a physical confrontation. The mayor of the town even brought me into city hall and awarded me a certificate of appreciation. If I died in Darkworld, that woman’s purse, money, driver’s license, and credit score might never have recovered.

“We can’t die, Brad.”

“We won’t.” I focused my attention on Fortune instead of the horrific implications of this doomsday code the developers had written. “Who am I up against?”

“The game and, of course, the butcher. The AI will drive game events based on your play. Your butcher’s aim is to hunt you. If they are successful, they receive a bounty from the Electors, among other considerations.”

“Such as?”

“Even if I knew, I would not be at liberty to say.”

“Fine. Tell me about him or her. What’s his deal?”

“His deal?” She cocked her head.

“I want details. Who is he? Name. Age. Job. Was he someone who tested the game, so I know if he has experience or not? Does he have a girlfriend? A wife?”

“A girlfriend *and* a wife?” Slash added, chuckling.

“Kids? You know, everything you’ve got on him.”

“I am truly sorry, sir, but I cannot divulge that information.”

“You have it, right? The lawyers, or whatever you called them, were thorough about the terms of use, you said. Collecting information on entrants and stuff. They did the same for these butchers, right?”

“They did, but that information is not something I can share, even if I was allowed. Even if I could.”

My jaw clenched. The healthy fire warming me did little to soothe my growing frustrations. “You can’t or you won’t?”

“I am not allowed.” She raised her hand again and lifted a finger. “Though there may come a time.”

“That would depend on?” I said, stressing the last word.

“If you make it to the appropriate level.”

“Which is?” I repeated the same tactic. Did she, or the program that dictated how she interacted with us, think I adored being forced to drag crap out of people, even digital representations of people?

“I fear I cannot tell you that. Not because I do not want to,” she said hastily as if anticipating my question, “but because I do not know the answer. I wish I could, sir.”

“Wonderful. Fine.” I tried to focus on something else because this was annoying and I wanted to get the game going. The quicker I did, the quicker it ended. “Let me ask you one more thing before we start this tutorial.”

“Of course, sir.”

“If I kill the butcher assigned to me, I’m assuming that’d erase them from the metaverse?”

“No. Only entrants are if killed in the game. Whether by the butcher, an NPC, or their own mistakes, such as accidentally using a spell that leads to their death. The manner of death matters not.”

Slash howled into the night sky. “This is so unfaaaaaaair.”

Did I expect anything less from a game structured as unethically as Darkworld? “Okay. But if I kill them, does that

mean I've completed the game?"

"Not truly," she said, grimacing.

I had to admit, the developers had done a wonderful job with the graphics. Fortune's facial expressions were detailed. What else did I expect of game designers who could write people out of the metaverse, along with their children and their impact on the world, and get away with it? Who the hell were their connections?

"That's not a very good answer," Slash said.

"One possibility is that you might end their game by killing them, but the possibility exists that they would purchase new tokens to reanimate," Fortune said. "That would depend on multiple factors. But to be assured you finished the game, you must complete all major game objectives *and* also kill your butcher."

"The bad guys get all the advantages? There goes hoping this game was an escape from reality." I put my hands closer to the fire, even though I was no longer cold. "When do we start? I want to finish this."

"Can we stay here by the fire and wait until the morning?" Slash said, still shivering. "I don't want to be cold again. In the morning, we can find something to eat. Anything, really. At least until we can set a trap or you can kill a deer."

"You're really set on me killing a deer, aren't you? I don't think you realize how difficult that is to do with modern weapons. All I have are my bare hands. Maybe you should try to take one down."

"Me? Oh, no. I'm more like the brains of the operation."

"Then we're truly screwed."

"If you are ready to begin the tutorial, we can start. Please remember," she said, holding up her finger again, "once we begin, you will live in Darkworld until you complete the game."

"Or we're killed inside it," Slash said glumly.

I ignored the unhelpful but accurate comment. “I’m ready if you are, wee man.”

He laid his head down, sighing through his little nostrils. “And I was just getting warm.” He lifted his head, his ears flopping in half. A permanent condition, surely. If they weren’t able to stand up on their own by now, they never would. “But I’m already hungry, and it’ll be worse if we wait until the morning. Hey, Fortune, will there be food in the tutorial?”

“Darkworld is an open world. Almost every feature is available for you to use, interact with, and yes, sustain yourself with as you complete objectives.”

Slash yipped. “Let’s get going then.”

“Sir?” she asked me.

“Oh, right. I’m the entrant, so I need to start us?”

“Yes, sir.”

Slash shook his head. “Humans. Always thinking everything is about them. Like the other nine million species around the world don’t have a say.”

“Actually, remember, you are no longer in your realm. In Darkworld, there are far more.”

“Even more reason for humans to not be dicks.”

“I am unfamiliar with that colloquialism, but I do not believe it is complimentary.”

“It’s not,” I said.

Her eyes scrunched. “From what I observed in the three tests, and what we were told during training, learning that other species do not hold the same appreciation for humans as they have for themselves is hardly surprising. Yes, humans can be these dicks.”

Slash sighed. “We’ll have to work on that. Let’s go, Brad. I’m hungry.”

I held up my hands. “Fortune, let’s start the damn tutorial.”

From everywhere all at once, I heard the deep roll of a timpani. It started low and distant in the night, and grew in volume, like a stampede I couldn't see rolling toward us. Violins and horns joined, playing steady tones and building toward a crescendo as more of the invisible orchestra followed. The music's volume rose. My heart sped from the tension the music created. In a crash of sounds, a great *ta-da* moment struck. The sky flashed a brilliant white.

Slash barked and yipped. I threw my hand over my eyes and held it there until the light faded.

"Wow," Slash said in an airy tone once the night stilled.

A wall of freshness hit me. Like I'd walked into the cleanest laundromat in the world. Like thousands of pleasant dryer sheets, marketed as having a 'natural' smell, showered the air with scents of a forest. Tentatively, I pulled my hand away. I'm pretty sure my mouth fell open.

We were on the familiar slope of the hill that rose from the last vestiges of Budd Inlet. Up the hill from us, a neighborhood had stood there earlier today. Now, it was nowhere to be seen. After the night I'd had, I didn't expect to see homes in this new daylight. Another thing I didn't expect to see lay on the other side of the narrow stretch of water. An entirely unfamiliar landscape. Green and open, the lush hilly land stretched away toward the blazing rays of a rising sun.

I gave Slash a reassuring smile. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."



# IO

## EVERY ROSE HAS THEIR THORN



“We never lived in Kansas,” Slash said, obviously confused. “Unless you were stationed there before you adopted me. You probably should have told me if that’s the case.”

“It’s a figure of speech,” I said, standing and stretching. I rubbed my naked stomach through a flash of confusion. I felt good. Fantastic. Strong. Fresh. Liked I’d slept for half a day. I wasn’t cold either. Had March given way to late June in the transition? Sure felt like it.

Something in the corner of my eye caught my attention. I tried to blink it away, thinking it might be a lingering aftereffect of being blinded by the bright sun when Fortune launched the game. I looked closer and noticed it wasn’t a flash I was seeing, but a thin, red bar.

Just as I was about to ask for her, Fortune popped up in the bottom corner of my view, just underneath the new bar. This time, the menu box now said: TUTORIAL.

“Welcome to Darkworld!” she said excitedly. “We will begin your adventure with the basic operations of gameplay. Since this is the tutorial, you cannot die. Any injuries or detrimental statuses you suffer here will be reset once you complete the tutorial.”

Underneath the word TUTORIAL in the menu box, a small dot appeared on the left side. Next to it, was the word HISTORY.

I wasn't excited about tutorials. Call me old school, but I remember the days when games came with instruction booklets. Back then, you could glance at the reference for controls and get into the game. Nowadays, it feels like the first day of gameplay centers on being forced to sit through cinematic crap so the designers can show off their programming skills. That's usually followed by monotonous elementary functions to teach you how to play. What used to take seconds now took an hour in the best case. I hoped this game wouldn't be like that.

"The land you see before you is Darkworld," Fortune continued, a bright and cheery smile on her face. "A land steeped in mystery and history. Though its past is glorious, recent times have changed the fortunes of the land and her people."

Oh, boy. This *was* going to be one of those tutorials.

"A dark magic has fallen over the land." She didn't sound like herself at all. All mandatory theatrics. Annoying. "The people of—"

"Fortune?"

She blinked, thrown off by my interruption. "Y-yes?"

"Is the history of the game necessary for me to complete it?"

"To know the story of Darkworld is—"

"Is it necessary?"

She blinked again. "W-well. N-no. Not completely."

"Okay."

852 suddenly appeared in the rectangle of the menu box.

She straightened, shimmied her shoulders and arms like she was trying to get back into character, and said, "The

people of Darkworld were once a peaceful people. In the year 852, they—”

“Skip,” I said, testing my theory and hoping the designers, these Electors, allowed for the function.

Much to my pleasure, Fortune stopped.

“Should you skip things, Brad? We might miss something,” Slash said.

“Anything they put in these stories is just fluff. It never impacts gameplay.”

“Have you been in a game like this?”

“Doesn’t matter. They’re all the same.”

“What if we miss a detail that’ll help us on a quest?” Slash whined.

“We won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Do you want to eat?”

Slash blinked, giving me a blank look. “Of course. Don’t you see how small I am? If I don’t eat something soon, I’m going to turn to dust.”

“We don’t know how long this backstory is. Do you want to sit through it, or do you want to explore and find something to eat?”

He scowled, the two tan dots of fur above his eyes nearly converging. “Do not toy with a dog and his stomach.”

“Is that you telling me you’re hungry?”

He growled instead of answering.

“That’s what I thought.” I focused on Fortune again. She wore an expression of concern. “We’re ready.”

“But I have yet to finish the history of Darkworld.”

“That’s okay.”

“No, you do not understand. I do not know how to continue without telling you the tale of its people and its

struggles.”

“And you don’t need to.”

“Sir,” she said, her face twisting like she was suffering from a bout of gas pain, “I must.”

“Seriously?”

She spread her hands in a helpless gesture.

“Fine. Go ahead.” I sat back and tried to get comfortable, taking in the extensive scenery stretching out across the open land. Green, glorious nature as far as the eye could see. Not a building, polluting factory stack, or overly dense HOA-loving neighborhood in sight.

Fortune looked unsure as she started. “In the year 852—”

“Skip.”

She bit her lip, collected herself, and started again. “When Overlord Bascus J—”

“Skip.”

“Jesus, Brad. We better not pay for this later.”

“You’re hungry, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me help you help yourself to grub.”

The pooch sat back on his haunches and gave me the dirtiest look seven pounds of canine could muster.

THE STRUGGLES OF WATERVILLE popped up in the menu box.

“The residents of Waterville—”

“Skip.”

This went on and on and on. Each time Fortune started a new passage in the story of Darkworld, I skipped it. After about fifteen minutes, Slash nudged my thigh with a paw. “I’m sorry for doubting you. Does this ever end?”

“It has to at some point.” I didn’t need to bask in the glory of victory. The introduction was what it was. A waste of time.

Filler. A chance for an insecure writer to demand his captive audience worship his words to satiate his need for adoration.

FREE PEOPLE populated in the menu box.

“When the last of the free people set out—”

“Skip.” I tried to keep my annoyance hidden. Fortune was doing what they’d programmed her to do. This routine wasn’t her fault. Man, did I feel for any entrant who wasn’t smart enough or who wasn’t a gamer and didn’t even consider skipping the intro. Who knew how long they’d idly sit, waiting for this torture to end.

“On a good note,” I said in the breaks when Fortune had to fast forward through her dialogue to the next section, “we’ll finish earlier than anyone not skipping through this story.”

“Does that mean we’ll get first dibs on food?”

“And gear and any loot lying around.” I pointed off in the distance to where the land rose steadily before what appeared to be a steep cliff. “We can get there and see if it’s a suitable spot to build our shelter.”

“And settlement, don’t forget.”

We were talking over Fortune now, I realized. “Skip.”

She moved on as I considered the implications of getting through this earlier than anyone else, using my SKIP command repeatedly and often. I wasn’t interested in PvP elements. Too many times, in too many games, the PvPers ruined the experience for those trying to enjoy themselves. Human nature and all that. People obsessed with denying benefits, resources, XP, and the like to other players because they considered other players the enemy at the risk of forgetting those programmed into the game. That wasn’t always true, but try telling gaming Neanderthals that.

If we were done with the tutorial first, and if my feelings about that cliff turned out to be accurate, we’d have a tremendous advantage. Maybe such a large one that we wouldn’t have to worry about anyone staking a claim near us because they’d see us as too established, too much of a threat.

I ran through scenarios and my early-game strategy, leaving allowances to adjust in case there was a twist at the end of the tutorial. I plotted the route we'd take to the promising elevated spot. I thought about the practical tools and weapons we'd need. I even gave consideration to how I could fashion a jacket for Slash. All this, I entertained while guiding my guide through her seemingly never-ending story.

Finally, she finished. "And that completes the tale of Darkworld. Now, adventurer, it is your time to write the fate of the world. Will you accept?"

"Do I have a choice?" I asked sarcastically.

She didn't smile. I don't think she got it.

I sighed. "Accept."

"Excellent, adventurer! Welcome to Darkworld. We shall begin the tutorial now. Darkworld is vast. Many adventures await. It is a fully interactive world. As an adventurer, you can use the world for your purposes. Everything within the gameplay area is available for use, so do not fret about interacting with the realm or being limited by it. For your first quest, I will need you to collect three petals from a fire rose. Good luck!"

"You've got to be kidding?" I said.

"Good luck!"

The menu box slid down and disappeared from my vision. My guide blinked away.

I pushed myself up with a groan. "Well, we might as well get started."

Slash trotted alongside me as we headed south. The route would take us around the farthest edge of the inlet. There, we could find the first solid ground to cross and start on my ultimate plan of getting to the rise and seeing if it could make a solid game home. "Do you even know what a fire rose is?"

"No. I doubt we're going to see much of our world here. Keep your eyes open. We might as well get used to learning. A lot." I stopped in my tracks when we'd reached the bottom of

the hill, where a field of lily pads lay across the water. Two words hung in the air above the group of fifteen pads, floating stagnant in the water like college kids relaxing with drinks while crammed into inner tubes on a placid lake.

### LILY PADS

I asked Slash if he saw them, too. “Yes. And I see words over the trees, that bush, the water, and—” He looked skyward. “Even the sky and clouds are labeled.”

I looked up to verify that I could see them. I could. “That’s going to get annoying.”

“Maybe there’s a menu option to turn it off once we get familiar with the game?”

I nodded, and we set off again. “That’ll be the first thing I check on after we find this damn flower.”

It didn’t take us long. Over the next rise, a single flower shot from the soil. At four feet tall, it was hard to miss. Even at a distance, it was easy to pick out the details. The petals were as large as ostentatious hand fans I’d seen in Eastern flicks, as red as an embarrassed teen, and covered in thorns as long as my thumb. To make things even more interesting, the thorns wiggled as if each had a mind of its own.

“There it is!” Slash said and bolted forward before I could stop him.

“Dammit.” I gave chase, reaching the flower well after he’d had the chance to approach, lowering his head to sniff the ground. He freaked himself out and yanked backward. “Next time, be careful. This could have been a trap.”

“This is a tutorial. Do you think they’d trap the first quest?”

I waved at the pristine world around us. “I’m not trusting these bastards. Be on your guard, okay? Practice makes perfect. If we get lazy about being cautious in the tutorial and the lower levels of the game, we might get ourselves killed later on.”

“Fortune said any injuries would be reset after the tutorial.” He shook his head, the effect jiggling his little body, all the way to his tail. “But that’s good thinking. Sometimes you’re not so dumb.”

“Gee, thanks.” I found a broken branch in the grass a few feet away. Using it, I poked the nearest petal. Thorns writhed and moved toward the branch like they were trying to sniff it. They curled, bent, and wiggled, just like thick, headless snakes.

“What are you doing?”

“Testing to make sure this isn’t booby-trapped.”

Slash snickered. “You said booby.”

I stopped poking the flower to shoot him an exasperated look. “Seriously? Get it out of your system now, please. If the game intends on forcing us to ally with other players, I don’t want you turning off helpful ones with juvenile jokes.”

“Oh, don’t be such a sourpuss. Booby is a funny word, don’t you think? Plus, it’s fun to say. Try it. Say ‘booby.’”

“I’d rather not.”

“Come on, what’s the harm? Booby.” He snickered again. “Booby. Come on. You know you want to. Booby.”

“Will you stop if I do?”

“Sure.”

“Fine. Booby.”

He snickered.

“Can we move on now?”

“Yes. Thank you for taking a second to not be serious.”

Lessons in life from a dog. This better be real, because if I wasn’t truly in a video game, I’d absolutely lost my mind.

After poking every petal, I dropped the stick. “Pretty sure it’s safe.”

Careful to keep my fingers as far away from the thorns as possible, I grabbed the petal as close to the stem as I dared and



plucked it. The petal popped off the stem. Just above the flower, I saw a new notification.

**FIRE PETAL (1/3)**

Plucking the next, I got an updated notice.

**FIRE PETAL (2/3)**

I snagged the last one to complete the quest. This time, we got a new notification.

**BOOM!**

**QUEST COMPLETE!**

**YOU'VE DESTROYED NATURE. GOOD JOB, FRIEND OF CLIMATE CHANGE DENIERS EVERYWHERE. YOU MUST BE REALLY PROUD OF YOURSELF. WHAT DID THAT FLOWER EVER DO TO YOU? ANYWAY, HERE'S YOUR REWARD. ENJOY YOUR LEVEL UP, DIRTBAG.**

**+5 XP**

**LEVEL UP! LEVEL 2!**

**ABILITY POINTS: 1**

“We got five experience points for doing that?” Slash laughed and pawed at the air.

“We leveled up by picking a flower?” I asked out loud, without calling Fortune. If this game was like any I’d played over the years, I knew to expect her to be around as soon as I dismissed this notification.

As predictable as rain in the Pacific Northwest, Fortune popped up on my screen, half-covered by the menu box which read LEVELING UP at the top.

I groaned at the wall of text in the box. The writing team for this game really went all out. I didn’t bother reading the mini-encyclopedia.

“Congratulations, adventurer,” Fortune said with a huge smile. “You have leveled up.”

I held up my hand, stopping her.

“Sir?”

“Can you please stop calling me adventurer?”

“But I have to. The script we were provided—”

“I understand that, Fortune, but it’s annoying and tedious. Plus, I’m not an adventurer. I’m just a guy trying to not die. Whenever the script has you call me that, just skip it, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” She didn’t look convinced or happy to be directed to skip more of the dialogue. Fine by me. I wanted a proper guide, one whose actions weren’t being completely led by the game’s AI engine.

“Oh, and please don’t call me ‘sir’ either. Makes me feel weird.”

Fortune’s tanned skin lightened. “B-but, sir. Um. Adven— If neither term is acceptable, I am loath to admit that I am at a loss how to refer to you.”

“Brad. Please, just call me Brad.”

“You could call him Cowboy,” Slash said.

I coughed. “Where did you hear that?”

He waved a thin black and tan paw in the air. “Like I don’t know. Tess used to call you it all the time when you and her were trying to make puppies and wouldn’t let me on the bed.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Though I like your company, I’m wishing you didn’t get the power to speak.”

Ignoring me, Slash said, “She used to say ‘giddy up’ once in a while when she was sitting on him. Even when she faced away from him. We’d make eye contact, and I’d give her my best puppy dog eyes so she’d let me up, but she never did. To be fair, I would face away from Brad if I was trying to make puppies with him, too.”

“Can we just move on?” I said, trying to refocus the conversation. “Fortune, we have an Ability Point now. Should we use it to select an Ability path or wait until we’re done with the tutorial?”

The guide's eyes lingered to the side, telling me she was still examining Slash and probably trying to figure out the context of his embarrassing sidebar story. Her gaze flicked to me, back to my pup, and to me once more. "Um, oh yes. Abilities. The decision is yours, si—um, Brad."

I can't lie. I appreciated she hadn't felt empowered by my pooch to call me Cowboy.

"You can assign your point to one of the two paths, or you could wait until you gain your next one before deciding."

"At what point will we get the next point?"

"At one hundred XP."

"That's not too bad." Some of my favorite things about these types of games, dating all the way back to the first of their kind, were the early level-ups, buffs, and abilities gained while taking down simple monsters and exploring new worlds. Sure, the bonuses and improvements weren't earth-shattering, but it was fun to get that dopamine hit with nearly constant upgrades. Later in games, when you needed thousands of XP to level, it always became a slog, even though the enemies and my character's powers seriously upgraded. I doubted I'd ever be able to explain why. Just who I am. A simple man, I guess.

"I want to use mine now," Slash said and spun in a quick circle.

"Not a good idea, wee man." I felt the draw too. It was natural. Game designers, at least well-funded ones, had the backing of neurological studies. Companies understood how the human brain worked and they had no problems designing games around our collective mental vulnerabilities. It sold games, and that's what they cared about. The capitalistic addiction.

The fact Slash was so excited to lock in his path with his first available point only confirmed that Darkworld was much like all the other games I'd played.

"Let's just wait until we get a few Ability Points. If we can play without having to set our path or without needing the buffs that come along with the Abilities, then we should hold

off. It'll make us better players. Fortune, you said we can't die in the tutorial, right?"

"That's correct, si—Brad."

"Can we accumulate enough XP in the tutorial to gain another Ability Point?"

"Yes."

"What about two?"

She was silent for a second. "It is possible, but you would have to complete every objective before leaving the tutorial and entering the game proper. Is that to your liking?"

Slash looked up at me, giving me his wet Chihuahua puppy dog eyes. I softened my tone. "Look, buddy. It'll be tedious. But if we stay in the tutorial and put up with this crap long enough to get two more Ability Points, we can see the first buffs of the path before we start playing. That'll leave us with a point left over to activate the second path. That way, we can adjust without being too invested in one if we don't like what it gives. I'd rather have options early in the game than have to scramble to adjust later. A little patience, okay? That's all I'm asking."

He lowered his head. After a moment, he said, "Fine. But only because you're my human pet. I wouldn't agree to this with anyone else."

I bent and scratched between his ears. "Thanks, buddy." When I stood, I asked Fortune about our next quests that would take us to a hundred XP, and two Ability Points. They were worse than I'd imagined. Worse than picking flower petals.

We had to fill waterskins and drink them within thirty seconds. Because we were so dehydrated, that wasn't a problem. We had to throw a rock at a blackbird. We didn't have to actually hit the poor animal. The thrown rock earned us the XP. We had to find a traveling merchant and barter. Success didn't matter in terms of XP, so I insisted on getting it over with as quickly as possible, especially once Slash tried to work the man for beefy treats.

The NPC seemed as confused about what a dog treat was as Slash did about why the guy didn't have a pocket full of them. That part took longer than I would have liked, but soon enough, we were off to complete other essential tasks like learning how to jump, squat, hide, and sprint. We had to run a mile. Talk about tedious. We had to collect fifty-one red flags that looked an awful lot like the banner flapping on our menu boxes. Not sure why the game gave us an odd number, but we plugged on without complaint, though Slash reminded me how hungry he was after every two or three collected flags.

“As soon as we're done,” I said, pushing Fortune for the next, and then the next, quest.

That included a mini-quest called Pick Up Sticks where we had to explore an entire field of sunflowers to find one hundred and three sticks. Broken branches counted. I probably would have pulled every single one of my short-cropped hairs out if it hadn't been for Slash's keen sense of smell. He made quick work of the task.

In the end, we'd completed twenty-one quests, and gained not only the required XP, but two Ability Points.

When we were done, we both sighed. Me, in frustration. Slash's was from hunger. He seemed unbothered by XP, Ability Points, or anything else.

“What now?” he asked.

“Now, we freaking eat.”

## II

### RASPBERRY BERETS



G luttony had nothing on us after we completed the ridiculous tutorial. Fortune led us through a shimmering gateway to a meadow that had been swarmed with raspberry bushes for hundreds of years, in game-time, by all appearances. A sea of fat, leafy overgrown greenery from which hung even fatter, red raspberries. My mouth watered.

Slash bounded forward. I reached for him, but he was beyond my grasp within his first few looping strides. “Whoa, wee man. Stop!”

Fortune popped up. “Do not fret, si—Brad. This is a Free Zone. There is no gameplay. No traps, enemies, or quests. The Electors designed Free Zones as areas for entrants to rejuvenate, rest, and recuperate. Many use these areas to meet other entrants and discuss the game, strategies, their holdings, and the such.”

“Building alliances, you mean?”

“Yes. That is often done here.”

For as far as I could see, raspberry bushes grew so close together that anything could hide within the green wall they created. To know this area was off-limits was exciting. On the one hand, I worried why they would give us this allowance. On the other, I embraced it. My suspicion was that once things ratcheted up, everyone stuck here would need decompression

time. It'd make us better players, thus making the experience more entertaining for the butchers. Happy customers were repeat customers.

“Where are the microphones?” I asked.

Fortune looked confused. “Microphones?”

“Listening devices, so the game can eavesdrop on our conversations.”

Fortune shook her head. Her long, loose curls swayed unnaturally over her bare shoulders. “No. No. That is not allowed. Plus, the Electors did not wish to listen in on the Free Zones.”

Slash ran from raspberry bush to raspberry bush. He'd nibble at a juicy berry, then skip away to eat from another. Sometimes he'd stop to lift his leg and pee on a bush whose berries he didn't approve of. His limp ears flopped as he loped through and around the bushes. Free Zones could be a place where he'd be free and happy. That brought a serenity I hadn't felt since opening that stupid chest, or gateway, or whatever it was called.

“Are all Free Zones like this? Fields of berries?”

“No. Riches such as you see here fill many. Others are simple resting places with comfortable beds. We also have quite a bawdy tavern Free Zone with more mead than anyone should drink. There are gorgeous gardens and treetop retreats as well. One of the most wondrous aspects of Darkworld is its diversity.”

I thought about the snakelike thorns on the fire rose. “Yeah. Diversity.”

Eating until my stomach was full refreshed my body and finally felt rested. The red bar in the top corner of my vision had disappeared throughout the tutorial, only showing again when I ate my first berry. I hadn't noticed the red filler moved slightly to the right. Only when Fortune popped on my screen to let me know that resting had replenished my Health did the cost of physical activity register. A devious little trick of the Electors, to make even mundane activities use a player's

Health. A note I tucked away because I was sure it'd come up again.

Slash yipped.

I panicked until I remembered Fortune said Free Zones were also free of harm.

My seven-pound terror was squaring off against an overgrown raspberry bush. Its looping branches stretched four feet over its root, hanging low with healthy fruit. The damn thing looked like it was wearing a leafy, green beret. And it was scaring the piss out of Slash. Literally. Tiny beads of golden nervousness dripped to the ground where he stood, legs spread, yapping and barking. He dashed to the side and barked every time a slight breeze ruffled one of the bush's leaves.

"Little Sir is quite adorable," Fortune said. From my perspective, she was looking directly at me, but it was obvious she was referring to his confrontation with the bush. "He will need to work on his Courage skill before too long. I fear it could become a detriment."

"Yeah, that won't happen." I smirked as my little buddy carefully approached the bush and brought his snout up to sniff at a berry. He snatched it and raced a safe distance away before chomping down. "Everything scares him. Plus, he has me. As long as I'm here, he's protected."

After a quiet moment, Fortune smiled. Strange how comfortable I was conversing with this digital woman implanted in my eye.

"Yes. Of course. I apologize for stating so."

Well, now don't I feel like an ass?

"Fortune, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap."

She put a hand to her chest. "Sir, you do not need to apologize to me."

"Yes, I do. I was rude."

"You are an entrant. I am your guide. No apologies are necessary."



“When I’m a jerk, they are.”

Fortune seemed to consider whether she should continue to fight my stance. A sense of queasiness washed over me. I was feeling guilty about my interactions with what was nothing more than a bunch of code cobbled together, represented in a brunette woman who dressed like she’d fallen straight out of Henry VIII’s entourage. Maybe it was because she seemed less bothered than me. Maybe because she made it sound like I could talk to her any way I wanted. Or maybe, possibly, it was because I despised dicks who talked to other people like they were lower life forms. Fortune wasn’t a person, but she seemed real enough to be something synonymous with one. The fact she was a collection of zeroes and ones didn’t change that.

She bowed her head. “If you insist, si—Brad.”

We’d have to work on her programmed subservience. Who knew how long I was going to be in this game, and if I was here for a while, she’d have to come around to see herself as an equal.

I smiled and settled back, watching Slash roll in the grass with a berry pinched between his paws. I’d never seen him this happy. My lousy job was mostly at fault. My choices leading me to take the job were too. Capitulation to my fate didn’t help. I never had enough time with the little guy. For all the bullshit that being forced into this crazy game world was, at least it gave us time together we wouldn’t have had otherwise.

“Once he has had his fill, we should walk through your Abilities,” Fortune said.

“Good idea.” Slash was rolling from side to side, pushing the berry with his paws, letting it roll away so he could scramble up and block it. He’d bark, pounce, then snag it in his mouth, tumble to the ground, and begin the entire process over again. “Slash, come on. Fortune wants to run us through our Abilities.”

Slash looked up, the berry spreading his jaws uncomfortably wide. This one was larger than most he’d taken a liking to. Half as large as his head, he’d taken on quite the

challenge. One ear stood on end, forming an impressive triangle, but the other flopped over backward. I hoped he never outgrew that. The pooch spit the berry out and raced over, launching himself into my lap.

“Ooof,” I said as I caught him. “Okay, Fortune. Lay it on us.”

Slash squinted at me. “Still unfair that you have one more XP than I do.”

“How do you know how many experience points I have?”

“It’s in the menu, dummy,” he said as if I should know how to check that. “Haven’t you been experimenting with your commands? What have you been doing this entire time?”

“Relaxing. Like I thought you were.”

“I was eating and hydrating and getting out pent-up energy,” he said. “But I still explored the menu. Shit, Brad. Anyway, I know you got a single XP at the beginning of the game. That’s not fair, because I didn’t get a chance and I want us to be equal.”

I pointed out that we both had three Ability Points to spend.

He rested his head on my forearm. Sniffing out a sigh, he said, “So what? I want to be even.”

I scratched behind his ear. “Once we get out of here, we’ll get you that XP, okay?”

“Fine,” he said with a sniff and a small growl. Then his head popped up. “Hey, Fortune, I want to work on my Abilities now. I’m tired of waiting for Brad to get us killed. Can we start?”

“Yes, Little Sir.”

“You don’t have to call him that.”

“Yes, she does,” Slash said, lifting his chin. “I told her that’s my title when you weren’t paying attention. I like it. It’s about high time someone gave dogs the respect we deserve.”

“I do.”

Slash licked my hand. “I know you do. But most people don’t, and I’m representing my people. Now, I want to pick my Ability.”

“Okay,” Fortune said. “If you will both open your menus, we can walk through how that is done. Once you unlock your first Ability, you can begin upgrading. Ready to start?”

## DILEMMAS



I pulled up my menu with ease, now comfortable with the basic functions of the Conjuror's Cane. Focusing on the Abilities tab, I switched the menu to the view of two grayed-out diamond shapes. FIGHTER and HARVESTER were my paths to choose from.

"Hmmm," Slash said. A tiny rumble came from his chest. "Do I go with SENTINEL or SLEUTH? SENTINEL sounds badass, but you're already going to be a fighter. I'm not sure both of us should be."

"What makes you think I'll choose FIGHTER?"

"Because you're a big muscle-headed oaf."

"Simply because I work out means I'm an oaf?"

"Yes." He sounded way too honest there. "I've seen those videos on the internet and TV commercials promoting that hardcore fitness stuff. Have you ever seen someone with arms the size of yours with a PhD?"

"How do you know what a PhD is? I'm sure quite a few people who work out have high levels of education."

"Not you." His ears perked up. "Fortune, how do I determine the benefits of these Abilities?"

“If you concentrate on one of them, a small window will appear detailing its attributes.”

I followed her directions, switching between hovering over the FIGHTER diamond and the one labeled HARVESTER.

My gut told me I needed to be a FIGHTER because being a HARVESTER might not get us through the early stages of the game.

There was no rush. Slash had yet to choose his path. Nothing in Fortune’s words, demeanor, or direction indicated I needed to decide this instant. If Darkworld had a strategic element, even a major element, all the better. Hardly the smartest guy in the room, I can hold my own and enjoyed that type of gameplay.

I concentrated on the FIGHTER diamond. True to Fortune’s word, a pop-up box appeared to the side.

### **FIGHTER**

**+5% BONUS TO STRENGTH**

**+3% BONUS TO STAMINA**

**+1% BONUS TO PRESENCE**

**+1% BONUS TO TOUGHNESS**

**WEIGHT ALLOWANCE BONUS: +15**

**ADDED TRAIT: THICK SKIN**

Essentially everything I expected to see in a FIGHTER Ability. I hadn’t realized we’d have a weight allowance. That tidbit hadn’t come up in our conversations. Obviously, if this Ability gave a player a boost to how much they could carry, the implication was that everyone had a limit. Maybe not a big deal right now, but it could be.

Plus, there was a mercantile aspect to games like these. The more you could carry, the more loot you could hold for those times when you came across a merchant. Being able to carry a hefty burden meant being able to sell a ton in towns and villages. The trade aspect was often overlooked as a good way to buy new gear, passage on ships, bribing officials, or

even build settlements. You name it. The weight allowance had my attention.

“Fortune, what’s the Thick Skin trait?”

“Sir—Brad—it is a two percent boost to your basic Defense score.”

“How do I know what my score is?” Two percent could make a big difference later in the game as I leveled and acquired armor. At least I hoped that was part of it, because I really didn’t want to run around Darkworld in only a loincloth, no matter how short the game might be.

“It’s in your player profile, duh,” Slash said. He sat off to the side, one paw raised in the air as if he were moving and manipulating invisible tiles. “I swear. You need to spend time in your menus or you’re going to get us killed.”

Maybe he was right. He appeared to have a mastery of this game far beyond our time in it. But I was also the one who’d kept him warm and dry. Searching for shelter, collecting wood, and starting and maintaining a fire without modern tools or equipment took a lot of my time and focus. Resources he must have used to familiarize himself with our new situation.

Fortune walked me through the process of calling up my profile. It was a tab that simply said CHARACTER and looked a lot like character sheets in other games I’d played. It was loaded with skill scores for just about every attribute imaginable. The game was at least kind enough to list everything in alphabetical order, so Defense was easy to find.

### **DEFENSE: 15**

Well, that seemed like a decent starting stat. “What’s your Defense score?”

Slash sighed, his paw hanging in the air as if I’d just broken his concentration. “Hang on. Let me check.” He hummed to himself then said, “One.”

“One?”

“Yes. One. Why? What’s yours?”

I told him.

“*Fifteen?*” He smashed the paw he’d been hanging in the air to the soil. “Fortune. This is unacceptable.”

“You are a small mascot, Little Sir,” she said apologetically. “The game assigns standard values based on its evaluation of your traits upon entering Darkworld. But there is a balance. If it detects someone of small stature, it will balance the entrant’s, or mascot’s, stats elsewhere. So you may have a low value for Defense when compared to Brad, but others will have a relatively higher value.”

His lip pulled up as he snarled at the thin air. “Relatively? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Mascots will always have lower baselines stats than entrants,” Fortune said tentatively. Her neck darkened with a flush. “An unfair aspect, I realize. But I will not mislead you, Little Sir.”

“Well, that sucks. And I don’t want to be called a mascot. That’s insulting.”

I didn’t like the fact that he was weaker all around simply because he was my pet. He was in this game as much as I was, as vulnerable to it as I’d be when we started playing. In my mind, he was a player, even if a powered-down version.

“If it helps you find peace with the matter, I can share something.” Fortune cupped her hands and rested them on the menu box that said ABILITIES at the top. Yellow text filled the box. Too much to bother reading. “All mascots start with the same overall point value. Yours are quite high in certain respects. Plenty of mascots lack the potential you do.”

“Hmmm.” Slash lifted his snout into the air, blinked, and then sniffed. “Fine. But I’m still not crazy about this. I’m going to pick my Ability.”

“Let’s talk that through first, buddy.”

“Only if you do too.”

“I will. I need to look at the other one, but I have to check out my stats first.”

“Don’t take too long,” he said, his paw moving up again like he was manipulating something on his player screen. “After I choose my Ability, I’m going to want to eat and then find a way to carry more of these berries. They’re amazing.”

“You just ate.”

“And?” he asked, his pitch raising. “I’m a growing boy, and Chihuahuas have a high metabolism. Don’t food shame me, Brad.”

“I—” No. I wouldn’t get into this with him. I’d obviously left the wrong apps playing on TV when I was at work. Who knows what vloggers I’d exposed that unsuspecting pup to? Plus, I needed to take a deeper look at my stats before I even bothered looking at the HARVESTER Ability. Far more important than exploring his sensitivities.

I did a quick scan of all the scores. There was a lot to go through. Too many to count. I had to ask Fortune how I could zoom in to make them out. She taught me. Manipulating the display wasn’t difficult. I had to pinch the air with my finger and thumb to zoom in, and then reverse the action to zoom back out again. That’s what Slash had been doing all along with his paw. Smart little guy.

Time evaporated as I combed through my stats, seeing which were the highest, and where I was vulnerable. The essentials, like Strength, Dexterity, Concentration, Intelligence, and Speed, were balanced. However, I didn’t like my Survival and Wisdom scores, both valued at two, and asked Fortune how that impacted gameplay.

“They are that low?” Her mouth stretched wide like she’d just seen a grievous injury occur in the middle of a football game.

“Yes.” I had a few other stats that weren’t exactly worth bragging to friends about, but none caught my eye like those two. “How is this going to impact my experience?”

“I do not like this. Those two are vital for early gameplay.”

“How so?” I pointed out in a general direction beyond the Free Zone. “From what I’ve seen of the world so far, it’s pretty



austere.”

“It is, and it will be for a time. Darkworld is massive and bountiful, but the Electors designed it so that entrants must evolve through their own ages. The Electors found that to be the most rewarding experience during their testing. Such as your clothing.”

“Or lack of.”

As if she didn't hear me, she continued, “They believe in improving gameplay by leveraging determinism. If entrants are given shelter and food, modern tools, and conveyance, even weapons, then they will be less inclined to problem-solve or find creative solutions to the challenges they face. Entrants must cultivate everything. If they cannot...”

“They die. The Electors believe this improves the game because the weakest, those who don't or can't adapt, are eliminated, leaving only those who can or have?”

“Exactly.” Her brows furrowed. “Thus, making the hunt more challenging and intriguing for the butchers. Which is why I share my concern over your scores for Wisdom and Survival. The early levels of the game will be even more challenging for you than for many others. You will have to play safely. Something as simple as fashioning an ax will take you three times longer than someone with a score of six, for example. You might never learn some skills because you simply will not see the opportunity while exploring Darkworld. The HARVESTER Ability will help with that, though. So have hope.”

“Guess I better check it out.”

I refocused on my Abilities tab. If HARVESTER showed potential, I wouldn't risk my fate on hopes and maybes. I'd choose the one that gave me and Slash the best chance of survival.

I hovered my concentration over the HARVESTER diamond shape.

**HARVESTER**

**+5% BONUS TO SPEED**

**+3% BONUS TO FORTITUDE**

**+2% BONUS TO TOUGHNESS**

**SOWING SPEED BONUS: 3X**

**ADDED TRAIT: NEVER A DULL BOY**

So, HARVESTER shared the Toughness bonus with the FIGHTER Ability and had one less trait bonus, but the same overall bonus upgrade. Increased Speed and Fortitude sounded nice, as did having another percentage point added to my Toughness. Sowing speed hardly sounded enticing. If the game designers were interested in entertaining butchers, hardly a trait worth drawing attention. Which meant they'd likely design a way to force me out of it. The added trait had me confused, so I asked Fortune about that.

“Your blades never dull,” she said as if the trait was self-evident.

“Never?”

“Never. Whether an ax blade for cutting wood, a pickaxe for breaking rock, or a weapon.”

“Nice.” I'd never had to sharpen a blade, for a farm tool or weapon, but I didn't imagine it was a quick process. Since we had no tools, no wheels, no whetstones for blades, repair time was likely high. I'd have to build everything by hand. Resources would need to be gathered. This early stage would be physically demanding.

Never having to worry about a blade's edge would be a true boon. If I didn't start out strong, I might never see the later stages of the game. Plus, from my military background and love of throwing weights around at the gym, I had enough going for me in that department to make up for what I lost by not choosing the FIGHTER Ability path. More strength on top of what I already had might be overkill, and no one liked a dude bro, anyway.

I moved my concentration over the HARVESTER diamond. A gold line shone around the shape. I told Slash what I was thinking.

“Sounds good to me.”

“What? No argument? No fight?”

“Why would I? If you pick HARVESTER, then we can have a home in no time. A home means a fireplace. Mmmm, fire. Plus, an ax that never dulls means plenty of firewood. And arrowheads to take down fat deer. Which means plenty of jerky.” He rubbed his belly with a paw. “Imagine, a lifetime supply of jerky beefy treats. I promise I’ll never intentionally pee on your floor again if you pull that off.”

“Settled then. Wait. What? You intentionally peed on my floor?”

“Only when you forgot to feed me on time. Don’t be dramatic.”

I scowled to hide my smile and focused on the task at hand. With the HARVESTER diamond still highlighted, I mentally clicked on it.

**BOOM!**

**YOU HOE, YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW!**

**YOU’RE A HARVESTER NOW, BA-BY. THE EARTH IS YOURS TO SCORCH. THE SOIL, YOUR WOMB. THE WORLD, YOURS TO BEND TO YOUR WILL. JUST DON’T GO RE-CREATING CLIMATE CHANGE, PLEASE. IT TOOK US THOUSANDS OF HOURS TO CLEAN UP THAT SHIT.**

**GO FORTH AND SPREAD YOUR INFLUENCE ON THE LAND LIKE A RELIGIOUS CULT ON AN AMPHETAMINE BENDER.**

**ABILITY POINTS: -1**

**2 ABILITY POINTS REMAINING**

“Can I pick mine now?” Slash said excitedly after the game announcement of my new Ability.

I had two more Ability Points to use, and I wanted to see the new threads that’d appeared underneath the HARVESTER diamond but figured I could get to those after my pup. After

all, he'd wanted to choose his Ability since we received our first point, and it was probably eating away at him to have to wait this long. To make him wait any longer would be cruel. "Yeah. What are you thinking?"

He put a paw to his snout. "I really like the looks of the SENTINEL, but I'm not sure I want it."

"Why not?"

"From what I read in the FAQs, it's basically a bullet sponge, and I'm not interested in being one of those. That's why we have military people. Well, not you. You were Air Force. That's not real military."

"We wore uniforms," I said with a chuckle.

"Sure. Keep telling yourself that. Anyway. SENTINEL isn't for me." He tried to detail the different bonuses between his choices but got too excited and always jumped back to the SLEUTH Ability.

It made sense. Having Slash's Investigation and Perception both receive a +5% bonus would come in handy. As would the ten point bonus to his Insight. Already armed with a dog's sense of sound and smell, very little would get by my wee man. He might not be able or willing to fight, but we wouldn't have to worry about hidden threats as long as he was on the case. Plus, everything scared him, so putting him in a tank role made no sense.

"What is the Puzzle Pieces trait?" Slash asked Fortune.

"When faced with a puzzle you cannot solve, upon your request, you will receive a notable hint to the solution," the guide said.

I made a fist. "Nice one."

"Hmmm, in'eres'ing," Slash said in what sounded like a dog's poor attempt at an English accent. Instead, it came out sounding like crumbling cockney.

"Don't. Just. Don't. Have you made up your mind?"

"Indubitably, mate," my pooch said, again in terrible British English.

I ignored him. Fortune nodded as if she approved.

“I choose SLEUTH.”

As soon as my pooch spoke, another notification popped up in my vision.

**BOOM!**

**IN DARKWORLD, SOMEONE HAS STOLEN ALL THE TOILETS. DETECTIVES HAVE NOTHING TO GO ON.**

**THERE’S ALWAYS TIME FOR DAD JOKES EVEN WITH YOUR NOSE TO THE GRIND. HAVE FUN WITH THIS ONE. YOU’RE ABOUT TO GET UP IN EVERYONE’S BUSINESS.**

**ABILITY POINTS: -1**

**2 ABILITY POINTS REMAINING**

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” I said.

**BOOM!**

**+2 TO PERCEPTION**

**ABILITY POINTS: -1**

**1 ABILITY POINT REMAINING**

My pup was already spending points on his Ability path!  
“Slash, stop—”

**BOOM!**

**+2 TO INVESTIGATION**

**ABILITY POINTS: -1**

**0 ABILITY POINTS REMAINING**

I shook my head. “Did you take time to check out both trees of your Abilities? Did you think if you maybe wanted to unlock the SENTINEL with your points before you spent them?”

“No. Plus, I have three branches for my Ability. Not two.”

I rubbed my face. “You’ve got to slow down, wee man. We need to think through this carefully.”

“Hurry and use your points, Brad. I want to see what you get,” Slash said, bouncing on his front paws. “Plus, it’s not fair that you still have two Ability Points when I don’t have any.”

Had he not heard what I just said? “You don’t have any because you spent them.”

“Hurrriiiiiiry uuuuuuup,” he howled into the peaceful, warm sky of the Free Zone.

“If I may?” Fortune said while Slash carried on.

“Of course.”

“It would behoove you to spend the Ability Points now, before you step out of the Free Zone. Once you leave here, you will enter the true beginning of the game. Though an early point where the vast majority of entrants will survive, I would recommend taking full advantage of the Ability Points you worked so hard to obtain.”

I could unlock the FIGHTER Ability and see what its branches on the bonus tree looked like, or I could unlock both branches in my HARVESTER tree.

I threw my hands up. “Fuck it.”

Slash was still howling, this time in celebration, while I looked at my two branches.

The branch on the left would give me a bonus for crops. The one on the right gave me a bonus for resource collection. When I zoomed in, I saw it was a bonus specifically for lumber and rock. I spent one point on each of the branches.

**BOOM!**

**+1% BONUS TO CROP YIELD**

**ABILITY POINTS: -1**

**1 ABILITY POINT REMAINING.**

**BOOM!**

**+1% BONUS TO RESOURCE COLLECTION**

**ABILITY POINTS: -1**

**0 ABILITY POINTS REMAINING**

“Happy?” I said with a wink at my excited pup.

“Yes.” His voice cracked halfway through his display. When he finished, he spun in a circle. “Hey, do you think you can have the house built by tonight? I’m looking forward to sleeping next to a fire.”

“You will want to rest before you leave the Free Zone,” Fortune said with enough caution to get my attention.

“I don’t want to take a naaaaaaaaap,” Slash howled.

Fortune pinched her mouth closed like she was fighting her smile. “If Little Sir will look in the top-left of his mindscreen, you can see your Health bar. Is yours completely full?”

“No,” Slash said, sitting back. “I still don’t want to take a nap. Brad, please, let’s get into the game so you can finish the house and feed me by the fireplace tonight.”

“There’s no way I’m making a house before nightfall,” I said, lifting a finger and suddenly feeling like I was copying Fortune. I folded it back into my fist again. “And, honestly, if Fortune says we should go into the level with a full Health bar, don’t you agree?”

“But—”

“Do you really want the game to end before it begins?”

“No,” he said with a pooper scooper full of petulance.

“Don’t you want puppies one day?”

“Dozens of litters.”

“Then we should listen to her.”

He loosed a tiny growl. “If you get cold when we’re asleep, don’t even think about cuddling up to me. I’m not okay with you violating my bro-zone.”

## NO ONE GETS OUT (A)LIVE



“This game is stupid,” Slash said as he shivered against my leg.

I stroked him, keeping him close. The little guy had been through so much in his young life. I didn’t imagine it was easy being ripped away from your mother and shipped off to a shelter. Surrounded by other abandoned pups, adopting him to give him a loving home initially forced him to live with another new stranger. One who constantly picked him up, cuddled him, gave him kisses when no one was looking, and who farted whenever he ate chicken wings.

Nor could it be easy to weigh seven pounds and have the metabolism of a squirrel on crack. No matter how big I made our campfire, it was a disappointment to him. The fact I hadn’t contained the fire in a hearth inside of a cabin didn’t thrill my pooch. I couldn’t be within ten feet of the flames without sweating. He practically wanted to sleep in them. I sucked it up because he felt cold to the touch.

“I’ll be okay for tonight,” Slash said, his fangs clattering. “But I really need you to figure something out for the morning.”

No amount of fur-stroking would satiate my wee man. “I know. At first light.”



Fortune had opened the gateway between the tutorial's Free Zone and the first level, reminding us more times than I cared to count that the game was now on for real. We hadn't made it to the cliffside rise, much to my disappointment. As soon as the sun rose, we'd be up and at it again. Sadly, that was hours away.

"Want berries?" I asked, hoping eating would help pass the time.

The eastern, or what I assumed was the eastern, sky brightened with the rising sun. It was now the color of slate.

Slash sighed. "I'd rather head out. If you think it's safe. The earlier we get going, the faster we'll get to that hill you wanted to scout for our house."

"Will you be okay walking this early?"

Slash narrowed his eyes. "Just because I'm small doesn't mean I can't handle a little chill." His fangs clattered again.

I scratched the tuft of black fur between his tan dots. "You're more dog than seven pounds can contain."

"That's what she said."

"Who?"

"Muffin."

I almost choked. "When? You've never been to the park with her. Even if you had, you wouldn't know what to do. Plus, you can't say that. I think it's copyrighted or something."

"I can say what I want. We're inside a video game, and I'm a dog with no valuable assets. Well, except for my Pussy. For all we know, our world might be gone. If it isn't? Who heard of someone suing a dog? I mean, seriously, Brad. Not only are you stubborn, which got us into this mess to begin with, but you also worry too much."

"And you don't worry enough." Still lightly petting the spot between his eyes that was narrower than my thumb, I looked toward the long climb ahead of us. "If you're ready, so am I."

“What are we waiting for?”

“It’s going to be cold for the next several hours.”

“I know. But just thinking of stretching out in the living room by the fire again...” Slash lied down, rolled onto his back, and squirmed. His head went one way while his hind legs and tail went the other. He continued twitching side to side, his front legs pawing at the sky for far longer than his misguided fantasy should be able to provide him with happiness.

The fire took a while and a lot of effort to put down. Slash helped, but there wasn’t much the Chihuahua could do. Sparks shooting off the logs didn’t help his efforts. The snapping pops made him jump.

The sky continued to brighten behind us as we trekked through the fields and thickets. I had a line on the hill until we reached a valley that forced us to wind through a small swamp. The detour threw us off course. On the other side of the swamp, we stopped by a thick tree.

“Stay here.”

“Where are you going?” Slash asked.

I pointed at the tree. “I’m going to climb and see if I can find the hill again. I don’t want to head in the wrong direction and have to work back this way.”

We hadn’t seen another player yet. Fortune had said this was a massive world, so that wasn’t surprising. On the off-chance other players started the game in the same area, I wanted to be the first to that hill. Maybe I’d made a mistake by only scouting the one spot and not having an alternate. But how many other players had done that much when they started?

Plus, I’d found the chest in the park almost immediately. Who said anyone found their gateways as quickly? Were the chest placements arbitrary, or did the designers have a strategy? Could chests still be unopened, sitting in supply closets and break rooms in closed office buildings around the world, waiting for a soulless employee to stumble upon them?

The tree's sturdiness made my climb easy. Most of the branches were as thick as my thighs, including those that extended thirty feet from the trunk. The bulky limbs and branches provided me with a sense of security that could have pushed me to climb seventy feet, but that height was well beyond my comfort level. I stopped as soon as I pinpointed our destination.

Slash paced at the foot of the tree the entire time. Back and forth, rounding in tight circles, the pup never stopped. He jumped at me when I was back on solid ground, planting his front paws against my leg.

I scratched behind his ear. "Let's go."

We headed off toward the hill. Before long, my legs burned with exertion as we climbed. Instead of being discouraged, I was thrilled by the effort the hike required. People were people. Few would trek this far to set up a camp. Mine wasn't an isolationist attitude. Simply, I'd avoid the PvP stuff as long as possible. This spot was critical in seeing that through.

Would my butcher be willing to search for me this far removed? Could he? I'd make his hunt the most miserable, regrettable event in his life.

Thinking about my butcher brought another thing to mind. The game wouldn't allow Fortune to name who was after me? Fine, then he'd be nothing more than a dude bro to me. They didn't want to let me know what advantages or in-game backhanded deals Dude Bro could participate in? Great. I'd force the sonofabitch to spend every bit of energy he had trying to find me. But I wouldn't fall to any barbarism.

"What's wrong?" Slash asked, looking up at me as he trotted uphill, his tiny ears flapping.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You're scowling."

I grimaced. Busted. "Just thinking."

"About what?"

“Nothing.”

Slash stopped, so I waited, thinking he was going to take a dump. Within five seconds, he started shaking.

“Are you going to do your business or freeze to death?”

His tone told me he didn’t care to hide his irritation. “Are you going to let me know what’s bothering you?”

Like usual, I caved and gave him a quick rundown of my thoughts about human tendencies, the bullshit game, and Dude Bro.

“So you don’t plan on killing him?” Slash asked when I finished my dissertation on the futility and repulsiveness of violence.

“Honestly? I’d like to find another way.”

“Do you seriously think there’s another way?”

“Can we chat about this while we hike? Remember, we don’t have cell phones here. That means I don’t have GPS. I have no idea where we are or how far we have to go.”

The Chihuahua remained planted. “Only if you promise you’ll kill the butcher when the time comes.”

I almost rubbed my face in frustration until I realized it’d been roughly two days since I’d showered. Time was difficult to keep track of in this strange world. I wanted to get settled.

“Slash, I don’t want to kill the butcher,” I said as patiently as I could manage. “Or anyone.”

“But we have tooooooooooo.”

“No.”

He threw his head back, his muzzle forming a small O-shape like he was pursing his lips. “Pleeeeeeeeeeease?”

Little murderhobo.

I held my finger up in a direct line with his eyes. A training tactic I’d used to teach him to sit during our first puppy training classes. Instantly, I realized how insulting that was now. Yanking my hand down, I hid it behind my back.

“Please, stop doing that. We’re not home anymore. There’s shit out here that will kill us. Another player, a game monster, or even those stupid fire roses. We can’t act like we could back home. Okay?”

“Fine.” He stomped the ground with a paw. The soft dirt didn’t even indent. “But you can’t keep walking around like we won’t have to kill. It’s obviously part of the game. You’ve played and lost enough games to know that. Don’t be naïve. Honestly, you’re terrible at games or you wouldn’t lose so often. You even lose at poker against your friends and online. If you won’t kill the people who want to kill us, I’ll be safer on my own. I mean, I won’t go. If I did, you’d die before the end of the day. I can’t do that to you. You need me.” He sat back on his haunches. “The butcher is out there. Other entrants are out there. Please tell me, if you refuse to kill them, what’s the alternative?”

I jerked my chin, signaling the uphill work we still had ahead of us. “Let’s get up there and see what we’re looking at. Then I’ll develop a plan.” I squatted in front of him. He shimmied with shivers. I slowly reached out and scratched his ear. “But I promise. If anyone threatens us, I’ll do what I have to do. Okay?”

He scowled. “Promise for real.”

I just said I did, but if he needed further reassurances, I’d gladly give them. “I promise for reals. Crossing my heart and swearing on my grandpa’s grave.” I picked him up and tucked him against me, sharing the comfort of my body heat and security. “By the way. My buddies cheated at poker.”

Slash yipped. “No, you’re just a terrible liar. Your face is so easy to read. That’s how Tess knew you weren’t telling the truth when she asked you if you’d humped your hand earlier in the day and if that was why you couldn’t hump her at night. Remember? I told her you had been in the shower for way too long to be cleaning yourself, but she didn’t understand dog speech. Still, your face gave it away.” He slapped his paw against my forearm. “Oh, do you think the game will give us challenges where you’re forced to lie your way through a quest or something? If it does, we’re screwed. You realize

that? Right? Oh God, I hope it doesn't. But, if it does, I'll do the talking. Got it?"

"Shhh." I palmed his face and pulled him in close. Restarting our hike, I hoped whatever was at the end of this tiring trek was worth the effort and held more promise than the prospects of playing Darkworld.

## WHEREVER WE MAY ROAM



S lash insisted we name the hill Booby Hill. After walking six hours, carrying him most of the way, I didn't have the energy to fight him over a name. The most effort I put into the discussion was reminding him of what the hill looked like when we were sitting on the bank near the inlet where Olympia used to stand. When he refused to accept my stance, I pointed out that I'd seen the hill from a superior perspective. It most definitely didn't look like a 'booby' or any other part of someone's anatomy. When he asked if examining boobies, his words, was a habit of mine, I gave up. And so, our new home officially became Booby Hill.

The decision to chase this slope upon which to build proved to be wise. Though the hike was intense, and would be for anyone who thought to encroach, once we crested the high ridge, we saw the potential it held.

A wide field sloped gently upward. I gauged the elevation rise as roughly three hundred feet over five acres. The land was viable, and prime for setting up a small farmstead. On either side of the wide, rising field, thick lines of pines protected the area from prying eyes. We were shielded from straight-on views and winds cutting across the rise. At this elevation, protection from the wind was one of the most important natural features you could hope for, and we had it. Sure, it'd be colder this high up. But this was a cost-benefit

situation. Here, no one would bother us. We had plenty of useable land. A cliff on the far end kept our backs to a permanent, natural barrier. Every night's sleep would come easier.

Though I didn't feel like walking any more, I pushed on toward the back of the hill in search of spots to build. The sun was on its descent, but still relatively high. I was encouraged by what I envisioned for this place.

Slash barked viciously enough that I nearly dropped him. I looked to where he'd craned his neck. He bared his teeth. At first, I thought the glorious open sky had found his ire. I was wrong. Hundreds of feet in the air, the massive wings of a bat caught my eye. Stretching over eight feet wide, that sucker was huge. Sunlight illuminated its wings, brightening the blacks and browns in the membrane.

"Shhh." I bobbed Slash. "We don't want to draw that thing's attention."

"Are bats supposed to be out during the day?" Slash said, shivering in my arms.

"Only when they're hungry, I think. That's why I don't want it to know we're here." I looked behind me toward the pines. "Let's go collect tinder and firewood. Hopefully, it didn't notice us and will move on by the time we're done."

We stepped into the line of trees that I think were spruces. Five feet into cover, the air smelled even cleaner than it did in the open. So far, the only complimentary thing I could say about being forced to play for my life in a video game was that the designers created a beautiful world.

The deeper we went into the trees, the thicker their growth. The spruces grew taller, broader, and fuller. An old growth area.

"Should be easy to find older trees," I said, waving at the ground. "We can collect needles for tinder. Shouldn't be too hard to get a fire going."

"How are we going to collect?" Slash asked. "It's not like we have something to carry them with."



He was right. The game hadn't given me anything but my loincloth, so we'd have to lug everything by hand.

"Let's see if we can find a clearing. We'll use an Inventory slot. Or whatever. We'll worry about it then." The trees were too full, so thick in some spots they made an impenetrable wall of green.

"Are you planning on staying?" Slash said, his voice pitched. "In here?"

"The woods will cut the wind down as the day gets colder. Also, it'll keep us hidden from that bat. We need a fire, and if we can find a clearing, we'll have the most comfortable night possible under the circumstances."

"But there isn't room for you to build the house."

"We'll keep looking. We've been here for a day. Not even. It'll take time to do this correctly."

"But Fortune told us we had to build a shelter and start working on a settlement."

I squatted, checking our surroundings. I scratched his butt. Nothing calmed a savage seven-pound beast like butt rubbings. He stood stiff, turning his backside so I could reach it more easily. "Shhh. I promise I'll get to work on a shelter as soon as I get a fire started."

"A house, not a shelter."

"Yes, a house." I gave him one more butt rub and stood. I pointed in the general direction of the open field, making sure I kept myself and my pooch orientated. "If anything happens, if we get separated for any reason, head back to that field. We'll watch for each other there. Got it?"

"Why would we separate? You need me around to protect you. Plus, I have the Sleuth Ability, remember?"

"I don't want us separating, but if we do, we have to have a plan. Why don't you put that nose to good use and find us dead wood that'll be easy to burn? Start with small branches, but don't pass up thick ones or even logs if you find them. We can worry about transport when we have better options."

“Hi, Fortune,” Slash said instead of responding to me, catching me off-guard.

She wasn’t in my vision. “Fortune?”

As soon as I spoke her name, she popped up in the corner of my eye, sans menu box. I got a full look at her. Her green linen dress was long and fell out of view, cut off from my mindscreen just below her knees. Her corset looked tightly cinched to show off her shape. I couldn’t help but imagine that was an attribute many female NPCs would suffer in Darkworld because some virgin programmer got off on seeing suffocated female forms, even digital ones. “Hi, Brad.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes. Slash called me.”

I turned to my pup. “Why? How?”

Slash shook his head. “You really need to learn to use your menu. Stubbornness will get you nowhere. And I called her to ask for help. I don’t want to search these woods all night long just to get a fire going.”

“Good point.”

“Do we have a way to see more of the forest?” Slash asked our guide. “Some games Brad has played have maps. Do we have something like that?”

“Yes. Your Conjurer Cane allows you to open your game options. If you call on those, scroll down and turn on the option for a hovering map.”

I felt a flush of frustration. “That would have been nice to know before.”

“No one asked,” she said. “I apologize.”

“My fault. Not yours.” The list of options was long and tedious. If there was anything in video games that I despised more than tedium, I hadn’t uncovered it yet. “Can you give me a hint of where it is? The option?”

“Third from the bottom.”

I spun down the list, visually commanding a swell of options to pass by in a blur. The game had far more than I cared to scan through. Part of me wondered if there was a search capability in the menu for future needs. Something I was going to have to explore. Right now, I just wanted to find the map.

Reaching the bottom of the list, I focused. The rectangle around the MAP option highlighted and expanded, showing me a slider button. I clicked. It slid to the right, turning the button from gray to blue.

“Once you have turned it on, you can close the Options,” Fortune said. “Once that menu closes, you will see your map at the bottom of your screen. There, it will remain until you turn it off.”

I followed her directions. Just as she said, I now had a new feature on my screen and understood why it was set to ‘off’ by default. The size of the map was ridiculous. A broad rectangular shape, it covered a third of my view. At least it was only fractionally opaque. Still, having what was essentially a cloudy box obscuring everything in the bottom third of my vision was far from ideal, and pretty dangerous.

“How’s this supposed to help?” I asked as I examined the map, most of which was covered in what looked like swirling black clouds. Only a narrow area around two dots in the center was exposed with definition. The line of detail cut from right to left through the middle of the swirling blackness. When I turned to my side, the world around the little dots turned with me. “The dots? That’s me and Slash?”

“Yes, sir.” She shook her head. “Yes, *Brad*.”

I gave her a smile that I was unsure she could see. “Okay. This map isn’t of much use. I think the green swirls are supposed to represent the forest, correct?”

“Yes. What you see as clouds is simply there to cover areas unexplored. As such, it will remain so until you begin your exploration.”

Ah, a fog of war-type feature of the map. “Got it. Looks like we need to do some walking anyway, buddy. It was a good idea.”

Slash’s two small, tan dots above his eyes slid closer together. “Well, that’s stupid.”

“Welcome to gameplay,” I said. Looking up, I activated my Conjuror’s Cane and commanded, “Close map. Ah, much better,” I said, now that my vision was clear again. “Let’s find a clearing and get this fire going. Thank you for your help, Fortune.”

She put a hand to her mouth. “You are most welcome.” Then she blipped out of my mindscreens, back to wherever digitally re-created people went when they weren’t needed.

“I’m keeping my map up,” my pup said as we started off.

“Might not be a bad idea with your Sleuth Ability. Do you think you want to use it now? Finding firewood is a harmless way to test it instead of waiting until we’re in a timed quest to get out of a trap or being chased by zombies or something.”

“Good idea!” His thin tail rocked back and forth. He narrowed his eyes, taking in our surroundings.

“What are you doing?”

His little doggie snout pursed. “Shhh. Give me a minute.”

I stood by while he inspected the nearby trees. He sniffed at most, stopped at half again more to lift his leg and pee, and kept his nose to the ground the rest of the time. Without looking up, he raced along a line of spruces. “Follow me.”

I did. The pup was onto something.

He scurried along the trees so quickly I had to jog to keep up. With his nose pressed down, his sniffing was clear, even from behind. Obviously, he wasn’t letting go of a scent. My job was to look out for him. With this speed and level of focus, he was about to run straight off the hill’s cliff if he wasn’t careful.

I warned him as he investigated, continuing to jog to keep up. The floor of tree needles didn’t feel great on my bare feet.

I pushed away the discomfort and annoyance and focused on protecting Slash and not breaking a toe, or worse, on a decayed stump.

The trail he'd found turned out not to be a trap, or anything nefarious. Instead, the little guy found a clearing, free of tree stumps and carpeted with grass. With a diameter of over three hundred feet, the open sky fed the grass a healthy dose of sunlight that warmed, and rain that nourished it to thrive this deep in.

**BOOM!**

**DO YOU SMELL WHAT THE PUP IS COOKING?**

**YOUR MASCOT USED ITS ABILITY TO FIND A MUCH-NEEDED RESOURCE. GOOD THING, TOO, BECAUSE IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE YOU COULD FIND A DATE IF YOU WERE THE ONLY SWINGING DICK LEFT IN THE WORLD... WHICH YOU MIGHT BE. WE'RE NOT TELLING.**

**+15 XP**

**+1 INSIGHT**

**+1 INVESTIGATION**

"I've got more XP than you!" Slash barked and raced toward the grass. I chased, yelling for him to stop. He didn't. Upon reaching it, he did the one thing all dogs inexhaustibly do. He lifted his leg and dribbled a few drops of urine on the grass.

"Mine," he said proudly, and bounded off, racing in circles and zig-zags with no rhyme or reason.

I was careful to avoid Slash's marked spot and gloried in the richness of the grass on my feet. This was the most comfortable they'd felt since this entire debacle kicked off. Until I found or made footwear, or developed serious callouses, I'd never want to leave this spot.

Off to one side, the ground was raw and open. Though I didn't want to leave this wonderful carpet of green, I moved to inspect it. My hopes were fulfilled finding a fifteen-foot-wide

circle of loose dirt. No grass. No spruce needles. Just bare, gorgeous dirt.

“This is where we’ll set our fire pit.”

Slash continued racing around and rolling on the grass. I think I could have told him I’d found Pussy and still not gotten his attention.

I searched until I found something to dig with. Even though the dirt was loose, there was no reason to go at it with my hands if I could make the job easier on myself. Every conserved resource was vital in games like this. Plus, I’d been watching my Health bar and saw how it continually inched to the left as we jogged through the forest, following Slash’s trail. Not something to panic about. But it gave me insight into how doing even the simplest things might put a player in a precarious position if they tripped across an enemy at the wrong time.

I found a branch that should do the job, and kept searching until I found a perfect rock. At a point in its history, it’d split. One side was round, but something sheered the bottom off, forming a sharp edge.

**BOOM!**

**WOOD. DO I REALLY NEED TO SAY MORE?**

**+1 XP**

**BOOM!**

**ROCK. YEAH. SAME. SORRY, WE JUST CAN’T GET EXCITED ABOUT STUFF LIKE THIS.**

**+1 XP**

XP for finding a thick branch and a rock? Was it because they were tools, or simply from a resource collection standpoint?

Bringing both new tools back to the site, I appreciated Slash’s determination to play in the grass, ignorant of the fact I’d walked away from camp. He deserved a break. I let him keep at it as I got to work in the dirt.

I don't know how much time passed, but I was sweating and my Health bar had dipped a quarter of its fullness by the time the pit was dug.

**BOOM!**

**YOU DID A MANLY THING. NOW YOU HAVE A WHOLE HOLE TO YOUR NAME. WE'RE SURE THAT'LL HELP YOU SURVIVE THE CHALLENGES AHEAD, YOU GLOBAL DOMINATOR, YOU.**

**+1 XP**

Did the AI's taunts really work? I imagined for some players it would. Maybe it'd get them to question their priorities and send them off chasing down the closest beast, NPC, or player to fight. Not me. Shit-talking never affected me in competitive sports. Never bothered me when the Army grunts tried to belittle the fact I was Air Force. Verbal chest beating never spurred me to outdo someone in a staff meeting. Probably why no one categorized my military career as sparkling, and why my post-military job was hardly one to envy.

Ignoring the taunt, I gladly accepted the single XP and asked my pooch if he wanted to go rock hunting.

Slash rolled over, jogged to the edge of the grass, looked at the pit like he was unimpressed, and then up at me. "Are you staying close?"

"Yes." I pointed off to where I'd found my rock shovel. "There's a small field of rocks over there. I won't be far. If I need to gather more from somewhere else, I'll call."

"Okay, I'll stay here then." His eye-spots drew together. "All that playing really did a number on my Health. It's down halfway. I'm going to take a nap."

"Your Health bar is at half?" Concern slipped through my comment. Because he was my mascot, I could see it on my mindscreen if I looked to the corner where my bar was.

"Yes. I just said that," he said with a sniff. "You know, Tess was right. You need to listen better or you'll never get another girlfriend."

I wagged my finger at him, pulling it back once I recognized what I was doing. When he couldn't speak, at least in the human tongue, it felt right to admonish him for misbehaving. But now, doing that felt wrong in every way possible, like I was acting like some jackass abusive spouse. "Just... Please be careful with your Health. We're only at level two. There's no numerical value assigned to it, so we can't be sure how much we have."

"Yes, Dad," he mocked in a teenage-pouty voice. "I will. Call loud if you need me." Without another word, he backed into the sun and curled into a tiny ball in the grass.

I checked the open sky for any sign of the bat and hustled to collect more rocks.

It took eight trips to gather enough to build a respectable firewall in and around the pit. We'd still have to be careful, but I felt much better about building the largest fire I dared. It'd not only keep us warm throughout the night, but it'd discourage nocturnal threats from getting too close. The bonus was that I'd gained another thirty XP for collecting the rock and twenty-five for all the firewood.

Somewhere off to the west, the sun had fallen behind the distant mountain range. In my collection of rocks, we had quartz. A design flaw, pure luck, or the game's way of helping, I didn't know. I remembered that quartz was a flint rock from an obscure survivalist training session I half-paid attention to early in my military career. I'd grabbed a dozen during my collection excursion. Finally, a training class that paid off.

Even though it took far too long to get sparks, I finally did. The tinder took, kindling caught, and the branches I added to the nascent fire pushed it on. I felt like a rock star when it was strong enough for me to add logs without puffing the entire effort out.

**BOOM!**

**YOU ARE THE FIREEEEEESTARTER.**

**CONGRATS! NOW YOU WON'T FREEZE TO DEATH.  
AT LEAST, NOT YET.**



**YOU'VE MADE YOUR FIRST IN-GAME FIRE.**

**+50 XP**

**+1 SURVIVAL**

My pup was going to be pissed when he found out how many XP I now had.

By the time Slash woke from his nap, the sky was dark, but we had a fire. A fat, hot fire.

“Nice work,” he said, half-cheerily, coming closer. “Though it’d be nicer in a fireplace.”

I was too tired to argue. My Health bar was at a quarter. “I need to sleep.” After a moment, I added, “For a long time. You’ve got watch.”

“Watch? What’s that? What am I watching?”

I could almost see his Health bar slide in the wrong direction with his burst of anxiety. “Calm down, wee man. Just stay awake and enjoy the fire. If you hear or see something, bark.”

Boy, that was a stupid thing to say.

## INTO THE FIRE



Slash's barking woke me fifteen times before I snapped at him. I consider that an excellent record. He barked at the wind, a bat's screech, a snapping twig, and the moaning and creaking of trees. More than a few times, I was sure he barked at the popping of logs on the fire, though I couldn't get him to admit it.

"The more you wake me, the longer I'm going to need to sleep to refill my Health," I yelled when I couldn't take anymore.

He slunk into a laying position, putting his head between his front paws and sniffed, blowing up a small dirt cloud.

This wasn't about beauty rest. A full Health was essential in gameplay, especially when you didn't know the first thing about the game itself. I needed a full reset, and he needed to learn its importance while we were early in the game.

Hours later, I woke to a disturbing realization. My Health still wasn't full. I asked Slash, who seemed to have forgotten that I yelled at him earlier if his wagging tail was an indication, if his was.

"No, but I've been up forrrrrrrreeeeeevvveeeerrr," he whined into the sky.

“No, you haven’t. Stop howling. You’re not a wolf. And you’re sure it was full when you woke?”

He cocked his head. The one ear that was standing up straight flopped over. “Actually, now that I think about it, no, I can’t say it was.”

“Hmmm. I don’t like that. Fortune.”

The guide popped up on my mindscreen. “Good morrow. How may I assist?”

“Why isn’t my Health full?” I asked, pointing at the bar, not sure if she could see it.

“Health refreshes to its maximum whenever you’ve taken a long rest,” the guide said, sounding like she was reverting to her script-reading mandate. “A long rest is defined as one of six hours or more in which the character does nothing but sleep. Interruptions in that sleep to eat, drink, read, or other things such as bodily functions reduce a full rest to that of a short rest. Health cannot be fully restored on a short rest, no matter how many of them you take in a row. Alas, I am afraid that is not the issue for you and Slash.”

Slash circled, bouncing off his front paws. “Then what is?”

“You have not yet taken nourishment,” Fortune said, lifting her arms in a shrug as if saying ‘isn’t that obvious?’ “Once you eat, your Health will maximize. Unless, of course, you become injured during the pursuit of food.” Her face brightened. “The good news is that bounty fills Darkworld. Not only in the Free Zones, but around the playable world as well. You shall find fields of berries such when I introduced you to the Free Zone, groves of fruit trees that will provide plenty of sustenance, and, of course, wild game.”

“Good, because we don’t have a weapon,” I said, feeling awkward about stating the obvious.

“Yes, that will become more and more important.”

“Brad, I don’t want to eat more berrieeeeees,” Slash howled, whipping in a tight circle. “I’m a growing pup and a carnivore. I need meat.”

“I know,” I said, feeling a flash of heated guilt at not being able to provide for him. “I’ll work on that today. Let’s first find something to eat. I don’t want our Health getting too low, and we’re already starting the day at a disadvantage.”

“Starting?” Slash tossed his head. “Some of us have been up for hours.”

“Because you slept most of the day away yesterday.” I gave our guide a thumbs-up. “Thank you, Fortune. That explains everything.”

“My pleasure. I wish you both luck. Please be careful as you search. For you, the game is now live. Your butcher has received his activation code. Proceedings do not wait for all entrants.”

That was surprising news. “Not all the chests have been opened?”

“No si—no, Brad. From the latest status upload, it appears almost eight hundred chests have yet to be accessed. The Electors must have hidden them well.

“Though concerning, we still have time. Butchers, much like entrants, will explore the world for a short while. The Electors conducted thorough research on the matter. They found that is what most human gamers preferred. They built that aspect into the game. Though I will warn you, it would be a miscalculation to assume your butcher is simply exploring. According to the profiles the Electors built, I would expect the opposite to be true.”

Now, that was an interesting comment. “What do you mean?”

“The Electors were hoping to attract a certain type of player to the game,” she said, cupping her hands at her waist. “While the entrants were completely random, in fact, that was one of the major attractions of the angel investors, they had a specific player in mind for the butchers. That was the entire reason they set up the application process.”

“So they could screen out anyone who didn’t fit the mold?”

“Did they only want assholes?” Slash asked, hunkering down on his rear.

“I fear I am not familiar with that term,” Fortune said. “But I can say with confidence that the profile they initially uploaded would have drawn the worst of the tavern dwellers into the streets to sign up. Drunkards. Aggressors. Anarchists. Those without familial ties or even interests.”

“Basement dwellers,” I concluded.

“The people of your time have such a strange tongue.” Fortune shook her head, her long locks swaying. “If you mean that they, or at least the profile they established, were focused on people who had little to lose or little reason to care if they lost, then yes, you are correct. That is the type of butcher the profile requires. Whether they did, I cannot answer that question.”

“So we have a bunch of sociopaths running around Darkworld? Great. From one fire into another.”

Fortune grimaced. “I would not consider this to be great. You must—”

I waved away her comment. “A figure of speech. Trust me, none of this is great.” I looked down at Slash. “What do you say we try to find something to eat? Once I have a full belly, I’ll fashion a spear or knife or something.”

“Finally!” Even with the dark prospects of a gaming world filled with weirdos getting off on the chance to act on their demented desires, the sight of the little pooch’s tail wag lifted my spirits.

We said our farewells to Fortune, and Slash pulled up his map. I didn’t. He enjoyed using his. I found having mine up annoying as hell, and it might make me miss important details in the game world. This was a win-win.

Our search took us farther from camp than I would have liked. But between Slash’s promise to keep his map up and the roaring fire I’d fed before leaving, we’d find our way back with no problem.

“This is really cool,” Slash said after a while of sniffing at the ground, plants, and trees he peed on.

“What is?” The overwhelming vastness of the forest, my growling stomach, and the Health bar’s constant slinking that ebbed into my vision every time I glanced up distracted me.

“Hey! I see something. On my map.” Slash pulled up and sat on his haunches. His eyes narrowed to slits.

I crouched, taking a defensive posture. “What is it?”

Slash looked askance and then straight ahead. “Could be an apple tree. I can’t tell.”

He was seeing something on his map, literally, not something in the trees and overgrowth around us. I stood and straightened my loincloth, swatting away imaginary dirt.

Slash scoffed. “Nice try. I saw you. Anyway, if we head...” He blinked rapidly. “Over there. I’m still getting used to the map’s scale, but I think we’re about three hundred yards from a fruit tree. I can’t tell which type, though.”

“Who cares? Let’s eat.” I scooped him up in my arms and jogged off in that direction.

I had to bust through the dense forest cover, receiving more than my fair share of scratches. Each time, my Health bar ticked down half a hair’s width. Maybe it wasn’t healthy to watch it. Surely there must be a setting to auto-hide that feature? Otherwise, I’d stress myself out before I saw the third level.

Slash yipped when I slunk, crawled, and wedged our way through the last wall of vegetation. “There it is!”

**BOOM!**

**JOHNNY MOTHER FREAKIN’ APPLESEED.**

**YOU’VE MANAGED TO EXPLORE THE WORLD  
USING ONLY YOUR MAP AND KEEN SENSE OF  
THINGS TO STUFF IN YOUR PIEHOLE. YOU’RE A  
REGULAR CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, JUST  
WITHOUT ALL THE UNSAVORY SLAVE-  
OWNERSHIP STUFF.**

**+20 XP**

**+1 EXPLORER**

He yipped. “Twenty XP, sucker! You’re never going to catch me now.”

“Hang on, buddy.” I didn’t have the heart to tell him how far ahead I was in the XP game and hoped he couldn’t see my stats as my mascot.

Ahead, an apple tree rose thirty feet in the air in a narrow glen. A brook ran alongside the concave slopes that were spotted with clumps of grass. Water trickled over smooth rock. For a moment, I regretted the fact that we’d established our life-sustaining fire pit where we had. This glen would have served as a tranquil place to get through each day. But surveying the area showed there was little in the way of space to build a shelter, never mind whatever settlement Fortune said we needed to set up as early as possible. Planting farm fields here would have been impossible. Maybe, once we secure housing, we could get a break from the farm and come here for peace and quiet. For now, I’d enjoy the brook and eat apples until I got the shits.

The tree was lush with oblong red and yellow-skinned apples. I set Slash down.

“Let me get you one.” I plucked one, saw the worm hole, and tossed it in the brook. It *plunked* when it hit the water, went under, and plopped back to the surface before floating away. I plucked another, snapping it from the branch, which bounced and sent three more apples falling to the soft ground.

Slash dashed forward, snatching one before I could tell him to stop or warn him away. He bit into one of the fallen apples and my breath caught. I stood frozen, holding the one I’d grabbed for him, and waiting for a calamity to befall us.

Good thing I did.

Behind me, a voice that sounded like rust said, “Why you be stealing my apples?”

Slash dropped the chunk of apple. He shivered and small beads of pee dropped to the ground underneath him.

“We’re sorry, we—” My apology was caught off when I turned.

A troll, no taller than four feet, stood at the edge where the forest peeled back from the glen. His white hairs swirled about him in wisps. Bent at the waist, age or a hard life within Darkworld had weighed him down. He supported himself with a driftwood cane. With his free hand, he held a twisted pipe. A name floated above his head—**FUJI**.

I pointed at it. “Like the apple?”

With one eye pinched closed, the troll sneered. “What’cha be saying, stranger?”

“Your name. Fuji.”

A flash of panic crossed the troll’s face. “How ye be knowin’ that? I haven’t be tellin’ the likes’a you my name!”

I wagged my finger at the name floating above him. “Your name. It’s... It’s right there.”

The troll looked up, then back at me. His eyes, already narrow, were nothing more than thin crevices now. “Not sure what your aim be, boy, but whatever witchery has ye knowin’ me name, you take it from my glen this instant.”

Of course. Fuji was an NPC. He wouldn’t be aware of Darkworld’s game mechanics placing his name above his head.

I waved my hands. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long day.” I nodded at the tree, seeing Slash open his mouth to pluck the chunk of apple he’d been eating when the troll surprised us. I clenched my jaw and shot him a hard look. He stopped right before snatching up the apple again. To Fuji, I said, “We just set up camp in the area and haven’t eaten in a day. I would gladly pay you for the apple, but we lost our money when we came across bandits.”

“Bandits?” Slash said, his voice pitched. “We didn’t—”

“Have a fighting chance,” I said over the top of my pup’s attempt to ruin the ploy.



Fuji leaned so far forward I feared his driftwood cane would slip out underneath him, sending him tumbling to the dirt. A side to side sweep of his gaze made him look like he was about to share dirty office gossip. “Bandits, ye sayin’?”

“Yeah.” I nodded encouragingly as I lowered myself and my voice, trying to think up a number that would frighten the troll into feeling empathy without making him question my story. “Eight of them.”

Fuji shrank back, which made him appear to stand a little straighter. “Eight, ye say?”

Shit. Was I too ambitious? Maybe Slash was right about me being a terrible liar. All I wanted was something to eat. I’d pay the gray-skinned NPC if I had a damn copper to my name. If it came down to it, we’d make a break for it. I could outrun the troll, and Slash wouldn’t have a problem avoiding him. I didn’t want that either. We might struggle to find game to hunt. This apple tree might be our only source of nutrients for a while. Our only lifeline. We didn’t need to upset this old troll.

The name above him was white. I didn’t know if that was something specific to all NPCs, since he was the only one I’d met besides Fortune. The color could have something to do with his alignment or his feelings toward me. I’d keep an eye on it. My words would go a long way in tipping that if the game was buoyant. The more NPCs we had on our side, the better for us and our prospects. Fuji was our first opportunity. I just hoped I hadn’t screwed it up.

Careful to keep my tone neutral, I said, “Yes.”

The game might as well have paused for the amount of time it took the troll to answer. He poked the ground with his cane, making a thick *thunk* sound. The corners of his mouth turned down. “Well, that be a bad case. World ain’t what it used to be. There was a time when a human and his pet could live in peace.”

Slash growled at being called ‘pet.’

“Shhhh,” I said from the corner of my mouth. To the troll, I said, “So you see our plight? We didn’t mean to take from you. We didn’t even know this tree belonged to someone. But we’re penniless and starving. Desperate, you could say.”

“Ye could.” After a pause, Fuji asked, “Where did ye say your camp be?”

I looked at Slash for help. He answered. “A mile and a half west.”

“Mile and a half is a ways to come to get me apples,” the troll said in a neutral tone.

“We’re starving.”

He looked from me to Slash and back again. I could feel an answer coming. He tapped the ground two more times. “Long ways for an apple or two.”

I didn’t say a word. Just nodded. This was his land. His tree. We were the interlopers. The decision lay with him. We’d have to react. That was the way this needed to be until I understood the troll or the nature of the game.

Fuji stuffed his gnarled pipe behind his broad belt. His hand, now free, swooped in looping circles in the air. Green sparkles floated from his fingertips, almost looking like fireflies. First, only a dozen or so, but as he continued, more sparks appeared. They swirled, suspended in the air just out of his reach.

Now a small cloud of dancing green, the sparks floated to the ground, collapsing together. As they did, a bright green light glowed from the center of the formation.

Slash barked, backing a step and quivering.

Admittedly, I wanted to back up, grab as many apples as I could, and dash into the forest with my dog. Instead, feeling no actual threat, I watched as the ball of green light expanded. The light flashed and faded away in a blink, leaving behind a three-foot-long burlap sack.

“Use the sack. ‘Tis yours,” Fuji said, retrieving his pipe from his belt. “Ain’t used the thing in ages. Might want to

wash it in the brook before you fill it with apples, though.”

I was stunned. A gift from an NPC that would be incredibly useful. “Are you sure?”

“Ain’t right, leaving you out here to starve,” Fuji said firmly. “Least I can do. But if ye be feeling bad about takin’ and not givin’, I’s got somethin’ for ye to do.”

“Sure thing,” I said, grateful for what he’d just given us.

“Got monsters roaming these woods near my place. Can’t be havin’ that. Ye get rid of ’em, and we call this a fair deal. Agreed?”

I didn’t have any experience fighting monsters here, but I had plenty of in-game experience. Without the sack, we could eat as many apples as Fuji allowed. Anything we could carry wouldn’t last more than two days. The sack changed that. With something that size, we could carry dozens of apples home, if he let us, and save time instead of making a daily three-mile round trip until we found another source of food.

I wasn’t naïve. I could detest violence all I wanted. I’d seen enough throughout school, in my neighborhood while growing up, in the military, and even while playing sports or at my gym. I knew what testosterone did to guys. When I was younger, I was all about a good physical altercation. But those times were behind me and that’s where they could stay.

The game was bound to force my hand at some point. Even if I declined the offer, I’d end up fighting something soon enough. Delaying the inevitable was pointless. Plus, if I declined, would that alter any algorithms and change my burgeoning relationship with this troll? Fortune had mentioned the AI changed based on the way I played.

“Yes, Brad will kill them all for you,” Slash said, pouncing forward like he meant to race off into a battle himself. “Don’t you worry about it.”

I groaned. Though I was about to agree to the deal, it would have been better for Fuji to hear it from me. I smiled at the troll. “We just need to know how to find them. The bandits

chased us a long way, and I'm afraid we don't know where we are. The forest is unfamiliar."

"Of course. Of course!" Fuji sounded thrilled. He threw his hand up in the air, twisted pipe extended. He froze like that.

I was about to ask if he was okay when a brown banner with a trim of golden rope blocked my view.

**DO YOU ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE OF  
LIBERATING FUJI'S HOME?**

Underneath the question, the banner had two separate choice boxes.

**YES?**

**NO?**

"Don't be dumb, Brad. Say yes," Slash said, pawing at my leg.

"Relax. I am."

I clicked on **YES**.

The banner flashed away.

"Excellent!" Fuji whipped his cane and tipped precariously.

"Whoa. Cool." Slash whipped around in a circle.

"What's up?"

"There's a pin on my map now," he said.

"There is?" I called up my map. The black swirling clouds around my location evaporated, showing a broad circle in decent detail of the brook, glen, apple tree, and tree line. Beyond that, I couldn't make out much, but I noticed an arrow pointing toward the top-right. "I don't see a pin, but I see an arrow."

Slash sniffed. "Just scroll in the direction of the arrow. Your map will move. Pretty soon, you'll see a pin tagged to the map."

Following my pup's instructions, my map did exactly like he'd said it would. Though I had to scroll for a bit before

finding it, making me wonder how Slash found it so fast. Maybe I needed to listen to him and spend more time with my map up. “We don’t know where that is.”

“We have to explore, dummy,” Slash said, sounding as exasperated as a Chihuahua could. “That’s part of the fun of the game. Don’t worry, Fuji. We’re on the case!”

“Tis appreciated.” The troll turned to leave, waving his haggard pipe at us, but stopped halfway around. “Fill the bag full before ye leave. Ain’t no sense in not takin’ all ye can carry.”

“You sure?” I asked his retreating form. “That’s a lot of apples.”

He just chuckled, shoulders bobbing. “Strange lot, ye humans.”

“Guess we take what we can?”

“Sounds like it.” Slash tipped his nose toward the tree. “Get to work.”

I snagged the sack. Rough as the burlap was, it was of sturdy construct. Making it intact to the camp wasn’t going to be a problem, no matter how much I filled it. A stale smell smacked me in the face when I opened it, so I followed Fuji’s advice and rinsed it in the cold brook and then headed for the apples.

I pulled up when I reached for an apple.

“What’s wrong?” Slash asked.

I pointed at the branch. “I swear I plucked the first apples from here and the others fell off this branch.”

“So?”

“The branch is full.”

“Hmmm. Oh well. Keep picking then.”

Every time I plucked an apple and put it in the sack, another appeared before I moved my hand back toward the tree. I didn’t even have to move from my spot. Apple after apple, I’d pick one, sack it, and another hung, waiting its turn.

Slash did circles, and little else, while I filled the sack. It didn't take long before I'd stuffed nearly fifty apples away.

We stayed in the glen, drank from the brook, and ate as many apples from the tree as we dared, leaving the sack untouched.

As we lay in the grass under the tree, I listened to the trickle of water, glorying in the full Health bar that popped up with each bite of apple and every drink.

Slash rolled on his back, swishing side to side, and biting at his tail.

Darkworld might not be bad after all. As long as we didn't die getting rid of Fuji's monsters, I could get used to this. Sure as hell beat sitting in a cubicle all day.

## FEEL LIKE A MONSTER



“Pull up your map and check,” Slash said with a shake of his head. “I can’t be the only one using the maps. What if something happens to me?”

“But you’re good at it,” I said, playing to his ego. Just like the small guys I knew, this dog liked to be reminded of how important he was from time to time. “Plus, I don’t want to pull mine up when you have yours open. Too dangerous. One of us has to watch for the monsters Fuji mentioned.”

“We’re not close enough to the pin yet.” Slash stopped and sniffed at the air. “Hey, this way.”

“What?”

“Water. I can smell it. We need to drink before we get to the fight. I want to have full Health going into battle.”

“That’s my boy,” I said proudly, meaning it.

“Don’t be gross, Brad. I won’t tolerate speciesism. Plus, if anything, I’m your daddy.”

“Now who’s being gross?”

My pooch was right, though. We’d brought a few apples in the sack to ensure our Health was maxed out before the fight. Besides that, the only equipment we had was a newly broken branch I planned to use as a club. I even received two XP for

practicing with it. Slash wasn't happy about that and swore it was his mission to kill all the monsters himself because I was "cheating" to earn XP.

We both knew he wouldn't.

We heard the river before we located it, and had my hands full making sure Slash didn't dash off. One of the first things I needed to figure out, besides viable weapons, a permanent structure to call home, and a way to till the land that wouldn't break my back, was getting a skill that allowed me to fashion waterskins. We couldn't keep looking for water sources and only drink when we found them.

One struggle at a time, though.

We took our fill until both of us were bloated. Probably not the best preparation for a fight. But this early into the game, I doubted we'd face anything formidable, even relative to our own basic skills.

"I feel good," Slash bragged after we drank, and he somehow scarfed down an entire apple by himself.

"Ready for a fight?"

He yipped, his tiny snout pursed. "So ready."

"Let's go. Wanna lead the way? See if we can get you more XP?"

His two tan spots slid together as he examined me. "Why would you want me to get more XP than you?"

His tone of suspicion was adorable. "Because I'm happy if you succeed. That's what love is about. Plus, the stronger you are, the safer you are. Can't it be that simple?"

Gaining XP was not remotely a competition to get excited about. Not to me. But if meant something to him and kept him distracted from this strange reality, then so be it. The less pressure on the pup, the better. Only one of us needed to be burdened with the complications of surviving a video game.

As we moved toward the fight, I pulled up my map and checked the pin's location. We were getting close enough that



I needed to focus on the next big event in my life. Imagine dying in a fight for the grand prize of a burlap sack.

The map's fog drew back from the small dots representing me and my dog. Off to the right was a large brown area with thick, darker lines squiggling off into the areas shrouded in fog. It wasn't the only feature of the map I'd never seen. A dotted blue line extended from my icon all the way to the pin.

“Slash, is your map up?”

He sniffed, all nasally and cute. Hard not to be when his nostrils were as broad as a Q-Tip. “My map is always up. How else are we going to navigate safely? Plus, I'm a Sleuth. I'll get huge XP bonuses for using it so often.”

“Probably.” I smiled down at him, enjoying how his legs, as thin as chicken drumsticks, swiftly rose and fell like pistons to allow him to keep pace. “What's that blue line? And have you seen that thing off to the right? The squiggly lines? This is the first I've seen something like that.”

“Because you're stubborn and never use your map,” he said. He went quiet, probably examining the feature, giving me my answer in his silence. “The line marks our path to the quest. It's been there since we accepted the challenge.”

“You mean since you accepted it?”

“We're a team, Brad. And, no, I've never seen anything like that other feature. What do you think it is?”

I shrugged. “Don't know. If we survive this, we should probably think about checking it out.”

“Well then,” he said, striding along, almost proudly, “let's not die.”

“Good plan, buddy.”

The quiet forest was unsettling as we made our way deeper into its embrace. It would have been eerie enough if we were nothing but a man and his dog enjoying a day out in nature. Heading toward a fight against mysterious monsters made it even creepier. Only the fact that this quest should be low-level settled my nerves. As long as we didn't royally screw up every

single decision and action, we should come out on the right side of the fight. ‘Should’ being the operative word.

Slash jumped a handful of times when strange birds cawed, or wood cracked in the distance. I understood the birds. After all, we’d seen a massive bat in broad daylight. All laws of nature and physics could be broken at will if the designers wished. Being skittish about bird commotions was totally justifiable in that context. But the wood? I’d need to get him out for more hikes when we got home.

“We’re deep in the forest, huh?” I said after he jumped for the sixth time, hoping he hadn’t pissed himself.

“Yes,” he said, trying his hardest to sound brave.

I tried to keep him distracted. “Much farther to go?”

“No. If I’m reading the map correctly, we should be close.” He looked up at me, squinting with wet eyes, and jumped when a tree creaked about two hundred yards away. “Don’t you have your map up?”

I shook my head. “I want to be ready for the fight. Remember, you’re the sleuth. I’m just your muscle.”

He rocked his head, his lips curling into a smile. “I like the sound of that. Someone has to take on the leadership role. Why not me? High time us canines resumed our rule.”

I wasn’t about to argue the accuracy of his memory of history.

Another half-mile through the forest of quiet exploration and map expansion followed.

“Brad,” Slash said after a bit, his voice going icy.

My immediate reaction was to shift my branch-club and prepare to clobber something over the head. “What is it?”

Slash hunkered, hackles raised. “Look at your map real quick.”

“I’d rather keep my eyes out for—”

He yipped. “Just do it.”

I pulled up my map, against my better judgment. The block obscured too much of my vision. When I did, however, I noticed why he wanted me to, and why he was so quiet. On the edge of my map were four red dots spread in a curved line.

“Looks like we found the party.”

Slash growled, low and as menacing as something smaller than a stuffed animal could sound. “Now is not the time for jokes.”

“On the day you die, you should be allowed to laugh, for it is the last time you will.”

“Nice. Who said that?”

“Me,” I said with a simple shrug. “Just now.”

Slash groaned. “Can we go, please?”

We slunk through yards of overgrowth. Darkworld was primitive in every way, and its landscape was a testament to that truth. By the time we sighted the monsters, I was scratched, sweaty, and had suffered enough mosquito bites to look like someone responsible for kicking off a pandemic.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said, taking in the four creatures, split apart every twenty yards.

“Hey,” Slash whispered. “I can’t see. Lift me up.”

I grabbed him under the belly and helped him peer over the tall vegetation.

“Wow, they’re ugly.”

“Sure are.”

Fuji’s nightmares came in green blob forms. Typical of old-school games and their early levels. Over their ill-defined heads, each creature’s name floated in the air.

### **BLOB LVL 1**

I don’t know why I expected more. Maybe because this world already seemed impressively complex, the designers might have been a little sexier in naming first-level creatures. Right now, I’d take any easy win I could get. I had no home

and no steady source of food. I was practically naked and didn't even, literally, have a pair of shoes to my name. Now was not the time to be ungrateful.

The four were featureless. No appendages. Probably not mobile either, not judging by how they remained static. They didn't wobble and wiggle like the classics. For all their dynamism, they could have been mistaken for green termite hills.

I nudged my chin to the right. "Let's take them out in order. One after another. Starting with that one."

"You sure?"

"Do you have another idea?"

"No."

He sounded miserable. I gave him a scratch between his ears. "It'll be okay, buddy. Just stay behind me."

We slunk forward, flanking the blob on the right by forty yards. Doing so took us out of the way, but it also helped us move without drawing attention from the other creatures.

Slash loosed a low growl.

I shot him an annoyed look.

His eyes flicked to me, but then he lowered his head toward the first blob.

Still crouched, I moved in, raising the branch-club. The blob never turned. Well, I wasn't sure if it had or not because the stupid thing didn't even have eyes. It only came up to my waist. I swung down. The branch-club *thunked* into the blob's head, sinking four inches and splattering green goo everywhere. The creature's Health bar went from full-red to completely black in an instant.

Globs landed on the leaves around us, bending them. They sizzled.

The blob wobbled and withered, not making a sound as its form sunk to the ground. A pool of green goo spread out as the thing deflated. I jumped back to avoid it.

## **BLOB (1/4)**

**+1 XP**

Slash sniffed behind me. “Brad. Be careful.”

I turned, horrified to see the leaves the globs of goo had landed on smoldering, sending thin tendrils of green smoke skyward.

“Dammit.”

“You got lucky,” my pooch observed. “Might want to come up with another tactic for the other three.” He leaned around me, his ears flopping over. “And do it quickly. They’re moving.”

I spun, raising the branch-club. The remaining blobs wobbled through the vegetation in our direction. They spread out as they closed in.

Slash growled, stepping forward and baring his teeth, as wide as the sticks I picked up at each dental visit. I don’t know what he thought he was going to do against these monsters.

“Stay back, buddy.” I held my arm out. “They’re acidic. You can’t bite them.”

“I can do what I want. You’re not the boss of me.” He pounced forward and barked, his teeth still bared.

“No, seriously.” I took a careful step forward, trying to figure out how I was going to kill all three without getting that goo on me. “This isn’t a game.”

“Yes, it is,” Slash said, but stayed behind me.

“Well, technically. But... Listen, just let me concentrate.”

At this range, I’d be lucky to get away with my skin intact.

I hadn’t made it five feet before one of them attacked. A glob of green goo flew from it, right at me. I tucked and rolled away. The goo hit the dirt where I’d been standing. Smoke rose as the dirt sizzled.

“Holy shit, Brad. That was close.” Slash snarled at the blobs.

I didn't have time to think about how close I'd just come to dying. All because I was cocky about the level of the beasts in the fight.

Slash pounced forward. He stopped within a few steps. None of the blobs made a move in his direction, but that didn't stop him from retreating.

Without faces, I couldn't tell which of us the blobs were targeting. I got my answer almost immediately, though.

Three globs of goo arced through the air like dulled arrows in a twisted medieval battle.

"Fuck!" Without time to get on my feet, I rolled four times until I was sure I was far enough away to not become the blob's next fast food stop.

"Get up, Brad. Stop trying to roll in poop!" Slash went back to barking and yapping at the blobs. I appreciated his efforts in distracting the creatures more than his criticism of my approach.

On my feet, I readied to sprint in a half-circle, but another coordinated attack stopped me before I made it ten feet.

"Watch out!" Slash spun in a circle, pouncing at the blobs from twenty feet as if he could shake the ground and topple them.

I raced back, trying to decide on a course of action because this wasn't working. The blobs had a distinct advantage in range that me and my branch-club couldn't hope to match. Making matters worse, I stood directly opposite of Slash now. If these creatures decided he was a softer target, I wouldn't be able to do a damn thing to help.

Fortunately for him, and not so much for me, the blobs swayed in my direction. They didn't cover ground quickly, but with their ranged attacks, they didn't have to. I was the one who'd have to change the direction of the fight or flee. The latter would keep us alive, but it'd also deprive us of the XP and any loot that'd come from winning.

In real-life, pacificism is fine. A principle civilized cultures were grounded on. Plus, I'd accepted this quest from

Fuji. How would the game punish me if I failed it? And this wasn't real-life. Far from it. I couldn't hope to survive this level, never mind out-live my butcher if I remained a level two. There were only so many rocks and pieces of wood I could collect before the game's enemies put distance between me and my ability to fight them off.

The blobs had to be taken out. But how?

Slash yapped and circled and barked. A futile effort.

The blobs were unaware or unbothered by his attempts to defend me the only way he could.

Before their next attack, while I scrambled to figure out how I was going to kill them without falling to their acid globs, Slash came through.

“Hey! Leave my human alone, you hear me? Or I swear, I'll take that stick he's carrying and shove it up each of your assholes. And if you don't have fucking assholes, I will make them. Just... Um... Just with the stick. Look how thick it is. Thicker than anything your mommas have ever taken, I promise you that. I'm going to make each of you ugly bastards squeal like baby piglets. Try me, you sonofabitches! Let's go, fucktards!” He stood on his hind legs, pawing at the empty air with his front legs.

**BOOM!**

**WHO'S A NAUGHTY BOY? YOU ARE, AREN'T YOU?  
WHO LIKES IT DIRTY? NAUGHTY BOYS, THAT'S  
WHO.**

**POTTY MOUTH SKILL UNLOCKED!**

**+50 XP**

**+10 TO INTIMIDATION**

I would have chuckled if we weren't in a fight. We could high-five his accomplishment if we survived.

I readied another sprint. This time, I'd feint. But as Slash growled, yapped, and spun in circles that accomplished nothing but probably making him dizzy, I noticed something about our enemies. They weren't moving. At all. Frozen.

Not wasting time wondering if Slash's verbal attack was the cause, this was a chance I'd gladly take.

I sprinted at the blobs and swung as soon as I was within range. I'd made sure my approach was diagonal so I could attack and avoid the collateral damage of spraying acid. The first blob went down, and I spun, whipping the branch-club around hard enough to push it straight through the top of the next. As both withered into the soil, we received another game notification.

**BLOB (2/4)**

**+1 XP**

**BLOB (3/4)**

**+1 XP**

The last was still frozen. Putting all my strength into the swing, the strike obliterated my target, shooting green goo fifteen feet into the vegetation.

**BLOB (4/4)**

**+1 XP**

“Yeeeeesssssss!” Slash howled before bounding to me and leaping to my open arms.

He licked my face as I petted him. “Nice move, wee man.”

“You better not give me anymore shit about my cursing,” he said in between licks.

**BOOM!**

**YOU TOOK ADVANTAGE OF HELPLESS  
CREATURES. WHAT A BADASS. BET YOU PICK ON  
THE SMALLEST GUYS AT THE BEACH TOO.**

**WOW, LOOK AT THAT. FOUR XP. YOU WERE  
PROBABLY A JOCK IN HIGH SCHOOL, WEREN'T  
YOU?**

**BOOM!**

**FREE FUJI QUEST COMPLETED!**

**+100 XP**



**MASCOT SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED A QUEST  
USING A NEW SKILL!**

**+50 XP**

**COMPLETED FIRST BATTLE WITHOUT DYING!**

**+25 XP**

**KILLED A CREATURE WITH A HOMEMADE  
WEAPON!**

**RECEIVED WOODEN STAKE x1**

**MASCOT UNLOCKED FIRST +10 BUFF**

**+50 XP**

**FIRST BATTLE BITES!**

**APPLES x10**

**SHOVEL x1**

“Wow, a shovel,” Slash said with a healthy dose of scorn.

“Hey, don’t discount it,” I said and pulled my Inventory up to make sure both the shovel and wooden stake were there. I panicked when I only saw the shovel in the Miscellaneous tab but switched to my Weapons tab on a hunch. A flush of relief hit me at seeing the stake. It’s strange to be carrying a short stake like the ones I’d seen in vampire movies, and a shovel without having them strapped to my back or in my hands.

“Are you going to equip the stake?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. We might need it later and I don’t want to waste it. Not while I have something else to defend us with. Speaking of. Nice move.”

Slash smiled, his black eyes shining. “Thanks. I didn’t want those bastards thinking they could push us around.”

“Well, they learned a lesson,” I said, looking at the pools of goo disappearing into the soil. “I don’t want to try and loot them. That goo will probably still burn us.”

“Hey, and I got mad XP. I’m closing in on level three. Let’s go find something else to fight.”

I chuckled, glancing at my Health bar, which was nearly full. Though the blobs hadn't hit us at all, that wouldn't always be the case. "How about we head back, get something to eat, and work on the shelter?"

Slash laid his head against my shoulder, exhaling with disappointment. "Fine. But you're carrying me. Only fair since I carried the fight."

## MOUNTAINS



“Are you looking at it?” Slash asked.

“Yes, buddy, I am.” It was the third time he’d made me promise I was using my map to work our way back to the map feature I was curious about. The squiggly lines signified something different from what we’d seen so far in the game. Slash constantly had his map open and had never seen a feature like it. The plan wasn’t to explore. We had too much shit to do back at the camp. But we needed to at least put eyeballs on what it represented. “And you were right. It makes exploring much faster.”

“Glad to hear you appreciate my genius.”

“And your humility.”

“One of my better features.” He pointed from the cradle of my arm. “We need to go that way.”

I clicked my mouth. “Not sure about that. I’m looking at my map. The feature is straight ahead.”

He lowered his head. “You’re the one doing the walking, but I wouldn’t go that way if I were you.” Suddenly, his paw shot up. “But if you think for a minute about setting me down, I’ll poop in your bed.”

“I don’t have a bed. Neither do you.”

He looked away. “As soon as we do, I’ll poop in it. I swear. Let my paws hit the ground and find out.”

I lowered his paw with a gentle hand. “Just trust me.”

I turned off my map and pressed forward near the area of the map with the squiggly lines. The forest was inconsistent. To our left, it was so thick with trees and flora I couldn’t hope to get through. Other areas, to the right and ahead, were bare and open, though none were as plush as the spot we’d found to make our camp.

We were close to the strange area on our maps. Of course, the vegetation here was ridiculously thick, forcing me to push through an area choked with uneven ground. I discovered too late that it sloped too steeply for me to weave around dense tree packs.

“I told you,” Slash said smugly from the comfort of my arm.

“Shush.” I didn’t mean to snap, but his comment came just as I was trying to hold the bare trunk of what might have been a maple in a field of spruce trees. A fire had long ago stripped all hints of its true nature before I’d set foot in Darkworld. My foot hovered in midair over a felled log. The next step was at least three feet down. Even at my height, it was a treacherous maneuver with such poor footing.

All the way down the hill, obstacles blocked my path, or at least made it difficult going, and the ground slipped out from under even my sturdiest steps. Most of the time, I was successful. The one time I wasn’t, I took a hard fall. Thankfully, the ground was more forgiving than my dog. Hearing my puny dog laugh and yip at my misfortune was hard enough, but especially since he’d been right about not taking this path. I’d done damage to myself because carrying my pooch threw my balance off, and because I wouldn’t listen to him.

“If this area wasn’t so close, I’d give up,” I said as I pushed myself up and brushed clumps of mud out of my fox fur loincloth.

“And walk all the way up that hill over those downed trees and stuff? I highly doubt that. We’ve gone this far because you wouldn’t listen. Might as well keep at it.”

I gave him a weak smile, hoping I hadn’t pulled a muscle.

His pink tongue flopped out of his mouth, and he licked my forearm. He blinked up at me, his eyes wet with Chihuahua tears. Small globs of clear liquid caught in the corner of his eyes. “Are you okay?”

I cleared the tear with a knuckle. “Thanks, buddy. I’m fine. Just a little stiff. Come on. We’re almost there, right? Hey, do me a favor?”

“Sure, Brad. Name it. Well, as long as you’re not going to ask me to walk. I told you, if you chose this path, I wasn’t walking.”

“No, no. Not that. Are you looking at your map?”

“Of course. I know better than to close mine.”

“Good.” I braced myself against a tree I trusted to not topple and send us down the steep slope along with it. “Can you tell how close we are to seeing something? Those lines have to mean something, and it could change everything for us.”

“Let me zoom in.” He went quiet, laying his head on my hand and squinting. I’d made it another three rows, feeling layers of mud jamming itself between my toes, squelching with each tentative step, when he answered. “Okay. We’re three hundred yards away from the first line. What did you call them? Squiggly?”

I bobbed a shoulder. “Yes. Why?”

“You couldn’t think of anything else? No other descriptors? Are adjectives too difficult?”

“What would you say?”

He jerked his head. One of his half-floppy ears bent backward and got stuck like that. “Oh, I don’t know. Meandering. Snaking. Sinuous. Oscillating. Zigzagging.

Undulating. Rippled. Hell, you could have called it ‘bumping’ just to change it up.”

“You’ve been talking for less than a week. How is your vocabulary so extensive?”

“Oh, ‘extensive’? See? You can do more than gym-talk. Good boy.”

“Don’t be an ass or I’ll drop you and laugh as you tumble all the way down the hill.”

“Don’t even think about it. There’s a cliff just beyond those trees.”

I skidded to a halt. “There is?”

“Yes.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me that?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I’m doing all the walking. I told you. I keep my map down so I can watch for threats.”

“Not aware of that cliff, though, were you?”

“Because *you* were supposed to be.”

“I just told you.”

“Just make sure we don’t die on our way toward the *squiggly* lines.”

Slash sighed and laid his head on my arm.

As we neared the line of trees, he said, “Okay. Go slow. The cliff is just a couple of steps beyond the trees.”

“How steep is the drop-off?”

“Of the cliff?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a cliff,” Slash said and shook his head. His ear finally flopped back over into its normal position.

“So, if we slip?”

“We die.”

“Got it,” I said.

My steps, already careful, became even more sure-footed. I refused to take the next step until the previous was firmly set. The going was much slower, but we’d be alive to complain about it.

“Okay. Careful,” Slash said.

“Jesus. How close is this drop-off?”

He cocked his head. “You’ve got about eight feet.”

“*Eight* feet? I don’t even see it.”

“Because the trees are blocking your view. But listen.” He raised a paw. His tan and brown fur wiggled. “Wind.”

Now that I stopped, I heard. Below my heartbeat, concentration and focus, and Slash’s idle chatter about finding Pussy, how he kicked the blob’s asses, and the potential motion he was going to file with PETA if I didn’t build him a home soon, I hadn’t until now. Unmistakable.

I reached to split the nearest spruce trees.

“Careful,” Slash warned as I brushed aside the thin branches.

Another row deeper, these trees were younger. Under fifteen feet tall, but not so old as to have solid branches strong enough to catch a grown man tumbling over the edge of a cliff.

“This is going to be uncomfortable,” Slash said as I squeezed through.

“Not as uncomfortable as carrying your grown ass for miles.”

“I’m not even an adult in human years, and it hasn’t been miles, you drama momma.”

“Keep it up and I’m going to throw you off whatever cliff waits on the other side,” I said.

We were halfway through the spruce trees. Plenty of open sky spread out above, and I couldn’t wait to see the unadulterated version.

“Ouuuuuuuuch!” Slash howled.

I stopped, all too aware of our hazardous position. “What is it?”

“The branch scratched me,” he said, lifting his paw.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Because I have fur.”

“Not that much.”

“I’ve got as much fur as your mother’s pus—”

I whipped my finger in front of his face. “No. Don’t do it. You can talk like that to our enemies. Even to me. Sometimes. But don’t be vulgar. Especially about family. Especially my mother.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s my mother.”

“I heard you badmouth her to Tess.”

Dammit. What hadn’t this dog listened to? “That was different.”

“Why? Because she let you hump her?”

“Because she’s a human and understands the nuances of being one.”

Slash pulled his head back. “Wow. What a dickish thing to say.”

“Better that you learn with me than with another entrant or even an NPC. Do you get where I’m coming from?”

“I do.” He licked my arm again. “I’m sorry, Brad.”

“We’re good, wee man.”

“I get your point about NPCs. I don’t want to offend any of them. Especially with how big that town looks.”

“What town?”

“The one at the bottom of the cliff.” Slash shook his head as if I should know better.



Pushing through the last few inches of branches, the sky opened up like I'd stepped on an airplane wing. My core temperature skyrocketed as my anxiety rose. One slip, one pebble in a bad spot, and we'd get a free ride to the ground far, far below.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Slash asked, completely comfortable in my arms.

"Sure is."

And it was. From up here, miles of Darkworld stretched into the distance. A range of mountains ringed the far edge of my view, twenty miles away. Their jagged peaks reached thousands of feet into the air. Impassable. The edge of the game? At least the explorable edge? Beyond the range, nothing? The next level, since Fortune said our objective was to finish this level? From this vantage point, was I seeing the entirety of what remained of the game?

So much complexity.

I'd almost made a costly mistake by underestimating the green blobs. They'd seemed like simple creatures because I'd been conditioned by video games to believe early challenges were supposed to be a basic mechanism to teach new players how the game and their characters worked. I'd thought of myself as bigger than the game I was in. Darkworld was a different kind. A game of life and death.

"Do you think I'll find out about Pussy down there?" Slash asked innocently.

I scratched behind his thin ears. So small. So fragile. Just like our lives, here in Darkworld and back in the real world. Pussy was Slash's sunny day parade, and I wasn't about to be the rain. "We can definitely hope."

"Can we go down there?"

"I think we'll have to at some point. I want us to be ready before we do." We watched the city from on high. The vantage point told us nothing about the place beyond its sheer size. The day's haziness made it difficult to see to the far edge, but there were easily thousands of buildings down there. How many

other players would I find down there? How many butchers hunted its streets and alleys?

“Do you know how to save locations on your map?”

Slash opened his mouth like he was about to make a smartass comment. He snapped it shut and sniffed. “Actually, I haven’t thought to try. Good idea. This is why I keep you around.”

I chuckled. “Is that why?”

“Hmmm,” he said as he squirmed. “Set me down.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

I carefully put him down, wary of the cliff.

He turned parallel to the cliff side, raised a leg, and sent a stream of pee arcing through the air. The wind caught it, separating the spray and sending it down on some unsuspecting schmuck below. Smiling proudly, he bounded away from the edge and asked to be picked up again. “Never send a boy to do a man’s job.”

“Focus, wee man. You think that’ll work?”

“Yep. Already have a new location pin on my map. Even though I’m having a hard time seeing the people down there. That would help.”

I held up my hand. “Wait. Did you say you can see *people* down there? In the city?”

“No, in Hell,” he said, dripping good-natured fractiousness. “Of course. But not just people. I just used that term so I didn’t have to spell out the elves, goblins, giant snakes, ogres, halfings... Well, you get the point, but thanks for making me use more words to explain what I was trying to save myself from having to explain.” He laid his head on my arm and sighed dramatically.

**BOOM!**

**ENJOY CREEPING ON OTHERS, DO YOU?  
CONGRATS, YOU LURKER!**

**YOU'VE USED YOUR ABILITY TO GET A LAY OF  
THE LAND, JUST LIKE A GOOD, LITTLE STALKER.**

**+15 XP**

**+1 INVESTIGATION**

I shifted him to my less tired arm and gave him a quick butt scratch. He shifted his hips and lifted his chin. We could do recon on the city from the safety of this cliff. What a glorious accident this detour home had turned out to be.

“Good boy, Slash,” I said proudly, giving him a bonus round of butt scratches.

He gave me a snaggle-toothed snarl. “Say that to me again, and I’ll bite your ankle while you’re sleeping.”

## SURVIVE



“Hey, Fortune!” Slash said cheerily. He’d been asleep in the grass, enjoying the sun on his belly, but had rolled over so fast he’d drawn my attention. I’d worried someone had gotten into the camp without notice. Now he was sitting up, his narrow chest jutting out.

“Hi, Fortune,” I said as she popped into my mindscreen. “Didn’t see you there.”

“Pfft,” Slash said, and rolled on his back like he expected belly rubs from our digital guide. “As if you could have sensed her before I did. Please, son.”

His Sleuth Ability and everything that came with it was a serious boon. A few more level-ups and who knew what my little guy would be capable of.

“What’s going on? I didn’t call you.” I looked at my dog. “Did you?”

He was too busy rolling on his back in the grass to answer.

Fortune beat him to the punch. “No, si—Brad. I am required to report to you.”

Gulp. Something was wrong. “Required? Why?”

Her bare shoulders dipped. “Your butcher opted to explore an enrollment bonus.”

“A what?”

“In Darkworld, butchers have a few options available to them at different stages,” she said. “They range from basic bonuses for their in-game ability, all the way to unique challenges. Your butcher chose the latter.”

“Wait. Before we get going on this. Are you going to tell me Dude Bro’s name?”

“I cannot, I fear. My apolo—” She cleared her throat, lifting her arm. At the movement, the medieval menu box rose from the bottom of my mindscreen. The red banner flapped violently. Something about it looked different this time. It took me a moment, but I finally realized there was a small ring of flames lining the box. The game was so detailed, the damn things even moved and crackled.

“Where’d the gold rope go?” I asked, referencing the box’s new border.

Fortune clasped her hands at her waist. “You and Little Sir have entered battle mode.”

Slash whipped over onto his stomach, his ears flapped forward. “What?”

“Your butcher opened a side quest for you,” she said. “Should you fall in battle to this special challenge, he will earn the credit as if he had killed you with his own hands.”

“Will we fight him?”

“No. This is a side quest. A special one outside the game.”

“So he won’t even be there?”

“He is not required.”

“That’s bullshit,” Slash said and snapped at a passing bug. “Because he’s a coward. He knows I’d kick his ass if he tried to take me on.”

“A lame way to win the game, isn’t it?” I asked. “Who’d apply for a game and then sit back on their hands and let someone else do their work? How much fun would that be?”

Fortune didn't answer. She simply stood there, looking my way with an apologetic expression.

"Ugh. Do we get a choice? Like when and where?" I had a feeling I knew the answer, but wanted to ask anyway.

She shook her head softly. "The challenge is in spirit with the survivalist nature of Darkworld."

"I don't like the sounds of this."

"If I may?"

"Of course, Fortune. Please speak your mind. I appreciate your advice."

"*We* appreciate it," Slash corrected with a yip.

"The challenge will not be much of a task for the two of you if you are practical. It is designed to show the butchers how the game is played. I have a feeling your butcher chose this option not to kill you, at least not as the main benefit."

"Hardly a benefit."

"To him," she said with emphasis, "the true benefit comes from learning the elementary functions of the game."

"You think he's playing the long game?"

She nodded.

"Okay. When do we start?"

"Now. You have the option to check your Inventory, but time is limited."

We didn't possess enough to worry about needing to check our equipment. A quest should give us the chance to gather loot, so I wanted to make sure I had space. I opened my menu, navigated to the shovel, and highlighted the box.

"Before you drop that item, sir—Brad," she said, correcting herself before I could, "might I ask something of you?"

"Of course."

She nodded sharply. "Then you might want to think about not doing so. What weapons do you have?"

I immediately saw the sense in her making me pause. “A branch, a stake, and that’s it.”

Her mouth tightened in the type of smile that said, ‘see, dummy, you should have already drawn the conclusion before you asked.’ “Holding onto the shovel going into this challenge might be to your benefit.”

I winked. “Sounds good. I’ll keep hold of it then.” I looked at Slash, who was watching us with his head laid between his thin legs. “I guess we’re ready.”

Fortune looked like she wanted to say something profound. Her mouth opened in an oblong oval, but she snapped it shut just as quickly. “Good luck, sirs.”

She seemed to need to use the epithet, so I didn’t give her any well-intentioned grief. “Thanks. What no—”

The entire world shimmered, cutting off my question. Beyond Fortune, standing in my vision, I’d been looking out over the field of grass, past Slash rolling around in it, and the trees beyond. Everything remained. The game hadn’t blinked it out. Instead, clear, thick rivers made everything undulate. It was like standing inside during a torrential downpour and watching torrents of rain run down your windows, except the physical world was doing the shimmering instead of a pane of glass.

“Whoa. Holy fuck!” Slash yelped. He was on his feet, racing to me. At least he’d had the wherewithal to make sure we weren’t separated when the game thrust us into the quest. He jumped into my arms. I was thankful I didn’t have any clothes but the loincloth when because I felt the distinct sensation of warm pee run over my arm and drip down my side.

“Sorry,” he said after a bout of whimpering.

“For what?”

He pawed at my chest. “For getting you dirty. I didn’t have time to clean my paws.”

“Not a problem,” I said, waiting for the end of the shimmering effect, which was just now beginning to dissipate.

“Make sure you’re ready for anything, wee man. We don’t know what’s coming at us.”

“I was born ready,” Slash said and then quivered in my arms. He whipped his head side to side. “Where’s Fortune?”

I’d lost her when the shimmering started. “Not going to fall for your bullshit traps,” I said to the sky, having no idea if the game designers could hear me or not.

Newbies to gaming might not think about how dangerous it’d be to call on their guide in a moment like this. Non-gamers might prefer using their guide constantly, essentially walking them through the game. If their experience remotely resembled mine, they might have no clue how to navigate the nuances of an open world. When people leaned too heavily on a limited set of tactics, games with smart AIs adjusted. Darkworld might do that right from the start. This might be the first chance it had to bend me over sideways and remind me who ran the show.

Even if we could call on Fortune, I didn’t want to, and told Slash not to either. “We can’t distract ourselves from what’s about to happen. I’d prefer you minimized your map too. At least until we know what we’re facing.”

“How will we know where to go if I don’t use my map?”

“Let’s just take it a step at a time. Once we get going, we’ll figure out the safe spaces to open it. Cool?”

He puffed a breath out of his nose. “Fine.”

When my view of the world stopped shimmering, details came into view. We no longer stood in the middle of our hilltop forest. Instead, a wood floor from what looked like a medieval sweat shop lay under my feet. Stretching a football field’s length, the room was dark and dusty. A single source of natural light punched the space from somewhere above and unseen. The only other light sources came from twenty oil lamps on the floor and torches that leaned in sconces along the long wall, burning something that smelled of scorched fur. Every few feet, there were tall spinning wheels.



The air in the room held a musty scent of fur and dust. There had to be at least forty wheels being worked by a cast of NPCs, each wearing identical gray wool dresses, complete with bonnets. Each of the women could have been the same NPC repeatedly replicated for as diverse as they appeared. The soft whirring sounds of their work filled the room. They fed rough threads of yarn into the production line while small mounds more waited. None of them spoke. The women's hands moved deftly along thread and wheel—they could likely do that with their eyes closed.

The rubble of their work littered the floor. Bits of yarn and clumps of wool were everywhere, scattered like peanut shells on the floor of my favorite Americana restaurant.

The NPCs were so focused on their work they didn't even glance at us. Besides the dust, their programmed sense of responsibility filled the air. I had no idea what they were making. I don't even know if they were actually producing anything but a visual testament to the gender roles assigned to the people of a medieval world.

Just then, I heard quiet whimpering coming from the far corner of the room beyond the natural light beaming down from above.

“What's going on? I don't see a challenge. Do you?”

I scratched Slash behind the ears. “I do—”

I didn't have time to tell him I didn't see any obvious challenge either when a rectangular box made of thick, rough planks of wood blocked my vision.

I stepped back instinctively.

Slash yipped. “What's that? Oh, cool, Brad. This should be easy.”

“How did you read so fast?”

The box contained a message, written in rough black lettering like a hot poker had burned it into the wood.

**QUEST!**

**NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK.**

**THE HEAD SEAMSTRESS HAS LOST HER NEEDLE. SHE CAN'T FINISH HER DAILY TASKS WITHOUT IT. HER MASTER WILL MAKE HER PAY IF SHE DOESN'T COMPLETE WHAT HE'S SET FOR HER TO DO. PROBABLY BY WHIPPING HER. DOES IT MATTER THAT SHE'S AN NPC? YOU WOULDN'T WANT THAT FOR HER, WOULD YOU? YOU'RE NOT THOSE KINDS OF GUYS.**

**FIND THE HEAD SEAMSTRESSES NEEDLE AND SAVE THE DAY, YOU HERO WANNABE.**

“Well, that seems simple enough,” Slash said, squirming in my arms.

“Jesus, hang on before I drop you.” I bent so he could jump down without breaking a leg. “Let’s not get too cocky. I have a feeling there’s more to this than searching the room for a needle.”

Slash sneezed, his little ears flopping, one remaining turned upside down. “For an introductory quest? I don’t think we need to make this a bigger deal than it is. Don’t worry, Brad.” He lowered his head and sniffed at the floor. “Detective Slash is on the case.”

He swept his sniffer back and forth as he moved forward. I watched the closest NPC as he worked. She didn’t seem to notice the little dog. “Careful, buddy.”

“I am,” he said, his tail standing straight up. “Now, let me concentrate.”

“How are you going to find a needle by smelling a dusty floor?”

“You’re not the only one with special skills.” He stopped after just a few feet, pulled his paw up, bent at the joint. “Already have something.”

The tiny pup swerved through the room with efficiency now. His lithe body darted from wool pile to wool pile. He stopped at the occasional NPC, smelling their robe. He yapped at one for some reason, but moved on when she didn’t react.

“I’ll be damned.” I smiled as I watched my wee man work, feeling guilty that I’d thought the Sleuth Ability might have been a secondary one when we were first forced to choose.

We were halfway through the room already. Slash was making quick work of the challenge. The quest was a nuisance, one designed to help someone whose goal was to put a very premature end to my life. If Slash’s skill could put this behind us in a matter of moments, it’d almost feel like a moral victory.

“Got anything?” I didn’t worry about disturbing the seamstresses. None of them had reacted to our presence, and if they hadn’t by now, we obviously weren’t bothering them. I wasn’t even sure they registered our existence. Like many NPCs, they were here to fill the room and create a game environment. Still, I’d keep my eyes on them.

“Someone was here,” he answered without picking up his head. “Not a seamstress. This person doesn’t smell like these women. The visitor smells different. The seamstresses’ robes all smell identical. Like the tacos you’d leave for me.”

“That was my lunch. I’d only left it out because I was taking them to work after I took a shit. You weren’t supposed to eat them.”

“Community property,” Slash said, suddenly bolting to the left behind an NPC whose skirts were spread in a pool of fabric like a slowly melting clump of ice cream.

“Got something?”

“Yep.”

I hurried to catch up. My skin raked with a chill of fear when Slash yelped.

I sprinted around the woman with the pooled skirt and almost ran into the wee man as he raced my way. Only a last-minute dodge on his part saved us from a collision he would have lost.

“Run, Brad!”

I didn't get a chance to ask what I was supposed to run from. Slash took the corner around the pooled dress woman, his hind legs skidding out from underneath him. He yelped, not in pain but panic, and was back on his feet, racing away and out of sight.

From the dark recesses of the room, something was glowing and pulsing with lime-green light.

“Stay, Slash!”

The light didn't emit noise or heat. Its light wasn't even strong. I crept closer. Far behind me, back to where we'd entered the room, Slash barked. The whimpering woman hidden toward the back of the room continued her sorrowful song.

“Give me a second.” I moved closer, interested in seeing why the light had freaked him out.

Embedded in the wall, an oblong crystal revealed itself as the source of the light between each of the pulses.

“Don't go closer, dummy!”

When I bent to inspect it, the crystal's light exploded outward, blinding me. I fell back onto my ass as I tried to shield my eyes. Talk about a sudden flashback to the chest event that pulled us into this weird new reality.

I was remotely aware of Slash's barking, but was too busy scrambling away from the weird crystal before it blew my face from my skull. So distracted, in fact, I didn't notice the new sound coming from all around the room.

Slash's barking pitched.

The pool-dress woman was no longer sitting, working her wheel. She was on her feet. In fact, 'she' wasn't even a 'she' anymore. Her pale skin and tired but youthful features had melted away, replaced by yellow, leathery scales. Her face, haggard before middle-age, had been replaced by that of a snake. No ears. Eyes, once human and drained, were cold and yellow. The snake woman opened her mouth to hiss. Sharp fangs filled her maw.

She writhed, growing taller. The gray wool dress fell, revealing a snake's body. Nothing about her previous feminine curves remained. Three feet wide, this was a solid threat.

“Shit!” I rolled just as she struck.

Wood splintered, her strike fracturing the heavy planks.

Slash barked and yapped.

On my feet, I still couldn't see him beyond the wheels and snakes. All forty seamstresses hissed and writhed, like the dancing snakes you'd see snake charmers entertaining people with. Except creepier and far, far more dangerous.

“Get out, Slash!”

“Not without you, dummy!”

“Go!”

“No!”

“Shit.”

Another strike, a narrow miss.

The air sizzled with tension. Their jaws snapped. Fangs smacked. Lightning-fast strikes. I was truly fucked.

Slash barked, racing side to side along the perimeter of the front of the room, not running, but also not jumping into the fray.

“Not working, buddy,” I shouted as I dodged another strike and pushed over the snake's spinning wheel. It toppled onto the snake's tail, sending the beast convulsing with anger and pain. “They're not distracted.”

“Because they're stupid snakes.” He barked again, obviously not getting the message that he was doing nothing to help.

Avoiding their constant strikes as I danced among them, trying to stay alive long enough to get to the front of the room kept me busy. Too busy to figure out how in the hell I could help him help me.

The oddity of the problem was that as I slashed and dashed in the spaces between the rows of wheels and piles of wool, the snakes didn't pursue. It was as if they were anchored to their wheel in some twisted video game commentary about the injustices of slave labor.

A backward leap from one strike almost brought me within range of another. I avoided that by the sheer luck of not being provided footwear in the game. One foot shot out from under me, and I went down. The second strike snapped the air where I'd been seconds before. Crashing to my side treated me to a rude splintering pain in my side and hip, but it kept me alive as both snakes' heads slammed together.

The pair flopped to the ground. Unconscious or dead, it didn't matter. I was up, leaping over them and snagging an oil lamp off the floor.

"Slash, do you know where the needle is?" I asked, swinging the lamp and tossing it at the nearest snake's pile of wool.

"By the glowing gem thingy."

"The crystal?"

The lamp crashed to the floor. The snake hissed, striking at it and clanging its teeth on the black iron lid.

"Yes!"

The lamp was on its side, leaking its contents across the floor, and, more importantly, the wool. Oil and flame mixed. The wool caught. A flash of flame burst into the snake's face. It cried out, pulling back a moment too late. Its scaly face was blackened. The snake whipped itself back and forth as if that would extinguish the pain of being burned.

"Is it there?"

"Yes, Brad." He said my name as if I was an annoying coworker, the type who sent an endless string of emails asking if you'd seen their findings report that had nothing to do with their actual job. The type that insisted on following up even when you informed them and answered affirmatively the first damn time.

I grabbed another oil lamp by the wheel of the first dead snake. I flung that down the line, toward the next living one.

“Get it!”

“But the snaaaaaakes,” he howled.

“Get the needle!”

More space spread around me as I took out snake after snake with my oil lamp attacks. The creatures were either too stupid, arrogant, or unfortunate to move from their spots by their wheels.

Smoke filled the air. I hacked. “Hurry!”

A few more oil lamps caught fire. The smoke was thick. I’d killed all the snakes along Slash’s path to the needle. Those remaining were tiny clusters at the front and back of the room along the far side.

The fires crackled so loudly I no longer heard the whimpering from the back of the room, and could barely make out Slash’s shout of celebration at retrieving the needle.

“Got it!”

“Come here,” I said, waving to him.

He came over, the needle in his mouth. He dropped it. “I want to leave.”

“We have to find the head seamstress.” I looked toward the far half of the room. Six snakes stood between us and where I originally heard the whimpering. I scooped up the closest lamps while I waited for Slash. I nodded to the open floor beyond the nearby wheel. “We’re going down that side and we’re killing the snakes as we move.”

He blinked rapidly, puppy tears caught in the corners of his eyes. “What about the other ones?”

“Leave them.”

“What? No way. They need to die.”

“Yes, way. I’m not killing them if they don’t interfere with us getting that needle to its destination.”

He threw his head skyward, his lips pursing in an adorable howl. “But we neeeeeed to kiiiiiiiillllll themmmmm.”

“Not happening. Come on.”

I grabbed the discarded needle. We slunk down the line as I tossed the lamps ahead. I’d like to claim my throwing accuracy was ridiculously impressive, but the fact of the matter was the piles of wool were too large to miss. Our work was quick and ugly. Six more dead snakes and we’d reached the end of the room.

We approached carefully. None of the snakes bothered us. The air was becoming toxic with smoke. My throat felt raw.

As we approached the corner, the darkness peeled back, revealing a woman standing in the corner, facing the wall. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She clutched a piece of tattered cloth between wrinkled hands. Her face said she might be forty, but her hands, calloused from decades of unforgiving work, told a different story.

“Ma’am, were you looking for this?” I asked, offering her the needle.

Hesitantly, she turned. Her eyes drifted to my hand. She blinked away her tears. The corners of her mouth quivered into a smile that continually slipped. In a raspy voice, she said, “You... you found it.” Her smile became permanent when I kept my hand open, the needle laying across my palm, until she took it. “Thank you, kind sir.”

“Hey, I’m the one who found it,” Slash said.

“Not a competition, wee man.”

“Is too.”

**BOOM!**

**WHO SAID SEWING WAS FOR OLD PEOPLE?**

**QUEST COMPLETE! YOU’VE FOUND THE SEWING  
NEEDLE OF VALANA AND EVEN HELPED A  
HELPLESS PERSON. WHAT A GOOD GUY.**

**+150 XP**



**+2 REACTIONS**

**+3 PERCEPTION**

**RECEIVED SEWING NEEDLE OF VALANA**

**SEAMSTRESS SKILL UNLOCKED**

**+25 GOLD**

**NOSE TO THE GRINDSTONE!**

**MASCOT**

**+150 XP**

**+5 INVESTIGATION**

**+5 BEEFY TREATS**

“Did that just say I got treats?” Slash asked, spinning in a circle. He plopped his butt on the floor, his ears flopping forward. “Oh my god. I do! I’ve got treats!”

“Just make sure you—”

**BEEFY TREATS -5**

His tiny pink tongue licked at his whiskers.

“Don’t eat them too soon,” I finished too late.

A corner of his mouth turned down. “I only had five. Bullshit. Oh, and you’re not the boss of me. I can eat what I want. Especially since I saved the day. I had to try them.”

**BOOM!**

**LEVEL UP! LEVEL 3!**

“We’re level three,” Slash said and then coughed as the thickening air got the better of him while he chased his tail.

I scooped him into my arms and scurried to the front of the room, using the path I’d already carved through the snake seamstresses. “Yes, we did. Let’s celebrate when we get back to the camp.”

He licked my arm. “Hey, do you think you can make stuff with that sewing needle?”

“We’re going to find out.”

“Good. I want a blanket and a new Pussy.”

That surprised me. His attraction to that stuffed animal was unbending, I thought. “You’ve moved on?”

“What? No.” He wrapped his paws around my arm. “But until I get my Pussy back, I’m going to need something to cuddle at night. You’re not a good cuddler, and I’m tired of being woken up by your stiffies.”

“My what?” Then I realized what he was talking about. “Never mind. God, that’s a totally normal bodily function.”

“Whatever you have to tell yourself, you pervert,” he said right before we stepped through the gateway at the end of the room. “We’re splitting that gold, by the way.”

## HOW TO SAVE A LIFE



We got back to the camp without further problems. As we settled down, we agreed not to call Fortune until the morning, since the sun had set and neither of us felt like extending what had been a long and exhausting day. Slash agreed as soon as I promised him I wouldn't complain about him eating another snack before bed. He forced me to promise I wouldn't even bother him about our limited Inventory. Honestly, as I ate a couple handfuls of raspberries, maybe running out of the berries would force us to find something else to consume. We woke with full Health bars, if not full bellies, and the sweet smell of the fire.

"I'm going to eat another snack," Slash said from my lap, shivering in the morning air even though the fire I'd maintained from the beginning raged. At this rate, I was going to burn every tree in the forest within a year.

"We'll set out later and see if we can find game," I said, bundling him the best I could.

He stretched his neck, blinking at me. "You'd kill an animal?"

"Do you want to eat fruit forever now that your beefy treats have run out? Plus, what do you think beefy treats are?"

He howled, scaring a blackbird from a tree across the grass patch. "Don't tell me that. Ignorance is bliss, Brad. Plus, I'm

just messing with you.”

“What do you say we call Fortune, and see what she can tell us about this sewing needle? That’ll take our minds off our stomachs until the sun gets higher and warms up the day.”

“Okay!”

“Hey, Fortune,” I said, calling her up after activating my Conjuror’s Cane.

“Good morrow,” she said as soon as she appeared on my mindscreens, wearing the same green dress she always donned. “How may I assist you?”

I held up my hands in apology as I scrambled for not being ready for her. Flicking rapidly through the Inventory tabs, I wasn’t exactly accurate. The faster I clicked, the more tabs I flicked through, and the worse I felt about wasting her time. “Sorry. Meant to be ready for you, but now I can’t find it.”

Tab. Tab. Tab.

Slash chuckled. Fortune patiently stood by until she offered her services. “Many tabs. Is there anything I can help you find?”

“Don’t mind him,” Slash said. “Most of the oxygen his blood carries goes to his ‘big muscles.’” Slash sat back on his hind legs, lifting his front legs and flopping his paws like he was making doggie air quotes. “That doesn’t leave much for his monkey brain.”

“We just earned the needle from that quest Dude Bro sent us on,” I said, flicking through more menus and tabs and finding way more items and stats than I wanted. “This stupid interface is ridiculous.”

“Did you use the search feature?” my pooch asked.

“There’s a search?”

My Chihuahua’s tail swished back and forth like an irritated cat’s.

Fortune simply smiled. It was nice to see a bit of personality. Though, if I was honest, I’d rather have her tell

me where to find the stinking needle.

I activated my Conjurer's Cane. "Search."

At the top of my mindscreen, a blank box stretched from side to side. Like all the boxes I'd seen in the game, a twisted thread of gold rope framed it. The interior of the box was black. A thin, white cursor blinked, awaiting my direction.

"Now, all you must do is use a term or group of terms related to the item or feature you seek, and the AI will find it."

I couldn't remember the name of the needle, so I just said, "Needle."

Underneath the search box, a new square box popped up. The avatar in the top corner displayed a shining silver needle. A sparkling thread slid through the eye and disappeared outside the margins of the box. Across the top of the box, the game reminded me of the name of the special item I'd earned thanks to Dude Bro: **Sewing Needle of Valana**. Underneath the nomenclature, the game listed its details.

### **SEWING NEEDLE OF VALANA**

#### **SPECIAL ITEM**

**THE SEWING NEEDLE OF VALANA ENDOWS THE HOLDER WITH THE SEAMSTRESS SKILL. THE PLAYER CAN NOW WEAVE CLOTH. CHILL. LEATHER WILL COME AFTER YOU'VE PROVEN YOURSELF.**

I closed the menu. "I can make clothes now?"

Fortune's head rocked toward her shoulder before popping back to the upright position. "Elementary items for now. But, yes. Clothes. Waterskins. Patches for torn fabrics. The skill is limited as you have only just received Valana's needle. But, if you use it often enough, like with any trade, you will improve."

"So you can make blankets? And jackets? And... Oh, oh!" Slash bounded in a circle. "You could even start making cuddle buddies."

"Can I?" I asked our guide.

She shrugged. “I apologize, si—Little Sir. I do not know this ‘cuddle buddy’ of which you speak.”

“A lot like Pussy.”

“Not helpful,” I said, then explained the love most dogs have for stuffed animals.

“Ah. I see.” Her mouth flickered, obviously finding Slash’s tendency adorable. “I am truly sorry, but such a thing is beyond Brad’s ability at the moment.”

“Well,” Slash said, the two spots above his eyes drawing together as he scowled, “how much sewing will he have to do to improve?”

“To make one of these... cuddle buddies?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid this knowledge is beyond me,” our guide said. “No one in the tests attempted such a feat. I... Honestly, I am not confident even the Electors know.”

Slash sneezed, his head whipping around so viciously I worried about him breaking his own damn neck. “Then let’s do it!” He sat back and smacked his front paws together. “Brad, start with a blanket. I really want one.”

I held up my hand like I was stopping cars back in my military crossing guard day. “Slow down, wee man. There’s a ton of higher priorities, none of which I see you helping with.”

He tipped his head. The ear pointing toward the ground finally stood straight. “Such as?”

“A house. Food. Fire. Potable Water.” I ticked off each by thumbing a new finger. “Don’t worry,” I said when I saw his panic set in. “I’m going to work on this sewing skill. It’ll have to be at night. After the sun sets. When I have nothing more urgent to get done.”

He laid back down, his head flumping between his spread paws with a big sigh. “Fine. But I want a blanket.”

“And a blanket you will get.”

“Just after everything else,” he said, sounding an awful lot like a few of my ex-girlfriends. Not Tess. She wasn’t like that. Tessa was special. I missed her.

“Slash.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Brad. Now that I can speak, I’m not subservient to you anymore.”

“You never were, buddy.”

“But you always told me to stay, and sit, and stuff like that. I hated when you’d ask me if I wanted to have dinner like you were doing me a favor by feeding me. Do you know how humiliating that is?”

Yikes. I’d never thought about that. “We’re not used to dogs understanding us. You guys just go off your sense of time and stuff. I thought I was helping.”

He exhaled so hard, his lips flapped. “All this science and you humans still don’t get us. We have a sense of your construct of time, which is nothing more than a dimension, by the way. I listened to the same podcasts you did, you know? Dogs watch humans and pay attention on a far deeper level than your kind pays attention to us. We get the way you say something. Your habits and behaviors.”

“Okay. Okay.” I put my hands up in surrender. “I promise. I’ll make you a blanket as soon as I can.”

“That’s all I wanted.”

Man, that pup had far more energy for arguing than I did. I asked Fortune for her advice. “How do I get started? I don’t imagine I can sew thin air, so I’m going to need raw materials.”

She gave me a look of pity. “According to the training we received about your people, you harbor unrealistic expectations about the circle of life and the needs of survival.”

“Many do, yes.”

“In that case, I wish to use caution. To obtain raw materials you’ll need for the needle, you must get them from... Well...”

“Animals?”

Her head lowered. “Yes.”

“Fortune, it’s fine. Really. Don’t feel guilty. I get it. Though I’d love a world where no animals would suffer for us to clothe and feed ourselves, I’m enough of a realist to understand that I can’t overcome millions of years of evolution. Sustainable bamboo is awesome and all, but we’re just not there yet, and I’m not okay with dying. The good old circle of life. But I’ll do everything I can to minimize my impact.”

“I better not freeze so a dumb rabbit can eat all the plants around our camp,” Slash said.

I gave him a questioning look. “Would you want to be someone’s pelt one day?”

He pulled his head back and both of his ears flopped in half. “Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous, Brad. A Chihuahua pelt? Who ever heard of such nonsense? I’m just saying. We have to survive. Right?”

“We will. I’ll do what I have to do. But I’m not going to turn into one of those assholes who adorn themselves in layers of animal furs or decorates our future cabin with animal heads just to reinforce the fact that I have a small dick.”

“Glad to hear you finally admit that,” Slash said as he rolled onto his back. “I’ll need to be mobile, so I’m okay going without layers of pelts. But I’ll need something at night.”

“If I may?” Fortune said, breaking up this bro-fest.

“Of course,” I said.

“I’d appreciate your opinion, Fortune,” my pup responded.

“What you can craft will be elementary, at best. For a while.” She clasped her hands. “If you only use the skill when you need something, your skill progression will be stymied. A decision will have to be made. Should you decide not to kill wild game to improve your skill, then anything you want to make, and dare I say, *need* to make later in the game, will be



most challenging. I would encourage you to practice early and often.”

“I don’t want to kill animals.”

My pup flipped over, looking at me like I’d stolen his favorite chew toy. “And *I* don’t want to die of cold and starvation. This is a video game, Brad.”

“I know.”

“The animals aren’t real.”

“I know.”

“We are. We can die if we don’t do what’s necessary.”

“I know that too, little buddy.”

He sat up suddenly, his rat-looking tail going stiff. “Did you have a problem killing those green blob thingies?”

I didn’t think about it. Maybe I should have. “No.”

“Game animals. Gross? Sure. But still animals created by the game. What makes them different from a deer or a fuzzy little bunny?”

Dammit. Outsmarted by a Chihuahua who was younger than most of my underwear and who’d only learned human speech this week.

He sat back, spreading his paws. “My point is, I don’t want animals to die, either. I’m one. You’re one. All you humans are. Even the ones who are too dumb to understand that. If this was Olympia, I’d tell you to suck a big, fat, hairy ball sack and break into a Ross or something and steal what you needed.” He looked to the side. “But this isn’t Olympia, and I’m cold.”

The way he finished his argument nearly crushed me.

Fuck. He was right, of course. I’d have to do something I had no interest in doing. But I could be as kind to myself, my pup, and every creature I interacted with while ensuring we lived to see the next sunrise. That was all I could do. The game would ensure it.

I opened my arms, welcoming him into my lap.

Slash promptly loped over, settling between my legs and curling his leg over my arm when I hugged him close.

“Let’s make you that blanket.”

## BLANKET ON THE GROUND



The details don't matter, but I was able to acquire a few coats of mountain goat once I came to terms with the necessity of it all. Let me tell you, those bastards are bigger than I thought. And stupid, too. Very stupid. Much to my benefit. A smarter animal would have had me exploring well beyond Booby Hill. As it was, we found the flock within our own forest.

Since I did the dirty work, I received the majority of XP. Slash earned a third of my total. Guess what happened then? He spent half the hike back to camp telling me how unfair that was, and the remaining portion about how he still had more XP. I didn't have the heart to tell him he was wrong. We'd reached camp, made a spit, and cooked the meat we harvested from the mountain goats before he quit.

Later, with full stomachs, we relaxed while I explored the Seamstress skill.

"Hurry up," Slash complained while he squatted in my lap, directly interfering with my crafting process.

"Let me focus."

"How hard can it be?"

"Do you know how to sew?" He didn't answer. I dropped my hands into my lap, atop the hide. I had the Needle of

Valana equipped. As soon as I'd clicked on it in my Inventory, the needle appeared in my hand. Freaky. I discovered I could shift it from hand to hand. Convenient, but not something I was willing to risk. Sewing with my left hand was a surefire way to screw up the few hides we had. "Not so easy, especially without having thumbs, is it? Now, let me see what I can do."

Those options were limited. On my mindscreens I had to select the needle. In my hands, it and the hide just... did nothing.

"You could call on Fortune, you know?" my pooch said.

"I hate having to bug her for everything."

"Still, if you did..."

"Slash, you constantly tell me I need to familiarize myself with my menus."

"You do."

I ignored the interruption. "The one time I actually try to learn my options for myself, you get on me about not letting her walk me through it."

"Because I'm cold."

I looked up into the darkening sky. It was a comfortable night. One of the better we'd had in Darkworld. "It's not that bad."

"You don't weigh seven pounds." He threw his head skyward and howled. "Just call her."

"No. I'm going to figure this out."

"When I freeze to death tonight, I hope you feel guilty. Just don't eat my corpse." He finished turning in a small circle and laid down in my lap.

"Don't worry about that. We have plenty of goat meat. I won't get around to you for a while."

He jerked his head up, saw me laughing, and glared at me. "You're not funny, Brad."

“Go to sleep, wee man. Let’s see if there’s a surprise by the time you wake up.”

Not much later, he’d fallen into the rhythmic breathing of rest. I envied him. Though the game designers might consider him nothing more than a tag-a-long, it at least provided him with moments like this. Times when he could check out of the necessities of survival, free of the sense of responsibility that weighed on me. My pooch had no idea how lucky he was.

The little ball he formed in my lap didn’t encumber my ability to explore my menus. With him asleep, our fire raging and keeping away creatures of the night, I focused on my next task. In a perfect world, I’d be doing this within the safety of the walls of a shelter. But Darkworld was hardly a perfect world. In our downtime, of which there was virtually none, I collected rocks and wood. The problem was, the amount of wood required for a simple structure was ridiculous. Between that and the need to feed the campfire, I had to prioritize where the wood went. Most, of course, went to the fire, which was and would remain our priority.

I wasn’t giving up. At some point soon, I’d have our first structure up. That time was closer than ever now that we had a fire, food, and water sources, and a better lay of the land thanks to our recent adventures. Exploring pushed back a broad expanse of the fog of war concealing the hillside on our maps. With each step, we understood our world a little better and its challenges. Challenges that required a solid foundation. That’s what perfect nights like this were about.

Well, not a perfect night, but one I could make better for my little buddy if I figured out this needle and Seamstress skill.

With the needle still highlighted in my Inventory, I noticed something I’d overlooked when Slash was bugging me about expediency. To the side of the item, another flyover menu popped up.

**CRAFT ITEM**

**DISCARD**

## **SALVAGE**

I clicked on **CRAFT ITEM**, and another box popped up. This wasn't one I'd ever seen. Must be one of those in-game management things, where the developers tried to cut down on clutter by making a menu active only when accessible.

### **CRAFTING ITEMS**

Like most of my other Inventory boxes, this one was a large rectangle populated by smaller square boxes. All of them were empty except for one. The top-left box showed a digitally drawn picture of the goat skins.

#### **GOAT SKINS x4**

When I tried to click on the goat skin box, I was pleasantly surprised to see I could highlight it. I wasn't sure if it'd work or not. What if selecting an item on this menu ended up de-selecting the needle in the other menu? Since it didn't, meant I was on the right track.

With the goat skin selected, a new option appeared.

#### **CRAFT GOAT SKIN?**

##### **YES/NO**

I chose the **YES** option.

Another box popped up in the opposite corner of my vision.

##### **CRAFT:**

**TUNIC**

**TROUSERS**

**HAT**

**BLANKET**

**WATERSKIN**

“Oh, yeah!”

Slash looked up at me with eyes clouded with sleep. “Can you be a little quieter? Really? So inconsiderate.”

“Shhh,” I said, tenderly pushing his tiny head down. “Let me work.”

We needed a waterskin. Badly. I didn't even know that was an option. I could craft four of them, and we'd only need to make a trip a day to the brook to fill them. Doing that would save us a ton of time, which we could spend building a literal roof over our heads. We'd be safer and warmer, even if only moderately more so. A step forward, though. More energy and rest for the next things to accomplish around the place.

From my lap, Slash yipped. I looked down to see his front paws swatting forward together. Another dream.

I rubbed his side. “What are you chasing this time, little buddy?”

No, screw the waterskins. We could take the four trips to the brook every day if that meant Slash had the comfort of a blanket. A sacrifice I'd make a hundred times out of ninety-nine if I had to.

I focused on **BLANKET** and clicked.

**NEW ITEM!**

**BLANKET**

**SEAMSTRESS SKILL +5**

**GOAT SKIN -2**

Damn, so the blanket had cost half our skins? Not perfect, but not the end of the world, either.

I focused on **WATERSKIN**. I didn't need clothes, at least not yet. My fox fur loincloth kept me modest enough, and the weather had been mild since our arrival. At some point, I'd need something more. Traveling to the city we'd spotted after killing the blobs would be an awkward experience, dressed as I was. Colder regions wouldn't be explorable until I had something heavier. Preferably something that covered my body. And forget getting into skirmishes against anyone without armor, even if it was leather.

“Priorities, Brad.” I mentally clicked with concentrated focus.

**NEW ITEM!**  
**WATERSKIN**  
**SEAMSTRESS SKILL +1**  
**GOAT SKIN -1**

Nice! The waterskin had only taken one skin? Without a second thought, I clicked again.

**NEW ITEM!**  
**WATERSKIN**  
**SEAMSTRESS SKILL +1**  
**GOAT SKIN -1**

Well, that was that. I was out of goat skins, but now my little man had a blanket and we had two waterskins to fill first thing in the morning.

I closed the Crafting menu and checked my Inventory, pleased to see the newly created items there. I clicked on the blanket.

**USE**  
**DESTROY**  
**DISCARD**  
**SALVAGE**

I clicked **USE**.

Even before I closed the menu, I felt the added weight in my lap.

Slash fidgeted. I closed my menus so I could see him clearly. A rough, white blanket covered my legs and lap. A ball roughly shaped like a seven-pound Chihuahua wiggled under it.

I chuckled as I pulled the side back, revealing my pup's head. He smiled.

“This is nice, Brad. Thank you.” Then he licked my hand until I moved it to tuck the blanket around him, leaving only his face sticking out.



“How’s that feel?”

“Amazing!” He lifted his head so far that the blanket slid back down his neck.

I fixed it. “Well, you’re welcome. We also have two waterskins now.”

“Really? Wonderful.” He licked me again. “You know, you’re a pretty good human pet.”

“Thanks.”

“How many goat skins do we have left?”

“None. Had to use them all.”

He laid his head on my lap. “So we’re going to need to kill more to make another blanket or four?”

“Appears so, unless we can find another way to get skins.”

“I want our house to be filled with blankets. I love them! They’re the bestest.”

I had to admit, sitting near the fire as night fell, my lower half covered in this goat blanket, I agreed. This was the most comfortable I’d been since stepping out of my apartment to walk the wee man right before everything went to hell.

After a quiet hour of peace, during which I enjoyed the sweet smell of the campfire and the star-filled sky, Slash looked up at me without lifting his head. “You know, any animal lovers who find out about this are going to be pissed at you.”

Looking down at my pup, who wasn’t shivering for the first time in the game, I grinned. “Fuck them.”

“Talk tough now. They’re a rough bunch. Mean, too. Don’t get me wrong. It’s all for the good of animal-kind, so I’m not complaining. Plus, it’d be funny to watch a bunch of suburban soccer moms kick your ass and throw buckets of red paint on you. Hey, now that I think about it, that’d make you look pretty badass. You should try it. War paint!”

“Thanks. I’m not too worried about them. They’d do the same if they were in our position. Plus, it’d be nice to have

someone else around to talk to than a dog. Especially hot soccer moms.”

“I’m insulted,” he said in a tone that told me he was anything but. “But I have to agree. Having a bitch around would be nice.”

I pressed a hand to my face. “Jesus, don’t say that.”

“Why? That’s what female dogs are called. What else would you call them?”

“Oh. I thought... Never mind. Just do me a favor, and don’t use that word around Fortune. Or any woman.”

“Wait.” He lifted his head, not fighting the blanket as it slipped down his neck. “Did you think I was talking about human *women* like that? Wow, Brad. I thought you’d leave misogyny back in the old world where it belongs. Women are to be referred to as ‘lady,’ ‘miss,’ ‘missus,’ or whatever title *they* prefer. Evolve and join modernity already.”

“How’d you turn this around on me? I didn’t. *You* did. Seriously, just enjoy your damn blanket.”

“Now that I own one, I’m going to invite bitches over.”

Pointing at the dark night beyond the fire, I said, “What ladies are you inviting? We don’t know anyone here.”

“As soon as you build me the house I’ve been bugging you about, I’m going into that big town-city place and hooking up with a few. We’ll take a stroll, maybe find scraps in a dumpster. Then, invitation time for them. Who’s your daddy?”

“‘Them,’ huh? More than one?”

“Yes. And I’m going to need you to take a very long walk when I do, especially since you haven’t built me a door to hang a sock from. Of course, that will be something I need for the house. Okay? A home should provide space and privacy for everyone. It’s healthier. After all, home is where the rawr is.”

His hips started moving. Even covered by the blanket, enough of the general nature of his gestures was clear. I got the

point. I flipped the blanket over his smiling face. “Stop being gross and go to sleep.”

## BAT OUTTA HELL



“Duck!” I hit the ground right after shouting the warning to my pup.

Slash raced in a looping circle. His ears were pinned back. He’d tucked his tail between his legs. “I’m only a few inches tall. I can’t get any lower!”

He headed into the tall grass.

“Dammit!”

Dumb move. The army of bats circling overhead, swooping and diving, would see him far more easily than he thought. The grass wasn’t that thick. They had the advantage of elevation. And the way he dashed around in chaotic circles, making the stalks sway, made it obvious to anyone with at least an eyeball where he was.

Our first shelter, a primitive lean-to of two poles, a crossbeam, and enough native branches to pile in layers on the pitched roof, was done. Close enough to the fire to enjoy the heat while we slept, we had the best night of sleep since arriving in the game. I’d even gained two hundred XP and five bonus points to my Construction skill by completing it.

We’d begun collecting wood and rocks for a house. Slash enjoyed each point of XP from the single sticks he carried back to the small sled I’d fashioned. Each time he received a

game notification, he'd wiggle his ass and asked, "Who's your daddy?" like they were his first. He did work quickly, which helped him rack up the points. We were both doing well in that respect.

More XP, improved skills, a modest shelter, and even a blanket. We were as happy as a man and his dog could be in such a primitive world.

Which was probably why everything was going to shit now.

The morning had been a cool one. Slash had hung out under his blanket while I went off for a routine and regular bodily function. As my luck would have it, I was halfway done with my business, in the most vulnerable of positions, when I heard him yapping so aggressively he started losing his voice.

My loincloth was much easier to adjust back into place than underwear and pants would have been. As soon as I was dressed, I'd dashed through the wild grasses, leaping downed trees, stumps, and around bushes too large and mature to plow through. I've never been a parent, but I imagined my pounding heart felt a lot like what they went through when their kids hurt themselves. Hearing Slash in such a panic cut my breath short, but also fired oxygen to my muscles. Though I avoided the larger obstacles, I felt like I could have plowed through a brick wall.

What I thought I was going to find was not what I saw at all. Slash is terrified by most things in existence, so he barks and yaps a lot. A. Lot. I'd hoped a deer accidentally traipsed into the camp or that Fuji had brought another quest. What I hadn't expected was the cloud of bats looping in the morning sky, diving at my dog.

I didn't see names above their bodies, but that was likely because I couldn't lock in on them while running as they danced in the air.

None came close as Slash dashed this way and that. The little bugger was way too quick for them to snag, and he was putting on quite the show while avoiding them.

Not that he appeared entertained. When he wasn't sprinting or taking sharper ninety-degree turns than an NFL wide receiver, he snapped at each winged attacker that dared dart at him. His aim was just as poor as the bats'.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” My brain was too scrambled to navigate my Inventory quickly. The damn thing, so simple in principle, wasn't so easy to manipulate in a crisis.

The air filled with angry clicks and chirps. Slash's barks accompanied them in contrasting notes of an animalistic opera.

I tried to focus on zipping through my Inventory but kept getting distracted by the size of those goddamn bats. Nothing should be that big and still stay airborne. Big enough that with one lucky swoop, one of them could snag Slash with their clawed feet, which looked to be the same size as my hand, and whisk him into the sky.

Finally, I pushed the dog's yapping and the swarm of humongous bats to the back of my brain. I found what I was looking for, clicked on it, and readied to protect my pup.

A problem presented itself as I called out to Slash. The bats never came closer than twenty feet above the ground except when they swooped to sweep up my pooch.

“Get closer!”

“They're trying to make a snack of me,” he yelped, racing in circles.

“Closer. Focus!”

With the foot-long stake in my left hand, I slid to the pile of rocks I planned to use around the future house and fields. “To me!”

Stalks of grass swayed as Slash avoided the bat attacks. A palm-sized rock in hand, I waited.

One bat began its descent. I concentrated. Once my gaze locked on it, the creature's nomenclature appeared above its body.

## **VAMPIRE BAT LVL 2**

Well, shit. This bastard was a level below me. That was great news, especially with fifteen of them.

Stalks split slightly, announcing Slash's approach.

The bat turned midair to give chase. That's when I saw its ugly mug.

"Fuck."

Though the creature had a black bat body, complete with a tail, freakishly human-esque feet, and opaque wings, its head was very human. Hairless, with slitted eyes, and tiny ears that lay flat against its skull, the creature opened its mouth, releasing a series of clicking sounds.

I chucked the rock. A sweet throw. As someone who'd played sports since I was old enough to walk, I was familiar with the feeling when I knew I'd struck or thrown something perfectly. The moment the rock left my hand, I knew it'd do damage. How much, that was the question.

The rock took the creature in the center of its big, fat forehead. The bat screeched and plummeted into the grass. Stalks folded and bent.

Slash darted past me as I sprinted to the bat.

"Where are you going?" he asked with a yelp.

"Stay there."

The Health bar over the bat's body took a hit with my rock. An eighth of it remained. I drained it completely with one stake strike.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (1/15)**

I didn't bother looking for the rock. I had plenty in the pile that would do the job. Plus, finding my ammunition after the fight sounded like the perfect task to keep Slash busy and out of the way while I worked on our farm.

Racing back to the pile, Slash stood in front of it, aiming his barks at the sky.

"There's too many of them," he said worriedly.

“Just stay by the pile and keep agitating them. We’ll take them out one at a time.”

“Agitating? My barks are intimidating. What’s your Intimidation stat? Bet it’s not—”

I picked up another rock. “Focus. We don’t have time for that.”

A shriek, like something out of a nightmarish horror flick, sounded in the sky. I lifted the rock and chucked it. At the risk of sounding cocky, I was a pretty good baseball pitcher in high school. Now, I was striking out bats with each throw. This one went down, tumbling like a fighter jet shot out of the sky. Like the last one, I raced forward and drove the stake through its shoulder. Though I meant to hit its heart, the thing was twitching and I missed. My stab was basically a blind, lucky, strike that drained the thing’s Health with a solitary stab.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (2/15)**

“Look out!” Slash yelled.

I ducked, feeling the air *whoosh* above me. The sun dimmed for a second as the bat passed, screeching. Before I thought about swiping out with the stake, the creature lifted into the sky.

“Brad!”

I fell on my stomach at Slash’s warning. Another bat used the distraction to attack me from behind.

I was in a bad way. Out in the open, away from my ammunition, with thirteen bats swooping in for the kill, I had no one but myself to blame. “Get into the shelter.”

“No way,” Slash said and loosed another series of barks and yaps, standing with his four legs spread like he was trying to make himself look bigger.

“Too dangerous!” I called.

“I’m not leaving you!”

I’d nearly made it back to him when he warned me again. Instead of dropping, I sidestepped and spun, my stake raised.



The strike was true, taking the bat in the wing and giving me a pleasant surprise. Though I hadn't hit the bat with a rock to deplete its Health before plunging the stake into it, the result was the same. Even though I'd only struck its wing, I wiped out all of its Health with one hit. It hit the ground, limp in death.

“Fuck, yesssssssss!” Slash howled in celebration.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (3/15)**

I looked at the stake, shocked by its effectiveness. This was a basic item. An elementary weapon received for an early-game victory. It shouldn't be able to kill with a single strike. Not at this level. That sort of thing was reserved for rare items often found later in games and players who bullied low-level monsters. Then again, these were vampire bats, and this was a stake. Cliche or not, trite Hollywood trope or not, I wasn't about to argue. I had three dead vampire bats because of this sharpened stick.

I made it back to Slash, still standing with his legs spread, and baring his teeth at the remaining bats as they circled overhead.

“What are they doing?” I asked, watching them reform in a tight circle.

“Getting pissed.”

“Let's not give them a chance to exact revenge.”

“What do you mean?”

“I've got an idea, but you won't like it.” I briefed him on my thoughts. As predicted, he wasn't happy.

“You're kidding me?” he said, growling. I wasn't sure if that was meant for the twelve remaining bats or me.

“Only way this will work.”

“And if it doesn't?”

I shrugged, looking at my Health bar and hoping I looked more confident than I felt about the plan. “Then we go down

together. Better that we take the fight to them instead of the other way around.”

Slash moved closer, swatted the air with a paw, and repeated the gesture when I'd missed. This time, I caught his paw in my upturned hand and clasped my fingers around his tiny appendage.

We shook, gave each other a nod, and set out for the middle of our field.

The circle of bats tightened, funneling downward like a black tornado of screeching doom.

“Get ready.”

Slash growled. “I am.”

Down and down, the bats swirled. Too many for the rocks to be an effective tactic. Ten feet away, they were out of reach of the stake. Together, they were too dangerous for me to take down. As the funnel of bats descended, I concentrated on each as best as I could. I couldn't be sure if I was just repeating the measurement of a handful or if I was actually isolating them, but I was convinced none of the bats were above level two.

I held my hand out when I sensed Slash going rigid. “Hold.”

“But they're almost at the ground.”

“Each of them has to be down for this to work. I think.”

A growl rumbled in his small belly.

He barked at the first two vampire bats to touch down. I think it was his way of feeling like he was accomplishing something. I understood. Right now, I felt totally useless, too. With one foot in front, one behind, balance struck. Stake ready to strike. While we waited for the rest of the bats to land, I pulled up my Inventory and equipped my branch-club. I hadn't been sure I could wield dual weapons, so this was an unanticipated windfall. Right now, I'd equipped it solely in a measure of calibrating my desperation to not die to these bloodsuckers.

“I don't like this, Brad.”

“Me either.”

Five vampire bats were down now.

“Just stick to the plan, little buddy. The reason things always go to shit is because people make plans then break them before they’ve given them a chance.”

“Plans are worthless, but planning is everything. Dwight D. Eisenhower.”

I risked a glance at him.

“What? History Channel,” he said as if I should have seen the obviousness.

“Anyway, just follow through. I’m counting on you. If you don’t, you’re going to have to hunt for your own food after those bats kill me.”

“I’m a domesticated dog. I don’t hunt for food.”

“Here we go,” I said as the last of the bats set its claws into the soil. “Remember, let—”

“I know. I know. Let you get close.”

I started forward, adrenaline pumping. Sweat beaded on my forehead.

“If they don’t kill you,” Slash called out, now five feet behind, “I will, for putting yourself in this position.”

I grimaced. “Focus.”

Crouched, I approached the vampire bats slowly. The beasts shifted on their feet. They wore nearly identical greedy smiles, like I was offering myself as the main tray in a human buffet. As a casual gamer, I wasn’t intimately familiar with vampire bat stats, or if they typically had any. Were these creature’s stupid enough to fall for our ploy? I assumed they weren’t actual vampires because they hadn’t shifted form, but this could be a ruse. Or simply the game’s version of vampires. How would I know?

Suddenly, regret seeped into my brain, but I was too deep to retrace my steps. Plus, if I did, they’d just resume their sky-bound gang approach. This was our best chance.

The bats echoed each other's clicking sounds. Their eyes were completely black, so I couldn't be sure if they were watching me or if some split their attention, greedily looking at the furry snack-sized treat hanging back. Each was shorter than me, and now that they'd tucked in their wings, they almost looked juvenile. Only their hairless faces gave them the sense of being mature. With indistinguishable features, pinpointing the different genders was impossible. Not that it mattered. Only one group was walking away from this fight.

The bats inched closer.

I raised the stake.

Their clicking grew louder.

Let them be confident. I had a protective pup on my side.

Twelve sets of fangs flashed as the bats moved in for the kill. The scent of iron hung heavy in the air. I screamed in a mixture of rage and fear.

"Hey, you stupid fuckers!" My pup's bellow easily reached us as he activated his Potty Mouth attack. "Don't you even think about taking another step, or I'll take Brad's vampire stake and use it to siphon your guts through your assholes!"

It worked like a charm. Each bat stuttered to a stop. They glanced at each other in confusion and down at their clawed feet.

"Keep going!"

Possibly encouraged by what he saw, my Chihuahua laid into them. The volume of his voice grew, carrying far past this finite battle spot. "And after I pull your entrails through your assholes, I'm going to keep you alive long enough to feed your own guts to you!"

The bats wobbled. Over each of their heads, a string of "Zs..." drifted into the air like smoke from tiny factory stacks.

"Ridiculous, but you did it!" I raced forward toward the stunned bats, plunging the stake into one after another.

**VAMPIRE BAT (4/15)**

### **VAMPIRE BAT (5/15)**

...

### **VAMPIRE BAT (9/15)**

Slash was swiftly there, barking and snipping at a stunned bat.

“Back up, buddy. Just in case.”

“No way you’re getting all the glory and loot.” With that, he darted forward, bit at one of the bat’s ankles, and jerked backward as if he expected the immobile creature to lash out. “You ugly fucker. Did your momma fuck every mole rat in your village?”

“What?” I stabbed the next bat.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (10/15)**

“Not you.” He snapped at the bat to his left. “That one looked like he was coming around. I’m tired of saving your ass. Pay attention and stick to the plan. I can’t do everything.”

I slammed the stake into the next bat.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (11/15)**

“You’re getting way too big for your own good.” I staked another.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (12/15)**

“But you still love me,” he said as he darted in and bit at the next bat’s foot, toppling it. Its Health bar barely fell.

I finished my pup’s work.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (13/15)**

“I do.” I plunged my stake after a flip-catch-stab move. Not that I was trying to be fancy or kill in an action movie hero-kind of way. I wanted to see if the game would give me Agility bonuses. With two remaining, it seemed like a good time to test my theory.

### **VAMPIRE BAT (14/15)**

Slash stepped in front of me. “Let me get this one. You’ve hogged them up.”

“It’ll take you forever.”

“Brad,” Slash said, sitting and frowning. The tan spots above his eyes tipped toward each other. “I need you to share the XP. I know you’re worried I’ll have more than you, and I understand. Human males have very fragile egos. I’ve tried to empower you by letting you do a lot of the fighting. But I can’t sit back and let you collect all the XP. What happens when I don’t level up enough to keep up with the game?”

I could have argued that, as my mascot, he shared in the XP we earned in fights, whether or not he contributed. Could have pointed out that I was the player, according to Fortune. Or that the game wasn’t driven to eliminate him. The butcher wasn’t hunting him, but me. Hell, I could have even brought up the fact that we had a thousand other things to accomplish if we saved time by letting me kill this last bat. I didn’t do any of those things, though. My pup seemed to need this. As long as it didn’t take him all day, I wouldn’t interfere.

I stepped back and sat on the grass.

“Thank you for understanding.” He slunk forward, head lowered, and snapped at the bat’s ankle. He jumped back even though the bat didn’t move.

“You’re fine.”

“Brad,” he said without turning around, sounding a lot like my mother when I’d tested her patience as a kid.

So, I fell back. Stretching out and trying to relax, I watched my Health bar tick back toward the right as it refilled. Slash bit at the bat’s ankles, sending its Health bar slinking in the opposite direction to mine.

One thing about my pooch, he was determined. I’ve seen him try to dominate a stuffed animal while I watched a movie. I finished before he did, even though I’d told him to stop every time I got up for a snack. There was no quit in the little guy when he had his mind set on something. Now was no different.

Over and over, he snapped at the bat's ankle. Its Health ticked down. So did his as he wore himself out. Mine refilled before he turned to me, his thin pink tongue flopping out of his mouth. "Okay. I've taught it not to fuck with us. You can finish it."

"You sure?" I got to my feet, already knowing the answer.

"Yes. I'm sure I'll get a ton of XP for all those attacks."

I flipped the stake in my hand, caught the end, rotated, and thrust the sharpened end through the bat's chest. Its Health plummeted, and it collapsed.

**VAMPIRE BAT (15/15)**

**BOOM!**

**YOU'RE AS VICIOUS AS A BAT OUT OF HELL. FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, HEAVEN CAN WAIT FOR THE TWO OF YOU. WOW! YOU'RE ALL REVVED UP WITH NO PLACE TO GO. WATCHING YOU TWO GENIUSLY FIGHTING TOOK THE WORDS RIGHT OUT OF MY... YOU KNOW WHAT? NO ONE BUT OLD PEOPLE WILL GET ANY OF THOSE REFERENCES, SO LET'S MOVE ON. NICE WORK, BY THE WAY.**

**+350 XP**

**+5 SILVER ORE**

**+50 GOLD**

**LEVEL UP!**

**+1 ABILITY POINT**

**MASCOT**

**BEEFY TREATS +10**

**INTIMIDATION +4**

**YOU STUNNED MORE THAN TEN ENEMIES WITH ONE ACTION. TALK ABOUT A GANGBANG. WHAT A STUD!**

**MASCOT ACHIEVEMENT!**

**NEW ATTACK UNLOCKED.**

**ANKLE BITER.**

**MASCOT ITEM RECEIVED: SPIKED STUDDED  
LEATHER JACKET ARMOR**

“Hey,” Slash said, bouncing on his front legs, “why didn’t I level up?”

I shrugged. “You didn’t pass the XP requirement.”

He lowered his head, squinting at me. “But you did? How?”

Ah, shit. “Remember all the wood and stone I collected? How I built the shelter while you slept?”

“You got XP for that?”

“Yes.”

Slash showed his teeth as his muzzle wrinkled. “That’s bullshit.”

“The only competition is to stay alive, wee man. Don’t worry.”

“Easy for you to say. *You* have more XP.” He sat on his butt. I was about to ask him what he was doing when a tiny leather jacket appeared around him. He rocketed onto all fours, looking over his back. “Oh, I like this. Pretty metal. Hey, do you think I could wear this to see Judas Priest when we get home?”

The jacket was indeed badass. Black leather. It ran from the base of his head to his hips and wrapped around his sides and under his belly. A silver skull buckle secured it, and three-inch spikes sprouted from the collar and back. Even on such a small body, I counted fifteen. Slash, a heavy metal porcupine.

I scooped him up, careful to not puncture myself with the spikes, and we headed back to our fire as the vampire bat bodies dissolved into the dirt. “You bet, buddy.” I set him down on his blanket, and he curled into a ball, glancing at his spiked back. “Warm?”



“Yes,” he said, already looking drowsy. “This is going to be epic.”

“You were epic,” I said, lightly petting his head. “You kicked their asses.”

“I know,” he said as his eyes closed. “You’re lucky to be my pet.”

I watched him drift off to a much-needed rest. “I know, wee man. I know.”

## HERE'S TO THE FARMER



“Will you hurry?” I asked as Slash zipped back and forth along the trail. I’d started carving it out of the landscape to make our trek to the brook and Fuji’s apple tree a little less taxing. Conserving our Health in as many ways as possible was essential to my overall strategy of surviving Darkworld. What it’d turned into was Slash’s favorite spot to do his business. He couldn’t decide whether to call it “Slash’s Dumping Ground on Booby Hill” or “Slash’s Poop Palace on Booby Hill,” either way, he insisted “Booby Hill” had to be part of the name.

“Don’t rush me,” he said, his head still lowered at the same grass, plants, and dirt he smelled three times a day. How he didn’t have his perfect spot picked out long ago was beyond me. “I’m trying to take a shit.”

Back and forth he zipped and zagged.

The trail to Fuji’s apple tree was a beaten path for the most part. The work I’d done was progressive; meaning I pulled a few weeds here and there every time we headed to and from the tree. That was in addition to ripping out roots and other hazards. It wasn’t wide. In parts, vines and leaves crowded it. Still, my little bugger spent the better part of five minutes inspecting every inch of the area and still hadn’t found the perfect spot.

“Come on, buddy.”

Half-squatted, Slash looked over at me, his ears flopping in half. “Here’s an idea. Instead of perving on me, why don’t you spend that horde of Ability Points you’re keeping hold of for absolutely no reason?”

“Touchy much?”

He turned away, lifted his tail, and exposed parts of him I didn’t want to see while he did things I didn’t want to see him doing.

Wee man had a point. I’d been holding my Ability Points. After our introduction to them in the Free Zone, I wanted a better sense of the game and what it’d require of me. To be sure to address any weaknesses I had. Now, days later, we’d kept ourselves busy by trying to stay alive. We didn’t have a house, though we had a lean-to. We didn’t have a farm, possibly because access to Fuji’s tree allowed me to put it off. Because I’d chosen the Harvester Ability, I didn’t feel the yearning, burning desire to spend the points on it until I was sure that’s what we needed.

On one hand, spending the three points by unlocking the Fighter Ability would have made our two major fights easier. On the other, we’d survived them without me having the skills that came with the Ability. Doubling down on my Harvesting Ability would balance my inherent skills and speed up establishing our homestead.

“You know what?” I said without turning around to look at him. “You’re right. You do... whatever you’re doing. I’m going to work on my Abilities.”

“Must be nice,” he mumbled.

“What was that?” I said teasingly.

“Let me shit in peace.”

I moved down the trail a few feet to give him privacy, while putting myself out of range of being hit by any of his post-poo kicks. Once I was safe, I pulled up my menu and moved to the Abilities tab.

“Hey, Fortune?” I called her.

“Hi, Brad. How can I be of service?”

“Just standby while I’m spending my Ability Points, please.”

“I wondered when you were going to utilize them.”

A tease? A flash of a personality beyond the tight constraints of an NPC? Either way, it was nice to see. “To be honest, I enjoy your company. Slash is only entertaining for so long before he either needs to sleep or demands an eternity to go to the bathroom.”

Fortune put a slim hand to her mouth to cover her giggle. “Little Sir seems to be a handful.”

“Are you talking to Fortune?” Slash asked. I turned to see him still hunched over. He stood again as he changed his mind about the location of his dump, only to find a new spot three inches away to hunch over again.

“Yes. Finish your business.”

His tail curled. I looked away but heard him greet our guide. “Hey, Fortune. I’m almost—” he grunted “—finished here.”

“Dude. Poor form.”

“What?” He groaned. “I don’t want to miss anything. Plus, you always talked to me when I shit during our walks back home. In fact, I remember you thinking it was quite funny to point out how many people driving by could see me when I was in my most compromising position. So if I have no problems pooping in front of Fortune, blame—” a grunt and groan this time “—yourself.”

“Jesus.” I shook my head, turning my attention back to the guide. “Sorry about that.”

“Sadly, I have seen grown men with worse manners,” she said with a smile, not sounding offended in the least. “I come from a different time. At least, the program allocates me to such a time.” Something flickered over her expression, but she moved on. “Have no worries where Little Sir’s manners are

concerned. Is there anything I can do to help you decide how to spend your Ability Points?”

“No, I think I’ve got it. I was hoping for your company. But, I’ll be honest, I didn’t think about you not having the time for me. I hope I’m not being inconvenient. Probably should have asked, huh? Sorry.”

I swear her cheeks colored. She put a hand to her chest. “Please do not feel bad, si—Brad. That is very kind of you. I... I am touched. Thank you.”

The response caught me slightly off-guard. “Has no one ever just wanted to hang with you?”

“Hang?”

“Yeah, just talk. Not just because they need something?”

“Well, honestly, through my earliest memories, I cannot say they have. Most definitely not during the three iterations of testing. I am grateful to you.”

“Don’t be. You’re cool. Sorry everyone has been a dick to you.”

She lifted her hand. “Who is doing all the apologizing now?” Her subsequent giggle was light.

“Busted,” I said with a wink, then focused on my Ability menu. “I’m going to develop my Harvesting Ability unless you think that’s a terrible idea?”

“I think that would be most appropriate based on what I can share about the game and your baseline statistics. Plus, the way the two of you have handled your enemies to this point has been impressive.”

“You saw that?”

“Of course.”

“I didn’t know you could see our gameplay when I hadn’t activated you.”

She pinched her lips. “That is hard to explain. While we are not present in all aspects of the game, we are always aware. A strange dichotomy. To not be present, yet be as aware

as if witnessing everything in the flesh.” She seemed about to say something before thinking better of it. “Much about our nature is a mystery, even to us.”

I suspected I’d hit on a personal and possibly sensitive subject. Crazy, really. I mean, Fortune was an NPC, a creation of the game. She wasn’t supposed to have feelings, needs, or desires. NPCs didn’t have dreams and ambitions, or struggle with the limitations and challenges of existence. Yet, Darkworld was the most complex game I’d ever played. It had to be for authorities to grant its owners the allowance to pull people out of their lives and force them to play by leveraging unethical legalese.

Ostensibly, everything I saw and interacted with besides Slash was a creation of the designers, the ones she called the Electors. An impressive world in its own right, Darkworld was a groundbreaking creation. One capable of manifesting that complexity in NPCs like Fortune.

I didn’t push her. “Well, I’m going to keep working this Harvesting branch then. God knows I’m tired of eating berries and goat and drinking nothing but water.”

“Wise choice.”

My Abilities tab still showed the FIGHTER diamond-shaped icon to the right of the HARVESTER. My Ability shone in white trim and lettering now, whereas the FIGHTER was still a dull gray.

Now that HARVESTER was active, two branches deviated downward at slight angles. The top icon on the left branch said **PLANTING YIELD** and the one to the right was labeled **RESOURCE YIELD**. I couldn’t see anything below either except the hint of new diamond-shaped icons.

Well, shit, I was going to have to bug her after all. Timidly, I said, “Hey, Fortune?”

She slid back into my mindscreen. “Yes?”

“I can’t see the options to know which choice I should go for.”

“Yes, that is correct. The Electors have done that deliberately.”

“Why?”

One bare shoulder lifted. “I fear they did not write that into our programming, so I cannot answer.”

I shook my head. “Typical.”

Fortune’s jaw dropped. “Have I disappointed you, sir?”

I was so troubled by her thinking the comment was for her I didn’t plead with her to stop referring to me so formally. “Oh, no! Sorry. These developers. The ones you call Electors. They did that kind of shit on purpose. Guess it makes them feel better about their complete inability to deal with the real world. I’ve known people like that. They use their programming smarts to fuck with us functional people. Little dick syndrome.”

“I would not know anything about their penises.”

She delivered the comment so flatly I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Probably not missing much.” I looked back at my Abilities menu. “So, I’m not missing anything? I have to guess between the two?”

“Whichever you most want to improve on in the immediate future. That would be my advice. The branches in your Abilities will continue to diverge as you progress, so keep that in mind if you find it helpful.”

“Great.” I rubbed my hands together as Slash finally joined us. “All done?”

“Whatcha guys doing?”

“Picking my next Ability upgrade.”

“Still?”

“Can’t rush perfection.”

“Don’t use my line, Brad. That’s uncouth.”

I made a shushing motion. “Let me concentrate.”

Slash growled quietly.

Time to decide. A planting or resource boost. Exactly what either led to was impossible to tell from the menu alone. Even when I focused on the side slider icon, I couldn't get my view to move up and down the Ability Tree.

Picking up rocks and wood was a simple task. Yes, it'd be great to collect more each trip, reducing the number I had to make. That was attractive. The Air Force prepared me for a lot in life. Though I didn't miss being in the military, I readily admitted how much better prepared I was because of the experiences it put me through. But one thing the military never promised was to teach its members how to farm. Militaries confiscated farmers' output in times of war, we didn't grow crops ourselves.

I clicked on **CROP YIELD**.

The screen rolled up by itself.

**CROP YIELD +1%**

**WHEAT SEEDS +500**

**ABILITY POINTS -1**

"That's what I'm talking about!"

"Is everything okay?" Slash asked, circling at my feet.

I told him about the upgrade and wheat seeds.

He didn't look entertained. "I can't eat seeds."

"We plant them."

"Where? We're in a forest."

I pointed at him. "Hold that thought for a second."

Focusing on my menu, I clicked on **FIELD YIELD** in the right branch.

**FIELD YIELD +1%**

**PLANTING FIELD +1**

**ABILITY POINTS -1**

"Whoa."



Slash whipped in another circle. “What? What is it? Tell meeeeeeeeeee.” He followed his howl with a “whoooooaaaaa” sound.

“Calm down, buddy. We are now the proud owners of a planting field. What does that mean, Fortune?”

This time, she beamed with pride. “I do not wish to ruin the reveal. You shall see upon returning to your camp. Well chosen!”

“Excellent. Hope you brought your overalls, buddy,” I said to my pooch. “Wouldn’t want to get your cool leather jacket filthy.”

“I’m no farm hand,” he said, lifting his snout. “I’m way too metal for something like that. You’ll just have to do all the planting.”

“Oh, yeah? What will you be doing while I’m doing all the work?”

“Guarding you, of course.”

“Of course.” I chuckled.

“What are you spending your last point on?” Slash asked.

“I don’t know.” Underneath the two branches I’d boosted, there were similar options for crops and fields. “Looks like more of the same.”

“At an increased bonus,” Fortune said.

Slash’s tail wagged. “It wouldn’t hurt to have more food.”

“Or another field. Fortune, how many wheat seeds can I plant in one field? And if I spend my last point on the field yield, will the game give me a second field?”

“Each field starts at level one and is limited to two hundred and fifty seeds. But you can upgrade them with gold. Yes, if you choose to use your remaining Ability Point on the **Field Yield**, you will receive a second planting field.”

“Brad, I don’t want to eat a bunch of wheat.”

“Do you know what we could turn the wheat into, Slash?”

His mouth turned down. “Yes. Bread. ‘Yay’ for bread.”

“Beer too.”

His ears rocketed up into perfect triangles before falling a second later. “Beer?” He yipped. “I love when you used to give me beer. Hey, can we do that again?”

“Don’t tell anyone about that. It was the wrong thing to do. I didn’t know how bad beer was for dogs. I learned. Okay?”

“Fuck that. I love beer.”

“Fortune, will beer harm Slash like it does in the real world?”

The corners of her eyes sunk. “The real world? Ah, you mean your world? My apologies, but I am not familiar with the effect of spirits on a human or canine in your world. In Darkworld, there is no difference between its impact, to humans or otherwise. All creatures of this world are equal.”

“Yet, I’m supposedly his ‘mascot’,” Slash said, standing to flip his two front paws like he was making doggie air quotes.

“Let it goooooo,” I sang.

“I don’t think you can do that, Brad. It’s a copyright violation or something.”

“You’re a lawyer now?”

“Apparently I’m about to be a drunk one,” Slash said, the corners of his mouth curling up. “How long until we can make beer?”

Game time was always different from reality. Things happened faster in games. Understandably. Who wanted to wait weeks or months for something to be produced or grow when gaming? I had a feeling Darkworld was similar.

“If you were to plant wheat today, it would mature and be ready to harvest in ten days.”

Slash threw his head toward the sky, pursing his lips and looking like he was trying to kiss an invisible friend. “Noooooooooooo. That’s foreeeeeeeeever.”

“Dude, you don’t even know.” I clapped my hands. “Okay, let me spend this last point, and then we can get home and get to work.”

Collecting rock and wood for our other needs would be a lot more entertaining after a beer. I’d still need to learn the specifics of the crafting process, but the promise of it gave me something to look forward to rather than more dull nights of waiting for my butcher to find me.

I clicked on the next **CROP YIELD**.

**CROP YIELD +2%**

**WHEAT SEEDS +1,000**

**ABILITY POINTS -1**

As the screen rolled up, another single thread was revealed, meaning this branch didn’t expand in the next upgrade either. That was fine. I had enough work ahead of me. We were days away from having our first crop and our first tradeable resource of any worth. Of course, there was also the promise of beer in the near future.

Things were looking up. Maybe Darkworld wasn’t so bad after all.

“Come on, buddy. We’ve got work to do. Thanks, Fortune.”

“You are most welcome,” she said and slid out of my mindscreen.

Slash trotted alongside me, his thin ears flapping. “You have work to do. I’m going to need you to hurry. Constantly protecting you has been very stressful. I need a beer.”

## THE PRICE



Peace was broken the day a stranger approached our camp. I'd been taking a much-needed rest after planting seeds and collecting wood and rock all day. The two hundred XP was nice, but it did little for my Health. Nicer still? Slash, worried about falling further behind in the XP race I didn't bother to run, carried sticks back to the camp at a speed comparable to a hummingbird after three pots of coffee. In the end, he earned himself twenty-five XP. He'd wanted to keep going because he was close to leveling up, but our individual Health bars were too low for my comfort, and I talked him into returning to camp for a rest. He accused me of "stick blocking" and playing the game too defensively, but ultimately came around.

Good thing, too. The stranger who arrived didn't look dangerous when Slash woke me with a raucous round of barking, but looks could always be deceiving.

The woman wore a long dress made of what looked to be sturdy cotton, dyed red, with gold embroidery. Her fitted bodice was fastened with a row of gold clasps down the front. The skirt was full and fell to the ground, covering all but the toes of her boots when she stepped. Over her dress, she wore a dark green wool cloak fastened at her neck with a brooch.

She was a brunette, and either wore her hair up or had cut it short. I couldn't tell with the red, wide-brimmed hat she wore cocked slightly. A thick leather strap lay over her shoulder, supporting the leather satchel at her waist. I think she was trying to cover the dagger she wore.

Slash stood with his shaking legs spread, releasing a series of low growls followed by a round of harsh barks.

I was up, branch-club in hand. "That's far enough."

"Fair thee well?" the woman said. She was roughly my age if you went by the sound of her voice, but the lines creasing her face spoke of a hard life in a challenging age.

"I'm alright. Who are you? What do you want?"

She held up both hands. They were free of weapons. "I mean you no harm. I only seek aid. I—"

I activated my Conjurer's Cane. "Fortune?"

My guide popped up in my vision. "How may I assist you?"

I kept my eyes on the woman. She seemed frozen in mid-sentence. "What's this?"

"I am afraid I do not quite understand what you mean, Brad."

"How did this woman find us out here?"

"She is part of a quest."

"But we've stayed here since we chatted with you the other day when we received the field for my Ability upgrade. How can we have a new quest when I haven't interacted with anyone?"

Fortune looked down as if staring at her feet. "Your butcher seems to have a blessing. The result is this quest."

"He unlocked something in the game to send me on a quest?"

"Were I to guess, he has done so in order to obtain hints to your whereabouts."

Slash growled.

“My intuition tells me he paid a fee,” Fortune said.

“That’s something he can do?”

“Oh, yes. Though I am surprised he has done so.”

So, my butcher wanted to tussle already, did he? Admittedly, I wasn’t ready for a fight, especially being in the dark about who was hunting me. Though part of Fortune’s explanation irked and troubled me—she was *surprised*? “Why do you say that?”

“Through the early tests of the game, no butcher unlocked or paid for one at such a stage. Far too early to have unlocked it. Thus, I suspect it is the latter.”

I scratched my head, eyeing the stranger frozen in mid-speech still. “He *bought* this quest for me? You’re seriously telling me that, most likely, this Dude Bro paid the Electors so the game would send me this quest?”

“That is my suspicion, yes.”

“Just so he can find me?”

She lifted her hands, alternating each like she was checking the weights of melons at the market. “More that he wants clues to your whereabouts. Darkworld is vast. Finding you and Slash will not be easy. Not for quite some time. Even at later levels, it would be difficult without collecting many clues or finding fortune. A blessing. Luck.”

“Gotcha.”

Fortune turned to the side like she was looking at the stranger. Her eyes narrowed in examination. “This merchant is low-level. Whatever task she has for you, I would recommend accepting it. You could do with the reward you will receive upon completion.”

“Do you know what the quest or reward is?”

“I am afraid I do not, since it will be determined by the Electors. Most likely based on your performance.”

“How well I perform determines what we get out of it?”

“That is so.”

“Alright. Let’s see what this merchant has to say. Thanks, Fortune.”

She dipped her head slightly. “You are most welcome. Best of luck.”

My guide zipped out of my view, and the merchant unfroze. This was a nice feature I’d have to keep in mind in case I ran into a chaotic situation I didn’t want to panic my way through.

“—only seek the assistance of a kind soul such as yourself,” the merchant said as if I hadn’t interrupted her with my sidebar conversation with Fortune.

I lowered the branch-club. The merchant slowly lowered her hands.

“What can I do for you?”

She threw a hand to her hat, tipping it back and exposing a big, bruising knot.

“How did you get that?”

“Raiders attacked me on the road to Shadowdale.” She snatched the wide brim, snapping the hat from her head. She’d braided and pinned up her hair. “I was such a fool.”

Her shift from a damsel in distress to pissed off hellion was so sudden she caught me off guard. How bad were these programmers at scriptwriting? Damn. Some consistency, here, please. But again, video game writing was hardly Hugo Award-worthy.

I waved her closer to the fire. “Come. Sit. We don’t have much, but you can share in the berries and water.”

Slash growled. “Don’t share with her. I don’t like her.”

“I thought you liked all the ladies?”

“Not this one.” As he spoke, he backed up, not turning away from our visitor.

I moved back to the large rock I'd rolled into the camp to use as a seat and backrest when around the fire. I sat and gestured for the merchant to the rock opposite. "Sit. Please." When she did, I offered a waterskin.

She waved it away. "No. But thank you, m'lord. Very kind of you. My worry is for my goods. I must find them immediately. To dally only puts me at risk of losing them for good. Can you help, sir?"

"I'd need to know what I'm getting into first."

"Of course," she said. "My wagon is located a few miles back." She turned and pointed in the general direction of Fuji's apple tree.

"How many is a 'few'?" Slash asked, still on guard. Even his legs no longer shook.

"I cannot be sure, of course."

"The game doesn't have GPS, Slash. Everything is a wag."

He tipped his head to the side. "A wag? Is that a dog joke? If so, it's not funny. You really need to work on your material."

"No. Means 'wild-ass guess.' She wouldn't know for sure how far she's walked. There's no way of telling. Not in this world."

He sniffed. "Well, she could use her map."

"I doubt NPCs have them." It was strange, talking about this merchant as if she wasn't sitting around the campfire with us. Based on her lack of reactions, though, it didn't seem to bother her in the least. "Plus, once we accept the quest, we'll see the pin on our maps, remember?"

"Oh yeah, that's right. Well, let's accept it then. I need to level up and get another Ability Point. I'm tired of you cheating to get ahead."

"Not so fast." I turned to the merchant. "What's your name?"

She whipped her hat so that the under brim was flat against her chest. "My name is Isabella, and I hail from the town of



Ravenswood. A bustling town, rich in wine, women, and song. I trade in all three. Successfully, I might add.”

Now she sounded like a bard entertaining a tavern of patrons. These Darkworld writers sucked.

“You’re a slaver?” Slash asked, lowering his head. His snout twitched.

“There is coin to be made in the trade,” she answered unapologetically.

He looked up at me, blinking away his Chihuahua tears. “I told you I didn’t like her. You need to listen to me more often. Like, all the time. Just because I’m a dog doesn’t mean you can ignore my thoughts.”

“I wasn’t ignoring you, I promise. I called up Fortune so she could help us make a better decision since she knows this game better than either of us.” I scratched his belly since I couldn’t touch his back with his spiked leather jacket on. Since he earned the equipment, he’d yet to take the damn thing off. “Plus, if the butcher paid for this quest, regardless of his motivations, I don’t think we can refuse it.”

“What do you think will happen if we don’t?”

“Who knows? Maybe the Dude Bro will get his money back, or maybe the game will keep sending the quest over and over until we accept. I don’t know about you, but I sure as hell know I don’t want Isabella hanging around our camp. I’ve played those types of games before. They’re annoying.”

It was too late to take back my offer of water and food to the unscrupulous merchant and slave trader. Thankfully, she’d declined because she was in a hurry to get her goods and get back on the road. Sounded perfect to me. The faster we accepted and completed this quest, the faster we’d rid ourselves of her.

“Do you have any objections to doing the quest?”

Slash sat. He lifted his ears as he looked at Isabella, but they didn’t stand for long. Still, he didn’t break his examination, shivering the entire time. When he satisfied

whatever curiosity he had, he answered without looking away from his target. “Fine. But I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I, wee man. Neither do I.”

## FREE BIRD



The forest was not what I expected. Trees, bare for the first seventy feet, bloomed with broad branches. They towered over us, reaching to the sky. Dense underbrush covered the forest floor, which was going to make this search for Isabella's five lost goods much more difficult than I first imagined. The canopy overhead was so thick it blocked out most of the sunlight, casting an ethereal green light onto the forest floor. From above, unseen scores of birds chirped and squawked. Not a pleasant chorus, but one that made me uneasy.

"Stay close," I said to Slash at their first calls.

He bounced forward on his thin legs, constantly looking toward the treetops. "I planned on it. Who knows what's up there. You're going to need someone to protect you." His eyes closed for a second as he inhaled. "This part of the forest might be creepy as hell, but damn, does it smell wonderful."

That was an understatement. The air was thick with the sweet aroma of the blooming vegetation and strange flowers with broad, yellow petals surrounding bulbous stigmas. For as far as I could see in this peculiar green light, the bushes were flooded by the flowers like a pond covered in lily pads. I focused on the nearest one and its name appeared above it. **BLOODROOT.**

“Just don’t eat or even sniff the flowers,” I said after telling him what they were called.

“Do you think dogs just eat anything they come across?”

“I’ve seen you eat poop.”

“All puppies do thaaaaaaaat!” he howled.

“Shhh!” I scanned our surroundings, listening for anything that stood out below the intestinal squawks and calls from the safety of the trees.

The earthy scent of moss undermined the pleasant smell of the bloodroot flowers. Weird how accustomed I was becoming to walking around without shoes. Far from amiable, I almost didn’t notice the feel of the world under me unless whatever I stepped on was painful or uncomfortable. This moist forest soil was the latter. The way it squelched between my toes made me cringe.

“Let’s find these goods and get out of here.”

“I hate that Isabella wouldn’t give us a description.”

“Me too. But I don’t think the game allowed it.”

“I guess. But why wouldn’t it?”

“Because programmers can be petty and passive-aggressive.” I held out my hand when a branch snapped in the distance. Hunkering, I asked, “Did you hear that?”

“Yes,” Slash said, his tail standing erect, front paw up and curled in a pointer position. “I can’t see over these plants, but it came from that direction.”

“Okay. Let’s move carefully.”

“That’s the only way I can get through this much underbrush unless you plan on carrying me.”

“Not going to happen.” I hefted my branch-club. “We have no idea what we’re walking into.”

“I don’t understand why I don’t have little dots on my map like when we were looking for Fuji’s blobs.”

“Probably because Dude Bro paid for this quest and the game is blocking us from seeing the icons. I’ll bet if this was a regular quest, we’d see them.”

Slash grumbled at my feet as we weaved our way around and through the forest’s flora. I wasn’t sure how long we walked, but this wouldn’t be a quick-and-dirty task. Slash had led us to this part of the forest after consulting his map when we’d officially accepted the quest. I didn’t need to verify. I trusted him. He’d warned that it was a large search area. Being large on a map was one thing, but finding yourself trekking through moist soil and slithering past flowers with a name like bloodroot was quite another.

“Hey,” I said as I took in the now silence of the forest, “how about you put your sniffer to good use? The faster you do, the faster we find these goods and get out of here. This muck feels disgusting on my feet.”

“Awww, poor human has to walk around without foot coverings. So saaaaaaad.”

“Stop howling. Dogs evolved to walk on bare feet. We didn’t.”

“Oh? What? Did you just jump into sneakers the day your kind fell out of trees?” He stopped suddenly. “Hey, wait. You’re not one of those idiots who says ‘I didn’t come from no damn ape,’ are you?”

“Slash, focus. Use your Sleuthing to find Isabella’s goods.”

He chuckled at his small victory, but put his nose to the soil. Within four steps, he yanked back.

“Did you find something?”

“No.” He lifted his head and sneezed. “The ground stinks. Smells like your bed sheets.”

“Keep going. I’ve got watch. Just follow any scent that seems out of place.”

He stopped and plopped down on his hind legs. “Do you know how many smell receptors Chihuahuas have, Brad? My smell is a hundred times better than yours and I’m picking up

stuff from miles away. You get that it's overwhelming, right? Have a little consideration."

I raised my hands. "My bad. I just don't like this place, and I don't want to walk into anything. For all we know, our butcher could be out there." I swept my arms across the forest. "But you're right. I'll shut up and let you concentrate."

"Please do." With that, he stood again and resumed his work.

He sniffed rapidly, sneezing occasionally, always returning to the task. Left-to-right and back again. He darted one way, only to swivel back almost as quickly. After a short search, he didn't lift his nose again. It seemed connected to the dirt as he raced forward, heedless of obstacles in his way. When a large tree blocked his path, he simply circumnavigated its trunk without looking up.

We were moving now. I had to take larger steps to keep up, just short of a mild jog.

"Got something?"

Slash yipped, not pulling his nose away from the ground.

We increased speed until I was running. I had the branch-club ready and also pulled up my Inventory and equipped my stake while we moved. Amazed I didn't take a tumble over a root, I closed the menu so nothing slipped by me.

Slash pulled up, taking his pointer position again. "Up there," he whispered.

I hunkered into a squatting position. I could barely see above the bushes. "I don't see anything."

"A person. Human. Female."

I looked at him, amazed. "You can tell that?"

"Yes. But she's not alone."

"How many? Human?"

"One." He sniffed at the air. "And, yes, he's human, too." His mouth turned down. "And he obviously hasn't bathed in an eternity."

“Neither have we.”

“We’re different. His funk is... well, I’m not going to touch him.”

“Have you checked out your new attack?”

“Which?”

“The one you got from the vampire bat fight.”

“Oh, that. Yes, I have.” He sat back, pawing at the air. “I don’t know if I’m going to use it.”

“Why not?”

“It requires me to touch someone or something. That’s not the type of fighter I am.”

“Are you a fighter?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I thought you were a sleuth. Didn’t realize you considered yourself a fighter.”

“Well, I am. An intimidation fighter.”

“I don’t think that’s a real thing.”

“Saved your ass against the bats, didn’t I?”

I nodded. “Very true. Well, if I get in trouble with this human, don’t be shy about using it. I’d like to see what your Ankle Bite can do.”

“I can only use it once per day, and I don’t think you want me wasting it when we’re only fighting a single enemy.”

A limited attack? Well, shit. “Good point, buddy. Where’s this guy?”

Slash turned slightly to the right and resumed his pointer stance. “That way. About fifty yards.”

The path ahead was clearer than most of what we’d pushed through. Paths of bare dirt carved around bushes and trees.

“Just keep me on target, okay?”

“Jawohl, mein fuh—”

“Don’t finish that,” I said, putting up a hand.

“Don’t blame me. You’re the one who binged all those World War II documentaries last winter.”

“Come on.”

I hated not knowing what I was going to face beyond species and gender. An advantage, but I’d prefer a lot more intel before facing off in a fight. For all I knew, the guy protecting Isabella’s stash was decked out in a full suit of armor. My stupid sticks wouldn’t stand a chance then.

My nerves were settled as we neared the cache.

“We’re close.” Slash slunk ahead, moving to the side. “Come this way.”

I followed without question until he stopped and laid down on his stomach, putting his head between his paws. Stopping beside him, I peered through a space in the underbrush.

Vegetation gave way to a small clearing, fifteen feet across. A secret hideaway in the middle of the forest. Slices of sunlight punched through the canopy above, lighting a corner of the clearing where a man lay on his side, turned away from us. Between us, a wooden cage. The vertical bars were nothing more than thick tree branches fitted into the base and top with rough construction. A hastily built prison for Isabella’s “goods.”

The frail woman inside the cage was filthy. Smudges and bruises littered her pale skin. The cage was too short to allow her to stand and too narrow for her to lie down. She sat with her exposed legs crossed. She held her hands to her mouth as if to stifle her whimpering. Something told me the sleeping man made her fear disturbing him.

I hadn’t planned on killing, NPC or not, but the sight of the woman and the knowledge of Isabella’s criminal activities made my temper flash. A brief, dark moment. The type of moment I never wanted to experience again. Knowing it’d be best not to react with emotion, I took a second to ensure the sleeping man was the only one nearby. We were too close for



me to ask Slash if he was sure the guard was the only one we had to worry about.

Even if he was, the quest was to retrieve five “goods.” Slash said this part of the forest had illuminated on his map the second the quest was accepted. It was a safe assumption that four other prisoners were somewhere nearby. If I was reckless and fought this guy, I’d rouse the attention of everyone in the area. No matter how large the active area was, I didn’t like my chances if that happened.

This woman needed to be rescued, but I had to be smart about how I did it.

I motioned for Slash to stay, thankful he didn’t fight me or give me an attitude about regressing to our previous master-pet relationship. I crouch-walked my way closer.

The woman spotted me, her eyes going wide. I whipped my finger to my mouth to ask her to remain quiet. She flinched, not making a peep.

I examined the cage as I gave her a smile that didn’t do much to reassure her if the way she watched me was any indication. Why would she think I was safe? If she’d been sold or abducted into Isabella’s slave trade, her distrust of everyone was justifiable. I had to reassure her.

“Friend,” I said as quietly as I could, keeping the message short to preserve the advantage.

She watched me as she backed away.

This side of the cage had no discernable way of freeing her. I craned my head to the side to find a door. As luck would have it, the cage opened on the side opposite me. Not only did I have to get around the cage, but I’d have to get the door open with my back to the sleeping guard.

I motioned for her to sit still, hoping she understood and played along. She didn’t move as I rounded the cage, watching her captor the entire way. Nothing in my Inventory would help open the cage and I didn’t have rogue-like skills. Freeing her would have to happen with nothing more than good old ingenuity.

On the other side of the cage, thick twine held the crooked wooden bars together. The twine was tied off to a stake five feet away. A simple job if I'd had a knife. Not too problematic that I didn't, but something that required me to keep my back exposed for far longer than I was comfortable with. As I unlatched the rope from the stake, I spared the guard a glance. Besides the occasional jerk from deep sleep, he was gone to the realm of deep rest.

The rope was rough and cinched down, so taut it might as well have been welded. This would have been an excellent time to have that damn knife. My domesticated farm life was quaint, and honestly quite peaceful, but it did little in terms of utility. One of these days, I was going to need a serious gear upgrade.

By the time I'd loosened the rope enough to inch it free, I was sweating from exertion and tension of the situation. I nearly yelled out in triumph when the rope finally broke free.

Checking on the man once more, seeing him still resting without a care in the world, I yanked the rope loose, whipping the ten-foot-long piece through the last loop. The caged woman watched me the entire time. Her expression only betrayed a hopeful excitement when the last of the rope slipped free. I yanked it so hard that it nearly smacked me in the cheek.

I was panting, my adrenaline surging as I gave the door a careful tug. The wood creaked. Behind me, the guard snorted. I held the door, not daring to move. He scratched his ass, grumbled something, and went right back to sleep.

I turned back to my work, giving the woman a flicker of a smile. I grabbed the door with both hands just in case it fell off its hinges. This wasn't a modern door or cage. Things in Darkworld didn't enjoy modern production technologies. The door caught on the frame. There was little room to maneuver it free with how it'd wedged into place.

The woman rocked forward to her knees.

I was still unsure if she trusted me or not, but I was knee deep in this rescue and not about to stop.

The door came free with a negligible crack. I winced, clenching my teeth, and waited for the beginning of a bloody tête-à-tête between the guard and me.

This time, he didn't even grumble.

I pulled the door away and motioned the woman out, backing out of her way so she didn't feel threatened.

She crawled forward at an agonizing pace. I set the door on the soft ground, keeping my hands bare. Equipping either of my modest weapons would have thrown her into an understandable panic. I didn't like being weaponless, but my objective was to free her, not kill the guard.

### **ISABELLA'S GOODS (1/5)**

She pulled herself free of the cage, shifted one leg forward, placed a hand on her knee, and attempted to stand. I saw her weight shifting even before she recognized it. I lunged the second she threw her arm out and caught her.

Thankfully, she was light. Malnourished during her time in Isabella's "care."

She looked up at me gratefully. When she put her hands on my arms as I helped her stand, they were shaking.

I became her stanchion as we snuck away from the cage and back toward where Slash waited. The short walk was a slog, but the guard never woke. Soon, we were behind the bush and sneaking away into the forest.

When we were safe enough away, I offered her my waterskin. She guzzled, rivers of precious water running from the corner of her mouth from her reckless drinking. When she finally stopped, she lowered the waterskin and wiped her mouth with the back of her filthy arm, leaving a smudged trail of black across her mouth and cheek.

"What do we do now?" Slash asked. "Taking her with us to release what I assume are four more women is a problem. She's not in any condition to explore with us. She'll just slow us down, even if she doesn't make a ton of noise, and get us all captured."

I watched the woman as I thought about Slash's comments. He was right. Getting through this quest was going to be a challenge as it was. Completing it, accompanied by someone who could barely walk, was a surefire way of being discovered.

But did I really need to put this much thought into it? Would I risk our fortunes and health or waste our time figuring out the perfect solution? Wasn't that the way of most modern games? Rarely did players have to come up with the perfect solution. They just had to satisfy the quest's requirements. For this single prisoner, we'd already done that. We didn't need to overthink anything.

I pointed toward a split in the trees off to our left. "Do you see that?" I asked the woman.

Her wide eyes drifted from me to where I pointed and back to me again. When she spoke, her voice sounded like cracking wood. "Aye."

"Make your way to that split in the trees. When you reach it, head toward the sun. That way is your freedom."

"Brad?" Slash said cautiously. "Is that a good idea?"

"You said yourself that we can't take her with us. She'll get us captured."

"But the quest was to retrieve Isabella's goods."

I reminded him of the game notification we received as soon as we'd freed the woman. "See? We're good. Plus, it's the right thing to do."

"Far be it from me to be the asshole of the group, but she's an NPC."

"So?"

He sat down, his ears pinned back. "The game already prescribed her fate, right? Isn't that the role of NPCs?"

"Would you really hand her over to Isabella?"

His head lowered. "No. It's not right. I don't want to. As a dog, I feel I have a unique perspective to provide, though."

A flush of agitation swept through me. I'd seen people mistreated during my time in the military. Having served in eleven countries, I'd witnessed the first-hand atrocities of humankind in a semi-global sense. People were shitty to the planet. Shitty to the other animals with whom we share this rock. More than anything, though? People are shittiest to other people. "Oh? And what's that?"

"If you hadn't adopted me, what do you think would have happened to me?"

"Someone else would have."

"Sure," he said in a tone that convinced me my answer completely missed the mark. "But what if I wasn't an incredibly adorable puppy? Everyone wants them. That's half the problem with you humans. You go all goo-goo over puppies, giving us love and attention. Then the minute we grow up, you ignore us. No one adopts us when we age. Or worse, you do and then discard us like your hopes and dreams the first time you run into life's complications. Where are we then? Back on the streets, that's where. Guess what happens at that point? We freeze. We starve. We get mange."

"I get it, buddy," I said, reaching down to scratch his butt. Slash loved his butt rubbings, and I could tell I'd hit a nerve and just wanted to reassure him.

Slash wasn't having any of it, though. "We are better off having what you call 'owners.' Humans who love dogs. *Truly* love dogs. They give us homes, shelter, food, and cuddles. Essentially, what I'm saying is that being owned by someone isn't always a terrible thing. If we set her loose instead of taking her back to Isabella, what guarantees her safety or prosperity? For all we know, we could be doing her a disservice by letting her walk out of this forest on her own."

"She won't be on her own. We're going to set the others free when we find them." I held up my hand before he could launch another very well-reasoned response. "But, you're right." Turning to the woman, I said, "Which do you prefer? Should we set you and the other four free? You can journey together, back to your homes, or wherever you choose. It will

be risky for you, but you'll be free. Or would you rather wait as we release everyone else and take you back to the merchant?"

The woman's gaze slid between Slash and me in amazement. It wasn't a look of stunned fascination at a nearly naked man and his dog having a philosophical discussion about bonds, love, safety, and property. When she turned back, her lips quivered. "I... I would very much like to walk my own path."

"Then so be it," Slash said with a nod as if this entire prospect had been his idea. "We won't stop you, but we'll wish you the best in your journey."

I smiled, truly feeling good about what we'd done. "We'll send everyone else out that way." I pointed toward the split again. "Best of luck."

Underneath the grit and grime, hope blossomed on the woman's face. "Thank you, sirs. Thank you so, so very much."

In true video game style, as soon as her utility for our storyline was complete, the woman's fatigue and trauma vanished. She stood up straight, wearing a bright and cheery smile, and dashed off through the forest's undergrowth.

I watched her go, shaking my head. When I was safely sure she was headed in the correct direction, I nudged my pup along.

His sniffer now in overdrive, we found the next prisoner far more quickly than the first. This guard was asleep, too. Obviously, Isabella was shorting her crew on their coin. Disciplined troops didn't act like this, but neither did those who were shown appreciation.

We freed the second prisoner much faster, and Slash almost ventured into the clearing where the woman was being held captive. This one put up even less resistance to our rescue, and soon enough, we were on to our third.

### **ISABELLA'S GOODS (2/5)**

"This is easy," Slash said after the third was safely on her way.

### **ISABELLA'S GOODS (3/5)**

“Don't get too cocky, wee man.”

The fourth wasn't much of a challenge. Her guard was off in the forest, ostensibly taking the longest dump I'd seen someone take since the guys in basic training who'd hide on the latrines to get out of bunk bay cleaning duties.

### **ISABELLA'S GOODS (4/5)**

Slash pulled up short of the last target, striking his pointer pose.

I scratched his butt to thank him since I couldn't get to his back with the jacket in the way.

Not until the last detainee did we run into a challenge. Just as with the previous four, this prisoner was being held in a roughly constructed cage in a small clearing of matted grass, as if she'd been waiting here for us for years. One notable exception with this situation: the guard was awake, and he was taking a piss.

Slash sat. I didn't need to ask for his cooperation. Maybe there were benefits to his shortage of bravery?

Equipping my branch-club, I stepped out of hiding, staying crouched, and asked for the prisoner's cooperation. This one was in her forties. Clumps of her graying hair had fallen out. One eye was swollen shut. My heart ached for her. During this period of history, a forty-something-year-old was an older-than-average member of most societies. No one should have to live in captivity, traded and used like a commodity, but definitely not someone nearing this stage of their life.

I didn't have to worry about her making a fuss and exposing my presence. She seemed to have given up on life.

The guard was a thin man with shaggy brown hair that fell just below the collar of his leather vest. He whistled a medieval melody while he swung his spray across the vegetation. When his stream caught the flat of a broad leaf, it rebounded and landed on his scratched boots. He didn't seem to notice or care.

His loud whistling made it a simple task to sneak up behind him. When I stood, I realized I had four inches on the poor sucker. Bringing the branch-club down, two things cracked. My weapon and his skull.

The guard grunted and fell unconscious on the ground. I looked at the branch-club in my hands, now half its original length.

“Dammit.”

Slash bounded into the clearing. He sniffed at the man’s face and jerked away. “Ew, his breath smells like sewage.”

“Is he breathing?”

“I’m not smelling him again.”

“Slash.”

I think he eye-rolled me. Because his irises were nearly the same color as his pupils, I couldn’t be sure, but it damn well seemed like he did. Little fucker. “Fine.”

He lowered his head, stepping forward before flinching and tentatively approaching again.

I’d already started working on the cage rope when my pup relieved me of guilt of thinking I’d killed the man.

“Still stinks,” Slash said after he joined me by the cage, dropping something at my feet.

I looked down. “Genius!”

“Thought you could use that since you broke the only weapon you have.” Slash smiled—at me or the fact he’d found the guard’s dagger, I didn’t know. Didn’t care, either. This would come in handy.

The dagger was a simple weapon. The blade was dull and had more nicks than a boy learning to shave for the first time. Spots of rust decorated it. Rough, unpolished wood served as the handle, wrapped in black leather.

I picked it up, noticing its scant weight. “Nice. Thanks, buddy.”



The work with the rope work done, I threw the door open. That took less time than it did to coax the woman out of the cage. She refused to budge until Slash told me to get out of the way.

I backed away after helping him over the lip of the cage.

He lowered his head, tucked his ears back, and pulled his tail in. Essentially, he sent the woman every single possible sign that he was a timid dog who only meant to befriend.

She opened her arms. A flicker of a smile later, as Slash jumped into her lap, and she was changed. He stood on her legs, his front paws pressed against her chest, and licked the tears she cried.

### **ISABELLA'S GOODS (5/5)**

As hard as it was to get her to accept my rescue, as difficult as it was to get her to come out of the cage until Slash intervened, it was far tougher to get her to set my pup back down when it came time for her to seek her freedom.

Slash didn't help matters while she embraced him. He turned his little head skyward and howled like he'd lost his stuffed animal all over again.

As we watched her fall away into the forest's safety, I turned to my pup. "You're a dick."

He looked up at me, wagging his tail. "I know."

### **QUEST COMPLETE!**

**WHAT GOOD GUYS. FREEING ALL THE WOMEN  
BOUND FOR A LIFETIME OF MISERY. TRUE  
KNIGHTS IN SHINING ARMOR, THE PAIR OF YOU  
ARE.**

**SADLY, NOT ALL GOOD DEEDS GO UNPUNISHED.**

**INSTEAD OF RETURNING THE GOODS TO  
ISABELLA, YOU SET THEM FREE. GUESS WHAT  
THAT GETS YOU?**

**0 XP**

**0 GOLD**

**TORN TUNIC +1**

**BUT, HEY, YOU GOT A SHITTY DAGGER, A TORN TUNIC, AND A CHANCE TO STROKE YOUR SAVIOR COMPLEX, SO THERE'S THAT.**

**CONGRATS!**

**MASCOT ACHIEVEMENT**

**BETWEEN ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR THE PERFECT PLACE TO TAKE A SHIT IN WHAT WAS, ADMITTEDLY, A LARGE PLAY AREA, YOU'VE GOT A HELL OF A SNIFFER.**

**INVESTIGATOR UNLOCKED!**

**MASCOT MAP IS NOW 3D.**

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?” Slash howled. For now, he was safe to release his frustrations.

I shook my head. “Welcome to having a heart. Always the first people, or dogs, to get fucked by life. But hey, at least you got a cool map upgrade.”

“Yippee freakin’ do,” he said as he stomped away, his tiny feet barely making a sound.

## KNOCK ON WOOD



“I can’t mooooooove.”

My arms were full, but I stopped for his sake. “Come on. You’re carrying a single stick. Pick it up. We’ve got to get this done. It’s our last load.”

“You said that last time.”

“I promise.”

“You said that last time, too.”

This trip had to be our last. My Health bar was approaching the fifty percent mark. Way lower than I was comfortable with. Blame my butcher. Even though I’d yet to see the bastard or even learn Dude Bro’s name, the fact he’d bought a quest so he could start collecting hints about our whereabouts was more than enough motivation.

After we’d freed the five prisoners, collecting exactly squat as a reward except Slash’s map upgrade and my lousy dagger, which wasn’t even technically a reward, we’d spent the next days working on a more permanent shelter.

Our lean-to wouldn’t do. Not to get through a long-term situation. It was mostly open to the elements and wasn’t defensible if our butcher snuck into camp. Hell, he didn’t even have to do that. All he had to do was buy another quest to put us in a bad spot. Maybe the douchebags who designed this

game also programmed mercenaries into the world. Why wouldn't they? There were probably countless options through which Dude Bro could terrorize us.

As it was, the camp was taking form. We'd cleared a plot over the weeks we'd been in Darkworld. What had been an overgrown opening in this marvelous forest, robust in thick, green wild grass, bare earth was born. We'd spent the days since Isabella's quest doing our best in compacting the soil to prepare for the foundation. Equipped with nothing but our feet, it was a matter of doing what we could. I had more than a few laughs watching Slash march around, stomping at the ground with paws the size of quarters while complaining he was doing all the work.

I dug modest drainage drenches with a series of sturdy branches, going through so many I felt far more guilty about my deforestation than the companies back in the real world raping the Amazon Forest of its treasures. I filled the trenches with the stone and rubble we'd been collecting since day one.

Up close, the foundation appeared level. It was only until I backed twenty yards away that I saw the tilt. I didn't bother. I wouldn't be here forever.

Slash did the best he could, breaking only for "doggie naps and shit breaks," as he said. But his tempo increased once I started laying the foundation, outlining the frame of what would become our home with logs that were a bitch to get to camp.

Carving out the interlocking gaps helped to pass the long, dark nights. Doing so also gave Slash the chance to tell me how much quicker this would be if I had an ax.

Helpful, that dog.

Back in the camp, Slash dropped a stick near the site and trotted back to the campfire and collapsed in the dirt.

"You're not going to lie under the shelter?"

He poked his head up. "No. I need the sun. Plus, I'm too tired to get up again."

I freed myself of my burden and joined him, lying on my back and looking up at the gloriously open blue sky. “We’re doing alright. Thanks for your help.”

“I live here too. I have responsibilities beyond ensuring the safety of our home.” Slash got up, came over, turned in a circle, and collapsed against my side. I wrapped a protective arm around him. “We have to hurry, though.”

“We are.”

He gave me the side-eye. “No. Really hurry, Brad. Everyone else I can see is either further in building their houses or they’re already done. There’s even a full settlement in the northeast of my map.”

I craned my neck up, realizing how stiff I was. “What? How do you know that?”

“I can see it on my map. Can’t you?”

I held up my hand like an overzealous school crossing guard. “Wait. You’re telling me you can see everyone’s shelters? Homes? Settlements? Whatever?”

“No,” he said, rolling on his back before flipping from side to side. I waited for him to finish. I think he carried on that long just to annoy me. He’s a punk like that. “Not everyone. Don’t be ridiculous. Didn’t you hear what Fortune said? The game will have thousands of players. How could you even think for a second that I could see that many places?” His head shot up. One lip was arched above his canine tooth, snagged as so often happened. “Tell me you didn’t think that. Please.”

“I didn’t. Just the way you made it sound. What are you actually seeing then?”

“According to my map legend, the tiny triangles are shelters. There are squares, too. Those are houses. Big circles too.”

“Circles?”

“Yes,” he said with a sigh. “Those are for hamlets. Towns are filled-in squares. Player settlements are marked with stars.”

“There are *player* settlements? Like... full settlements?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Slash didn't have to look up at me for me to communicate his frustration. “How do I know? But I'm telling you I can see them. I can see game towns and cities, and player locations. Well, not the players themselves, but what passes for their home bases. Doesn't matter how big or small. There are a lot of them on my map. Even in the blacked-out part.”

“The fog of war.”

“What's that?”

I flicked my finger in the air as if it would help him understand the concept. “The area of the map we can't see because we haven't explored yet.”

“Sure, dork. If that's what you want to call it. The fog of war area. Inside that, there's a lot of them. But just shaded out. A lot of players seem to be ahead of us. That's all I meant. Can you let me sleep now? Geez.” He wiggled into a ball and grumbled, “Maybe you can spend the quiet time familiarizing yourself with your map.”

“Go ahead. I'm going to get more rocks and logs. Bark, or yip, if you see something.”

Leaving my pup, I set off to work.

I'd made too many trips to count while I distracted myself with thoughts of the implications of Slash's insight. Honestly, I didn't expect him to see every player on his map. That was ridiculous. I hoped he could see enough, though, and it sounded like he did. From his observations, we had a new challenge. One I had to give serious consideration to. Sure, we could spend forever on this hillside, content and playing like we were camping. Relaxing? Yep. Fun? Sure, as long as I pushed aside any reminder that the real world and what passed as my real life awaited me there.

Tess and I weren't a thing any longer. We hadn't been for a while. Adore her though I did, she wasn't exactly waiting

around for me. Why would she? And my job? Honestly, there were days I didn't want to wake up when I thought about going back to that place. The building could burn down tomorrow, and as long as every innocent person was out of it when it did, I wouldn't have cared less once my unemployment benefits kicked in. A necessary evil since I'd burned through my savings when I transitioned out of the military. There's shit they don't tell you about life on the outside when you're about to jump into it. Not that I was irresponsible. Still, misfortune, circumstances, and the fact I didn't want to live in the middle of Podunk, America all contributed to a rude financial awakening.

Here in Darkworld, I could stay. Here, I could pretend all was right in the world. But here I wouldn't remain. My butcher was already moving his chess pieces. Though this isolated hillside was a paradise compared to my real life, it'd only be as long as he didn't spend the entire allowance his mom gave him to fuck with me more than he already had.

But, as much as this place was growing on me, we couldn't stay here forever. Not safely.

While I worked, I checked my map. It looked nothing like what Slash said he saw. Mine was flat and lacked everything but the most basic details. Not a single clue about another player's situation dotted any part of my map.

When I stopped to rest, he was stretching. He yawned, making a tiny squeaking noise. I grabbed my waterskin, joined him, and asked him about his map's features. He didn't seem to believe mine was as bland as it was.

"All I see are a few dots, the fog, and the parts of the world we've explored."

"Nothing but dots?"

"Yep."

"No squares, triangles?"

"None."

"Circles?"

“Just the dots, Slash.”

“Hey! What about the stars?”

“Just dots.”

“Like a dot matrix printer? Oh hey, can we call you ‘Dot’ from now on? It could be your gamer name.”

“How do you know about those types of printers? Hell, I’m too young to get that reference. Only old people would understand it.”

“Movies, duh.”

I shook my head. “I’m glad Darkworld doesn’t have any televisions.”

“I miss them.”

“To answer you. No, I’m not going to name myself Dot. Brad is a perfectly fine gamer name.”

He grunted.

I nudged him. He stretched again when I said, “Let’s get to work.”

I don’t know how long we worked but the pile of wood and stones grew as I ran through the implications of my dog’s insight.

*We* were behind. If we didn’t catch up with the other players and the pace of the game soon, the butcher wouldn’t be our biggest threat. Fortune had said this game had a PvP element. Anyone pulled into Darkworld would be disoriented and probably scared, but there’d be a bunch of them who’d take advantage of other players the first chance they had. They’d target the scared and disoriented, surely. Players like that wouldn’t pass up the unprepared though. Right now, that was us.

She also said other players hadn’t opened chests yet. What was to say I was even in the first round of players in that case?

The head-start would explain why some players had settlements already, unless they were simply that much more efficient than the pair of us. Dammit.



Hours later, as my thoughts ran rampant, the supply of wood and rock grew. Slash had gone back to sleep. I found him at the foot of the fire. He twitched and yipped in his sleep.

I dropped the load of wood onto the existing pile, wiping the sweat from my forehead. Thank the game designers that establishing a bloodline through romantic interactions wasn't an element of Darkworld, at least not an apparently important one. The way I felt, I couldn't imagine my smell would attract even the most love-starved woman in the world. If that were an element of Darkworld, I'd be the first eliminated from the game. We'd have to hit Fuji's brook before we ever thought about exploring the village at the bottom of the valley.

Slash grumbled, yipped, and jerked awake. Groggily, he mumbled, "Hi, Fortune."

Our guide popped up on my mindscreen. "Hi, Brad and Little Sir."

Slash was on all fours, wagging his tail, immediately awake in the way only dogs seemed capable of pulling off. "How are you?"

"Fine. Thank you. And you?"

He elongated his body in a downward dog stretch. "Feeling much better. I rested a long time because I brought most of that wood into camp. I let Brad do the rock."

Fortune turned away from looking to the side, staring straight at me. "Brad?"

"I'm good, Fortune. What's up?"

"Do you mind if I help?"

"Of course," I said, my thoughts still focused on the settlements and houses and all the things that placed other players ahead of us.

"You're doing an awful lot of work you don't have to."

"How so?"

"With the supplies, I mean," she said, waving her hand to the broad side of my mindscreen. "Though it makes sense to

focus on collecting wood to build your home, please know that you are doing it in the most demanding of ways.”

“Oh?”

“You are physically carrying wood.” She turned, ostensibly looking at Slash. “Little Sir, you are a mighty warrior, but you are only carrying a single stick each time.”

“Don’t pick on me, Fortune,” he said, swiping at his face with a paw. “I just woke up.”

“I mean no offense,” she replied, sounding horrified that she might have done just that. “Most mascots your size would be proud to handle the weight you have carried in such a manner.”

Slash stopped wiping his face, looking skyward, smiling.

“If I may, there is a smarter way. That is the reason I come to you.”

“Hey, I’m all about doing things smarter, not harder,” I said, drinking from my waterskin, draining half. I held it up and scowled.

“Have I displeased you?” the guide asked.

I dropped the waterskin to my side. “What? Oh, no. I just realized we’re going to have to make a trip to the brook. I’ve been so focused on working, I wasn’t paying attention to our water.”

“We need more waterskins,” Slash said. “Or to move closer to the brook.”

“We’re not moving our camp. There’s not enough room for the house you want.” I turned slowly, arms wide. “Though, I’m not sure there’s enough room in this spot either, and we have about five acres of open land.”

“Ha, ha. Very funny.”

“We need room to farm, and we can’t do that around the brook. Plus, we’ve got a steady source from the stone fields. There’s nothing like that near Fuji’s place.”

“Well, I do like it here, and we don’t need to be up in his business, anyway.”

“Right. So we’re not moving. Now that we’ve settled that, we’ll need to make a run to the brook.”

“And you’re going to have to make more skins,” Slash said.

“Yeah, I know.” I didn’t like the thought of seeking out more mountain goats, but we had few options. We needed waterskins. We needed tarps. I needed freaking clothes. “We’ll get to that. But, Fortune, you’ve got ideas how we can carry more wood? I’d love to hear it because we’re working way too hard.”

“Yes, your Inventory.”

“What about it?”

“Were you to leverage your Miscellaneous tab, you could carry a significant amount of whatever you need. Especially at this point of the game.”

Our Inventory? For wood and stone? I hadn’t even considered it. Funny thing, being forced to play a video game. Part of my brain understood how all this worked. Being a casual gamer-turned-full-fledged once I left the military and came home to a pretty lame social life gave me that advantage. But I was still a real person who would return to the real world. If I survived this game that is.

The way I saw my world influenced how I interacted with this one. For me, gathering wood and rock and whatever else we needed was part of the manual labor required in these builder-survivalist games. It’d never crossed my mind to use the slots in my Inventory to do the work for me.

“That’s going to make our work go a lot faster.”

“How did you not think about that, Brad?”

“I didn’t see you saying anything either, wee man.”

Slash sniffed. “Well, we should test it out. We could carry back the entire forest, and then you can finally get this house done.”

Slash, willing to work? Never look a gift horse in the mouth.

We were back to the spot in the forest, about a quarter-mile from our camp, where a storm had torn through the area long before we were part of Darkworld, leaving its wreckage behind.

“Let’s see if this works.”

“Interact with the timber just as you would anything else in Darkworld,” Fortune said, reappearing without being called. “Once you have it selected, you will see a flyover box asking if you want to use or store the item.”

I did and the word **TIMBER** appeared over the log. The flyover box appeared, just as she said it would. “Son of a bitch. How did I not see that before?”

“Do not be hard on yourself,” Fortune said. “Sometimes we do not see those things that are right before our eyes.”

Her comment seemed to hold a deeper context, but I was fixated with how much wood I was slapping into my Inventory. When she’d told us about this, I figured it’d turn out we could only put one log piece into an Inventory slot. That wasn’t the case. Each slot in this tab allowed me to hold a hundred like items. With eight slots open, I could use each of them and still carry even more. This was a serious boost. Once we were back at the camp, I’d drop the shovel. I’d held onto it because I didn’t see a need to drop it. Not until now. If I dropped it in the camp, it’d be there for me to retrieve any time I wanted while freeing up another slot. That was my thinking before Fortune’s revelation.

Slash yipped, racing in circles. Each time he picked up a log, it zapped away as if it’d never been there. He slowed down as he picked up more, his excitement getting the better of him.

Not only could I carry full logs, but so could my seven-pound Chihuahua.

“This is awesome, Fortune,” I said excitedly as I filled the seven available slots with eight logs each. “Why the hell didn’t

I think about this sooner?”

“Try not to think harshly upon yourself,” she said. Something dark passed over her expression. “Being immersed in Darkworld must be overwhelming. Being thrust into a new world cannot be easy. Not having a say in our fate or fortunes never is.” Her voice lowered as if her mind was somewhere else, in deep thought. “Only those with a voice, to wield like a weapon if necessary, those who have a say in the course their lives, are free to criticize. They are the only ones with the power to alter conditions. Most of us do not. We must be kind to ourselves and remember that.” She blinked, coming out of the dark place she’d taken herself. “My apologies, Brad. But try not to worry about missing this detail. I should have spent more time walking you through it.”

I watched her for a moment longer, wondering if I should say something, but unsure what might be helpful. I decided against proving that I was absolutely clueless and kept our conversation focused on the game. “I can’t thank you enough for not waiting on me to get this on my own. This trick will make everything much easier.”

Slash moped near a small pile of logs, sniffing at them right before they blinked away as the others had.

Her cheeks flushed. “You are welcome, Brad. I am glad I could be helpful.”

“You always are.” The sun was high, meaning we were nearing the early afternoon. “Slash, come on. We’re running out of time to get to the brook.”

He yipped and released a series of barks after he stepped on a twig. It twitched under his foot.

I laughed. “It’s dead, buddy.”

“Not funny. We’re in the wild. We need to be on our guard at all times.”

He saddled away, but not without giving the twig a series of nasty looks and one rumbling growl.

I started down the trail. “Can we do this with any material in Darkworld?”

“Any you can interact with,” Fortune clarified. “Of course, when you reach more civilized areas of the game, not everything will be something you can touch, move, or manipulate. But much of Darkworld is open to you. What you are able to interact with my surprise you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

My mind remained busy with the possibilities I hadn’t considered before. Dwelling on the fact I’d been too myopic to test the game’s capabilities wouldn’t do me any good. A simple unlock, sure, but one that was a game changer. Fortune’s advice had lent itself to more than just our carrying capacity. Instead, it’d unlocked the understanding that I was more like a greater master of how I played this game than I thought.

I could and needed to take control of how this played out. That awareness kept me so lost in my thoughts I didn’t realize Slash wasn’t behind me.

“Slash!”

A crow squawked from the safety of a tree. Slash barked, coming from too far away.

I sprinted back toward his agitated yet scared bark. “Keep making noise, buddy! I’m coming.”

I could navigate the trail in my sleep, so I scanned the sides as deep into the forest as I could peer, running toward the sound. My surging adrenaline narrowed my focus to my dog’s barks and little else.

I skidded to a halt when I came up to the spot where we’d collected the wood. Lumbering down the trail, as if carrying a mountain on his back, was Slash.

I raced to him, skidding on my knees and feeling my skin burn as the rough ground cut it open. “God, you’re okay. What the hell happened?”

Slash scowled, showing me one of his fangs. When he spoke, his words were lethargic, almost sounding as if he was drunk, just without the slurring. “Well, I called to you.”

“What? When?”

“I can barely move,” he said, howling into the air. “This suuuuuuucks.”

“Why? What’s wrong? Did you hurt yourself?”

“No. It’s just hard to move my feet. This is humiliating. I probably look as stupid as you did all those times you came home from your juvenile boy’s niiiiights.”

“Calm down,” I said, scratching his ears. “Want me to carry you?”

“Please,” he whimpered, and I felt terrible for letting myself get distracted.

I picked him up, surprised to find that he felt as light as ever. There was nothing in the area that could have hurt him, and even said he hadn’t hurt himself. I didn’t see any injuries. I rifled through his fur to see if he was bleeding. Even peeked under his studded leather jacket, nothing.

This didn’t make sense. “Fortune?”

The guide popped into my view instantly. “Yes? How may I be of assistance?”

“I can’t waaaaaaaaalk,” Slash said. He followed that up with a “oooooooooooooh” that lasted for far longer than an injured pup could have howled.

“He *can* walk,” I said, “but it’s slow going, and he said he wasn’t injured. What’s going on?”

She smiled knowingly. “Little Sir, would you be so kind as to open your Inventory?”

He wiggled dramatically. “Please help meeeeeeeee.”

“Calm down.” I reached around to give him butt scratches. He turned his hips so I could reach more of his ass. Another indicator he was just fine. My heart stopped thumping. “Give her a chance to help.”

“Do you see that number in the top corner?” Fortune asked.

Slash said, “Yes.”

“See how the number on the left is larger than the one on the right?”

“Yes.” He sighed, sounding bored.

“Ah,” I said, seeing where the guide was going. “We’ve got weight limits. He went over his, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” she said. “You see? There is nothing wrong, Little Sir. You are fine. Though, if you want to make it back to your camp in time to make the brook, you will need to drop enough wood to get under your weight allowance.”

“But I don’t waaaaaaaant to. Why can Brad walk just fine?”

“My allowance is higher than yours. Mine is thirty.”

“Thirty? Mine is ten!”

“Well, there you go. How much are you carrying? What’s the number on the left?”

“Twenty.”

I smirked, giving him an extra butt scratch and setting him down. “You’re encumbered, wee man. You’ve got to toss logs.”

He growled in protest, then a second later, a small pile of logs appeared in the weeds a few feet away. “That’s stupid!”

“What is?”

“I dropped all that wood and I’m still overweight even though I’ve got open slots.”

“It’s not about the slots, but the weight of what you’re carrying.”

“Your allowance will improve as you level up,” Fortune said. “Be warned, yours will always be lower than Brad’s, I am afraid. Depending on how the game goes. There are upgrades you can earn through various achievements, and you can buy gear in towns, or from merchants and traders. Doing so will help.”



“Gear? Like what?” I asked.

“Saddlebags are expensive but helpful. You will find plenty of places to buy them.”

“I am not wearing saddlebags,” Slash said and then *harrumphed* to drive home the point.

I shrugged. “Then you’re stuck with a light carrying capacity for now, buddy. No worries. I can carry enough, and you’re carrying far more than you did before. Drop wood and get below your cap so we can get back and then refill our skins. We’ll figure everything else out later.”

“Fine.” He sniffed, and another pile of logs appeared in the weeds. “Plus, you stink. When we’re refilling the waterskins, maybe you should think about jumping in the brook and washing your balls.”

“What are balls?” Fortune asked.

“They’re—”

“A vulgar way to refer to a male’s body,” I said, not wanting to risk Slash explaining his comment.

Her cheeks flushed again. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Thanks again, Fortune.”

“You are most welcome. Do you—” She stopped, shaking her head, making the long curls sway. “Never mind.”

“What is it?”

“I should not ask. It is not proper.”

“Come on. We’re friends. Ask away.” I couldn’t imagine her asking anything out of sorts.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“Would you...” She drew a deeply wispy breath. “Would you mind if I walked with you? I—I can say nothing if you prefer. I just... would like to spend time in your company.”

This time, the flush didn’t just touch her cheeks. Even restricted to a relatively modest but small size on my

mindscreen, it was easy to see her neck darken.

Delaying a response might only embarrass her more. She said she was always with us, even when inactive. This meant she had a deeper need. Only an ogre would point that out. I tabled my curiosity for now. “Absolutely. We’d love to have you along.”

“You bet!” Slash said and whipped around in a circle. “You’re way cooler than Brad. It’ll be nice to have entertaining and interesting conversations for a change.”

I stomped the ground, making my pup jump.

Slash yelped, tucking his tail. “That wasn’t funny.”

I was still chuckling halfway back to our camp.

We dropped the wood into piles around the site. I stood back and admired our work. “You really put us back on track, Fortune. Thank you.”

“Of course. And thank you for the company. I really needed it. Please let me know if you need anything else.”

“We will. Bye, Fortune,” Slash said and ran to the shelter, snatching the waterskins. One minute they were in his mouth, the next they zapped away.

“In your Inventory?”

“Yep,” he said, trotting back.

“This is going to come in handy.”

“Especially when I find Pussy. As soon as I do, I’m keeping her tucked away.”

I couldn’t help but find that funny and periodically laughed all the way to the brook. I stopped laughing when Slash yelped a fraction of a second before a new face popped up in my vision, this time on the right side of my mindscreen. Fortune had always appeared on the left. Something told me there was a reason for this man to be on the opposite side.

Had Fortune still been up, this warrior would have towered over her. To scale, he would have been my height if he suddenly popped out of my view and into the game itself.

Though I'd already met Fortune, Fuji, Isabella, and her guards, his antiquated appearance still surprised me.

Darkworld was a game of ages. I'd had plenty of hints that most of the characters were from the medieval and dark ages. His suit of gleaming plate armor, adorned with intricate engravings depicting what looked to be battle scenes, fit right in. A fiery plume—literally—adorned his conical helmet. The column of flames danced and waved as if blown about by a strong wind. A visor covered his face, but behind its shield, his crystal eyes hinted at Nordic heritage. He kept his beard trimmed short, which was complete bullshit for a warrior of any point in history close to medieval times.

“Who are you?” Slash asked, shivering.

“Run all you wish, coward. I will find and slay you,” the warrior growled.

“Dude Bro?” I asked, clenching my fist.

The warrior threw his head back. “I will find you, coward. You cannot hide from me for long. When I find you, I will butcher you.”

Slash looked at me. “He sure likes the word ‘you,’ doesn’t he?” My pup squinted. “Nice sword, dumbass.”

Dude Bro carried a broadsword at his side. Green gems decorated its hilt. In his left arm, he carried a shield. The crest was a yellow field with two circular objects abreast that reminded me of the obnoxious dangling metal testicles small men with big trucks hang from their trailer hitches.

Slash yipped. “How pathetic. Brad, look at his name.”

Above the gargantuan knight, emblazoned in flaming red letters, was my butcher’s game name.

I snorted. “Fucking predictable.”

**BigDk** crossed his massive arms. “Laugh now, little man. One day soon I will face you on the field of battle, and I will drop you like an ugly prom date.”

“You’re going to try, asshole. We’ll be waiting,” Slash said, barking and pouncing in the dirt. “But we’re—”

He didn't get to finish this round of shit-talking. In a blip, BigDk was gone.

“Well,” my pup said, turning to me, “at least we now know who's trying to kill us.”

## RATTLESNAKE SHAKE



There's something about a known enemy that puts a hyper-focus on all activities and erases any malaise. In the days following BigDk making his presence known, Slash and I made significant progress on our home and farm. The reality that there truly was someone out there, controlling an avatar to hunt us with, put a fire under our asses. Being behind so many players on Slash's map helped push us through times when we were tired. Maybe it came down to the fact that I was sick and tired of being practically naked all day, the tunic I received helped immensely, and sleeping under a lean-to at night. Or maybe it was the shocked advice of our guide after our butcher's appearance that was the final nail driven home. Whatever the cause, the past days were a blur of non-stop work.

We worked as soon as the sun woke us. We worked until it dropped out of the sky. Even then, we now had a raging fire casting light forty feet into the night. It wasn't much, but it was enough to work as late as I physically could.

I'd reorganized our days so that anything that couldn't be done without the firelight was addressed while the sun was up. The tasks we could do within the campfire's light, like forming the locking pieces in the logs or chipping away at larger rocks to sharpen their edges for more effective axes, we did during the day.

My To-Do List got longer each day. Between the fire, wood, framing the house, and making weapons, I also had the first yield of crops to harvest. Without proper tools, it was a slow going process. Slow, but necessary. BigDk might play tough behind his avatar, but he wouldn't draw me into a fight before we were ready. Establishing a homestead was the first step in my defensive strategy. One of many.

On top of all that, our guide dropped a major hint.

Earlier in the day, Fortune advised us to head to the Gloomswamp.

“You will find particularly useful materials there, like vines, that will assist you in making a sickle,” she'd said. “Then you can harvest your wheat.”

That was all Slash needed to hear to encourage me, endlessly, to make the trip. He had it pinned on his map. Thanks to his three-dimensional features, he promised the way would be relatively easy. His encouragement was appreciated but not needed, though he put in an impressively stubborn performance just the same. I was ready to make the monotonous work easier.

“As long as we aren't attacked on the road,” Slash mumbled.

“Wow. That's cheerful,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Suck it up, buttercup. We need these vines so you can make that thingie Fortune was talking about.”

“A sickle.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” he said, waving a paw in the air. “When you humansplain to me, all I hear is ‘food, food, food.’”

“Yeah, I've got to admit we're overdue to harvest the wheat, anyway. I don't know how we get bread or beer once we do, but Fortune will help with that, I'm sure. Let's just hope BigDk isn't waiting for us out there.”

Since his unanticipated appearance, the butcher wasn't far from my mind. He couldn't be. Since that first, brief interaction, Slash had been champing at the bit to get his tiny

fangs sunk into Dude Bro's ankles. Fortune didn't help. She brought him up in every conversation, regardless of the topic. Her urging for me to take the threat seriously was as unnecessary as Slash's encouragement to head to the Gloomswamp.

She had the benefit of singular focus. Slash did as well when he wasn't harassing me to feed him, walk him, and build him a cozy home. Seems, even in a game world, some things never changed. BigDk was definitely a problem, but one among many. I could only afford him so much of my energy when there were so many tasks to complete.

The Gloomswamp was appropriately named. I'd seen the white mist swirling long before we smelled the rotten water. It was dark and foreboding, shrouded in shadows as if Darkworld's sun didn't dare venture into this realm.

"Gross," Slash said, moving as far away from the murky water as the trail carving through the undergrowth allowed.

"Not just the water," I said, pointing to a barely perceptible ripple in the water twenty feet away.

"Is that something swimming?" he said, repulsed.

"That'd be my guess. Just watch out for—" My warning was cut off when my foot sank into the spongy soil. I could only imagine what sort of bacteria were crawling all over my bare feet. I gave a quick shake of my head, not wanting to think about that.

The swamp's trees, gray, sickened creatures, were bent and gnarled, their branches twisting this way and that as if waiting to snag an unsuspecting traveler. Wet tendrils of moss hung limply.

"It's creepy," Slash said, jumping at a splash coming from our right.

"Chill, wee man. That was too far away. Save your nerves for when that shit gets closer."

"I don't want to save my nerves. They're what's keeping us alive. Well, besides my intimidating presence. I'll bet that's why those things don't get too close."

“I’ll bet.” Because I walked in front of him, Slash couldn’t see my smile.

Only occasional splashes and deep croaks from hidden frogs broke the eerie silence. From the sounds of their calls, I could only imagine how big they were.

The scent of rotting vegetation and stagnant water hung heavily. I regretted each mandatory breath.

“Keep your eyes out for the vines Fortune described so we can get out of here as soon as we fill our Inventory.”

“I don’t even care if we get that many. Let’s just collect enough for you to make that thingie—”

“Sickle.”

“—and leave.”

“I don’t want to come back. We’ve got to pick up as much as we can.”

“Fine.” He sneezed. “But if I lose my sense of smell and it costs my Sleuth buffs, we’re screwed.”

“Why would being here do that?”

“I don’t know, but every time I inhale, I can feel the creepy crawlies slithering up my nose.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re being a little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“Oh? Suddenly you know what it’s like to have a dog’s sense of smell? Get bent, douche monkey.”

“You’re right,” I said, ignoring his latest attempt at copying all the shit he’d heard on television. When we get back to the real world, I’ll have to figure out what else I could leave on to entertain and occupy him while at work besides whatever I’d inadvertently exposed him to since the adoption. “I don’t have a clue what you’re feeling.” To my left was an outcropping of rock, fifteen feet high, covered in vines. “We’ll leave as soon as we get our fill. I think we’re about to do just that.”



“How—” he started. “Oh, wait. Nice. Not bad at all. For a human.”

“Careful. Keep it up with the compliments and someone might mistake you for a friendly pup.”

He stopped, plopping on his rear. Holding a paw up, he said, “First, I’m not a pup. I’m almost two. I’m a tween in human years. Essentially an adult.” He shifted his weight so he could get his second paw in the air. “And second, I’m the muscle of the group. Anything you perceive as me being standoffish comes from not being able to be seen as lazy or a pushover. I have to be a badass, Brad. Please understand.”

It took everything I had to not smile. “You’re right. I get it. Let’s grab—”

Slash rocked back down to his front paws, standing on all four, hackles raised. The rapid-fire barking he sounded would have woken the dead.

I turned, ready to see him upset at a surprise interruption by a squirrel or butterfly or something. What I didn’t expect to see was a rattlesnake. The density of the swamp made spotting any of its crawlers impossible to pick out. Catching sight of anything was a feat. Chills raked my skin as the rattlesnake slithered out from under a thick bush, its eyes locked on us.

“Holy shit,” Slash said with a yelp.

“No kidding. Don’t move.”

The rattlesnake had to be thirty feet long. It flicked a tongue that was as long and wide as a spatula.

“Back up.” I held one arm out as if he was trying to pass me to get at the beast. I didn’t dare move. Whereas my dog might get away by backing to safety, I worried my movement would antagonize the monstrosity.

Its scales, mottled patterns of gold and deep browns, glistened as if they’d caught the sunlight before slinking into the swamp. Shit camouflage, but when you were as long as a semi-trailer, you could be whatever color you wanted.

Frozen, I knew I couldn't outrun the rattlesnake if it saw me as a threat. Slash might have a chance, but he wouldn't leave me. Chained to me, our fates shared.

Unlike in movies, the snake didn't race at us. This beast moved at a cautious pace, curving its girth every couple of feet.

Behind me, Slash whimpered.

Without turning, I said out of the corner of my mouth, "Buddy, I need you to creep back."

Between whimpers, he said, "I'm not going anywhere. I've got to protect you from it."

The snake, its head the size of a football, kept coming. Its rattle sounded like a score of maracas as if I needed any warning of its presence.

A cloud of confusion began to take hold of my mind. Fear. I shook it off, keeping my faculties. I couldn't allow my repulsion to get the best of me. We were too far from our camp. We were in a video game, far away from anyone who might help. If anyone could at all. I was less than confident about medieval cures to snake venom or game designer intervention.

"Thanks, buddy. But I don't want you to do that. I want to let this thing be. We can find another batch of vines somewhere else."

"Vinesssssss, you ssssssssay, human?" the snake said, its green tongue flicking. "Ssssssshould Sarpa Raja be surprised that a human feels as if they can tresssssspasssss and steal from another?" The snake's eyes glinted with malevolent intelligence as it flicked its tongue at the air again.

"Holy fuck," Slash said with a yip. "It talks."

I wanted to point out the irony of a Chihuahua being fascinated that a snake could speak but had better conflicts to address now.

"Look," I said, holding up my hands to show I meant it no harm. Over its head, it didn't say **STUPID FUCKING**

**RATTLESNAKE**, as I'd hoped. This big boy's name was **SARPA RAJA**.

It flicked its tongue again.

Getting a smell of me and Slash. If I was going to talk our way out of this, I needed to do it fast.

"We didn't know anyone lived here," I said, continuing my apology and buying us time. "If we trespassed, it was by mistake. We'll take our leave. Sorry for disturbing you."

I took a step back. I had to show this way-too-intelligent snake I meant what I said, or Slash would end up being an appetizer to me as the main meal. I almost blew out a breath of relief when my roughened bare heel sank into soft soil instead of stepping on my pup's tail.

"Keep moving back, wee man," I said out of the corner of my mouth again.

"Okay," Slash said, no longer putting up a fight. "But only if you're coming, too."

"I am. Keep moving."

"Ssssssstupid human," the rattlesnake said and flicked its tongue, "you don't get to traipsssssse on our land and then act assssss if you've done no harm."

This dude was pissing me off. "Look. We didn't touch a thing. Keep your swamp. We're leaving."

"Not without my permisssssssion!"

I watched in horror as the snake shot, straight as a dart, from its relatively relaxed position.

I spun and scooped Slash, plowing through the underbrush, back the way I thought I remembered us coming. After a few strides, I checked behind me.

"Run, Brad. Dammit. See? This is what happens when you only work out with your arms. Leg day, buddy. Leg. Day. Include it when we get home. If you had before you volunteered to play this game, we'd already be back at camp."

Sarpa Raja was closing. Despite his size, he moved with grace and frightening speed. He'd be on me before I realized he'd sunk his fangs into my Achilles, shredding it.

I felt, more than saw, the snake close in and snap. The air shook. I leaped. His strike missed.

"You're faster than me," I said.

"Don't you dare think about throwing me again."

"Got to. Faster."

I dodged around a small tree, using the break in the snake's rhythm to pull up my Inventory and equip my dagger.

"What are you going to do with that?"

I ignored my dog's question and kept running, looking for anything that might be useful.

Taking another loop around a tree, I headed back in the opposite direction.

"What are you doing?" Slash screeched. "You're going back toward his lair."

"Don't think..." Breath. Huff. Pant. "Snakes. Have. Lairs."

"Turn arrooooooooooooooooooooooound!"

How the wee man had the energy to howl while bouncing in my arms as I sprinted across the only firm ground I'd found in the swamp could only be attributed to the fact that he was, indeed, not exerting himself. Not that I had to worry about his howls drawing attention. Not with a thirty-foot rattlesnake bearing down on us. Who cared if his racket drew other threats? Were another one or a hundred to suddenly show up, they could take their pick of which parts of me to devour.

At every chance, I swerved around trees. Sometimes circling them more than once, figuring it'd take a lot of energy for the giant snake to wrap itself around the tree without... well, wrapping itself around the tree. I had two feet. A rattlesnake that large had to have hundreds of scoots to pull it around any obstacles I forced it to navigate. That took time and energy. If nothing else, my evasive maneuvers were

making it work harder than it was probably used to. That should wear it down, I hoped. Hell, otherwise, why was I paying seventy dollars a month for my gym membership?

I glanced over my shoulder, seeing that I'd put fifteen feet between us and Sarpa Raja. My pup quaked. "Hold on," I said.

"What are you thinking of doing? I don't like that tone in your voice."

"Have an idea. See those boulders?"

From my periphery, I saw Slash turn to look ahead. "The big rocks?"

"Yep. I'm going to slow down enough for you to jump. That's your target."

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm here to protect you? You can't just dump me on the rocks."

"Not going to." I swallowed and drew a breath, pushing myself to keep the small margin between us and the snake. Fifteen feet sounded great until I thought about stopping long enough for my pooch to jump and make sure he wouldn't slip off. In that context, fifteen feet might as well have been five. We had one chance to do this right. I couldn't fuck this up. "You're going to save the day."

"Oh?" His voice raised in interest. "I guess that makes sense. I probably should. To use Ankle Bite or Potty Mouth? Both have merits. One must ponder the implications."

"Potty Mouth, Slash. No pondering implications. Okay?"

"Geez. Fine. No need to be nasty."

"Focus!" The rock was feet away. So was the rattlesnake. "Going to dump you and run. Stay and scare the fuck out of it. Okay?"

"I've got this. Just don't drop me."

We closed in on the boulders. "Ready?"

"Yessssssssss!"

My dog's answer trailed off as I made sure he had firm footing before continuing past the rock, rounding a tree, and racing off to the side.

The rattlesnake didn't bother looking up at my pup. Good. If I ended up inside this beast's stomach, at least it'd likely lose track of Slash.

My focus needed to center on getting Sarpa Raja back in front of the boulders so Slash didn't need to project his voice through the entire swamp. No reason for the innocent creatures of this wretched place to suffer the consequences of his mouth without an adult content warning.

I grabbed the next tree, whipping myself around and barely avoiding the snake's next attack. Bark tore into my palm, but that was the worst of my injuries. This time. Ahead, my tiny black and tan Chihuahua waited atop the rock, looking this way.

“Get him, Slash!”

I dove out of the way and Slash vocally barreled into it.

“Hey, fucker,” he started his Potty Mouth spell. “Talk about a snake in the grass. No wonder you're cursed above all livestock and wild animals. Learned that shit on the Discovery Channel, bitch. Proud of yourself, are you? I wouldn't be. Not with a fucking face like that. Though, I'll be honest, come at me, belly crawler, and I'll make a fucking purse out of you.”

I bolted to a copse of gnarled trees. Grabbing the first, I spun, looking back at my pooch and the relentless snake, readied for its attack. Instead, what I saw was thirty feet of coiled rattlesnake ready to pounce on a seven-pound Chihuahua elevated on seven feet of rock. The Chihuahua's spell hadn't worked.

“Shit.” Glancing at my feet, I saw a temporary solution. The only one I had.

A branch, two-feet long, lay there. I picked it up and launched it, aiming at the snake's coil. Aiming for its head was too much of a risk. The branch wouldn't do anything but get

its attention, and that was my entire aim right now. Baby steps. I needed it to focus on something besides Slash.

The branch tumbled end over end. Watching the wood flip through the air was like watching a bad sports flick where the oppressed hero realizes he's been the star quarterback—somehow—all along. This was just the clip where he threw the state-winning touchdown. No sound. No rotten, moldy trees. No brackish water molecules hanging in the air. Me. Slash. Stick of wood flipping over and over. As sexy as it sounds.

The chunk hit the snake's hide. Slash's head snapped down at the impact. So did the snake's. Then they both looked at me.

I did what felt right. I flipped it off.

Sarpa Raja darted at me, like a bolt shot from a crossbow.

Behind me, Slash's barking and shit-talking faded away as I dashed in the opposite direction. Sarpa's rattle buzzed as the beast closed in.

Swamp to my left prevented me from seeking an escape. Rotted and twisted trees taunted me like hostile spectators watching a race in which they knew who the winner was going to be before anyone fired the starting gun.

I cut between two bushes, hoping the snake would lose sight of me. They had pathetic smelling senses, right? I couldn't remember. Why the hell hadn't I paid attention during high school biology? Had we even covered snakes?

A moment later, Sarpa Raja burst through the shrubbery, blasting leaves and branches outward as he crashed to the ground ten feet behind me.

I looked back in time to see him lift his head, flick his tongue rapidly, and then snap his head my way. Snakes might have crappy senses of smell, but this giant apparently didn't. As soon as he'd got his bearings, he'd locked on.

My legs burned with the exertion of trying to sprint through a swamp. The ground underneath me sank more times than it slid out, but I never came close to hitting top speed.

The snake didn't seem to have the same problems. I heard it thud against the ground after it picked me out, and its nearly constant hissing, drawing nearer with each second.

Ahead, a thick tree had collapsed so long ago that the thick layer of moss covering it made it almost unrecognizable. I could clear it and keep going. The tree wouldn't stop the rattlesnake, but at least it would slow it down. If I found enough of these felled trees, maybe I could put distance between the snake and me to circle back, grab Slash, and get the hell out of the swamp. We'd find our vines somewhere else.

I almost shelved the dagger back in my Inventory except I didn't want to risk blocking my vision while on the run from the determined snake. Plus, the dagger wasn't really slowing me down, and it didn't throw off my balance. Not worth the risk.

Just as I approached the felled tree, I launched myself. My planting foot sank into the soft soil, and for a second, I was sure I'd either trip and face-plant into the trunk, or simply continue sinking in the ground. Then Sarpa Raja would have no problem fanging me to death.

When I recognized the danger, my body took over, firing energy into my launch. Though the foundation of my jump wasn't solid, I still had enough firm ground underneath me. I was airborne. My trailing foot clipped the tree. The bark raked at my skin. Had the tree not been rotting for ages, I'm sure the bark would have ripped away more than a few layers. Victory was snatched away when I saw what lay on the other side of the obstacle.

Water. Lots and lots of brackish water, where lily pads and clumps of green and frosty white fungus floated.

"Fuck!" I braced myself before my knees were shoved into my chin when I hit the shallow bottom.

As my luck would have it, though, this wasn't a typically shallow swamp. When my feet hit the stinking water, they kept sinking. So did the rest of me.



I drew a breath right before my head went under.

All the repulsion I had for swamps swarmed my mind in a flash once I was submerged. Who knew what I was sharing the water with. I sure as hell didn't want to find out.

I scrambled for the surface, eyes closed, pushing away the dark thoughts forming in my brain about what bacteria were swimming for my cavities. I was wearing a patchwork tunic and a goddamn loincloth, for fuck's sake. As fast as I sank, getting to the surface seemed to take an eternity. I'd never been so grateful as when I broke the surface.

Not meaning to, I gasped for previously revolting swamp air. My lungs filled, and I swam for solid ground, steering clear of the log.

I was within fifteen feet of the bank. Letting my feet sink, I tested the water's depth. My toes felt something squishy but firm. I paddled closer and was about to stand when I heard a splash behind me.

Already knowing what I was about to see, I still looked back.

Zigzagging across the top of the water was the gargantuan.

I no longer cared what I was stepping on. I planted my feet and scrambled for the shore.

The water around me rippled with the snake's approach as its writhing body slid across the surface as if gliding across a frozen lake.

No way was I going to make it to land. Even if I did without slipping and falling on my face, the rattlesnake had every advantage here. Without options, I turned to face the horrific threat.

This close, Sarpa Raja's head seemed to have grown far larger than its original football size. A perception probably created by the last seconds of panicked life playing tricks on my brain. The snake hadn't opened its mouth to fill me with venom yet.

Had to take my blessings where I got them.

It closed.

What a way to go. Bitten to death by a giant snake on the edge of a rotting pool of nature's waste in the middle of a made-up-but-frighteningly-real fantasy world. Talk about culminating moments in someone's story.

Three feet away, I held my breath and waited a second more. The pause brought the rattlesnake's head within arm's reach. As Sarpa Raja opened its mouth to show off impressive fangs, I shot my arm out from underneath the water.

There was no moment of sexy destruction like you see in the dramatized versions of aged fighting. No glint of sunlight off the blade. No *ting!* sound when I drew my blade. No gasp from my enemy.

I swear I saw a glint of recognition in the second before my blade struck. I didn't get the satisfaction of watching its moment of sealed fate right before I drove the blade down.

I'd aimed for its eye, and the blade sunk deep.

The snake pulled back and snapped at the air as it hissed like a tire with an irreparable leak.

I slashed sideways, no longer aiming for anything specific. This was about damage, unlimited.

"Go, Brad! Go! Its Health is at half!" Behind the snake, standing atop the felled tree, my puppy yapped and yipped.

My slash ripped down the side of the snake's head. I'd come perilously close to accidentally thrusting my hand inside its mouth, but I hadn't been aiming. My strikes came in panicked self-defense, nothing more. The Air Force doesn't do hand-to-hand combat training, and it was showing.

"Yes!" Slash shouted from atop the tree. "Do it again! You've got him!"

When I played video games, I could watch my enemy's Health bars. That was never a problem. Though Darkworld was technically a game, this shit was very real. I didn't dare risk a glance at its Health. Hell, I hadn't even seen the bar appear above its head until Slash pointed it out.

I brought the dagger up but fell backward when the snake attacked. Bleeding and hissing, it still had enough fight left in it to snap my arm off, even in desperation. Had my reactions been worse, it might have been five inches into me right now. It missed by such a small margin I felt the air whip.

I went under the water again, kicking back against the muck that continually fell away from my heels. I almost opened my eyes and yelled until I remembered where I was.

When I regained my feet, I thrust out of the water, rusty dagger raised. I must have looked like a madman as I screamed, blade held high, water cascading off me like a tiny waterfall as I drove down on the dying snake. Steel sank through its scales just behind its nostrils.

“Yeeeeeeeees!” Slash said, turning in circles above the tree.

The snake collapsed, splashing. I pulled my dagger free as its head sank below the surface as its body went lax.

Looking up at my Health, I was surprised to see that it was only three-fourths full. The snake hadn't bitten me, but the effort of avoiding him and the fight had sucked away my precious life force. We still had a long way to go to get back to camp. We hadn't come this far not to collect the vines, especially after that fight. I'd earned the goddamn vegetation. This task still required energy, and I liked a positive margin in my Health. Another enemy in the swamp, and I'd be in trouble.

**BOOM!**

**SHAKE IT LIKE A RATTLESNAKE!**

**YOU'VE KILLED THE SCALED KING.**

**BOY, HAVE THE TWO OF YOU STEPPED INTO A MESS NOW. BUT, DON'T WORRY, THAT'S NOT A CONCERN... YET. MAYBE. NOT IMPORTANT.**

**WHAT IS?**

**THE LOOT YOU'RE GETTING FOR TAKING DOWN THE SNAKE OF SNAKES.**

**+700 XP**

**+500 GOLD**

**NEW ATTACK!**

**SNAKE BITE**

**MASCOT LEVEL UP!**

**LEVEL 4**

**ABILITY POINT +1**

**NEW MASCOT ATTACK!**

**CHEERLEADER**

**BEEFY TREATS +10**

“Oh, my god! Beefy treats!” Slash circled three times before stopping and almost falling over.

**BEEFY TREATS -1**

“Couldn’t wait?” I pulled myself to the bank, climbing and slipping constantly. By the time I grabbed the tree and hauled myself up, I was panting.

“Nope. I’m hungry from commanding that fight. It takes a lot to coordinate troop attacks.”

**BEEFY TREATS -1**

“Slow down, buddy.”

“Plus, not only do I have to get my Health back up, but I need room in my Inventory because of that stupid weight allowance.”

**BEEFY TREATS -1**

“I’m doing this for us, Brad.”

“Thank you for your sacrifice.” I looked down at my bare chest and legs, noticing the freeloaders clinging to my skin. Four black leeches were along for the ride.

“Gross,” Slash said, flinching and backing away.

“You got here fast once the fight was over,” I said, sliding my dagger between my thigh and a leech. I grimaced as I

pulled the thing away, seeing the small mark it left that looked like a small set of curled antlers.

“Thankfully, I was there to guide you. Can you imagine how much you would have struggled without my input?”

“I’m very lucky.”

“You are. Oh, hey. You have one of those things on your back, too. Please take it off. I can’t stand to look at it.”

“Get it.”

“How?” he said, sitting back and lifting a paw. “No thumbs, so I can’t use your dagger.”

“Use your nails. Or your mouth. I don’t care. Just take care of it.”

“I’m not touching that thing.”

“I’d do it for you.”

“I can lick my own balls. What makes you think I’d have trouble getting one of those off any part of my body?” On all fours again, he sighed. “Fine. Sit down.”

I did and tried not to laugh as Slash came behind me and barked. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to stun it.”

“I’m not sure they can be. Just swat it away.”

I felt his paw swipe at my skin. “Oh, nasty.”

“Did you get it?”

“No,” he said, sounding like he was about to get sick. “It’s dangling.”

Now I was getting queasy at the image he’d painted. “Please, knock it away.”

“You owe me big time for this.”

Again, I felt him swat at my back. This time his nails scratched me, ticking down my Health bar by a sliver of a sliver.

“Thanks.” I turned to see the leech atop a clump of green and frosty white moss.

Slash stood over it, barking and snapping, and jumping backward like it was darting back at him.

“I think you’ve scared the fight out of him, buddy,” I said as I got to my feet. “Let’s get these vines and get out of here.”

We were twenty feet away, and Slash was still yipping at the leech. “That’s right, fucker. Come at me again. See what happens then. Oh, you’re so lucky I don’t have time to spend my new Ability Point, asshole.”

I reached down and petted him, careful to avoid the spikes on his jacket, and grateful that he’d come away from the fight with the giant rattlesnake. Darkworld had plenty of seen and unseen dangers. One thing this mess of a mission had taught me was that we needed to be more careful going forward.

## DUDE, WHERE'S MY HOUSE?



The sun beckoned us back to our camp. Sitting high above the mountains to the west, it served as a bright beacon, calling us home.

Since leaving the Gloomswamp, I'd found my spirits rising with each step. After a short diversion to fill ourselves on Fuji's apples, refill our waterskins, and a quick dip in the brook, we headed back.

Slash seemed to almost be bouncing. He was peppy after filling his stomach with half an apple. He yipped and chased butterflies along the trail, and spun in enough circles to make a pinwheel dizzy. At one point, he started singing George Michael's "I Want Your Sex" over and over. He only knew the chorus, so he sang that on a loop. I loved he was celebrating the fact we hadn't fallen to the Scaled King and now had vines to make tools, but there were only so many times I could hear that terrible song.

My pooch hadn't had the ability to speak for very long. In that context, how could I fault him for singing off-key? But the only thing worse than a George Michael song is a George Michael song sung by the tone-deaf, on repeat. He didn't stop until I literally begged. He honored it, mostly. We were almost home before he stopped humming it as he bounced ahead, his ears flapping.

Our lofty spirits dropped when we reached our camp.

“Brad, where’s all the wood and rock for our house?”  
Slash asked, scampering behind me.

I stomped forward, panic and unease gripping me. “I don’t know.”

The frame of our house still stood. The foundation was still there. Our shelter, the lean-to, was as well. Our field of wheat still stood proud, waving in the day’s warm breeze. The campfire crackled and popped. But the piles of wood to the side of the house’s foundation, the wood I’d stacked near the fire, the small hills of rock I’d collected over the short weeks we’d lived in Darkworld weren’t. Every goddamn stick and pebble, gone.

“Fuck!” I raced around the lean-to. Madness, thinking I’d see all our wood and rock sitting behind the five-foot-tall structure. But I was desperate and in a panic. How could so much material just disappear? I was at a loss. We’d spent our first weeks in Darkworld lugging that shit to the camp. How could it all disappear in an afternoon?

Peeking inside our lean-to, I swore. Bad news didn’t get better with time. “Slash, your blanket is missing.”

### **ABILITY POINTY -1**

### **INVESTIGATION +1%**

I whipped around. Slash already had his nose to the ground after spending his new Ability Point. He was stubborn about his Abilities, and reckless in every way from a gameplay perspective. Spending his point now, and on his Sleuthing Ability, was the right thing to do.

“Thank you, buddy.”

He kept his nose down, sniffing at the soil around the foundation where we’d piled weeks’ worth of work.

While he searched, I called up Fortune.

“How may I assist you?” she asked as soon as she appeared in my vision.



“Someone stole our supplies.”

“First my Pussy, now my blanket!” Slash cried from near the site, smelling at a spot near the divide between tall grass and the flat dirt we’d pounded out as the future sight of the house.

She put a small, pale digital hand to her face. “Oh, no. How much?”

“All of it.”

“All?” She shook her head.

“Another quest?”

Her hand dropped. “Let me check the log.” The guide seemed to freeze, neither blinking nor moving. On my mindscreens, only a nearly imperceptible sway of her long locks suggested the game hadn’t stopped completely.

Slash was around the backside of the house, moving along the ground more swiftly. He swiped his head to the side as he sniffed and sneezed every few feet.

“Coming up with anything, wee man?”

“Shhh. Let me investigate,” he said without stopping.

Fortune was back, raising her hand. “Brad, I have good news and bad news.”

“Give it to me.”

“I have confirmed this is not a quest, either from the AI or your butcher.”

“Is that the good news?”

“It is.”

I groaned, looking around the camp. Nothing else was missing or even out of place. “What’s the bad news, then?”

“This was done by another entrant,” she said, waving her hand to the side like a game show hostess.

“A player did this?”

She nodded, biting her upper lip.

“Why the fuck did another player steal our shit?”

I knew why, of course. People didn't change. Whether it was competitive or intramural sports, a worldwide pandemic, or a meaningless game, anytime humans faced limited resources, they'd turn on each other. Some did it with no nudging. I hate people like that. Cooperation lifted communities. Competition brought out the worst in humanity. With her single finding, I had all my real-world expectations of the human race validated.

Fortune's eyes widened at my outburst. “Brad, I mentioned previously that Darkworld has an entrant dynamic. Its design allows entrants to interact, to form alliances, and to battle and kill one another, among other things.”

“Like steal from each other?”

“Darkworld is a game of survival, Brad. The only reason you started the game with the loincloth instead of being naked is because of the rigid beliefs of a few of the politicians the Electors needed approval from.”

“They'd have thrown all of us into the game naked?”

“The aim is to make the game the ultimate test,” Fortune said. “Which entrants can not only survive but maybe thrive when every comfort is stripped away? As you have seen, and will continue to see, the AI will heavily influence your experience, as it will for all entrants and butchers. But that is not the only aspect that will affect your game. Other entrants will as well.”

She stopped and looked to the side as if she taking in our camp. “You have done well for yourselves. Though Little Sir teases you about how far ahead the entrants are, he is both right and wrong. His map shows him much, but not everything. And not always accurately, I fear. Or, at least, he does not interpret it so, mostly because of his level. Though I cannot share specifics with you, I will say this. There are entrants who are much further along in their play than you. But there are others who have fallen drastically behind. Many others.” She added that last bit ominously.

Now, she turned fully, and for the first time, I saw her back. Though her long, dark hair fell to her waist, I noted her green dress dropped precipitously toward her hips. I tried to look away, but no matter where I glanced, Fortune followed. Thankfully, she turned back soon enough. “You are very close to building a homestead. Once you do, it will draw more attention from those who know how to read their maps.”

“Great. But we only have a lean-to. Nothing desirable about that.”

“And your crop. Your home is going up as well.” She dropped her hands and interlocked her fingers at her waist. “These are desirable things. You risk losing them if you do not defend them.”

“Defend them? How? We spent all morning and most of the day getting to and from the swamp for those fucking vines.” She winced at my tone. “Sorry, Fortune. I’m frustrated. Not mad at you. I shouldn’t have to protect piles of wood and rock from other people who got screwed like I did.”

“But you do,” she said in a tone that told me she knew better about the rules of Darkworld. “If you refuse, others will take advantage. They are now. Plenty of entrants lack the scruples you hold true. They will act in their best interests, even if it deprives you of yours.”

“Such is the way of people.” I looked up into the late afternoon sky. “I was hoping to enjoy a break from humanity’s selfishness while being forced to play the game. Doesn’t look like I’ll get that chance.”

Fortune started to say something, stopped, and clamped her mouth closed.

“I won’t fight another player, Fortune.”

“You may not get a choice,” she said. “Everything is fine when you have solitude and peace to live by a code you believe in. That changes the instant a new dynamic is added.”

“A new dynamic such as another person.”

“Exactly.”

Something bumped against my leg. My puppy yipped. He stood back up, shaking his head. His thin ears flapped like clapping hands. “Sorry, Brad. Didn’t see you there.”

I squatted and scratched his cheek to just behind his ear. “We’re going to find your blanket, buddy.”

“Oh, I know,” he said confidently, tipping his head so I could scratch deeper. Aside from his butt rubbings, Slash enjoyed a deep ear scratch. He sat, not moving his head away. His back leg rapidly kicked.

“Good spot, huh?”

“Don’t make this awkward.” He let me scratch him for a moment longer before standing. “And I’m not worried about my blanket.”

“Why not? That spiked jacket won’t keep you warm tonight. Not like your blanket.”

“True. But that won’t be a problem.”

Curious, I dropped my hand to my leg. “Why’s that?”

“Because I’ve got the scent of the fucker who stole everything from us, and we’re going to find him.”

**BOOM!**

**DID YOU GET A WIFF OF THAT?**

**MASCOT HAS CAUGHT HIS FIRST TRAIL. WHO’S A GOOD BOY? YOU’RE A GOOD BOY, THAT’S WHO.**

**INITIATIVE +1**

**PERCEPTION +2**

Slash beamed.

“Nice work, wee man!”

“Thanks,” he said with a smile that evaporated almost immediately. “Just promise me something.”

“Absolutely. Name it.”

“As soon as we get our stuff back and win this game, you won’t bitch when I go after that stupid game voice. I’m going

to rip its ankles apart and then hump its corpse.”

Fortune stood there, shocked, her mouth fallen open.

I just laughed. “You bet, buddy. I promise.”

MODERN CAVEMAN... AND  
DOG

“Slow down, wee man.” Tracking Slash was difficult when he was motivated. Stubborn little shit. Though he’d been leash-trained following a few weeks of focused attention and plenty of training snacks, he was still a punk-butt any time we walked around our neighborhood.

Especially when he picked up on a dog ahead of us. If it was Muffin? Forget it. Then he’d tug so hard his ass would kick up in the air as he tried to pull free from my grip. Keeping track of him now, an hour after the sun fell and in unfamiliar territory, him loose from any leash, was essentially impossible. Only his sniffing clued me to his whereabouts, no matter how many times I asked him to stay by my side.

“I’m right here,” he said a few feet ahead. “Focus, Brad. Stay close.”

“I’m trying. You’re moving too quickly, and I’m not as small as you. I can’t take your exact path.”

“Damn two-leggers, I swear.” He sighed, staying where he was until I caught up. He smelled the dirt and compacted wild grass.

“Got something?”

“Still the same scent. One human. The same guy from our camp.” He looked up at me. One ear folded in half while the other stood straight up. “These tracks keep smelling fresher, which means we’re getting closer.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” I said excitedly. “But let’s not rush it. Stumbling into his camp won’t help. We need to know what he’s got going on since Fortune couldn’t tell us much. We don’t need to rush and twist an ankle or something.”

One of Slash’s tiny brown spots jumped up. “He has my blanket.”

I looked past my dog into the darkness ahead. My Health bar was ridiculously low. About a third of its fullest level. Maybe lower. It was difficult to evaluate a bar that didn’t have numbers.

Whether it was the darkness or the fact that the world was virtually empty of light and noise, depriving me of depth, the shapes I made out shimmered. I could see the basic outline of the world around this spot, but little else. Beyond the outlines of trees and bushes, the night muted everything else. It was like someone had poured a bucket of water over a painting, smearing colors the creator had spent an inordinate amount of time perfecting to create depth along with dimensions.

“I realize that, wee man. I’ll do whatever I can to get it back.” I snapped my hand up, pointing a single finger at the sky. Being a dog, his eyesight was far superior to mine. “But we’ve got to be careful. *You* need to be. Who else will protect me if you misstep into an accident and get hurt?”

Slash jerked to a halt. He looked over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing. “Brad, I’m going to be honest. I hadn’t thought about that. You’re right.” He swiveled his head down the trail. He growled at the darkness. “You lucky fucker. I’m coming for you.”

I put a knee on the ground. The soil was cool. The night would only get colder. I could smell the chill in the air. Slash wore his ever-present black leather spiked jacket. But that couldn’t keep him warm. I was naked except for the tunic and

loincloth. Tonight would be uncomfortable unless we found shelter soon. Even that might not be enough.

I owned it. “Slash. Buddy. I’m cold. I need to find a place to bunker down for the night if I’m to help take on the thief in the morning.”

He looked around. A crow *cawed* somewhere in a nearby tree. My dog sniffed at the air. “I don’t smell him beyond the scent of his trail. I’ll be able to pick it up in the morning. I guess we should probably protect you hairless apes as much as possible.” He tipped his head, one ear falling toward the ground while the other flipped forward. “Honestly, I don’t know why they didn’t build this game for us instead of you lot.”

“Probably because the ones Fortune calls Electors are all human. Super focused only on our experience, as if no other animals mattered.”

Slash nodded, narrowing his eyes. “True. That’s the only thing that makes sense. Can you believe there are people who honestly believe this rock flying through space was specifically built for them to have dominion over? Fucking embarrassing.”

“Humans are stupid, Slash. Try not to stress about it.”

He held up a black and tan paw. “Tomorrow we’re going after him. Promise?”

“I promise,” I said and crossed my heart, for absolutely no apparent reason. “Think you can find us something that’ll protect us tonight?”

“Let me look at my map.”

He stared off into the dark night. My role was to protect him from anything in Darkworld that didn’t give a rat’s ass what he was doing, seeing him as nothing more than something to kill or eat, or both. Thankfully, it didn’t take him long.

Slash sat back, slapping his front paws before pointing. “That way. There’s a hole in the ground. Sort of like that one in that German show you used to watch and argue with your



friends about when you tried to talk them into watching it, but they wouldn't."

"Because they're too lazy to read subtitles."

"Yeah, that one. By the way, why is it so difficult for you humans to read? Do you know what us dogs would do if we had thumbs and could write things for other dogs to read? Even if we didn't care about writing, imagine being able to read and communicate to hundreds, thousands, even *millions* of others at a time?" He scowled. "You humans waste literally every advantage evolution gave you."

"I'm not going to argue with you, buddy. The real world would be better if other species had a chance at running it. That's for sure. Now, can we find this cave you see? I'm freezing."

He winked. Slash actually winked! "This way, furless friend."

I let him start off while rolling my eyes.

"Not much farther," Slash said after we'd covered more ground than I thought his sense of smell could calculate.

How'd he picked up on this spot, even accounting for his superior map-reading skill and sense of smell? We'd gone so far out of the way, I was worried he wouldn't be able to pick up on the thief's trail again in the morning.

But sure as the sun would rise every tomorrow for the next five billion years, the mouth of the cave plunged through the darkness, beckoning us forward.

"Dammit, Slash. Impressive."

"Never doubt me, Brad."

"Never."

We settled in a recess in the shallow cave that was the warmest part of the hole.

"You need a fire-starting spell," my pooch said, shivering against the cold.

I sat on the crisp ground, taking in his thin, frail form, and feeling horrible about his discomfort. Even though I hadn't caused it, I couldn't shake the sense of responsibility. Nor did I want to. "I'm sorry, buddy. We have to figure something out. I agree. Let's worry about that after we get our stuff back from the thief." I pulled my slender pooch toward me, curled to shield him as much as possible. "The faster we fall asleep, the faster this miserable night will pass. We can set out at first light."

"Okay, Conan," Slash said, squirming backward until his body pressed up against mine. "Calm down. Let's get some sleep. I need to rest before I kick ass tomorrow."

## BEEN CAUGHT STEALING



Sleep was intermittent. Rest, nearly nonexistent. Cold, ever persistent. A miserable night, but one both man and dog survived.

“My teeth are clattering *inside* my teeth. I swear,” Slash said, tucking his nose into the crook of my elbow.

“I know, wee man.” My own jaws were locked, an automated bodily response to the wretched cold.

Slash risked poking his head up. “You should put your nipples away. It’s awkward.”

“I would if I could,” I said, trying my best to ignore the cold air’s effect. “How about we focus, okay? Take our attention away from how cold it is. How much longer?”

“How would I know? You’re the one walking.”

I looked down at him in disbelief. “You’re the one tracking.”

The dog’s small head shook from side to side. “I haven’t been tracking since last night. How could I? I’m not even on the ground.”

I bent.

“Don’t you dare.”

“Slash,” I said, trying to stop my teeth from clanking. “You’ve got to pick up the scent again or we have to go back to the cave and retrace our steps. You’re cold. I’m cold. Come on, buddy.”

“Fine...” he grumbled as I set him on the ground. His legs quivered. He looked up at me, and something told me he was going to piss in the first corner of the house he could once I finished building it. “But as soon as I find him and kick his ass, you’re building the biggest fire ever. Just for me.”

“Deal,” I said, flicking my hand. “Now pick up the trail before I freeze.”

“Hey, you don’t think the butcher is the one who took our stuff, and this is just a trap, do you?” He watched me as I entertained the question.

“No. Fortune said it was another player.”

“What if she was wrong?” He yipped. “What if the Electors reprogrammed her to mislead us? Oh, what if they changed the quest log she refers to? Then, to her, she wouldn’t be lying, but it’d give the butcher all the advantages like you’re worried about.”

I rubbed my face. “Don’t give me more shit to think about.”

“Good points, though, right?”

“Actually, they are. Which is why I’d rather not think about them. Not now, anyway. But we definitely need to be ready for anything. Then we can talk to Fortune later and see what she thinks about this theory of yours.”

“We could ask her now. Fort—”

I shot my hand up. “No. Let’s not call her right now.”

“Don’t you trust her?”

“I do. But I’m freezing and just want to get our shit back.”

He looked me up and down. “You should get a leather jacket like me. It’d keep you warmer and you wouldn’t look

like such a douche running around with a dead fox covering your junk.”

Without waiting for my response, not that I had one, he got back to work. He moved back and forth across the dirt, sniffing here and there. Though it looked as if he didn't have a reason or rhyme to his methods, I wasn't about to question him. Doing so might lead to a lecture from my seven pounds of attitude, claiming I was presuming to understand all dogs.

He crept under bushes before jumping back after getting spooked. He sniffed around one tree so long I thought he picked up the trail, only to realize too late that he had other ideas when he lifted his leg.

Twenty minutes of aimless searching passed. I was absolutely miserable. The air didn't feel to be getting any warmer. It was like having my skin lightly raked by a frozen fork, all over, all at once. The kind of cold that seemed to penetrate internal organs. I couldn't stop my teeth from knocking. My pooch couldn't have been doing much better. Already diminutive, it wasn't like I'd overfed him or turned a blind eye when slipping him too many beefy treats when he did the simplest of tricks. Body weight wasn't something the wee man was packing, and likely never would.

Our drifting search continued to take us in the opposite direction of our cave shelter. I'd long ago lost my sense of direction as we headed downhill and followed a river. The banks rose thirty feet above, cutting off my view of the surrounding landscape and disorienting me further. With the sun still rising and the sky bright, being tucked into this narrow channel prevented me from pinpointing it to help us navigate.

Slash hadn't spoken for a while, though his sniffer worked overtime. Still, I needed more to settle my nerves about being lost. “How are we looking?”

“Got something,” he said, still searching, “but it's faint. Almost as if it's not here, you know? I...” He pulled up, striking his pointer pose by pulling up one leg and bending it at the joint. “I think I've got something.”

I blew out a breath. “Thank God.”

He turned, giving me a flat look. “How about thanking me?”

“Of course, wee man.” I tucked my hands under my arms while squeezing in on myself and trying to create a shell against the cold. “I’m very thankful to you for getting us out of this mess.”

Slash turned to the river. The water rolled past us. No froth. No roaring. A mostly flat surface that exposed its cracks only when it had to bend over rocks or around nests of driftwood caught in its crooks.

“Don’t tell me we need to cross,” I said with a groan.

Slash sniffed at the air. “I think so. I’m having a hard time picking up his smell, but I think that’s because it rained in this part of the forest last night.”

“You can tell that?”

“Yes. Anyway, it’s close. It’s like that time last summer when you took me camping. It was obvious when someone started a campfire. Remember how I sniffed, and you picked on me?”

“Because it was cute, and you didn’t stop.”

“It smelled good, Brad.”

“Yes, sir.”

He sighed. “As I was saying, the smell was obvious, but I couldn’t pinpoint which site was burning a fire. That’s what this is like.” He sat, looking across the water. “But I definitely know it’s coming from over there.”

“Okay. So we find a way across.” I pointed backward with a thumb. “Do you remember seeing anything back that way?”

Slash shook his head. “I don’t, because I was busy keeping us on track.”

I walked to the bank, careful where I stepped. The ground was soft and could kick out from underneath me, sending me plummeting into the icy river.

Where the trees and underbrush had blocked my view of our whereabouts, even at least partially, the river carved through the land and peeled back its secrets. For at least a half-mile in both directions, I had a clear view up and down its length.

“Down there,” I said, pointing to our left. A humped peninsula, like a land bridge, poked out into the river. Four feet above the surface, extending at least thirty feet into the waterway, it would give us an unobstructed view of what lay ahead. If it was a land bridge, we could use it to cross, find the thief, maybe smack him around a bit to discourage him from fucking with us again, and then get our asses home by the end of the day. “Can you see around the bend in the river on your map?”

Slash was quiet while he searched. “There isn’t much that way. A few players’ camps are scattered throughout the fog. No one is close to anyone else. Oh, there’s a town, but it’s a way off. If I had to guess,” he said, pointing in the air with a black and tan paw like he was showing me the point of reference on his map, “I’d bet that’s our boy.”

Against my wishes, I pulled up my map while trying to keep an eye on our surroundings. It was like a new find. I hadn’t pulled it up in days. Now, with all this exploring, we’d covered a portion of the vast forest that the roiling fog had shrouded. A broad-bending band peeled back the mystery, exposing unknown parts of the forest, the cave, and a long swath of the river. The band ran from right to the upper-left corner of the map, disappearing behind the fog again. I wish I could see the other players’ camps and settlements Slash could. I didn’t like how many he’d mentioned. A worry for another time.

Just after the river bent out of sight, a small dot sat below the dark, swirling mass.

“If you’re right, we’re close,” I said, starting up the bank to more solid ground. “Let’s check it out and see if that is a land bridge that can take us across.”

We trudged through the dense underbrush, lush from its location close to the life-giving water. Trees towered over us to our left, giving way to the open expanse of the creeping river. We had to be careful on the uneven ground, which Slash took with ease. He jumped from rock to log to ground like a tight rubber ball chucked on a blacktop driveway. I, on the other hand, slid, slipped, and plowed my way across the angled soil.

Ahead, my wee man yipped.

“Stay close,” I called, automatically nervous at the distance he was putting between us again.

“The smell is stronger.”

“That’s great, but don’t go rushing off into anything.”

The underbrush was a constant obstacle. Branches I didn’t see or couldn’t avoid scraped my skin. Once, a thorn vine snagged my loincloth, tugging it with just enough firmness that for a panicked second, I envisioned myself suddenly standing at the riverbank in nothing but my tunic. Even that already bore two scars from the thorns. Hardly a hardy material to already begin falling apart. Slash would never let me hear the end of that. Fortunately, I snatched the loincloth and pulled the vine away before it did anything more than loosen a small tuft of the fox fur.

Slash dashed ahead and zipped back repeatedly. He bounced and circled me before heading back into the underbrush.

“Stay close, dammit,” I’d call each time.

“I’ve got him,” his tiny voice rang from the other side of the vegetation.

The river slid past, a tranquil accompaniment to my increasingly heavy breathing. Being in great shape was one thing, but this trek was doing a bang-up job of convincing me to lay off the weights for a bit and work on cardio and stretching. As cold as the morning was, I was sweating before too long. Keeping my balance, at least trying to, was one of the most demanding workouts I’d had for a while.



The air, crisp and clean, burned in my lungs. When I exhaled, small, white clouds rose in puffs to join the birds zipping and looping overhead.

“This way,” Slash called as he bounded through a wall of river stalks before disappearing again.

He was twenty yards ahead and standing atop a mound when I punched through the wall.

“You were right, Brad. It goes all the way across the river.”

I clapped my hands. “Perfect. How close do you think the thief’s camp is? Is he alone?”

“I only see a small triangle. Those mean it’s just a shelter. He can’t be doing much better than us. He’s probably lazy, like you.”

“You’re more than welcome to build the house and harvest the wheat. You’d have to make the sickle first, though. Oh, and gather wood and rock again, if this doesn’t work.”

“That’s why we’re doing this, isn’t it? So we don’t have to go through all that again. And you know I can’t make tools. Opposable thumbs. Don’t be a jerk.”

The land bridge took a lot of time off our trek. Once on the other bank, we moved at speed. Slash picked up the scent again on the bridge and said it got stronger once we crossed. Now, we were jogging up the bank, around clumps of flora and outcroppings of rocks. Whoever had stolen from us had carved a narrow path up the hillside. An impressive feat, considering how little time I had to think about doing something similar. Unless he was one of those who’d been in the game longer. Maybe a lot longer.

Though I hadn’t thought about it in a while, just because I tripped across the chest that suckered me into the game, didn’t mean it’d popped into Olympia’s shrubbery at the same time as every other chest around the world. I needed to ask Fortune. She’d never said. Not her fault. Mine.

Maybe they released the game in phases. Hell, maybe the designers had logistical issues distributing the chests and mine appeared weeks after the thief arrived in Darkworld? That’d

explain the path, and the players who seemed so much further along in the game, but also hinted of greater problems if that was how this had all played out.

I pushed the recurring troubles away. Nothing I could do about it, even if Slash's comment led me to go spinning down that cesspool of dark thoughts. Instead, I put my energy into getting up the hill.

Four hundred feet above the river, the land leveled out to a small prairie. Across the field of rock and short wild grass, grayish campfire smoke snaked into the air.

"Over there," Slash said, striking his pointer pose.

"You sure he's alone?"

"From what I can see on the map. It hasn't led me wrong yet."

"Stay low," I said as I started across the field, crouched.

Slash trotted beside me, his ears flapping as he bounced. "Was that supposed to be funny?"

"Somewhat."

"Keep your day job."

We made it to the far side of the narrow prairie without incident. The thief had built his camp much like our own, tucking it just inside the tree line to be shielded from the elements but with easy access to open land. That allowed us to creep to a knoll and observe the camp.

A broad circle of matted dirt held a small structure with steps that led to a cockeyed door. The house was narrow, no more than four feet wide, but eight feet long. Enough room for a cot and protection from the elements. A pit had been dug in the middle of the camp. A fire burned there, a third the size of ours. Two work benches sat to the side of the house. Both held a few blocks of wood. Atop the one on the right sat a small hand ax.

"That's our wood!" Slash said and laid his head on the ground.

Piles of wood and rock, along with our supplies, were stacked along the house. All our hard work, now the possession of the man who squatted by the campfire, his back to us. Above him, his name floated in midair. **Lukieboy81** had no idea the two strangers he'd stolen from had come for justice. At least, not by the way he scratched his nuts and farted.

“He’s gross,” Slash whispered.

I held a finger to my mouth to encourage him not to speak.

Lukieboy81 searched through a rough wool sack spread open on the ground between him and the fire. He grunted, farted again, and pulled out a purple cloak. After a series of grunts, he stood, scratched his ass, and whipped the cloak over his shoulders.

“Huh, nice,” he said.

In admiring himself, he half-turned in our direction. I ducked, pushing Slash’s head down with me. We stayed like that for a moment before I nodded for him to poke his head up. Being as small as he was, Lukieboy81 would have a hard time picking him out of the background. We needed to get an idea of what we were facing, and I wanted to keep the element of surprise. All I wanted was our wood and rock back. Neither of us needed a confrontation, especially over material that was in bountiful supply to anyone willing to put in the effort.

Slash peeked and then grimaced. “It’s okay. He turned around. Though I saw him rub himself with the cloak.”

“Sorry, buddy.” I craned my neck again.

Lukieboy81 had returned to searching through the sack. The grunts of satisfaction and surprise told me the sack didn’t belong to the thief. Hardly surprising. He pulled out a simple redwood goblet, held it up for inspection like it was a precious gem, and tossed it into the dirt.

“Think he stole that, too?” Slash asked. I silenced him with a nod and a finger to his mouth.

The trees in this part of the forest were spaced too far away from each other to provide dependable cover. Mature growth

would have made it easier to circumnavigate the camp without notice. Lukieboy81 didn't look like much of a fighter, but he might have buffs I wouldn't know about until it was too late. Plus, his class might be along the Fighter route. Best to avoid finding out, especially since I didn't want to fight. I just wanted our shit back.

I nearly jumped from my hiding spot when Fortune popped into my view.

"Hi, Fortune!" Slash said with more excitement than the situation called for.

I leaned to the side as if doing so would help me see around our guide to the thief. "Shhhhh!" I said at the same time to my pooch.

"Oh, relax, Brad. The game is frozen."

"Sirs, if I may..." Fortune started, waiting for my response.

One look at the thief told me my dog was right. Fortune's involvement stopped the thief in mid-butt scratch. Half of his ass crack gave me a vertical smile that was covered in hair smeared down by things best left unobserved.

"Neat timing, Fortune."

"I do not understand."

"Never mind," I said with a chuckle, glad to have a distraction from the other guy's rump. "Don't pay attention to me. What's up?"

She rang her hands. "I know you do not wish to harm another entrant, Brad."

"I don't. I'm firm on that. It's bad enough having to hurt NPCs or creatures I know are nothing but code."

She winced. "Be that as it may. You came all this way to retrieve the supplies this player stole. In saying that, this presents a dilemma. How to retrieve your goods without hurting the entrant?"

“Do you know his plans or intent?” I’d only seen a flash of Lukieboy81’s face as he tested his stolen gear. I didn’t see a threat. Not in this guy. What I saw was a man whose most intellectual conversation had come while trying to convince his cheap beer-drinking buddies that monster trucks were cool and ‘big pharma’ tricks people into being inoculated against diseases. No way would I discount the hidden skills and abilities he might have, but just going off first impressions, I couldn’t see what was so essential to share that our guide had interrupted the game.

“This is an early high bonus opportunity for you and Little Sir.”

“High bonus, you say?” Slash said. “Tell me more.”

“Well, this could be your first PvP battle, and—”

“I’m not fighting another player, Fortune. I’ll find another way to get our shit back. What’s stopping me from walking over to the piles he took from us and shoving them into my Inventory while we’re chatting?”

“Because you cannot.”

Oh? “Can’t or shouldn’t? Look, I’m all about playing by the rules of a game when I’m a willing participant. But guess what? I don’t want to be here. I didn’t ask to be here. This asshole,” I said, loudly now that volume wasn’t a concern, and I was frustrated, “didn’t play by them. So guess what I don’t care to do?”

Fortune crossed her arms, raising one eyebrow. “Will you listen to my advice, or are you going to remain firm in your stance, regardless of what I have to say? Plus, you cannot retrieve the goods, even if that was your sole motivation for coming here.”

“It was.”

She shrugged. “You still cannot do anything to re-obtain the wood and rock.”

Slash yipped. “And my blanket.”

“And Little Sir’s blanket.”

I snorted. “Fortune, I appreciate everything you do for us, but I feel like I’m being pushed in a direction I don’t want to go.” I put my hand up before she could protest. “I don’t blame you. It’s not your fault. The fuckers running the game probably wrote that into the code or the script. They’re probably sitting in the background right now, stroking themselves to how smart they think they are. You’re saying what they want you to say.” I lifted my head, speaking to the sky. “So let me be very clear. I’m not fighting another person you assholes pulled into the game. Fact.”

“We could take over his camp,” Slash said out of the side of his mouth.

“Our camp is fine. We’ve got everything we need.”

“We don’t have food.”

“We’ll have wheat as soon as I make a sickle.”

“We don’t have water. He has water.”

“His water is down at the river. Do you want to hike up and down that hill every day? I don’t know about you, but our diet doesn’t exactly prepare us for heavy exertion.”

“Well, no. I wouldn’t. But you’re the water fetcher. Not me. After all, you’re the one with the big Inventory.”

“Don’t be jealous of how big I am.”

Slash lowered his head between his paws. “Grow up, Brad.”

After humoring myself, I was about to push myself up and walk to the stolen goods to prove just how passive-aggressive the game designers were, and how I was going to make fools of them and their game. That’d been my intention right until I realized I couldn’t push myself off the ground.

My face must have betrayed my surprise. Fortune didn’t laugh, didn’t point a finger or taunt. She didn’t cover her joy at my foolish display. She simply nodded. “As I told you, Brad, you could not take a leaf from this camp that is out of your current reach.”

“What’s she talking about?” Slash said, suddenly nervous.

“Try to stand, buddy. Can you?”

Slash started to hop his front paws backward to push away from the hill, but each time he raised more than a few inches off the ground, he slammed back to it. He tried until I couldn't stomach the sounds of his whimpers.

Obviously, Fortune didn't enjoy hearing him suffer either. “Little Sir, it is pointless. Please do not strain. You see? While we're in tutorial mode, you can't interact with the game.”

“We could before. Why not now?”

“Before, you were inside the game's tutorial.” Fortune waved at the camp. “You're in the full game now. Any time I interact with you in a tutorial capacity, the game pauses. It and any threats cannot take advantage of your state—”

“And we can't take advantage of theirs,” I concluded. “Great. So I'm a prisoner to the game until you tell me about this great opportunity to hurt someone else.”

The corners of her eyes turned down. “That is the way of the game.”

“I don't care, Fortune. I won't hurt him over some fucking wood.”

“I wish not to see you and Little Sir hurt.”

Slash yipped. “Me either. Maybe we should listen to what she has to say?”

“I'm not going to let him hurt you.”

“I wasn't worried about that. I'd kick his ass. But do you understand the implications of the PvP game? No, you don't. That's the answer. So why not let Fortune finish?”

My frustration was nearing its boiling point. “Tell us what you're supposed to, so we unfreeze. The ground is cold, I'm hungry, and steadily growing pissed off.”

“Cold is not affecting you. Every element of the game is paused. You do not even need to draw breath if you wish not to.”

“Really?” Slash said, his snout opening wide before he clamped it shut. He held his breath until he started sneezing. I plugged one nostril to help him stop. When he regained his senses, he said, “Thank you.”

I scratched his ears. “You’re welcome, wee man.” Focusing on Fortune, I said, “Okay, great. I could sit like this until I starve to death—”

“Biological functions don’t continue while the game is paused.”

“She’s probably right, Brad. That dude hasn’t farted since she stopped the game.”

“My point,” I said, stressing the second word, “is that you can’t talk me into giving the Electors what they want, so you might as well skip us through this tutorial.”

Our guide pressed her hands together like she was about to pray. She kept them pressed, pointing her fingers in our direction. “How you engage with the entrant will alter things.”

“Meaning what?”

“As an entrant, you have choices. Darkworld is complex. Should you agree to fight, duel, or try to sneak past him, the game will adjust. When he stole your supplies, the game marked his location because he interacted with your camp.”

“That’s why he was on my map?” Slash asked.

“Yes.”

“And because we’re in his camp now?” I asked, not liking what this new turn implied.

“Your camp is marked for him.”

“He already knew where to find us.”

Fortune shook her head. “An accident. I read the logs while you rested. Lukieboy81, some of you have chosen strange names, did not intend to find your camp. He was looking to loot a caravan. He got lost. That is how he came across your home. That action resulted in the game labeling your home for him.”



“He set out to steal. He just stole from the wrong target.”

“That is true.”

“Hey!” Slash said. “Wow. Look at that.”

“What?”

“I pulled up my map, and guess what? His camp is labeled now.”

I called up my more basic map and noticed Lukieboy81’s name was added to my map in a swirling, plain white banner, curled at both ends.

“Our camp looks like that on his map now?” I asked our guide.

“It does.”

“Shit.”

By simply wanting to get our supplies back, I’d inadvertently made us vulnerable. Lukieboy81 knew where we lived and could find it, even if he was the most unskilled player in the world. I gritted my teeth. These fucking designers were planting mechanisms throughout the game to ensure increased hostilities.

“Let me ask you something, Fortune. Can this guy share the location and name of our map with others? NPCs? Other entrants?”

Her head dipped slowly as if she was trying to anticipate what was coming next. “Not with NPCs. The game drives what they know and are not aware of. Allow me to correct myself. The AI adjusts based on entrant action and non-action. But, yes, were Lukieboy81 to join an alliance at the appropriate level, all members of his alliance would know your camp’s location, and name, of course.”

I grunted. “Of course.”

“Brad, though you may detest the thought of fighting and killing this entrant, should you not, you put yourself and Little Sir at great risk.”

“Brad?” Slash looked at me, shaking. Tiny dog tears rimmed his eyes. “I don’t want this guy knowing how to find us again and telling all his friends.”

“I know. Me either.”

The game was going to push players to fight each other. I saw that coming a mile away. It’s the type of thing powerless, insignificant assholes did once they had a little control over something. Didn’t matter if that inflicted harm on others. It gave them the power they were desperately deprived in all other facets of their lives. Game designers, bloggers, you name it. Hell, even NCOs and especially officers in the military. No one was immune to the negative impact of the influence of having a bit of power. Politicians were easy targets. Everyone hated them. But every walk of life was susceptible. The worst person to give power to was the person who sought it.

“Are we done, Fortune? I’m ready to deal with this asshole.”

Slash growled at the frozen form of Lukieboy81. “Get some, douche monkey.”

## FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS



“Are you ready?” our guide asked.

“More than,” I said firmly. I’d locked my gaze on the frozen player hovering near his campfire, looking through a sack of goodies he’d taken from someone else.

“What do I do, Brad?” Slash asked, looking ready to pounce the minute Fortune disappeared and the game resumed.

“Stay right here.”

He grumbled something.

“Sorry, buddy. But I need you to come through if this goes sideways.”

“Oh, so I need to be ready to save the day?”

“Exactly.”

He slapped the ground with a tiny paw. “Makes sense. Good strategy.”

I scratched him behind the ear. “I know you’ll rescue me if this turns upside down. Just be ready.”

“Okay.”

“Alright, Fortune. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“I do not understand the intention behind those words, Brad.”

“That means he’s ready,” Slash said with an eye roll. “He’s just trying to sound relevant.”

“Okay.” She nodded. Her digital jaws clenched. “Brad?”

“Yeah.”

“Please be careful. Whatever you’re planning.”

“As careful as I can be.”

She didn’t need to know I’d formulated the least detailed, safest plan possible. If the game was marking players’ camps when others came across them, and then added marks to their camps if they interacted with another’s, that meant the game could change based on inputs. Fortune said so when she warned me against lying low at camp. The designers didn’t want bystanders. They wouldn’t tolerate pacifists. Their jollies got rocked by conflict.

According to Fortune, a fight between me and Lukieboy81 would result in a ‘high bonus,’ whatever that meant. Psychological warfare, in a way. They’d designed the game to reward skirmishes, fights, and battles because it wanted more of them. If that’s what their paying customers lusted for, it was the experience they’d deliver. All contests were surrounded, if not grounded, in conflict. Even sports that were ostensibly designed around a competitor battling themselves had drama introduced. If not by the player themselves, then their handlers, the media covering the contest, or some online loser calling themselves an ‘influencer.’

Sport for the sake of sport or competition for the sake of fair competition was never enough. People got off on problems, real or manufactured.

Let’s see if I could change that. I nodded at Fortune.

She returned the gesture. “Well wishes, Brad. Please be careful.”

“Thanks.”

Suddenly, every sound returned. Birds above. The wind. Lukieboy81’s farts. Cold seeped from the ground into my skin. The crisp smell of the air.

“Game on, bitch,” Slash said, narrowing his eyes at Lukieboy81.

“Stay here. Remember—”

“I know. I’m here to save the day. Got it.”

I petted him and slid down the knoll, only standing in a crouch when it blocked the other man’s view of me. I bent to pick up a stick near my foot. Moving far enough away from Slash, I knocked on each tree I passed, drawing my opponent’s attention.

Lukieboy81 dropped the sack and bumbled his spin, catching himself at the last second as he tried to find the source of the sound. It took him far too long to find me. He finally did.

I dropped the stick and raised my hands. “I’m not here to fight.”

Lukieboy81 was a heavy man. Even in the chilly air, sweat beaded on his forehead. I didn’t expect kindness in his round eyes now that we squarely faced one another. In a different world, under different circumstances, I might trust this guy with a friendly chat over beers. But this wasn’t that world. Not now. Maybe not for a long, long while yet. Maybe not for either of us.

“Who are you?” he asked in a husky voice.

“My name is Brad. My camp is—” I stopped when I remembered he already knew the specifics. “Well, you know.”

Lukieboy81 shifted a step backward. I think he wanted it to go unnoticed. It hadn’t.

“Listen, I don’t want trouble. I just want my blanket, wood, and stone back.”

Another shift. “That’s my shit.”

“No, it’s not. We both know it.” Keeping my hands up, I continued moving to the right. “Look, you took more than I can carry, so you’re already benefiting. I’ll just take what I can carry, and we’ll call it even.”

He shifted again. I didn't like his edginess. A thief was one thing. A nervous thief was something else entirely. Though I felt a twinge of pity, he truly looked like a sad man. I don't trust people who couldn't relax when someone tried to de-escalate a situation.

Lukieboy81 stepped to the back side of the campfire with a series of slight shuffles. I picked up on the fact that his eyes continually flicked to the ground behind the fire. If he had his own version of Slash back there, the dog was even smaller than mine. The rock he'd used to form his fire pit was only a few inches tall and couldn't hide much.

"No trouble?" I asked once more, staying rooted. My movements, though I was trying to be non-threatening, seemed to only make him edgier.

The man lunged toward the ground, reaching behind the rock ring, and coming up with an ax.

"Goddammit. This is not the way this needs to go down."

"Get away from my wood." He hefted the ax.

Forty feet separated us, so unless this dick was an exceptionally good ax thrower, I was safe. For now. I had time to equip my dagger or branch-club if he insisted on a fight. With his size, judging by the lack of speed when he moved, I'd have plenty of time to snag a weapon. Doing so now would only set this confrontation on a path I didn't want to explore.

"Just calm down, man." I took a step back, even turning partially to the side, using all the skills of de-escalation I had in my repertoire. "All I want is my stuff back. I'll get out of your hair right away. I'll even talk to my guide about removing this location from my map so I can't find my way back. Cool?"

I didn't dare check on Slash. This guy couldn't know I had a dog. I was faster than him, but he was closer to my pooch. Since he'd already given me too many nervous signs that he was itching for a fight, I didn't want him to think he was being ganged up on. Hell, I didn't want him to know he had more

than one visitor, even if one of those weighed as much as a small bag of sugar.

“Did Ragnar send you?” the man asked.

I lifted my hand slowly, mimicking his posture. “How about we lower that ax so you and I can talk?”

“No way, man,” he said and took a step forward.

“Whoa. Whoa.” I put up both hands now. I had no problem appearing to be the one backing down. The game designers could think me cowardly all they wanted, as long as Lukieboy81 and I were still alive to be criticized. “I don’t know who that is.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Ragnar is a butcher. How do you not know that?”

I tried to grin. I’m not sure it came off the way I intended. “Look. I just learned the name of my own butcher when he showed up to talk shit to me the other day. I’m pretty isolated.”

“Yeah, well, if you knew Ragnar, you’d know why I need your shit.” He took another step. “Sorry, man, just the way the game goes.”

I stepped away, realizing I was putting myself too close to his house, running out of space to avoid his attacks if he decided now was the time to kick this off.

By reducing the space between us by a few feet, Lukieboy81 allowed me to make out the details of his ax. It was an elementary weapon, hand-crafted. That was being kind. It was really nothing more than sharpened rock, bound by a length of twine, and an uneven four-inch thick branch he’d fashioned into a handle. Despite it being simple, it could still kill me.

“We don’t have to do this,” I said, taking another step back. I tried to chuckle. It came out sounding forced. “We’re in the middle of a forest. There’s plenty of wood and stone.”

“Good. Go collect what you need from the forest and leave mine alone.”

My anger flashed. “That collection you stole from me took weeks to gather.”

“Tough shit. I need it.”

“So do I, and I’m the one who put the hard work into collecting it. You’ll keep what I can’t carry, but I’m taking back what’s mine.”

Lukieboy81 grinned wickedly, running a hand through his mangy hair as he shook his head. “You don’t get it. I told you Ragnar is on my ass. My guide says he’s already narrowed down which server I’m on. I got a fort to build, asshole. So fuck off with your whining.”

He charged before I had the chance to propose alternatives, like working together and seeing where each other’s skills could complement the other’s weaknesses. He denied me the chance to explain that we could sit down over a meal once I harvested and processed the wheat crop into something consumable. We could have literally broken bread together and explored a closer working relationship, if not an outright alliance.

Instead, I was busy dodging and weaving as he closed, swinging the ax like he was trying to cleave mosquitos out of the air.

I jumped to the side. His strike was vicious and far too close for comfort. “Stop!”

Had I ceded the need for peace talks, I would have equipped my weapons. Because I tried to take the high road, I was now weaponless and scrambling. Lukieboy81 was slower, but armed. Pulling up my Inventory and hoping it popped open to the weapons tab was a distraction I didn’t want to risk while this madman tried to open me like a pinata.

The man grunted as he swung. Sweaty clumps of his dark hair stuck to his face when the momentum of his swing whipped it around. One lateral swing nearly ripped my gut open.

I dodged around a workbench, keeping it between us. Over three feet wide, he was going to have a hell of a time swinging



over it and getting to me. He tried anyway.

I stepped back.

Lukieboy81's arm crashed against the workbench. I lunged forward and grabbed his wrist, wrenching it in both hands.

He howled and pulled back. His sweaty skin gave him the reprieve he needed when my grip slipped.

Somewhere, Slash barked.

Lukieboy81 whipped around, his hand going to the rope that cinched his loincloth. A hidden dagger hung behind the belt. He equipped it, making it zip away from its current location and appear in his hand. He brought it back to fling at my pup, who now stood in the middle of the dirt patch, bouncing side to side and yapping between tiny growls.

As his arm came up, I raced around the workbench and drove my shoulder into his nasty, sweaty back. He cried out when I hit him and again when we crashed to the ground.

I pushed myself up, about to demand he stop with the stupid shit, when he rolled over. His arm swung out in a wide arc too late. Where I'd forgive his trespasses, he refused to forgive mine. The blade of his dagger sliced my skin open.

I roared in pain, spinning away, feeling the burn of open skin and the warmth of blood. I tried to turn on him, but the pain was excruciating. My Health bar was down a quarter of its length. A glance at Lukieboy81 showed his in a similar state.

Slash dashed forward, baring his teeth, and snapping at the man as he got to his feet.

Lukieboy81 spun on my dog and a small stream of piss ran down my boy's legs as he tucked his tail. His ears were pinned to his head as he raced away.

"You stupid fucker," I growled, still holding my arm, disturbed by how much blood I was losing. "It didn't have to come down to this."

Lukieboy81 lifted his dagger and charged.

I barely avoided him, distracted by protecting my dangling arm that felt like it was on fire. I sidestepped just in time, giving him a shove in the back to propel him forward. He smacked his head, yelling out. When his hand went to his nose, I figured my shove had taken a bit of the fight out of him.

When he turned, swinging wildly, his strike gashed me across the chest. The tunic took some of the damage, but shredded far too easily. The burning red line across my chest stood as testimony to how much trouble I was in.

## SNAKE BITE LOVE... SORTA



“Fuck!” I screamed as I spun away from his swipe and stumbled backward into the center of his impressive camp.

Slash dash between us, hackles raised and yapping enough to annoy the deafest player in Darkworld.

“Get away,” I grunted through the pain and the flashes of white. When he didn’t move, I yelled, “Now, Slash!”

“Nuh, uh!” he said without looking my way. He skipped from side to side, like the way a flat rock skims across the top of a static lake, just without the ripples and satisfying *plop* at the end of the journey.

I pulled my arm away from my side, exposing a four-inch long cut. One look at Lukieboy81’s blade told me I was going to have to figure out if Darkworld had an urgent care clinic to get a tetanus shot. Without pressure against it, blood seeped from the wound.

I’d tried to keep the peace and tried to find a reasonable solution. Look what it got me. I’d tried to de-escalate and talk him back from an edge he’d send both of us over, and he refused to listen. But when my pooch stepped between us and the fucker went after my wee man, he’d crossed a line no one was allowed to cross.

In a way, it was comical. The lumbering man, just shy of my six-foot-one-inches, and exceeding my two hundred and ten pounds of decently fit masculinity by about forty of flubber, swung down at my seven-pound Chihuahua.

Slash danced away, yapping. His snout wrinkled with the most vicious snarl I'd ever seen on him. When he pounced, his ass lifted twice the height of his tiny head. His tail was as stiff as a board, and I swear, if one inch of fang could rip the world asunder, this was the moment I'd point to as proof.

Lukieboy81 kicked at Slash.

Even blinking felt like an effort. My eyelids seemed to lower and open like they were being moved by a rusted crank. The smell of iron, my blood, filtered through every thought, every action I planned.

But the sight of another person, not some game monster or NPC, kicking out at my innocent dog was too much. My veins fired with energy. Fuel. Fire. In a moment of clarity, I remembered I'd gained an attack, my first, when I'd killed the Scaled King, Sarpa Raja. The AI told me it was called Snake Bite.

I didn't have a lot of time, but I used the little I had during Slash's distraction to pull up my menu. Along the regular tabs was a new one, labeled ATTACKS AND DEFENSES. The only attack listed was Snake Bite.

### **DASH AND RETREAT ATTACK**

That was all the menu gave me as a description, but I was going to take it. Literally. I clicked on the attack name.

**EQUIP?**

**YES/NO**

I clicked **YES**.

**ATTACKS EQUIPPED (1/3)**

**SNAKE BITE**

I quickly closed the menu, breathing again when I saw Slash running circles around Lukieboy81.

I bellowed and activated Snake Bite.

The world blurred. The campfire, the trees surrounding the camp, the house, workbenches, and even Slash turned to smudges as Lukieboy81 came into clear focus, ballooning to three times his size.

The attack had pushed me into his range at an incalculable speed. His head barely turned. His eyes were just widening as he sensed the attack he thought was still coming but was actually very much underway.

I slammed my fists into his stomach. Once. Twice. Three. Ten times.

Lukieboy81 was still turning to face where he thought I stood when he winced at the infliction of pain. I was well into my series of blows. His face began to twist from the assault. Everything he did was in slow motion, yet my attack felt at normal speed. The opposite was true, though. He was responding at his usual speed; it was me who'd launched a lightning attack.

I was about to step back and curl my punch upward to deliver the knockout uppercut when I was sucked backward as if a bungee bouncer system was attached to me. My swing connected with nothing but whipping, empty air. I almost fell. Only my last-second shift of weight prevented that from happening.

Lukieboy81 was still rocking from my punches even though half his camp separated us. He looked like that awkward kid who always showed up at high school parties even though no one invited him. The guy everyone tried to keep in the dark because he'd cause a scene, gyrating in the corner like he was at a thrash metal concert while everyone else was dancing to Top Forty pop.

I tried to use Snake Bite again, but nothing happened. While Lukieboy81 rocked back and forth, slowly moving to cover his gut, I pulled up my menu and saw the attack was grayed out. I clicked again, even though I knew exactly what a grayed-out option in a video game meant.

Nothing happened, just as I figured, while wasting precious seconds.

In the meantime, Lukieboy81 twisted from the punches I'd landed. I watched with amazement and stunned satisfaction as his Health bar plummeted.

I hobbled forward, no longer powered by the attack. Each step was lethargic. I was sure he'd see me coming and counter with a slash of his dagger or axe. Time dragged with each step without Snake Bite.

I was within two feet of the man again when the effects of my attack wore off.

Slash's barking resumed, a series of high-pitched yaps.

Lukieboy81 suddenly rocked backward and then forward in a counterstrike. His dagger flashed up, readying it.

The change in game speed happened so fast I nearly froze. The only thing saving me was the fact I'd already been thinking about the impact the special attack had on the situation, mourning its loss, and anticipating how I'd finish this fight without it. Had I not been running those scenarios through my head, who knows what would have happened when Lukieboy81 regained his normal speed.

The dagger darted down, aimed at my skull.

I lunged, under the arch of his arm and shoulder. I nearly stumbled as I came up behind him, but my preparatory thoughts ended up saving me.

Lukieboy81 didn't enjoy the same chronological slowdown I had inadvertently taken advantage of. To him, it must have been insane to see me standing fifteen feet away one second, feeling a series of rapid punches the next, only to see me back in my original spot, before, once again, I was on him. No wonder his retributive attack was awkward.

He stumbled forward. His arms moved in a whirlwind like the wings of those annoying plastic windup ducks parents used to entertain their bathtub-bound kids back in the day. He lost his grip on the dagger. It flipped end over end as he tumbled to meet the ground. The dagger, thrust in front of him by his own

momentum, fell first. The soft dirt did Lukieboy81 no favors. The dagger's pommel sank into the ground at just the right angle to keep the blade upright.

I reached out my hand as if I could stop what was about to happen, seeing it coming and unable to stop it.

Slash yipped as if he was mad at the blade or Lukieboy81, probably both.

Before I could look away, the thief was skewered by his own dagger. At the same time, his Health bar fell, the red coloring of life disappearing completely and leaving the bar empty. A small skull appeared over Lukieboy81's name, then it, his name, and even his body faded away. By the time Slash sat at my side, all that remained of the person who played the game as Lukieboy81 was gone.

"I'm going to find my blanket," my pooch said.

"Don't take too long." I didn't want to be here any longer than necessary.

Slash bounced up the steps of Lukieboy81's house. "Grab that dagger. You could use another one. The ax, too. That'll come in handy."

Even though the man was gone, I felt gross about plucking the dagger from the soil. It showed in my Inventory in a vacant weapon slot. When I unequipped my weapon, I was relieved to see a '2x' next to the dagger icon. At least I could carry multiple weapons of the same type in a single slot.

"Got it!" Slash called from inside the house. "Hey, he has an extra loincloth in here. Want me to grab it? I'm tired of smelling your nasty ass. You know what? Never mind. I'm going to get it." After a second, I heard him hacking and coughing. "Oh my god, did he shit a taco into it? Forget it, Brad. If you want it, you come get it."

Slash was on his way out, carrying his blanket in his mouth, dragging it through the dirt, when we got our next game notification.

**BOOM!**

**YOU KILLED A THIEF. DARKWORLD IS A BETTER REALM BECAUSE YOU'RE IN IT. CELEBRATE YOURSELF FOR A MOMENT... NO, SERIOUSLY, CELEBRATE. SHIT IS ABOUT TO HIT THE FAN, SO YOU'RE GOING TO WANT TO ENJOY THIS MOMENT WHILE YOU'RE LIVING IT.**

**+1,000 XP**

**QUEST SATISFIED!**

**FIRST KILL!**

**YOU'VE KILLED YOUR FIRST ENTRANT. LET'S BE REAL, YOU PRETTY MUCH RAN SCARED, FIGHTING LIKE A FEATHERWEIGHT WHO SUDDENLY WOKE UP ONE DAY AND FOUND THEMSELVES IN A TWO-ON-ONE HEAVYWEIGHT FIGHT. BUT, LIKE THEY SAY IN CORPORATE AMERICA, ALL THAT MATTERS ARE RESULTS. SO, CONGRATS OR WHATEVER.**

**+500 XP**

**LEVEL UP!**

**LEVEL 5**

**ABILITY POINT +1**

**+500 GOLD**

**THIEVES CAN'T**

**BY KILLING YOUR FIRST ENTRANT WHO MADE HIS LIVING TAKING FROM OTHERS, YOU'VE MADE IT TOUGHER FOR FUTURE THIEVES TO PICK OVER YOUR STUFF LIKE A SATURDAY FLEA MARKET IN AMERICA'S DEEP SOUTH.**

**CAMP WARD**

**+2% MAP WARD**

**MASCOT DEBUFF!**

**COME ON, YOU PISSED ON YOURSELF. WE CAN'T LET SOMETHING LIKE THAT GO UNPUNISHED,**



**CAN WE?**

**NIGHT TERRORS!**

**THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT AREN'T  
THE ONLY THINGS YOU SHOULD FEAR.  
APPARENTLY, THERE'S A LOT THAT FRIGHTENS  
YOU. DEBUFF. PISSING IN FEAR NOW RESULTS IN  
A TEMPORARY -2 TO YOUR AGILITY.**

“What? That’s bullshiiiiiiiiit!” Slash howled into the suddenly warmer day.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. Pointing at his leg, I said, “You might want to clean yourself up when we reach the river.”

He arched an eye, the tan dot above it rising. “Uh, you too, sunshine. You don’t exactly smell like a rose petal. Well, unless someone accidentally ate one while chowing down on a three-dollar grease buffet in a redneck town where no one understands the consequences of poor hygiene, only to shit it out after downing a case of crappy beer that probably sponsors stupid car races. Nothing like greasy food poops, let me tell you. Well, maybe coffee poops. Those are good too.”

“I’ve never given you coffee. And you need more material than poop jokes.”

“No, you haven’t. But you always miss the trash can and dump grounds on the floor. I never let them go to waste. And you’re wrong. Poop jokes are always funny.”

“Look around. See if he had anything else useful,” I said, looking at the spot where Lukieboy81 had fallen. I couldn’t ignore thinking about his fear of his butcher. “He won’t need them anymore.”

Had Fortune been right when she said that dying in Darkworld meant death for real? Not only here and in the real world, but also having your line written out of everything. What did that mean for Lukieboy81? Did he have a family back home, worried about him, wondering where he was? If Fortune was correct, what did it mean to them that he’d been erased from existence? Did those who loved him simply forget

he ever was? What fate could be worse than never being thought of? Forgotten?

My mood darkened as I inspected the poor bastard's camp for anything useful that would be worth dropping an Inventory slot of wood. He had a ton of shit, most of which I'd bet wasn't his. Desperate acts of a desperate man? Or the actions of a scumbag? Who was I to judge? Did it matter? He was dead. No, he was worse than dead. He was nothing.

Slash stood near the sack Lukieboy81 had been looking through when we found the camp. He constantly jumped backward as if the sack was attacking him.

"Leave it, buddy."

Slash gave the sack one last growl. "Did you not see all the stuff he had in there, Brad? Why would we leave it?"

"Because it's not ours."

Slash looked left and right. "Don't see anyone ready to claim it." When we stared each other down, his posture slumped. "Taking the moral high ground is all great for priests and people on Twitter, but we're in a survival game. How many more times does Fortune have to warn you about the butcher and how the AI adjusts based on our gameplay? God, your stubbornness will get both of us in serious trouble. Or worse."

The sack suddenly disappeared.

"There. Now we don't have to argue because you can't tell me what I can and can't take. I'm part of this game too."

I grimaced. Slash sniffed and turned away lethargically. I was at the edge of the camp before I called him out. "You're encumbered again, aren't you?"

"Yeeeeep," he said stiffly.

He'd only made it two feet from the campfire, his front paw slowly descending as if he were in a slow-motion video, like the ones I shot when I first adopted him. "Goddammit. Give me the sack."

I dropped a slot of wood and took the sack. A small portion vanished as Slash put it in his Inventory. Not a total loss.

All the way back to our camp, I thought about Lukieboy81 and the faceless people who loved him. I thought about the fact that this wouldn't be the last time the game overlords would force me to face off against another person. I thought about BigDk and if today's fight had given him clues to our whereabouts. And I couldn't shake the game message encouraging us to enjoy today's win, because things were about to get a lot worse.

## MOSTLY THE GOOD DIE YOUNG



Licking wounds is the worst part of getting in any fight. Worse when blades are involved, I discovered.

“Could I encourage you to go into Olyndria?” Fortune asked. She’d shown up during our walk home from the unfortunate run-in with Lukieboy81. I think Slash called on her, though he denied it. He might not have. I couldn’t be sure. I was in a daze, sort of out of it between my injuries, worries over how slowly my Health bar inched to the right, and that I’d just seen a man die.

And he was erased from existence as if he’d never lived. Couldn’t forget about that part.

“What’s there?” I asked, sitting by the campfire and keeping a wet cloth pressed against my worst injury.

“Aren’t you glad you listened to me and took the sack?” Slash said, lying on his blanket next to the flames. His head popped up as if Fortune sat across from him. “Fortune, did you know he didn’t want to take the sack? Mr. White Knight or something. But he hasn’t bitched about it since we found the healing wraps.”

“You were right,” I said for what felt like the five hundredth time.

“Imagine how bad you’d be if you hadn’t used them?” he continued. “Look at your Health. You’re not doing so hot. What if you didn’t have those things to heal you? Huh? Bad news.”

Without the healing wraps we’d found in the stolen sack, I’d be far worse off and unable to be much good around camp. Using them had been easy and effective. All I had to do was click on **USE** once I’d highlighted them in my Inventory. The game asked me how many I wanted to use. At first, I’d chosen one. Though I knew the basic principles of them in other games I’d played, that didn’t mean they’d act the same in Darkworld.

When I used the first wrap, the cut on my arm closed up, forming a minor swollen slit that looked like it’d healed a week ago. My Health bar had stopped inching to the left. Encouraged and needing a boost, because all I could think about was Lukieboy81 and his almost maniacal fear of his butcher and what that meant for me and our future, I applied the second healing wrap. This time, with far less resistance.

With the depletion of my Health halted, I forced myself to relax at the fire. In my recovering state, Slash recruited Fortune to double down on how I needed to listen better. I put up with it. First, because he’d been right to take the sack. Second, he did what he did because he cared. When someone truly cares for you, no matter how they deliver their message, you listen. Even if that means listening to the message behind the heat or passion.

Turning us back on topic, I asked Fortune, “What’s in Olyndria that would benefit us?”

“Traders. Merchants. Shops. Food.” She gestured at the field of wheat. “You will harvest that soon, will you not?”

“We are.”

“Good. Then you will have a crop that merchants at the market will look to trade for. Olyndria has plenty of trade.”

“Like clothes?” Slash asked. “Because I’m tired of looking at his junk.”

I tugged my loincloth down even though it adequately covered me. “My junk has not been on display.”

Slash snorted. “Keep telling yourself that. Hey, Fortune, how are we supposed to get the wheat to the city?”

“You have the materials you need for a crude sickle. That will suffice in harvesting. My recommendation after that would be to plant the next round of seedlings, bake bread with half the crop, and take the other half into the city for trade.”

“I don’t know how to bake.” Slash gave me a critical look. “And you don’t want to eat anything he bakes. Trust me.”

Fortune giggled. “In Darkworld, like most everything, you will begin with only the most basic skills. Take faith, though. They will improve over time and with practice. Everyone, even Brad, can create bread. It may even be tasty.”

“We don’t have much in the way of baking, Fortune,” I said, wincing when I turned too sharply to look across the bounty of wheat I’d soon be breaking my back over. A farmer, I am not. Another lesson of Darkworld.

She pointed toward the campfire. “You have wheat. You have fire. Once you have a sickle, you will have everything you need.”

Slash yipped. “It’s that simple? Just put the wheat in the fire?”

That made our guide giggle. “You do not put the wheat in the fire. All the work is done in your menus. The physical properties will not actually come into contact with one another.”

I liked the sound of that. “Ah, that makes it easy.” An image of Lukieboy81’s kind eyes juxtaposed with his face, twisted in fear, flashed through my mind. I shook my head.

“Did I say something wrong?” Fortune asked.

“No. Not at all. Just thinking about that guy.”

“Who?”

“The guy he killed,” Slash said. “Well, the guy who accidentally killed himself.”

“Oh,” Fortune said carefully. “His death troubles you?”

“Yes. He wasn’t much older than me. And he’s gone. Just another sad bastard who got suckered into this game. And now what? I didn’t want to fight him. None of that mattered. Not to the game.”

“You’re so stubborn, Brad. No matter how much trouble it’s gotten you into at work or the fact that it cost you Tess.” He winked at the air. “Fortune, she was a smokin’ fire stick. Still is, actually. For a human, of course. Brad, you have to be willing to change. Remember that one guy you got in the fight with, the guy who sucker punched you, because he was being an asshole to that woman, and you confronted him? Stubborn. Plus, he started it,” Slash said, flopping on his side and blowing out his nose so hard a small cloud of dirt swirled into the air, which only made him sneeze three times. “You didn’t have to get involved.”

“I know, but this guy was worried about his butcher. I think that drove his actions. And stop listening in on my conversations.”

“What did it drive? Like stealing other people’s stuff? And if you don’t want me listening, don’t go putting your business out there for everyone.”

“Yeah. To his motivations. Not the part about my business.”

Fortune watched the exchange, taking this chance to interject. “I wish I had access to his log. I fear I do not. Therefore, I cannot tell you what motivated him to act as he did. Though I know it has upset you, I hope you noted how he prepared for his butcher.” She looked like she was about to say more, then caught herself.

“Go ahead, Fortune. You’re here to guide us through the game. What’s on your mind? Don’t hold back.”

She spread her hands as if to say ‘What else do you want me to say that I haven’t already?’ Instead, voice reflective and

soft, she said, “You saw the state of his camp. Most likely, that was driven by the entrant. Most likely.” She reinforced those last two words with a long pause. “We are far too early in the game for the butcher to have found him... Unless...”

“Unless what?”

A spot of red appeared on the side of her neck. Her unease made me nervous. “Unless his butcher paid for a higher level quest and the entrant found out somehow.”

“How so? Do you mean he might have had Lukieboy81 facing an advanced challenge even though he was lower level?”

“The entrant was level five. Just one level above you at the time of the fight,” she said, not sounding any less troubled. “His butcher must have either gotten lucky, paid an extreme toll, or...”

“Or cheated his way closer to contact?”

Without a word, she nodded grimly.

I blew out a breath. My side pinched. I winced.

Slash flipped over to his side and scrambled to his feet. “Are you okay?”

I gave him what I was sure was a weak smile. “I’m fine, wee man. It’ll take a bit for me to feel better. That’s all.”

“Healing wraps only have a minor effect,” our guide said.

“Better than nothing.”

“You should just lick it,” Slash said. “That always makes me feel better.”

It hurt when I chuckled.

We sat, sharing the fire quietly for a bit. Fortune remained in my mindscreen, which I was starting to get used to. She’d moved to the side of my vision, almost disappearing, but present.

“Fortune,” I said after a bit, just as sleep crept over me. I didn’t want to fall asleep yet. I didn’t trust the game’s healing



methods enough to risk drifting off and maybe never coming around again.

“Yes?”

“I promise I’ll get serious about fending off the AI by participating more, but I’ve got a question that’s been bugging me since Lukieboy81 died.”

“If I can answer, I hope you trust that I will.”

“I know.” I pushed myself into an upright position. The day was warmer as it hit late afternoon. Soon enough, the sun would descend and the temperature would drop. I’d rest then, and hopefully recover enough by morning to get back to work on the house. I needed this answered first, though, because it hadn’t sat right with me since it first flashed through my mind. “You told us what happens to entrants when we die in Darkworld. Hard to forget about something like that. But we’re just part of the equation. Technically, butchers are playing the game as well, right?”

Her mouth twisted in thought. “Yes, that would be an acceptable way of looking at it. They would be, I guess. After all, they are not part of Darkworld, but from the outside. Engaging with the world as you are.”

“Not really the same.” I waved away the comment almost as soon as I said it. “They’re applicants, right? And those who weren’t selected for this early release could pay to assume the role of a butcher?”

“Correct.”

“That’s what I thought. So, the Electors probably look at the people playing the role of butchers as their customers.”

“What are you getting at, Brad?” Slash spoke up. “This sounds like one of those boring Ted talkie-thingies you listen to when you drive me around town so I can check out the bitches.”

“Don’t—never mind. Just let me finish. My point is, the people who are butchers in Darkworld are actual customers in our world. Customers of the people who made the game.”

“You must forgive me,” Fortune said. “As you can imagine, this is a strange concept.”

“Because Darkworld is your home?” Slash asked.

“Yes. This,” she said, lifting her arms out wide, “is all I know. Though I try to understand the context of your comments, I fear I am limited by my own understanding. Not only of my reality, but yours.”

Impressive. I was never a programmer. One computer programming class in high school nearly destroyed my GPA, so I dropped it. Though I gave computer geeks a lot of shit, I also gave them a lot of credit. What they did was mind-boggling. No doubt. Darkworld was an entirely different level. Fortune was so lifelike, she came across as self-aware and sentient. I’d never think to insult her by bringing it up. That’d just be a dick thing to do. Plus, as insightful as she was, who knew what that’d do to her programming? A comment like that might plant a seed that would send her spiraling.

“I still think you can help me understand the game and plot out what I’m going to do.”

“Okay.”

“Have you gone to the market in Olyndria? Or any other market?”

Fortune shook her head. “I have not. This is the limitation of my experience with Darkworld.”

“What is?”

“Where you have gone,” she said as if it should be obvious.

“What about your former players?”

“They...” She turned to face me again, and she blinked rapidly. I worried I’d kicked off that programming meltdown after all. “I only remember portions of their journey.” She placed a hand on her temple. “I... I don’t think I’m supposed to.”

Slash missed the turmoil my question had caused. He rolled over and sat up. “The only places you’ve gone are those

places Brad and I have gone?”

She stared down, now almost unblinking. “Correct.”

“Wow. That’s fucked up.”

I agreed.

My pooch farted, hopped up to circle his own butt, and sat again. His tail rocketed side to side. “Don’t worry, Fortune. We’re going to get out and about. You can come with us and see more of Darkworld. I need to find the dog park, anyway. It’s been forever since I’ve had a good hump.”

I shook my head. “You, literally, have never humped anything.”

“I’ve humped your leg.”

“True.”

“Tess let me hump her leg, too. That was fun. Her legs are smaller. You’d think they’d be easier to hold on to than yours. I’ve peed on trees that are softer than your legs. But she doesn’t have all the hair you do, so hers were slippery.”

Fortune’s eyes went wide through Slash’s poorly timed diatribe.

“Ignore him,” I said. “Yes, we will get around more. We have to. My point for asking was to see if you could relate to my world’s concept of customers. A patron, if you will.”

She smacked her hands together in sudden understanding. “Like in a tavern?”

“Yes. Exactly. The tavern owner wants them to be happy, right? Then they’ll continue to come back and fill his common room.”

“And drink a lot of mead.”

“The more mead they drink, the looser they are with their coin.”

“Though I have only been in one tavern, I have seen that to be true.”

“Then you understand what I mean about customers. Patrons. These butchers, they’re the equivalent of tavern patrons. The Electors want them to be happy. No one spends their time or money, or both, to play Darkworld and be bored. They want to be entertained. All people do. If they enjoy their Darkworld experience, they’ll tell more people about the game back in our world.”

“And, like a popular bard, word will spread, and more people will be interested in the game.”

“Exactly.”

She frowned. “Though I do not see what this has to do with your PvP battle.”

“This.” I leaned forward as if she were sitting across the campfire from me. “What happens to Lukieboy81’s butcher now that he’s dead?”

“Well, he stays in the game, of course.”

“And?”

“He hunts.”

“He hunts entrants, doesn’t he?”

She looked unsure. “Y-yes.”

“He’s not assigned a new one?” Slash asked, sliding over and crawling into my lap. The spikes of his jacket scratched my side. I winced. “Oh, you can take it off, Brad. I need cuddles.”

As I unlatched his jacket, Fortune responded. “The Electors only have a pre-determined allocation for entrants.”

“No new players coming into the game means the butcher will hunt another butcher’s entrant,” I said. “Is he assigned someone specific, like the guy who fought his entrant, or does he have the freedom to hunt anyone?”

“An important question,” Fortune said.

Slash wiggled deeper into my lap. His little body gyrated slightly. “Cuddle me. I don’t like thinking about this.”

I wrapped my arms around him, shielding him from the cooling day, but not the reality of my suspicions. There was plenty to live for, and I didn't want to die. My little furry companion hadn't asked to be here and tried to warn me away from opening that stupid chest that kicked off this madness. He was as innocent as innocent got. Well, as long as you overlooked his penchant for humping everything, stationary or otherwise, and the sudden explosion of a vocabulary that was worryingly becoming restricted to four-letter words.

He slapped my leg. Even on bare skin, I barely felt it. I looked down at his tiny paw. Fuck, I needed to get serious about taking the offensive. Whether it disgusted me or not was irrelevant. As tough as my pup thought he was, he wouldn't last more than a few days in Darkworld without me. I didn't have anyone to look out for him. I was his entire safety net. Priority number one. If I couldn't find a solution to this dilemma, I'd become the solution.

Fortune's eyes turned down with a hint of sympathy. "Each butcher freed of their target through no fault of their own becomes free to explore the realm."

"Some wild, wild west shit there."

She tipped her head. "Sir?"

I lifted a finger with a wink. "Just a saying."

"Ah." She smiled, her face brightening. It was nice to see. She lifted both hands, extending a single finger and hooking them. "In the 'real world?'"

I laughed at my guide using air quotes. "You pick up quickly."

She bowed. "I hope you do not think I take any of this lightly, Brad?"

"Not at all." I looked down at my pup. "This could be a good or bad thing. Not sure yet."

Slash's chest expanded and fell with a dramatic sigh. "Sure, what could go wrong in, say, a week? A month? Players walking off the edge of a cliff. Mauled by a bear. Someone who has never played video games and doesn't even get past

level one blobs. A year from now, imagine how many butchers there'll be out there, just roaming around, trying to find an entrant to kill. Good stuff."

"The game is only going to get uglier. We need to as well, wee man."

He looked up at me, his mouth curling slightly. "Finally."

Fortune lifted her hand, appearing sheepish. "Now seems like a terrible time to mention this, but I must give you another warning."

"How much more does Darkworld want to fuck with us? What? Are they going to assign two butchers to every entrant just to raise funds for the public launch?"

Her brow scrunched. "I do not know what the last bit of that means, but as of right now, the Electors are not looking to assign more than one butcher to a single entrant. But the game has changed now that you have succeeded in your first PvP fight."

I groaned. "How so?"

"Each time an entrant wins a PvP fight, not only is the defeated entrant's butcher free to hunt as they please, but the winner's butcher will receive a clue about their target. That happens when entrants complete major objectives as well."

"A clue?" Slash yipped.

"What sort of clue?" I asked.

Her mouth stretched in a grimace. "Information about you. It could be your skill level. Weapons you have bought or found. Hints to your location. Skills or spells you have acquired."

"Anything to give them an advantage while I still don't know who the fucker is that's chasing us." She'd never mentioned the fact that BigDk had threatened us. Could she seriously not know? If she didn't, where were the assholes who created this game? Right now, we'd keep that card close.

"My apologies, Brad. I wish it were another way."

“Yeah. Me too. I don’t imagine you know what information he was given about us?”

“I fear I do not.”

I slumped against the rock, lying out fully. Slash cuddled in a ball on my chest. I kept my arms wrapped around his puny body. “This game is going to be the death of me.”

Slash’s head whipped around. He squinted, his adorable tan dots of fur above his eyes drawing closer together. “Don’t you dare go get yourself killed, Brad. I plan on having forty puppies, so I have way too many legs to still hump. How will I do that if you die?”

“Don’t worry, only the good die young, and I already feel like death warmed over. Hopefully, you’ll be stuck with me for a while.”

Slash nuzzled into me and licked my arm before resting his head. Within seconds, he was asleep. In a way, that was answer enough.

## ZOMBIE



The frame of the house was up, and the floor was in before Slash gave me any credit for “being serious” about its construction. Despite the fact he hadn’t helped beyond bringing me the crude hammer, one we’d found in Lukieboy81’s sack. To him, that was a major contribution. To me, it was adorable. All except the complaining part.

The intensity of the change in our lives after Lukieboy81’s death motivated him to contribute in different ways, though. He took far fewer naps than ever before, remaining alert and actually watching the camp instead of just talking about how he was doing it. Birds were barked at almost as much as the swaying stalks of mature wheat. Nothing got by Slash now, it seemed.

We hadn’t seen a single threat since our run-in with the scared man. No other players stomped through our field. No vampire bats watched from above. No blobs from Fuji’s neck of the forest.

The troll had come to the edge of the field once, to check in, he said. According to him, he couldn’t trek out of the forest itself. He didn’t have a reason, and I figured it had more to do with the game not allowing him to venture beyond a specific point. How else could he interact and drive the game forward



if someone else stumbled upon his tree if he was halfway across Darkworld?

Slash told him about our adventures. Fuji seemed interested, but the conversation was restricted to talking about his storyline and not much else. I think the only reason the conversation came to a respectable end, where no one felt awkward about going our separate ways, was because I'd asked him if he had anything he needed help with. A lack of a quest was usually a good way to stop conversations with annoying NPCs in the games I'd played, so I'd hoped it would work with him as well. It had. Not that I didn't enjoy Fuji's company. The small troll was pleasant, and life in the camp was routine and repetitive with just my pup and guide around for company. His visit was a refreshing break from chores. But even those sorts of breaks were still breaks, and I couldn't afford too much time away from my tasks.

Lukieboy81's camp showed me just how far behind I was, and that guy had seemed scatterbrained on the best of hypotheticals. Yet, he had work benches. He had a house. His field was overgrown and wild, but that was probably because he spent most of his non-building time stealing from others to prepare himself. That's not how I was going to run things.

After Fortune's revelation that my butcher had received a clue from the designers, I was even more serious about getting things done. I didn't want to be what the game was making me, but I'd lived a life of others directing my life. My parents had done it, and so had administrators and teachers in school. As an adult, the military assumed the role of controlling almost all aspects of my life. Only since leaving the service did I get a taste of true freedom. It was a meal I enjoyed, and I wasn't going back.

Lukieboy81's sack had come in handy. Not only had the healing wraps sped up my recovery, but the sack held the hammer and hundreds of nails. Work on our house went faster with the modest tools, helping speed up the setting of the beams and laying the floor. I'd even placed the first stones of what would ultimately become the fireplace and chimney on the opposite wall, a masonry work that would radiate the

future heat. That soon became Slash's focal point. Any time I worked on another part of the house, he'd remind me I hadn't finished the fireplace.

Clearing the field had gone better than expected, the extent of work and crude tools considered. Honestly, the prospect had intimidated me, but once I got to work, things went smoothly.

As I harvested the wheat, which included three swipes of each stalk, Slash came behind me. He'd grabbed each stalk, one by one, and carry them to the collection point we'd set aside next to our lean-to. Lukieboy81 had taught us a valuable lesson about being lax in defending what we had. There was no way we were storing that wheat anywhere but next to where we slept.

Once I started baking the bread, if it could be called that, we realized how precious having room in the lean-to was. The game's process for turning wheat into bread consisted of combining five wheat stalks, no need for removing the bran or grinding seed into flour, with the fire icon in my Camp menu. The first time I tried it, I almost didn't believe the new icon I saw in my FOOD/DRINKS Inventory. A loaf of bread. Making bread was easy, and before I knew it, I was burning through my wheat and fire. Every so often, I'd have to feed wood into the fire to keep it going. I was vindicated then. All those hours of wood collecting and taking back our stock had paid off.

I was still making loaves when Slash chowed down on the first one. When I asked how an entire loaf of bread fit inside a seven-pound Chihuahua, he asked if I also wondered how a penis the size of his disappeared into any breed of dog. As I, stunned, searched for a response, he mentioned that he included Saint Bernards in that calculation. I didn't explore the conversation, because, after weeks of eating nothing but berries, a plain loaf of bread was the most wonderful culinary experience I'd ever had in my life. That included the place I took Tess when we were still dating that cost me half my payday check.

A house going up from the foreign dirt of Darkworld. Stacks of bread growing from a harvest of seeds. All from a

former Air Force enlisted puke who spent eight years at a desk, deploying when I was told to, playing video games, or hanging with fellow military drifters when I wasn't, and doing little else with my early twenties. Not bad. Not bad at all.

“As soon as we finish the house,” I said to Slash during a break, “we’re going into the city. Are you ready for that?”

“Brad,” he said, tipping his head, “as much as I enjoy your company, we’ll have to address your dependent personality at some point. You can’t hang out with just me. A trip to the city will do both of us well. As long as you’re not afraid of the bitches. Please tell me you’re not.”

We had a long conversation about the differences between humans and dogs and his new ability of speech. He didn’t seem to understand the weight of responsibility for what he said or the power of words, and only capitulated when he tired of listening to me expound on the necessity of discretion. Especially in strange places around strangers.

We were laying on the finished floor of our house, staring up at the foreign night sky that was already becoming a familiar one. None of the constellations were recognizable, but we made a game of naming them just the same. Especially funny, since Slash didn’t know the first thing about constellations back home.

“That one is called Boner,” he said, pointing a paw close to the horizon. He shifted it to the opposite side of the dome. “That’s Boobie.”

“We already live on Boobie Hill,” I noted. “Don’t you think we can come up with non-anatomical names for things?”

“What’s the fun in that? Oh, there’s Moist Mounds.”

I gave him a couple ‘uh huhs’ and ‘yups’ at regular intervals to keep him thinking I was listening. As thrilling as it was to listen to a pre-pubescent pup explore his newly born fondness for vulgarity, I instead enjoyed the view of the night sky for the first time since arriving in Darkworld.

A myriad of colors painted the night. From profound purple and blues to faint brush strokes of pinks and oranges,

the eternal blackness never seemed to reach it like back in the real world. I felt like I was seeing the essence of the universe. The stars twinkled and beat a never-ending rhythm across the abyss. A cosmic dance.

At points, I drifted off even though there was still work to do. Wouldn't there always? Not taking moments like this, when staring at natural beauty no amount of Instagram influencing could replicate, was a crime.

"Beautiful, isn't it, buddy?" I asked my pup after the extended appreciation.

When he didn't answer, I looked over to see the dog fast asleep, twitching as he chased an imaginary rabbit in the dream realm. After this long in Darkworld, maybe he was pursuing blobs. Who knew?

I flattened out on my back, allowing my mind to swirl in whichever direction it wanted. Something about the peaceful quiet of the night, combined with the late hour, pushed me to contemplate the game without dark thoughts.

Fortune had warned me about its nature. I'm not dense. Half the reason I kept us at the camp and the safer parts of the forest was precisely because I understood what people were about. How they always went into full-fledged self-centered mode when their competitive spirit kicked in. Even at the expense of their safety or their own advantage over an NPC or opposing alliance, when the margins narrowed, people always turned on each other. To delay, they believed, meant to hand the opportunity of the first betrayal over to the player or players they meant to betray first.

Lukieboy81 had been a stranger until he violated me. Even so, I hadn't gone looking for a fight or retribution. I definitely didn't go to his camp wanting to hurt him or remove his essence from the life thread. All I'd wanted was my wood and rock back. Now, a man was dead. Back in the real world, if he was married, his spouse would be an ignorant widow. If he was a father...

I swallowed. My throat was dry at the realization, and it felt like I was trying to push down a cotton ball. What if he

had kids? Lukieboy81 was gone, and if Fortune's script was truthful, he shared that fate with his children.

I sat up. Unable to sleep.

I didn't have kids. Didn't have a spouse or ex-spouse. I had Slash and east coast parents. Tess was a friend now, though she had an advantage over my ugly ball-scratching bastards in Seattle who I only saw every few weeks. Not only because she was way hotter than them, but Tess knew things about me no one else did. As cool as my buddies were, I'd never opened up to them like I had with her. She had the master key to my brain. A special woman who was unable to unlock all my secrets. Each share came willingly because she was as safe as a bank vault surrounded by ten feet of concrete and buried at the bottom of the Pacific.

Still, if I fell in Darkworld, she'd never remember me. The thought hurt. I wondered if Lukieboy81 thought about things like this before he attacked me when all I wanted was my stuff back. The bastard was dead and had no such worries anymore. Only the living felt the pain of death.

I felt so numb, so distracted by the sudden discomfort over the stranger's fate, I almost didn't hear the moaning. It came up on me like a slow wind rolling across an open prairie, something you hear coming, but it doesn't impact you until it hits you.

Thankfully, the zombie ambling into the campfire light toward the house moved as slowly as that prairie wind.

"Slash." I nudged the dog awake.

"Leave me alone, Brad. I was having a nice dream about humping fourteen bitches at the dog park. I've got my own harem! Why did—"

I wrapped his muzzle in my hand. "Don't talk. We've got company." I pointed to the zombie. "I see that one. Do you see any others?"

The zombie shambled past the fire, right through a tall arc of flame. The whipping reds and oranges wrapped around its body. It didn't even flinch. Instead of being singed or

scorched, it continued sliding through the flames as if untouched. Its rotting flesh hung from its cheeks and biceps. A tan wool shirt hung from its squared shoulders. Its left foot, which was bent at a right angle that had to be painful, forced an uneven gait.

Slash flipped over and got to his feet, growling.

I grabbed his snout. “Shhh, buddy. It can probably tell we’re here, but there’s no need to help it.”

“What? Do you want to invite it in for dinner?”

“I’ve got a plan.” I shared it with Slash as I opened my Inventory and armed both daggers. Awesome option, to dual-wield without earning a special ability, though I was pretty sure that was limited to small weapons.

“Well, just hurry. It’s getting a little too close.”

I crawled across the floor and off the far side of the platform. I jumped the three feet to the ground. Using the structure of the house as a barrier, I snuck to the edge and peeked at the zombie.

It made its way closer. Slash started barking the second I’d slunk away. With each of the zombie’s plodding steps, the pitch of my dog’s barks increased. Soon, he’d be splitting ears.

The zombie wobbled as if confused and took a hard right turn toward the house and my dog.

Slash played his role, yapping loudly and racing in circles near the middle of the floor.

I moved away, taking a wide circle into the field and coming up behind the zombie.

A name floated above its head when I focused on it.

## **ZOMBIE LVL 2**

A second-level zombie? Seemed like a waste for the game. Unless this was part of the clue BigDk received from the game for my PvP win.

With that now weighing on my mind, I raced at the zombie’s back.

Up close, the smell of rotten garbage wafted from the undead creature's body. Involuntarily, my arm was at my nose and mouth, trying to protect me from the putrid aroma of the walking corpse.

Slash, to his credit, was making a hell of a racket. The zombie's moaning was drowned out by seven pounds of somewhat furious attitude. I used the noise as cover to get closer to the zombie.

I dropped to a knee, slashing its calf with the dagger, before doing the same on the opposite calf with my second. Double-wielded weapons were cool in video games, but doing it for real was amazing. Adrenaline surged through me as the blades bit.

The zombie moaned evenly, sounding like it was rolling out of bed instead of having its legs ripped open.

Blackish goo oozed from the two slashes. It didn't pulse. It didn't pump. It didn't even squirt. The way the bodily fluid filled the mouth of the slashes, fattened, then crept down the zombie's rotten skin reminded me of the way cold syrup comes out of a condiment package.

After slashing its calves, I backed up, standing ready. The zombie, still moaning, turned. Its milky white eyes, irises, and pupils lost in the cloudy murkiness, were flat. The undead's reaction was as muted as a hyperactive teen after being forced to stack library books all day for less than minimum wage.

Its next move didn't come as a shock. The nightmare took a swing at me. Lethargic and painstakingly obvious, I easily dodged to the side, spun, arced a dagger, and cut across the zombie's arm. My blade, hardly sharp, caught the loose skin. I yanked downward, trying to rip through the parts of the body dangling from the zombie. The blade didn't budge. It was properly snagged.

I never saw the backhand, but I felt it. My cheek exploded with pain as the monster struck. My head rocked to the side, sending me sprawling to the ground. The fucker packed a punch for a level two.

Slash jumped from the platform, cutting around behind the zombie and barking wildly.

“Don’t piss yourself,” I said, holding my cheek and scrambling to my feet.

The zombie ignored Slash’s machinations and took an awkward step toward me. I was faster, and back on my feet before it got within arm’s reach. I tried to ignore my dagger dangling from its arm because the sight of it was absolutely ridiculous, circled to the zombie’s bad foot side, and lunged, stabbing with my dagger.

The blade sank into the flesh like I was puncturing a half-full sack of grain. It came back out mostly clean, with only three small specks of goo dotting it. I moved, stabbed again when the zombie’s balance was thrown off, and moved away to keep the angle on its injured side. Over and over, I moved and stabbed with successful lunges. All the while, its Health slithered toward death.

“Hurry,” Slash yapped from behind the zombie, racing to its side and jerking forward on his front paws like he meant to launch a fresh attack. “I can’t keep it distracted all night, and I can’t keep carrying the weight of the entire team.”

“He’s tough,” I said, lunging and stabbing, and ignoring my dog’s boasting. “Keep doing what you’re doing. It’s working.”

“Of course it is,” Slash said, sounding insulted. “I’m pretty much an expert monster hunter now.”

I stabbed and moved, stabbed and moved, and broke into a sweat as I gradually whittled down the zombie’s health. As the red filling inside its Health bar fell to a sliver, the creature wobbled.

“Get it! Get it!” Slash barked angrily, still a safe distance away.

“I am!” I stabbed again. The zombie’s Health was so low its Health appeared as a red highlight on the far end of the meter.



Slash dashed in, snipped at the zombie's ankle, and jumped away with a yelp. He spit on the ground, even though he didn't make contact with the creature. "Tastes like kimchi."

"You've never had kimchi."

The undead creature moaned, long and mournful, and then withered to the ground like one of those blow-up auto dealership dolls.

**BOOM!**

**YAY, YOU KILLED SOMETHING THAT WAS  
ALREADY DEAD. BET YOU FEEL ACCOMPLISHED,  
DON'T CHA?**

**+15 XP**

**YEAH, YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T ASK FOR  
ANYTHING MORE THAN THAT. IT'D BE  
EMBARRASSING.**

"There," Slash said, bounding forward, his ears flapping, "that's how you do it." He watched the zombie's non-dead corpse fade like a mist slowly blown apart by a soft breeze.

We looked at each other.

"Shit," he said, snarling. "You didn't loot it. Do I have to do everything?"

"What would I do without you?" I asked, picking up my pathetic dagger resting in the dirt. I flipped it in the air, catching it by the handle, and wagged the blade at my pup. "One thing I am doing soon is finding a merchant." I wagged the blade again. "I need to buy better weapons."

## WHY CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS?



In the morning, over a meal of berries, bread, and water, Slash and I spent our available Ability Points. Our menu stated we'd receive the next point at ten thousand XP. That was a long way off unless we got into a major fight with something we had no business fighting. I didn't trust the game designers or Dude Bro to not put us in another situation like that, but I couldn't control them or their actions. All I could do was be proactive where and when I could. Proactive and prepared.

Darkworld was similar to other games, the Ability Tree would expand its branches as we progressed. I wanted to be smart about how I spent my point, always with an eye toward what it could become as I leveled. The Planting Yield was a win, but there was only so much wheat we could plant with limited space. Though I could spend gold to upgrade the field or unlock another, that just meant more work.

And to what end? We could only eat so much bread, and I hadn't learned how to craft beer yet. The rest would go to waste, or we'd have to travel into town or find a merchant to sell the excess. All of which sounded wonderful if Darkworld were a peaceful strategy game. It wasn't. Wouldn't be. Ever. My butcher would show up on our doorstep one day. We had to be ready. Becoming a docile farmer wouldn't keep me alive and my existence in the metaverse sustained.

“Can your map point out travelers, like merchants?” I asked Slash.

“What would they look like?” he said, curled up in a ball and intently watching his tail twitch. Every few seconds, he’d snap at it, catch it, yelp, and let go before repeating the process all over again.

“How would I know? You’re the one with the fancy map, not me.”

“There’s a ton of symbols. Let me play with them and see what I can come up with.”

“Perfect.”

While he did that, I pulled the trigger and spent my point on upgrading my **Resource Yield**.

**BOOM!**

**ABILITY POINT -1**

**WOOD YIELD +5%**

**STONE YIELD +5%**

The new yield buffs were helpful, for sure, but the biggest joy I got from spending the point was seeing the Ability Tree expand. Two faded lines angled away from the **Resource Yield** buff to the bottom of my mindscreens, falling out of sight. Like always with this menu, I couldn’t see what those options were. That didn’t bother me. Once I received my next Ability Point, the menu should scroll. Then, I’d see the next phase of Abilities.

“What are you spending your point on?” I asked my pup after closing my menus.

Without looking away from his twitching tail, he said, “Investigation.”

“Good choice.”

“Mmm,” he mumbled, distracted. “It gave me extra buffs for my Investigation, Perception, and Insight, but only added another percentage to my actual Investigation buff. That’s bullshit.” He swatted at his tail, pinning it. He dove in,

chomping on it, yelping, and releasing it before watching it move back and forth again.

“It’ll help.”

“I guess... Oh, hey, my map can show me merchants, but it’s limited to the areas of the map I can see. It’s not like the player camps. I can see a lot of them in the foggy area. But they’re the only symbols in those parts. Merchants are different. They have little wagon icons.”

“How do you know? Is that what your menu says?”

“Yes, but I also see one.”

I sat up. “You see a merchant on your map?”

Watching his tail, he didn’t answer.

“Slash?” I said a little more forcefully to get his attention.

“Huh?”

His distant answer encouraged me to snap my fingers near his muzzle. “Hey. Do you see a merchant now?”

“Yes.” He stopped tracking his tail to shoot me a frustrated look before jerking his chin to the north. “That way.”

“How far?”

A short pause for calculation later, he said, “Two miles.”

I was on my feet. “Come on.”

He jerked up. One of his ears pinned backward. “What? Now?”

“Yep. We need to sell the excess wheat and bread and spend gold on stuff we need. Unless you want to keep going without?”

Slash flipped over, his Chihuahua legs flailing. “Wait.”

I wasn’t even to the lean-to when he caught up. We filled our respective Inventories with as much of the wheat and bread as we could carry without encumbering ourselves.

“Should we bring stone?” my pooch asked.

“No one needs to buy stone. Plus, it weighs more, which means we couldn’t bring as much bread. I’m betting any merchant in the world would pay more for baked bread than cold rock, even if they wanted to buy it.”

“How do you know? We might have accidentally mined precious gems or something.”

“I can promise you we haven’t. Come on. Let’s see if we can catch them. If we buy enough, maybe they’ll come back this way more often.”

The day was early, so we had plenty of daylight ahead to track the merchant indicator on Slash’s map. I pulled mine up occasionally, mostly to see if I could pick out any interesting additions to my map, but nothing caught my eye. All I saw inside our fog of war feature were the plains and forests of the area. The mountain range was just to the top lip of my map, but I didn’t see a label for it.

I really did need to use my map more often. In Darkworld, the game seemed to give out XP for using its features. By not using mine, I was playing a dangerous game, becoming ever more reliant on Slash and what he saw on his. If anything happened to his ability to map read, or even to his map feature, we were screwed. Yet, pulling up my map right now and keeping it up were two unique challenges. A cost came with every decision.

“Are we close?” I asked the pup after a mile.

“Yes,” he said, trotting ahead and striking his pointer pose. “There’s a road just around that hill. It doesn’t look like they’re moving.”

“Stationary merchant? Good sign.”

“There’s another dot there.”

“You think it’s another player?”

“Give me a second.” Standing still and staring straight ahead, not in the way dogs did when they saw something they might need to chase, he looked frozen. Freaky, if you didn’t know what you’re looking at. Finally, he finished his analysis.

“Well, this is frustrating. I can tell what player camps look like, but I can’t tell if that dot is a player or an NPC.”

“Only one way to find out. Ready?”

“You bet. Maybe they’ll be friendly, and you can buy me beefy treats.”

Before we introduced ourselves to the player, we were going to do recon. Justifying that decision to Slash took a good part of the walk to the merchant. Even though we’d done the very same thing with Lukieboy81, he didn’t seem interested in using practical caution this time. The thought of getting dog treats from the merchant or another player was too tempting, I guessed.

But as the forest thinned out as we neared the intersecting roads, Slash behaved. Staying at my side, we hung back two hundred yards from where the merchant’s wagon stood at the side of a wide road. We were behind the wagon, still provided anonymity by the tree coverage. We had a relatively safe egress if the other player showed the potential for hostility. If it was an NPC, we had no worries. The shadows also provided us with a minimal amount of protection. Not much, but still better than the stranger.

“I can’t see much except the bottom of one set of legs,” Slash whispered.

“Do you see the other person on your map?”

“Yep. Still where they’ve been.”

“Close?”

His tiny black nostrils sniffed at the air. Laying on his stomach next to me, he lifted a paw. “They’re on the other side of the wagon, according to their dot on my map. It’s right there.” He jabbed his paw as if his map hung right in front of our eyes. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Blocks braced the covered wagon’s thick wheel. Two draft horses were tethered to trees a short distance away, eating grass. Colorful banners hung limply from each of the four corners. The wagon was constructed of a rich red wood I didn’t recognize.

“Let’s move. I want to get a better angle. Maybe we’ll figure out where this player is.”

We pulled back into the protection of the forest and made our way west, parallel to the road. The diversion took us farther from the wagon, but it also put more space between us and the other person. I could only hope that if they were a player and hostile, their map skills sucked as much as mine. Slash kept me updated about their inactivity, but we didn’t understand what we were seeing on his map until we made a long loop to put the scene in a profile view.

A silk canopy jutted from the wagon, providing the merchant with protection from the high sun. Two angled poles kept the canopy aloft, stretching eight feet away. To each side, tilted, tall open-top boxes were filled with goods. Vegetables and fruits were on one side. Because of the merchant’s layout, the near-side displays were blocked from view.

My stomach growled at the sight of the food. Apples, oranges, breads, corn cobs, pies, and cakes filled the display boxes. The fire he’d built at the side of the wagon filled the air with its aroma. An enormous pot hung over it. Supported by an iron bar attached to a thick wagon beam, he’d swayed the pot over the fire. The ladle’s neck stuck out of the pot. A scent of beef stew and potatoes wafted into the air.

The merchant had his back to us. Broad-shouldered but rotund, he wore a thick wool robe even though he stood near the heat, stirring the soup. His hair was long, strands of black and silver, hung in a ponytail between his shoulder blades.

As much as I wanted to put a bowl or ten of soup in my gut, we hung back. As attractive as the thought of spending all our gold here with the merchant was, the vision of the merchant’s company kept me rooted.

The woman sat on the ground opposite the merchant’s wagon. She didn’t look interested in carrying on a conversation with him. She’d crossed her legs. A bag sat next to her, full. A rough bow leaned against the bag, easily within her reach. She didn’t look up or down the road. Instead, she

leaned forward, peeling bark from a thin stick, her head cast down.

Her wool tunic and pants were practical for surviving in Darkworld. The tunic looked heavy and was belted at her waist. To my envy, her leather boots looked sturdy. Her hair was dark and drawn back in braids. Her brown skin made it impossible to tell her story. Maybe Native?

There was an air of strength about her, even at this distance. Maybe it was the way she dressed or the fact she sat in the open, apparently unconcerned about threats that gave me that feeling.

Above her head, her name floated in the air. **Gaming Gal.** Not very entertaining or original, the name didn't give me much to go on about her personality. But who was I to criticize when mine was just my first name?

“She’s hot. I mean, for a human. Bet you want to hump her.”

I shook my head. He was right. She was attractive. Very much so. Though the last thing I was thinking about was romance of any kind. Who had the energy for that shit when you were trying to survive day-to-day? Plus, when I got back to the real world, my effort would go into seeing if Tess and I could smooth things over. Right now, my energy was aimed at uncovering the type of player I was looking at. “Focus, buddy.”

“Are we just going to sit here in the weeds all day, stalking her, or are we going to go say hi?”

“We need to figure out if she’s hostile first.”

“I want food. Let’s introduce ourselves. She looks nice.”

“No, hang on a sec—”

Slash scrambled to his feet and bounced off to the open road before I finished my sentence.

“Slash!” I said quietly but strongly as sunlight gleamed off the spikes on my pup’s leather jacket.



He ignored me, trotting toward the woman while swishing his tail back and forth.

Gaming Gal looked up from her stick as if she'd expected to see a seven-pound Chihuahua roaming through this game world. Her face brightened. A grin split her face. She opened her arms as Slash neared.

He lowered his head, still wagging his tail, and slowed his approach. His steps were still light, and his thin ears flapped like tiny wings. I'd seen him do this a thousand times, usually at the dog park, and always to female dog owners. A charmer.

"Hi, little guy," the woman said, patting her leg with one hand.

Slash jumped into her lap, turning to face in my direction, and licked her cheek when she bent forward.

I pushed myself to my feet. "Little shit. Time to make friends, I guess. Or die trying."

## HARD BARGAIN



I felt awkward walking up on Gaming Gal. She'd noticed me as soon as I stepped out, watching me approach as if she knew I'd been hiding. She'd glance down at Slash occasionally, but merely to cover the fact that she appeared as wary about me as I did about her.

I stopped fifteen feet away. Equipping any of my weapons would have been a gross miscalculation. She didn't make a move for her bow. When her eyes met mine, I tried to smile. Her dark eyes sparkled with insight as if she could read my deepest secrets.

"Hi," I said clumsily.

"Hi," Gaming Gal said, still petting Slash.

That little fucker looked up at me from her lap, his mouth curled in a smile. The light *thump-thump* of his tail hitting her wool tunic was the only sound he made. Truly playing up the adorable pup role.

"I don't mean any harm," I said, finding words hard to form. "Just looking to trade with the merchant. My name is Brad."

She raised her thick eyebrows. A sparkle of humor painted her eyes. "I guessed that." She looked skyward, just above my

head, and I realized I'd made a fool of myself. Of course, she'd know my name since it floated over my head.

I fidgeted. "Yeah. Still getting used to this. A little too crazy. Living inside a video game."

Her eyes burrowed into me. Then she broke off her analysis and looked at Slash, still scratching behind his ears. "He's a cutey."

Slash yipped, smiling so broadly that his muzzle wrinkled. Freaking brat.

"Careful, he's a real killer."

She leaned her head forward. "He looks it. Very ferocious."

On cue, the little jerk threw his head skyward and howled so passionately that his little lips flapped.

"Oh, such a brave boy," she said, giving him a snuggle.

I smirked at my dog, waiting for him to say something. Instead, he simply leaned into the ear scratches.

She looked away from him and back at me. The smile he'd elicited slipped away. Not unfriendly, she was still on guard. Probably where her air of confidence came from. She was a badass, and she knew it. "Nice to meet you, Brad. I'm Kira."

I glanced at her gaming name floating above her head.

Her eyes registered my silent question. "Don't read into it too much," she said. "When I was pulled into the game, as you know, I didn't realize how little time I had to choose a display name. I went with something simple that would keep creeps from learning too much about me."

I didn't remember getting a choice in which gamer name I displayed. Probably because I missed it when I missed every other bit of legalese written on the chest I'd opened. "Smart decision."

A corner of her mouth quirked up. "Is Brad your real name?"

I chuckled. Called out on my foolishness so quickly. “Yeah.”

She gave me a smug look. “Impressive.” Her eyes traveled from my head to my feet. “Especially for a guy walking around Darkworld without armor... Unless your loincloth is reinforced?”

Slash yipped. The little fucker was laughing at me. “Hardly.” I jerked my thumb at the NPC merchant. “I’m hoping he’s got a pair of shoes.”

She held her smile. “Not an impressive selection. Some weird stuff too. Not unless you’ve picked up a lot of coin drops.”

“Figured.” I pointed at her armor. “Mind me asking how you got all your gear so quickly?”

“A lot of grinding and earning gold, and finding any merchant I could to trade the crap I didn’t need,” Kira said. “Exhausting, but worth it. You must be freezing at night?”

“We’ve got a decent setup. I’m a geek about campfires. Love them. We built a huge one as soon as we got settled, so that’s kept us alive. He needs it too.”

She looked down at Slash and gave him another scratch behind his ear. He tipped his head to give her better access. “I’ll bet. He’s a little one. Is he a game mascot?” She jerked when Slash growled quietly.

“Nope. All mine.”

Her sharp brown eyes widened. “How’d that happen? My guide told me that the game has players with pets, but he’s the first I’ve seen. Every other one I’ve seen has been an NPC or one of the bullshit game characters.” She curled her free arm around him, dedicating both to the dog.

Ah, she swore too? Attractive, confident, and not afraid to cuss, even to a stranger. As long as she didn’t kill me, maybe I was looking at my first friendly relationship with an actual person in Darkworld.

“He was with me when I opened the chest. That’s how he got sucked into the game. It’s been nice having him around.”

“I’ll bet. Darkworld is a lonely place. I take it you’re as happy about this as I am?”

“Not excited to be here?”

“I own a business in St. Louis.” She looked around, whipping an arm in the air. “This isn’t doing much for its prospects.”

“Sucks. Are you on your own?”

Her gaze hardened instantly. “Part of my strategy of not dying is to be careful about what I share. Especially with someone I don’t know.”

“Oh, yeah, I get it. I do the same. It’s cost me, but I prefer being alive and regretting bad game choices to making the wrong choices and winding up dead.”

One corner of her mouth crooked up. “Pretty smart for a guy running around this twisted fantasy world wearing nothing but his underwear.”

That drew a laugh. “I have my moments.” A brief, awkward silence followed. Neither one of us knew how to proceed, it seemed. How could we? I could turn my back and she could jab a knife in it. She might think I’d do the same, even though she still sat cross-legged on the ground. Hardly an offensive position, and one that wasn’t much for the defensive aspect, either. My gut told me she was on the up and up. Sure, if I trudged into her camp, she’d probably slice me open without breaking a sweat. But something about Kira told me she might be someone to consider working with. “Listen, I didn’t mean to pry. I don’t have any ambitions, either. Not anything more than enjoying a conversation with a living, breathing person. That, and getting out of Darkworld as soon as I can, as alive as I can.”

She nudged her chin at the merchant, who was still stirring his soup. He hummed an uplifting melody as he worked. A pleasant-sounding tune that would have fit right in with the

cheery parts of the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack. “They’re not much for stimulating conversation, are they?”

“Not even remotely. Though, to be honest, I haven’t come across many. Or other players, for that matter.”

“Entrants.”

“Huh?”

“We’re entrants, not players. At least, according to my guide.”

“Mine says that too, but I’m not a willing participant, so I’ll be damned if I refer to myself that way.”

“Rebel, huh? Good to know. I’m not crazy about the title either. Not much of a gamer either. No time for that when I’m working my ass off to keep my gym open. I used to be, as a kid and in my freshman year in college. Then I got serious about life. Shit, I don’t even want to be called a player. I *want* to be in St. Louis, running my place. I want to be called Kira.” She bobbed her head. “Or Ms. Hunter, if I don’t like someone.”

“Hunter? Your last name is Hunter?”

“Yep. Is there a problem with that?”

I rubbed a hand through my hair and chuckled at the madness of this. “Not at all. Sort of badass. Just a little too on-the-nose in a reality where we’re living in a video game, and you just admitted to hunting for gear and gold.”

The stiffness of her expression loosened as she relaxed. “Like a bad Hollywood action hero, huh?”

I made a finger-thumb gun gesture, flicking my thumb down in the classic firing motion. “Bingo.”

“I’ve told you mine. Care to share yours?”

Slash yipped. There was a glint of deviousness in his eyes, and I knew he was about to give me a ton of shit once we were alone. I couldn’t wait to hear his thoughts on this exchange.

“Wright.”

“Brad Wright? Could you be any more white?”

Damn, she had guts. What had started out as a careful investigation into meeting another player was turning into an enjoyable exchange that provided a reprieve from the stress of the daily grind. “Oh, I’m white as white gets.”

Slash yipped again, receiving a fresh round of ear scratches from Kira.

“God, he’s just so adorable.”

“You’re falling into his trap.”

She was looking down at him when she said, “I can think of worse places to be. Like my place.”

“Here? In the game?”

She didn’t look up, so I couldn’t confirm it by seeing her non-verbal cues, but her tone dropped, sounding almost sad. “Do you know how long you’ve been here?”

“In Darkworld? No. I’ve sort of lost track. A few weeks would be my guess.”

“That’s what I figured too. Maybe a little longer. Weeks that have felt like an eternity.” She looked up at me now. Her eyes, hard and intense, seemed to soften. “I don’t know how you’re playing, but I’ve been pretty aggressive. I’m guessing, between knowing what it’s taken for me to get geared up like I am while looking at you, that you’re not playing the same way. Guess what? I’ve got shit-all to show for it except the clothes on my back, miscellaneous gear, and weapons. I just earned my first spell two days ago. My camp is bare bones. Fucking miserable, I swear. Every time I lay down to sleep, I wonder if I’m going to wake up again. I’ve got no protection from predators or players. Let’s just say I’ve slept like shit since this kicked off.”

I wasn’t about to invite Kira to our camp, but maybe there was a way we could help each other.

“We had an undead visitor in the camp last night.” I figured easing my way into seeing if she was willing to work together would be more effective than being a bludgeon.

“Oh, those sonofabitches are everywhere.”

“Are they?”

Her face scrunched. “Do you not get out often?”

I made a whirling motion with my finger, pointed skyward. “I tend to hang around the part of the forest near our camp. Safer that way.”

“That explains your get-up.”

“Man, hating on the threads.”

“Lucky for you, there isn’t much there to hate on.”

Slash’s immediate yip didn’t need interpretation.

Kira snickered. Her face brightened with her smile. “Ha! Almost like he understands me.”

“Yeah,” I said, shooting my pup a sneer when Kira paid him the attention he so desperately desired. He stuck his tiny, pink tongue out at me when she wasn’t looking. “Sometimes, he’s too smart for his own good.” Deciding that moving the conversation away from my mysteriously quiet pup was the better choice, I asked, “Can I ask why you’re hanging out here? So close to a merchant? Could be trouble if the wrong player comes by.”

“Is that you? The wrong kind of player?” she asked, not looking remotely bothered. Her small nose twitched playfully, adding to her already stunning appearance.

“No. I’m the guy who minds his own business and doesn’t cause trouble for anyone else, including NPCs. Well, unless they cause trouble for me. Oh, and I’m the kind of player who just wants to see the other side of this damn game and get back to my unexciting-but-very-real life.”

She seemed to weigh my response. “Good to hear. I headed to the forest because I wanted to get as far away from a bunch of players and NPCs as possible until I got the hang of the game. My guide recommended I not go so deep into the forest, but I didn’t listen. I wish I had.”

“Why’s that?”



“Even though I can handle myself, the toll gets heavy after a while.”

“I hear that. Sort of tired of playing medieval knight whenever I’m not farming and building a better, more defensible camp. Doing all the work gets exhausting.”

Slash barked directly at me while sitting in Kira’s lap. He even followed up the bark with a tiny growl for good measure.

Kira pulled back, watching him before turning to me and shaking her head. “I swear to God, it’s like I’m on a hidden camera show with this dog.” She lifted him. With her hands wrapped around his belly, his front legs jutting forward, stiff as a log. Kira bounced him slightly. “You. Are. Just. So. Cute.”

Slash licked her cheek.

“Well, I guess I should give him back and let you get on your way. You didn’t come all this way to chat. Careful with the merchant. He’s one of the tougher negotiators I’ve dealt with.”

The middle-aged merchant was still working on his soup and humming a new tune, appearing completely uninterested in a pair of players just a few feet away. I guessed, if we weren’t spending money on his goods, he didn’t care to pass the day with us. Such was the way of blessings, intentional or otherwise, of the AI.

“Negotiate?”

She shrugged. “Well, unless you want to pay his going rate. I wouldn’t. Especially with him. He’s out of his mind with some of those prices.”

“Good to know. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She gave Slash one last round of belly rubs before setting him back on the ground with care. “Nice meeting you.” That was to Slash. Just as I was turning, she added, “And you, too, Brad.”

“Same here. Thanks for the info.”

“Hope it helps.”

“If we see you around again, Kira, do you mind trading updates on the game?”

She looked at me with narrowed eyes, analyzing my question. After a short, but awkward bit, she said. “I like that idea.”

I smiled, encouraged by the exchange. We hadn’t done anything significant, but we had laid the groundwork to team up with another player, and that was something. I especially enjoyed it because our cautious cooperation was the antithesis of what the game creators wanted, I’d bet.

Turning away, without Kira shoving a knife between my shoulder blades, I approached the merchant.

“Good day to you, sir,” the merchant said, turning to face me. “How may I be of assistance?”

“Hi. I want to look at your wares.”

He let go of the soup ladle, took a step back, and opened his arms. “Then, my friend, feast your eyes upon my offerings. Feel free to examine the merchandise, but I ask that you allow me to pour a sample of the soup if that is to your liking.”

This close to the pot, the soup definitely was. As hungry as Slash and I had been, and after eating nothing but berries and bread for far too long, the guy could have boiled possum in that pot and I’d venture a taste.

“Sounds good. Give me a sample, please.”

Slash barked.

“And I’m going to need a separate bowl for my dog.”

A look of confusion passed over the merchant’s face. “For your... Ah, yes. Of course,” he said after looking down and spotting my wee man. He rubbed his hands together. “Let me get those samples for you.”

I waved him away. “No need for the samples. Two full bowls.”

“Coming right up.”

**SOUP x2**

## -2 GOLD

Two bowls of soup for two gold? A tad expensive, and didn't bode well for the rest of our negotiations. With bowls in hand, I set one on the dirt road for Slash. "Enjoy it, buddy. I'm going to look at what else he's got. Be a good boy. Stay."

Slash looked up at me with narrowed eyes. I silently dared him to speak. Instead, he dipped his tongue in the soup, a tentative first taste. The second, and every following taste, wasn't as cautious or polite. He enjoyed the soup with a constant blur of slurping scoops.

I sipped mine as I looked through the tables to the right. They'd been blocked from view when we were spying on the merchant and Kira, so they were my first target. Even more so because, no matter how much I wanted to buy all the fruits and vegetables and the entire pot of soup, I needed to focus on sustainable goods.

I immediately understood why Kira said she was exhausted by the amount of grinding she'd been doing in order to outfit herself in real clothes. I'd wanted footwear more than anything. Even sandals were preferable to being barefoot. I'd never get the sensation of the Gloomswamp muck out of my head.

I started with the sandals, figuring they'd be the cheapest footwear, giving me a baseline for negotiations. I've hated negotiating prices for anything my entire life. It was annoying, awkward, and time-consuming. Probably half the reason I overpaid for too many things. Best to make this as quick and painless as possible.

The sandals were soft leather. A brown strap crossed over the top. Sewn to it, a piece of leather provided support and security for the heel.

I held the sandals aloft. "How much for these?"

"For you, good sir, I could part with those for one thousand gold."

One thousand? Had I heard him correctly? "You're kidding."

“Kidding?”

“Jesting.”

The merchant put a fat hand to his chest. “I can assure you I would not jest. Not about my wares. No, sir.”

“These are sandals, and you want a thousand gold for them?”

“A fair price.”

“A rip-off.” I set the sandals down and grabbed one of the leather boots next to it. Dickering sucked.

These were soft leather. Their soles, thick. Thankfully, the heels were three inches too high to be practical in a world like this, so I didn’t have to worry about the price the merchant was going to quote. Still, I wanted to see what he’d throw at me.

“And these?”

He was slightly more hesitant this time, maybe afraid of scaring me off. “Two thousand, sir.”

That was more gold than I had. I set the boot down, watching him carefully cover a frown.

Slash’s slurping had stopped. I glanced over, his bowl was empty, with no dog in sight. I scanned for him as my hand drifted to the next pair of footwear. I couldn’t see him because he was right under me, nudging my shin. I smiled down at him until I saw what he held. I was about to ask the merchant about the price of the next pair of boots when Slash stunned me. Not sandals. Not boots. Not sabatons. Not whatever else medieval people would wear to avoid Gloomswamp muck jamming up in between their toes. A legitimate red canvas high-top sneaker hung from his mouth. Its thick, white shoelaces dangled from the top eyelet. Slash dropped the sneaker and yipped.

I put my foot alongside it. The perfect length. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Talk about anachronistic. How the hell did a sneaker fall out of a California skater boy’s high school locker into the middle of Darkworld?

I was almost afraid to ask what the merchant would need to take these off his hands but figured the third time was a charm.

“Ten gold, kind sir, would you be so kind to do me that favor.” His mouth twisted as if someone had just shoved a lemon slice in his maw. “I promise, Karl Von Schlüssel would never allow such... such a putrid pair of footwear to mar his offerings. Allow me to apologize for any offense you have taken from having to set your eyes upon them. A mystery, it is, how they appeared in my wagon one day. By the gods, such an atrocity was not placed there deliberately. Not by me, sir. I assure you.”

A box appeared, hanging in the air between us.

## PURCHASE SNEAKERS FOR 10 GOLD?: YES/NO

“Ten?” I asked, not sure if I’d heard him correctly after his earlier attempts at, almost literally, highway robbery.

His eyebrows drew together. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.

Before he could kick off another round of negotiations, I focused on the transaction box hanging between us and clicked **YES**.

**BOOM!**

**MOVER AND SHAKER.**

**YOU’VE MADE YOUR FIRST PURCHASE!**

**+5 XP**

**ITEM RECEIVED: HORRENDOUS CONTEMPORARY  
FASHION STATEMENTS, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS  
HIGH-TOP SNEAKERS.**

**+1 TO DEFENSE**

**-10 GOLD**

“Well played, sir,” the merchant said, his beaming smile as inauthentic as a vegan eating a medium-rare steak on a dare.

“Thanks.”

“If you would like to see...”

As the merchant droned on about the wealth of his wares, I pulled up my Character Profile. The digital representation of me still needed work, but it was growing on me. I found my new sneakers in my Armor menu—the more I used these things, the faster I was at pulling everything up—and focused on them.

**EQUIP HORRENDOUS CONTEMPORARY FASHION STATEMENTS, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS HIGH-TOP SNEAKERS?**

**YES/NO**

I clicked **YES**. Just as the red high-tops disappeared out of the Inventory box, they blinked onto my avatar’s bare feet and my Defense stat bumped up one notch.

I looked down. The red high-tops now adorned my feet. I wiggled my toes and smiled. After such a short time in Darkworld, I didn’t even care that I was wearing canvas sneakers without socks. I was just happy knowing the next swamp I stepped into wouldn’t be the most miserable experience I put my toes through.

Mood instantly improved, I set about spending our wealth of gold.

We stocked up on enough beefy treats to see Slash through a Darkworld apocalypse. Because of my pooch’s weight limitations, I had to put them in my Inventory until we got back to camp and stored them. I grabbed two more blankets for him, which stopped him from insisting I was supposedly “taking my sweet ass time building the house.” We picked up as much fruit as we could reasonably eat before it’d spoil. The merchant, to my surprise, was gracious enough to throw in two

small bags of seeds for ten gold. I'd make ten times that after I harvested the crop.

I peeked in the merchant's wagon. The interior was lined with plush velvet. Cushions were placed in every spot his goods didn't occupy. Pillows too. How nice would it be to have a pillow or ten lying around? When I asked the merchant how much they were, he told me they weren't for sale.

"Everything is."

"Not those, sir."

I had to test his will. At nearing thirty, I freaking needed a pillow. Sleeping without one highlighted every jagged joint in my neck. Shit sleep led to less productive days. Better sleep would mean I'd be fresher to tackle everything facing us.

"I'll give you ten gold for two of them."

The quick smile was supposed to make me feel guilty for low-balling him, I suspected. "I cannot part with them, as I said, sir."

"Fifteen."

A deep sigh this time. The effort sounded like it required a lot of the merchant's energy. "My soup is burning. I must attend to it."

I thought he was kidding until he turned away and started back toward the pot.

"Fifty."

He stopped in his tracks, casting a look over his shoulder.

"Seventy?" I said with way less conviction than I wanted.

The merchant turned to face me now, remaining silent.

"Look man, they're pillows. Okay? Let's not get stupid."

The merchant stared blankly for a moment like he didn't understand me. "I will accept that exchange, sir."

**PURCHASE PILLOWS (2) FOR 70 GOLD?**

**YES/NO**

This was going to hurt. I clicked **YES**.

**BOOM!**

**YOU'RE A WIMP. WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO  
START WRITING A DIARY, KID?**

**ITEM RECEIVED: PILLOWS (2).**

**-70 GOLD**

**SLEEP WELL. YOU PAID FOR IT.**

Slash barked and whipped around in a circle.

“Uh, uh, buddy. You’ve got three blankets. All of which are four times bigger than you. You’re fine. The pillows are for me.”

He turned his head away, looking down the road and side-eyeing me to make sure I was still paying attention to him.

Impressed that he still didn’t break and speak in front of Kira and the merchant, I said, “You’ll survive. Ready to head back?”

He growled and looked at the pot of soup.

“Sorry, wee man, but I can’t carry anymore.”

Wouldn’t you know it? The little ass scooted his front legs forward until he was lying on his stomach. His ears drooped, folded in half. As he crossed his paws and laid his head on them, he whimpered.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Awww. Is he okay?” Kira was on her feet, looking concerned. She shot the merchant a look that could have frozen the sun. “Did you slip something into the soup?”

The merchant shot his hands up, and the sleeves of his robe slipped down to his elbows. “I swear, my lady. I have done nothing.”

“No. Slash is pouting. That’s all.”

She stood a few steps away. Just shy of my height, she looked even more fierce now that she was standing. Her bag and bow were slung over her back. She smirked. “Nice going



with the merchant. Hope you plan on doing a lot of grinding. You're going to need the gold with negotiation skills like that."

"That bad?"

"Bad." Her analytical eyes twinkled.

Before I realized how it sounded, I said, "Would you be willing to give me pointers?"

Bad pickup line or not, it worked.

With a hitch of her basic bow, she winked. "Let's chat while we walk."

STRANGERS IN A REALLY  
STRANGE LAND

“Do you usually go wandering off with strange men?” I asked once we were out of earshot of the merchant. Not that it mattered. The NPC had gone back to his soup the moment I stopped buying goods from him, whistling happily. I would be too if I’d earned myself a thousand gold in the same amount of time it takes to make a PB&J sandwich. We made back half our coin by selling the goods we’d brought. That helped to balance the sick feeling in my gut about how much gold I was going to need to get my hands on to buy better gear.

“Only with those who bark and are as adorable as all get out,” Kira said without missing a beat.

Slash yipped, trotting to her—not my—side.

“Shush.”

“Oh, leave him be,” she said. “He’s smart enough to know where his protection is coming from.”

“He still licks his own junk,” I said, knowing it would tempt a retort from Slash. He remained quiet. His whimper only made her stop and cuddle him. What a master he was.

The dirt road narrowed the farther we walked from the merchant. Our camp was slightly behind us and to our left.

That should mean the city Slash and I found from the cliff side was ahead. If that were the case, I'd expect the road to widen, though that didn't look to be the case. Either my perception was off or fewer players and NPCs traveled to the city than I imagined. There might be no reason for this road to be packed like a Los Angeles highway during, well, any part of the day. A city full of NPCs might not need to leave. Still, it was odd.

With the forest hanging so close to the road, the day, though still only nearing noon, felt longer. Thick branches hung over the road. Ferns pushed up to the ditch. Though the dirt had been worn down by untold scores of travelers over the time of the game's existence, I only heard the crunching of pebbles under our steps. Everything around us was still. The air held a light smell of dust. The ruts on the right side of the road, heading toward the city, were deeper than those on the left.

Kira noticed too. "Do you always stomp around like one of those white guys in heavy metal videos?"

I looked down. My next step was already descending. Two shoots of dust shot sideways from underneath my new high-tops. I chuckled. "Blame it on my shoes. I can't tell you how good it feels to have something on my feet again after so long."

Kira shook her head. Her tight braids didn't even wiggle. "What were you thinking, trying to get through the game for so long without shoes?"

"That's the first merchant we've found. Plus, I thought I'd be able to make them at some point," I said with a bob of my shoulders.

"Have a flock of sheep, do you?"

Slash barked, making Kira jump. As he raced ahead to chase a blue jay, I noticed her hand slip away from the bow it'd gone to at his aggressive taunt.

"Yeah. Didn't think that one out, I'll admit."

"You don't say."

I had to make a choice. I hadn't planned on meeting someone I wouldn't have to fight to the death against for the entertainment of the losers who'd forced us into this game. When Slash said he saw another player near the merchant, we'd set out on a reconnaissance mission. Nothing more. But the more we shared, the more I felt the need to risk opening to Kira.

Birds chirped in nests overhead, singing songs to each other from the treetops. Under their melody, the winds rolled from the mountains, bending the crowns of the forest in a swaying dance. Cirrus clouds, stagnant, looked painted on the blue canopy above.

A pleasant enough day to establish trust, or one to open my big mouth and say something that would lead to being robbed or killed by my attractive companion.

"I was too busy building a house and setting up our farm to worry about getting something on my feet. And, no joke, after my callouses turned to concrete, stepping on hard or sharp objects stopped hurting... For the most part."

She kept walking but kept her face locked in my direction. "You're telling me you have a house *and* a farm?"

"Don't be impressed. It's not much." To trust, you had to give. Here went nothing. "The house isn't close to being finished, and I only have one field. We can't plant more than two hundred and fifty seeds at a time. One good thing about this game is that wheat doesn't take long to mature to harvest."

"I think you mean reaping."

"Huh?"

"When your fields are ready to be cut, it's called 'reaping.'"

"Ah. Gotcha. Lot of farming in St. Louis?" I winked.

She punched me in the arm, lightly. "I grew up outside the city. And, yes, there's a lot of farmland in that part of the world."

"Didn't take you as a farm girl."

“Careful, buddy. Farm girls are hardy. We can take an ass whooping and deliver them all day.”

“Oh, I know. Trust me.” As we walked, I shared a bit of my military background and the people I’d met in my time in the service. The military is famous for recruiting heavily in rural areas of the country. In eight years, I met more small-town Americans than even the most dedicated Hallmark Channel viewer who struggled to separate fact from fiction had in all their watching.

Kira was quiet. After going much farther than I planned away from our camp, she broke her silence, her words heated with passion. “Here’s the thing about this fucking game that I hate. I can take care of myself. Always have. Always will. I could farm from sun up to sun down. I can grind for loot with anyone. But I can’t do both. You know what I mean?”

I opened my mouth, about to answer, when she carried on.

“It’s like the game does this on purpose. Puts us in this rock-and-a-hard-place dilemma. Either we farm or we fight, but we can’t do both well. If we try, we’ll fail.” She flicked her arm in my direction. “Look at you. Besides the fact that you’re a terrible negotiator, you must be a badass farmer to have a field and enough wheat to bake bread to sell to merchants. Especially since you just got here. I’ll bet most players with farms are hoarding their stock.”

“We have plenty still. I didn’t sell him everything.”

Her mouth fell open, but she quickly composed herself. “See? That’s what I’m talking about. You’re rolling in bread, but you’re nearly as naked as the day you were born.” Her eyes slid down my body to my new sneakers. She pointed at them. “One of these days, we need to talk about those.”

I looked down. “Jealous?”

“More like I’m curious how they got into this world if we all fell here in leather and fur loincloths.” She reached up to tighten the tie she’d wrapped around her narrow braids. Call me a typical guy, but anytime a woman fixes or plays with her

hair, it's sexy. She looked just as good as my memories of Tess.

Damn, I missed her. Weeks away from seeing a woman that wasn't my digital guide had that effect, I guessed. Old habits dying hard.

"Me too. But I'm not going to ask too many questions." I stomped the next step even harder than the earlier ones she'd given me shit about, making her smile. A beautiful smile. Instead of thinking about things I didn't need to think about, I followed her line of reasoning. "It's almost like they want to force us into working with other players. My guide has told me how important the PvP aspect is. Has yours said the same?"

"Yep. She's said it's essential if I want to survive. None of her prior players made it out of the tests without allying with other players."

"Basically, the same thing I was told." I wanted to see where she stood on plenty of issues, but there was one that would tell me what I needed to know to understand her motivations on a deeper level. "Met your butcher yet?"

"Not yet. But I've been grinding in secluded regions. I've been hoping that'd keep me safe."

Fortune had told me the game's AI changes based on how an entrant plays, not allowing for someone to coast along. Though we'd tripped across Fuji's apple tree and had to fight the blobs as a result, that'd been an accident that might have staved off the game from pushing something worse on us. But the other instances hadn't been accidental. Was it possible that my butcher was just more motivated than hers? Would being honest with Kira cost me? What opportunities would I miss if I wasn't? "Mine introduced himself to me."

"What? Yours found you?"

"Not really. But somehow, he did that pop-up thing that our guides do."

"How does that happen? Wouldn't he have to know your avatar name or something?"

I bobbed my shoulders. “No freaking idea. Maybe we’re assigned login IDs or something, and he got his hands on that. Or maybe he bought access to get a few minutes with me.”

“Setting yourself up an OnlyFans in Darkworld? Not so smart.” She’d delivered the line so deadpan I thought she was serious until her mouth twitched. “If your butcher talked to you, best assume he knows at least your player name.” She pointed at a spot above my head. “Which isn’t very creative, by the way.”

“I’ll work on that. Maybe it’s better. A single name could give me autonomy.”

“Brad?” She scoffed. “No one else would dare use such a douche name.”

“Ouch.” I chuckled along with her.

After a moment, her head dropped. “This is nuts. Hunted in a weird place. Alone. Only ourselves to rely on.” She found my eyes again, and I felt drawn in by her analysis. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

Neither of us replied for a bit. Just as the awkward silence started weighing on me, Kira laughed.

“What?”

She shook her head. “We’re both thinking the same thing, but neither one of us has the balls to bring it up.”

I knew, and she knew. We both knew the other knew. I asked anyway. “Oh, yeah? What’s this thing we’re both thinking about?”

She stopped and turned to face me, crossing her arms.

Slash, who’d tired of chasing birds he would never catch, was thirty yards ahead, watching.

“What?”

She pursed her lips, which created adorable dimples. With a single finger, she waved up and down my body. She tucked her hand under her arm. “Though your negotiation skills suck, you’ve proved you’re good. If you’re telling the truth about

your camp. And, look, I own a gym. It might be ‘just a woman’s gym’ in your male brain, where guys think it’s not working out if you’re not lifting truck tires and grunting like you’re taking the most constipated shit ever, but I know what I’m doing. I know how a fit person should look. And, you sir, are fit.”

From thirty yards away, Slash yipped. I coughed, trying to cover his way-too-convenient timing. If he was trying to stay incognito, he failed. Thankfully, Kira didn’t seem to notice.

“So, I’m betting you can handle yourself in a fight.”

“I don’t like to fight,” I said, honestly.

“You’ll have to here.”

“I know. I already have. But that doesn’t mean I’m crazy about it. I’ll fight if I have to, but that’s it.”

She rolled her lips, tapping a finger against her shapely biceps. “What if we tried to work together? How would that look?”

What could I say? Kira was the first player I’d met who didn’t try to kill me. I had little to go off of regarding how people were playing Darkworld. Shutting ourselves up on the farm might have kept us safe from other players, but it also kept us ignorant. At some point, if I wanted to walk away from this game and return to my dead-end job, shitty apartment, and scarce romantic hopes, I needed to develop relationships. Preferably with players who wouldn’t put a knife in my back. If Kira wasn’t that type of player, who was?

I was just about to reply when something came crashing through the forest and provided the answer.



## YOUR BEAST OF BURDEN



There's a tendency Hollywood scriptwriters and novelists have when describing a creature or movie monster. Too many lean on the "something out of nightmares" tag. As trite as the saying is, it nailed what came out of the forest on the south side of the road.

Slash started barking and yipping before I saw the creature. He'd started even before I heard the racket it caused. The split-second warning from my pup probably saved Kira's life.

At first, there was only a wave of fiery purple. Something was searing, the odor landing somewhere between flesh and an unemptied dumpster.

Kira was rooted in place. A crashing of branches and shrubs announced the creature's arrival. As it charged, I snagged Kira's arm and yanked. This wasn't a movie superhero move. This was a guy reacting to a situation. Nothing more.

The purple blur blew a heat into my face so intensely, that after snagging Kira, I threw an arm up to protect myself.

A ball of dirt rose into the air as the beast skidded to a halt and turned on us. That's when I got a good look at it. The beast looked straight out of a video game, that was for sure.

Fiery, purple scales covered its entire body. From the front of its snout to the heart-shaped tip of its tail. Pyres of purple fire burst from the ball of flame which wrapped its entire body, as if wearing a fiery force field.

The creature threw its long neck back, whipping its elongated head around like a whip's fall. It roared, sounding like a rock guitarist smashing his instrument against the stage at the end of a concert.

Behind us, Slash's barks pitched in fear.

"Stay there!" I ordered as I pulled Kira back.

She unslung her bow.

"I don't think an arrow—" I pulled my Inventory window up and equipped my pathetic daggers. My critique of her weapon, aside from being hypocritical, thinking she couldn't do damage to a five-foot tall, fifteen-foot-long scaled alligator-thing, fell short as I stopped mid-sentence.

Kira wasn't just going to fire arrow after arrow into that thing. Droplets of green goo hung from her arrow tip.

"What's that?" I shouted over the roaring alligator-thing.

Her narrowed eyes focused on the beast as she slowly backed away, pulling the bowstring. "Poison dart spell."

The beast roared and slammed its thick front legs down. The road under my feet vibrated. Its name hovered above its head.

### **BURDEN BEAST LVL 3**

Shit. This was a level three beast? The highest level I'd fought so far.

It rose again and fell back to the road just as Kira fired, causing her arrow to go sailing over the beast's head.

"Shit." She shuffled back as another arrow blinked into existence, already braced against bow and hand. An advantage of video game fighting over real life. She didn't need to draw from her quiver. One second she'd fired, and the next, a new arrow waited. Green goo dripped from this next arrow.

Slash dashed forward, stopping just behind me.

“I told you to stay back.”

His legs shook like Darkworld was going through its worst earthquake ever. “You need my help.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I also saw a small spot in the dirt under him that was darker than all the patches around it. He’d pissed.

“Check your status,” I said as I hunkered and started moving to the side, away from my pooch and Kira.

“Why?”

“Your debuff.”

“Oh. Shit.” After a second, he howled. “Noooooooooooo. Brad, the Night Terrors is active.”

With the debuff active, his Agility was decreased by two percent. As I pushed around to the side of the alligator-thing, I thrust my hand up, making sure Slash knew I was not playing around. “Stay there, wee man.” As I rotated, the fiery beast did as well. “You might not be able to dash back in time. Let’s not push it.”

“I want to heeeeeeeelp.”

“Stop howling!” The fiery alligator had taken notice of my wee man’s location the first time he howled. The second time was like letting the damn thing lock in.

The alligator-beast stomped forward.

Kira fired another arrow. From where I was standing, I couldn’t see it strike. I wasn’t even sure it had. The overgrown lizard only whipped its tail in her direction. The heart-shaped tip sliced through the air.

“Watch out!” I called out a moment too late.

The tail caught Kira, connecting just before the tip, taking her legs out from underneath her. She flipped over the tail as it swung around. She crashed to the ground, hard. From the other side of the beast, I heard her cry.

I couldn't get around it without putting myself right in its face. Slash was far enough away, barking and yapping his little head off, to be safe. For now. Kira wasn't. It didn't appear the creature could shift as quickly as me, so I used that to our advantage.

I dashed at its backside, intending to tear its flank open. I glanced up at its name and Health meter as I closed, hoping Kira's attack had been successful. Glorious, glorious black space to the right side of the meter told me she'd hit the burden beast. Not only had she been successful with her arrow, but another few seconds of watching the meter as I neared told me her poison was having an effect. The beast wasn't hurting, but its Health was at about ninety percent and dripping consistently to the left each second.

To kill the monster, Kira needed to hit it with plenty of poison arrows. To do that, she needed protection.

Bad news came in a king-sized serving. I didn't have armor. The +1 to my Defense from my sneakers and the extra +1 from my sash cinching my loincloth wouldn't cut it against something this size, with that nasty whipping tail attack. If I was going to have a chance of keeping it occupied while Kira did her work, if she'd recovered, I had to out-dance the thing.

The problem was, though I could guess at the rough value of its Health, I had no clue how agile the thing was. Maybe back in the real world, I'd have a chance, even for a big guy. But here in Darkworld, especially having chosen the HARVESTER Ability, I moved as well as a glacier. My news only got worse the closer I crept to the burden beast. The purple flames licking over its scales made finding a vulnerable spot nearly impossible. Plus, with that bubble of purple haze encasing every inch of the damn thing, even if I avoided the flames, I was still going to be turned to toast by its shell.

Two feet closer was twenty-five inches too close. My torn tunic felt like a wool blanket as beads of sweat rose on my chest. No way I was getting right up on that thing. But then, how to do any damage?

I scrambled backward as fast as my mind scrambled to find a solution. The only attribute I had worth a damn was my Defense. Already buffed, the two points from my sneakers and sash put me at seventeen points. With it being a level three monster, I shouldn't have a problem taking a hit, but I wouldn't know that for sure until it hit me.

Still, this wasn't the real world. The creature might be a fire beast, but this was a game. It was two levels lower than me. Unless its strength was astronomically out of whack with all traditional game rationale, I should be able to take plenty of hits from it based on my Defense skills alone.

It was just the whole 'it's on fire' thing that made me hesitant.

Still, the day's demands hadn't drawn on my Health all that much. Essentially, I had a full Health bar, give or take a few percentages. I remembered the old tabletop games, where a player got knocked prone, and that was when they could really get messed up. Without being able to see Kira, I had to lean on my military mind conditioning of planning for the worst-case scenario.

In that mindset, the first thing I had to do was draw the stupid thing's attention. Glancing to the side of the road, I noticed a rock about the size of my two hands when placed side by side. I lifted it to my shoulder and trudged toward the burden beast. With a grunt and a thrust, it was airborne. My adrenaline surged. My breath came heavier as the rock arced through the air, on target.

The rock did what rocks that size do when it hit the fiery creature. Its head shot sideways. And... that was it. Rock, hit. Creature's head, jolted. It snapped back at me, and I swear to any bit of sanity I had left in my brain, the beast glowered.

"Shit." I scrambled back.

The burden beast turned with a stomp. The dirt road shook like one of those stupid county fair rides. The one with the metal diamond-wedged reinforced floor—which some local drunk had been hired to "safety check" before allowing minors onto—kind of rides. I spread my legs almost instinctively.

“Come on, you fucker.” I flicked my four fingers at him like an overconfident boxer people loved rooting against.

Another rock god guitar growl later, and I was skipping side to side. It snapped. I dodged easily enough, even with my crap Agility score. It telegraphed a lunge. Once more, I skirted the attack. This time, though, it was far too close for comfort since one of its strides matched five of mine. The air rippled as its flat jaws and jagged teeth came together.

As it pulled back, I chucked another rock. This one took it right in between the eyes.

The beast howled and shook its head. I wish I could say my attack had dropped its Health meter, but I was throwing stones at a van with skin, lungs, heart, and at least a loose interpretation of a brain. If its Health dropped, I didn't notice. But that could have also been because I was busy running for my life.

Somewhere in the deeper recesses of my situational awareness, I heard my dog barking. He shouted something as well, but I was dealing with enough just trying to avoid the beast coming up on my rear faster than a hummingbird who'd guzzled a pot of coffee.

Behind me, Slash carried on. Kira shouted something. I couldn't make it out, but it did a world of wonder to hear her. Her words weren't meaningless. They existed, and that meant the burden beast hadn't done her in with a single tail swipe. It also meant she could still fire at it, assuming she could while it chased me.

I jumped off the road, into the weeds, and swerved behind a tree. I dashed around a rock. The giant alligator impersonator crashed through them all, rock included. The spray of newly formed pebbles raining down around me was a 'sign of signs' that I needed to use the forest's obstacles to my advantage. I had to be careful not to put too much distance between myself and the other player who could help me, though.

I zagged against the creature's zig. With all that weight, its shift took ten times longer to correct than my movement, even with my lousy Agility. As it busied itself turning, I snagged a

thick branch and clobbered its leg. The branch broke, but the creature's leg buckled, and its Health dropped, noticeably this time.

I ran back toward the road, shouting to my pup, "What does your Cheerleader spell do?"

Kira was on her feet again, holding her head and swaying, but loading another arrow.

"It's stupid," my pup said.

The burden beast was lumbering out of the forest again.

"I don't care. We need help." My Health bar was fine but was lowering as I attacked and sprinted in avoidance. With Kira just now returning to the fight, this might turn into a battle of attrition. Not something I was interested in. Slash had a Cheerleader spell, but we'd never tested it out. With everything around camp keeping us busy, I honestly forgot to ask. Right now, it sounded like the perfect remedy to help a struggling team.

"Use it, Slash," I said as I taunted the burden beast.

Slash stood in the middle of the road, shivering. He threw his head up. "Noooooooooooooooo. I haaaaaaate it."

"Do it!" I ran straight across the road into the opposite ditch, dodging the beast, grabbed two more rocks and chucked them at the recovering monstrosity headed my way.

Kira had her bow trained on the creature, but she hadn't fired. She squinted as if it was difficult to make out.

"Now!"

"Fiiiiiiiiiiiiine. Aaaaaaaooooooooo!"

I waited until the beast was close and at full speed before sidestepping. It had lowered its head and hadn't seen me, not that I expected it to stop even if I'd announced my intentions beforehand. It split a modest tree, dropping its Health, and cracked another before coming to a halt and starting to round on me.

I'd already equipped my branch-club and went after the same joint as last time. Another round of guitar-smashing roars followed. I doubted the thing was in pain. My branch-club was an elementary weapon, hardly something capable of doing a lot of damage. The back of its knees seemed to be a weakness, though. The basic rule of engagement at this point was bludgeoning the thing into exhaustion, doing small amounts of damage with every attack while absorbing everything it threw at me. It'd work as long as its damage wasn't debilitating. I just needed to absorb it and give Kira time to recover. Right now, we didn't have the luxury of me being knocked wobbly like she'd been. Playing it safe until she recovered and my damn dog used his available spell was the way to go.

As I ran back across the road, a burst of yellow light encased Slash, followed by a chorus of angelic voices that sang "Ra! Ra! Sis boom bah!" like we were at a deep South Baptist revival. The light didn't fade until I was across the road, trying to taunt the burden beast and not laugh at my pooch.

Slash had been transformed. Where he looked like a little badass in his studded leather jacket before, now that he'd used his Cheerleader spell, his appearance had changed. As a seven-pound Chihuahua, he'd always been amusing to look at. How could something that small not be? But gone was his studded leather jacket and in its place, he wore a blue and white cheerleader outfit, complete with a skirt and a blonde wig with horribly square bangs and pigtails.

"Oh, my god. You look hilarious!"

"Fuuuuuuck yoooooooouuuu, Brad!"

A notification box popped up in my vision.

**BOOM!**

**TEMPORARY +2% TO FORTITUDE**

**+15% BOOST TO HEALTH**

"Nice!" I pumped my fist.

"Still hate youuuuuuu!"



Kira no longer wobbled. She fired arrow after arrow at the charging burden beast. The arrows didn't stop it from barreling down, but its Health bar ticked away with larger drops than previously.

It charged into the forest, missed, and lumbered in a slow turn that gave me plenty of time to strike it and dash away again. When we repeated the cycle, with Kira loading it up with arrows as it crossed the road and Slash hanging back out of the way, I noticed something else.

Once the monster's Health dropped below the fifty percent mark, its flames lowered and kept lowering with each attack. By the sixth pass, its Health fell to about a tenth. Our joint efforts vanquished its fire shell. That's when I moved in.

Its last charge was lethargic and plodding. With it nearing its end and the fire out, I equipped my ax and used the Snake Bite attack.

The world blurred by as I crossed the yards in a flash and raked my ax down the beast's hind flank.

Before it could turn, it bellowed, swayed, and tipped over. I glanced at its Health bar and saw that it was empty.

**BOOM!**

**YOU BELONG IN THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME WITH THAT PERFORMANCE! HIGH ENERGY, BABY!**

**+550 XP**

**+300 GOLD**

**+2 STRENGTH**

**NEW ATTACK!**

**ROCK N' ROLL**

**MASCOT BONUS!**

**USING YOUR CHEERLEADER SPELL FOR THE FIRST TIME. GOING IN DRAG, AND BENEFITING THE PARTY?**

**TEAM PLAYER!**  
**CHEERLEADER LEVEL 2!**

I rejoined Slash and Kira, disappointed to see my pooch now donned his studded leather jacket again.

At my approach, wearing what I was sure was a goofy smile, he lowered his head and growled. “Don’t say a goddamn word.”

Kira was slinging her bow over her shoulder but stopped to jut her chin at Slash. “When did he learn to talk?”

He lifted his head. “I had to see if I could trust you first.” His tiny nostrils sniffed at the air.

“What’s your verdict?” she said with a humored smile.

“I think you’re fine,” he said as he turned to head back up the road. “I’d hump you if we were the same species. But it’s not me you have to worry about.” He cocked his head at me. “That stubborn jackass is the one you’ve got to convince.”

Kira and I looked at each other, held a breath, and burst out with laughter.

## FEAR OF THE DARK



“Are we going to walk forever until we reach Olyndria?” Kira asked.

“Do you need to rest?” I asked, stopping. We’d walked a few miles since the fight with the burden beast. She was the one who’d taken damage, not me. Though I’d checked to see if she felt okay, I hadn’t followed that up when she said she did. Our pace had slowed because of her. Maybe she was worse off than she wanted to show. I understood. “We can split so you can head off to your camp and rest.”

She put her hands on her hips. “What makes you think I need to rest? Because I’m a woman?”

Kira had enough of an edge to her voice that I knew I’d stung her pride. “No. Of course not. But you’re the one it went after.”

She gave my arm a light punch. “Just fucking with you. And I seem to remember it going after you quite a bit. That back-and-forth shit across the road was funny. Almost like it was out of a Monty Python flick. Just needed that ridiculous soundtrack.”

“I don’t remember you laughing much when it was happening.”

“That thing packed a punch.” She put a hand to her head. “I swear, I’m still groggy.”

“How’s your Health bar? Really? Don’t play tough guy.”

She grimaced. “Worse than I’d like it to be. But I’m going to sleep for like three days when I get back to camp. Speaking of, since I’m the lady here and you’re too much of a gentleman to ask me back to your place, what do you say?”

Slash yipped. “Told you she wanted to hump.”

I snapped my fingers at my pup. “No, you didn’t. And stop saying that.” I turned to Kira, feeling like I’d missed something. The day had grown much warmer as the sun rose to its peak. I blamed that for the clamminess I felt on my neck. Better than thinking I’d given her any signs that I wanted to take her back to my camp, for any reason. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. I... I didn’t mean to. What...” I huffed. “It’s just... that. Well.”

Her hand shot up like a school crossing guard. “Please stop. This is getting awkward.” In between laughs, she explained herself. “This whole time we’ve been walking, I thought we were headed to your place so you could offer me a chance to recuperate under watch. That’s all.” She bent to scratch Slash. He offered the spot behind his ear. “And there will absolutely be no humping. Of anyone or anything belonging to me.”

An immediate silence followed her declaration. One that felt like it required filling. “Oh, of course,” I answered like a dunce.

Kira stood, wiping her hands on her pants. “Look, if I misread the signs, that’s my fault. Not yours. One nice thing about being in this. This.” She flipped her hand over and over in the air. “This fantasy world. Whatever it is. Anyway. One benefit is that we don’t have to put up with the ridiculous social mores we face back home. This is a new world. We don’t know how long we’re going to be here. Why not take this chance to establish new rules? Just because you’re a guy doesn’t mean you need to save the world. Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I need saving.” She pressed her fingers

hard enough against her temple that the skin around the four contact points paled. Her eyes, when they found me, were sharp. “I’ll go out on a limb here and trust you with information. I swear, if you use it against me and kill me, I’ll find out if Darkworld has ghosts and I’m going to come back to haunt your ass.”

I snorted. “Fair enough.”

“My Health bar is low. Like, frighteningly low,” she said. “As much as it bugs me to admit, I’d feel a lot better knowing someone had my back while I rested.” She looked around as if searching for something.

The sun beat down on the hard-packed road and into the nearby trees, casting shadows a few feet into the forest. In the distance was the roar of a river. Birds’ songs filled the forest on both sides of the road as if they were warning each other about the presence of two humans and a rambunctious dog.

The warm day was perfect for a relaxing stroll with good company. Kira was very much that. But she was a player, just like everyone. Thoughts of Lukieboy81 were never far away. They couldn’t be. Ever.

A dark perspective, for sure. One I didn’t enjoy operating under. I wouldn’t allow Darkworld to turn me into that type of player. In order to be the sort of player I wanted to be, I needed to keep myself as safe from threats as possible. The thing the military taught me all too well, in a war zone or in an air-conditioned office in a stateside staff meeting, was that fear is the catalyst for all human behavior. If you ever wanted to understand why people did what they did or anticipate what they might do, you needed to first understand what they feared.

In the military, I found my peers most often feared damage to their carefully constructed image or their next promotion. It wasn’t about bullets flying or the enemy coming over the wall. That made for great movie drama, but it didn’t fly in reality. Once I understood that most stupid decisions leaders made were driven by their fear that they wouldn’t get promoted early

or on time, it was easier to accept just how nonsensical the entire thing was.

Right now, Kira might be driven by her fear of being attacked while she was already at a risky Health level. Slash's Cheerleader spell was only temporary. After it wore off, we'd returned to our previous stats. Since she'd taken a wallop, her recovery would take far longer than mine. We hadn't rested after the fight, so her Health inched in the right direction. Only inched. In her place, I'd have the same concerns. Or she might fear my knowledge of her state and the great unknown that came with it. We didn't know each other. She didn't know my ambitions. All very reasonable.

I had one advantage, one card I could play. She was worse off than I was. She was the one in desperate need of recuperation. Not me. If she was worried about being attacked while in a weakened state, I could test to see her true motivation by simply staying away from inviting her to my camp. She could recover at hers, under my watchful eye, if she wanted. A win-win.

"What if we went back to your camp?" I said. "Slash and I can keep an eye on things while you sleep."

She winced, like something painful had jabbed her side. "My camp is a few miles into the forest. What about yours? How close are you?"

I pushed down my immediate reaction of vindication. Kira hadn't given me a reason to distrust her, and I didn't. Not yet. But I wasn't ready to extend the trust branch. Her seeming fixation with heading to our camp only kept an edge to my suspicions.

"We passed it a while back." I jabbed a thumb over my shoulder. "We're deep in the forest, too." I pointed toward the sun. "The day is half over. We've got to make a quick decision. If you don't want us at your camp, I get it. But we'd be lucky to make it back to ours today, never mind before the sun sets."

Kira groaned. "I don't mind being out at night, but I'm not crazy about the idea of a long walk in the dark with my Health

as low as it is. I'm not afraid. Just to be clear."

"Would be risky."

She looked at me like I'd just tried to make a joke that fell flat. With a sigh, she rubbed her forehead again. She slapped her hand against her leg. "My mother would kill me if she knew I was inviting a strange man back to my place. Especially one who looks like John Cena in his prime."

"Hate that guy. So white-washed. Lame. Would she know who John Cena is?"

Kira snorted. "Probably not. Momma has her stories. Soap operas. And no one messes with her shows. The only thing she allows on her TV."

Slash nuzzled against her leg. "Brad's TV is always on. Usually porn."

Kira pressed her forehead again, pinching her eyes closed. "Stop making me laugh. It hurts." She bent and scratched my pooch again. "I love that you can talk. You make for great company."

I cleared my throat. "For the record, I don't watch porn." When Kira gave me a disbelieving look, I corrected my statement and moved the conversation away from me and my adult entertainment preferences. "On my TV, I mean. And my gramps was like your mother. Had about ten shows he watched, and three of those were news. Didn't care about the television beyond that. Said it made people stupid."

"He's not wrong. Back then, it did. Nowadays, it's the internet. Come on. If we're going to make it to my camp, we need to get going. I need a bath, something to eat, and sleep. Lots of sleep." She started toward the shadowed tree line. "But remember what I said about you screwing me over."

I put both my hands in the air in mock surrender. "I know. I know. You're going to haunt me or something."

She looked down at Slash, who happily trotted alongside her. "I don't think he's taking me seriously."

Slash bounced on his hind legs until she picked him up. “He’s a stubborn asshole sometimes.”

Kira laughed as she petted him. I walked behind.

Slash looked over her shoulder, his face hidden from her view. He looked at me and smirked, but spoke to her. “Also, he hasn’t been humped in forever, so sleep with one eye open.”



## MAN WITH A MISSION



Kira wasn't lying about the state of her camp. I'm a gentleman and I also don't believe in being a dick unless someone deserves it, so I didn't say anything. But it was a sorry sight.

A collection of failed attempts to build a reasonably sturdy shelter littered the wide clearing. The place looked like a medieval version of a Kentucky trailer park.

Kira might have noticed my initial shock because she dismissively waved at the collapsed piles of sticks, timber, and scattered twine. "Don't pay attention to that. I'm still perfecting my design."

"Oh, that's what this is?" I said, unable to hide how humorous I found her attempt to explain away the wreckage. "I was about to ask when the tornado came through."

Kira groaned.

"Trust me, he's full of those lame jokes," Slash said as he trotted ahead, his nose to the ground.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I watched him swerve back and forth.

He didn't stop sniffing at the ground. "Looking for a place where you can build a lean-to for Kira."

“Oh, that’s sweet of you,” Kira said, motioning me to the side of the field where the sound of moving water caught my attention before we even stepped into her camp.

“Nice river.”

Slash said, “Must be nice.”

“Don’t you guys have one?”

“I wish.”

“Who’d build a camp in this world without access to clean running water?”

I looked at the maple trees towering over the small campfire flickering inside a circle of rock. A small stack of firewood sat off to the side. A gray wool tarp hung heavy from a branch. Holes dotted it.

I assumed it would be near the campfire. After all, in Darkworld, we’d stepped back to medieval times, maybe earlier. I was terrible with history. It bored me. The Air Force’s promotion tests had military history questions on them, and I always lost points in that area. Whichever period, we lacked modernity and its conveniences. Understanding that, it was wise to play in a safe, sustainable way. Kira should have built her shelter as close to her fire as was safe. With the size of her pit and current fire, she could have practically built her shelter on top of it. But as I looked around the camp, I didn’t see one.

I turned to her, confused. “Where’s your shelter?”

She pointed at the blanket hanging from the tree.

“That?”

Her face scrunched as she lifted her hands, palms up, apologetically.

“Do you just curl up under it?”

“Not like I didn’t try to build something.”

Slash dashed past us, running toward the river. His nose was still pressed against the dirt, hot on the trail of a scent.

“He’s adorable.”

“When he wants to be,” I said. “He’ll find a spot for you. His Investigation score is ridiculously high.”

She watched him for a moment longer before saying, “I’m going to head to the river to get clean. You’re free to use it.”

I was about to tell her I’d wait until she was done when she said exactly that.

“Just wait until I come back.”

“Cross my heart.” I made the time-honored sign over my chest with my finger.

Kira’s gaze lingered on my chest a little longer than I was comfortable with. Then she blinked like she’d just come out of a daydream. “Yeah. Uh. Okay. I’ll be back soon.”

I watched her go for longer than she’d stared at me. I told myself it was because I wanted to make sure she was safe, at least until her Health regenerated, but I’m not much of a liar, even to myself. Instead, I searched for Slash, who I heard sniffing around in the weeds at the top of a small mound.

I joined him. “Finding anything?”

“The soil here is rich,” he said, pulling his nose away. Small clumps of dark brown dirt clung to his nostrils. Even his thin whiskers had clumpy riders that made them bend toward the ground. “I don’t know why she doesn’t have a farm. It would put ours to shame.”

“You can tell that from just smelling the dirt?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Nice. Well, I guess she doesn’t because she’s playing a different game than us.”

He restarted his search, but not before saying, “Hers sounds far more interesting.”

“Yeah, but also way more dangerous.”

“Please. She doesn’t have me to protect her. You do. We should have more adventures like today. That was fun.”

“Oh, was it? Want to wear that cheerleader get up more often?”

He looked up at me, his lips pulled up on one side, showing off a sliver of a fang. “Don’t be an asshole, Brad. That’s not funny.”

“You might think differently if you saw what I did.”

“Right there. See? That’s what being an asshole looks like.”

“Find a place to put her camp.”

“I’m trying. You keep interrupting.”

Slash searched long after Kira returned from the river. As she stashed her dirty shoes, she called out that it was my turn if I wanted. I did. Very much so. Funny how quickly I’d adapted to washing without shampoo and soap. I didn’t care about any of that. Just standing in moving water, feeling my skin breathe again, was incredibly refreshing.

A geothermal vent must have fed the river from upstream because the water was gloriously temperate. Not hot by any means, but the temperature wasn’t chilly either. I couldn’t even call it cool. I could have stood in it all day.

There was a shallow crop of rocks that formed a natural bench of sorts. I braced myself atop one and rested my back against another. The water lapped at my skin. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, feeling the stress of the past weeks flow away with the downstream current.

When I opened my eyes again to stop myself from falling asleep, I enjoyed the glittering slivers of sun dancing across the jagged peaks of rippling water.

I scooped up handfuls and splashed my face. My skin felt invigorated. I did it a few more times, because I could and because, dammit, this felt wonderful. A sanctuary. A place to escape from Darkworld and enjoy the present for a goddam minute. A place to enjoy being alive and not inside the stomach of that nasty burden beast.

Slash barked.

I know his barks, and this one lacked urgency or panic, but was full of annoyance.

Without looking up the bank at him, I said, “What?”

“You better not be peeing in there. I want to take a bath too.”

“Come down then.”

“Brad, I’m not taking a bath with you. That’s awkward.” He sounded deadly serious.

“Don’t you have a spot to find for Kira?”

He barked, followed by an “aaaarrrrooooo” sound. “I already did. Now, stop fucking around and come build her lean-to while she’s sleeping.”

I sat up, turning to him. “Kira’s asleep?”

“Didn’t I just say that? I swear, it’s like I’m never listened to. Come on. I want to take a bath.”

I reluctantly got out of the water, feeling the fresh chill of the air on my skin. Stepping into the loincloth and adjusting it so the flaps hung correctly, I cinched the sash and had my pup show me to the spot he’d found.

It was perfect. Set back against a hill rising a hundred feet above the field, Kira was still close to the river, but now also protected on three sides by the natural formation.

She was asleep under the large, ratty blanket she’d used as a tarp.

I petted Slash behind the ears. “You did good, little buddy.”

“I know.” He trotted toward the river. “I’m going to wash my balls.”

“Enjoy. Bark if you need something.”

I set to work, heading back to her original camp, and adding the rock and campfire wood to my Inventory, along with all her twine. I scoured the nearby forest for more

supplies. Before long, I had a new, larger campfire going. A pleasant surprise for her when she woke.

Using the dagger with the sharper edge, I stripped branches from fall maples. Cutting them to length, I lashed three of them together with her twine and set the lean-to poles, then started on the roof.

Chirps of insects from the weeds kept me company as I lost myself in my work. Slash returned, *harrumphing* because I hadn't finished, though I was well into my work. That pup and his unrealistic expectations.

He pushed his head under her blanket and settled next to Kira, curling into the space between her folded arms and her bent legs, forming a small ball in the cover.

My work went faster than my own lean-to. I guessed building one already and starting on the house had done wonders for my Construction score. I didn't consider a score of five to be anything to brag about, but the rate at which I finished Kira's lean-to convinced me otherwise. All things were relative, after all.

I patted the sturdy, slanting roof like a proud father. After I broke branches from trees and wove the thick-bladed weed through them to form an insulation barrier, I stepped back to appreciate my work.

**BOOM!**

**THAT'S YOUR SECOND SHELTER. THIS ONE ISN'T  
EVEN FOR YOU. WHAT A GOOD GUY. A HANDY  
MAN. GET IT. HANDY. MAN? HANDYMAN?**

**NOTHING?**

**OH WELL, HUMOR IS LOST ON THE UNINITIATED.  
FOR YOUR ACT OF UNSELFISH KINDNESS.**

**+100 XP**

**+1 CONSTRUCTION**

**50 GOLD**

Suddenly, Fortune popped up in my vision.

“Good day, Brad.”

“Hey, Fortune. How are you? Everything okay?”

“I am fine. Thank you.” She glanced to the side. “A very nice deed you have done.”

“Thanks. I’m sure she would have done the same for me.”

Fortune considered me for a moment. “Mayhap that is something you should think about while she rests then?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have told you about the importance of working with others and forming an alliance. The time will come when you may not survive without one. If you feel comfortable with her, might I recommend you do so now?”

“Form an alliance now? I don’t even know her, Fortune.”

My guide made small fists and jammed them in a motion that made her look like she was trying to shove down the heads of kids standing at her side into the ground.

“What is that all about?”

“I...” Her chest swelled as she drew a deep breath. “May I speak candidly?”

“Of course. By now, I’d hope you felt you could.”

“Be that as it may, I am still your guide.”

“And?”

“My role is one of subservience.”

“Says who?”

“It is written,” she said as if I’d asked a taboo question.

I wasn’t going to let this go. “By who?”

“The Electors. It is they who assigned me as your guide.”

I rubbed a hand through my short hair. Even though she was restricted to my vision, unable to walk around Darkworld, she still observed things happening around her. She’d told me she was always with us. I snapped my hand away from my head. I mean, what did you say to someone with a pleasant

personality but who was really nothing more than a digital imprint on my eyeballs? The fact I thought far more of her than that didn't change her reality.

“Fortune, you are more than a guide to us.”

Her cheeks radiated, and her mouth split in a grin. “Truly? You mean it?”

Admittedly, I was a little taken aback. A few weeks ago, all of this would have been ridiculous. A fantasy video game world. A talking Chihuahua. Conversations with an avatar that no one else could see except me and my pup. Shared delusions. Certifiably insane. Yet, in that moment, seeing the impact my comment had on Fortune, I couldn't help but give a handful of damns.

She might be an NPC, only born into the world as a string of code, to serve the purpose of driving the player she would ultimately guide toward the end of their game. Yes, I staunchly refused to believe Fortune could guide me without bias. Yes, for an NPC, she was a good person. Definitely kind. Benign at worst. But much like how humans often couldn't overcome genetics, as every bald man who'd tried to regrow hair by paying outlandish prices for gels and lotions could attest, Fortune couldn't overcome her fate ordained by the programmers behind Darkworld.

Fucked up. Yes. Something I'd balance by being honest with her now, no matter how tacky it felt.

“Absolutely, I do. You're a friend. And no friend of mine should ever think of themselves as subservient. Not to anyone. Definitely not to me. Friends are friends because they find equal value in each other. I do with you. Not only do I like you, but I respect you. I respect your opinions. Your knowledge. Your insight. There's more to you than being a guide.”

She looked down and to the side. “Even if you do not always follow the advice I give, is it still worthwhile?”

“Of course. If I don't follow your advice, it's because of what I've learned from playing other games. My refusal



doesn't reflect on what I think of your input." I wanted to reach out and put my hand on her shoulder like I would with any friend I'd met in person who needed reassurance. Instead, my hand hung uselessly in the air, and I dropped it after a moment. "Can I ask where all this is coming from?"

She stiffened as if resisting an internal struggle to run off into the woods. "Well, I do appreciate you saying that. I... I want to be more than a guide to you. While serving you and those I also served during the testing of Darkworld, I saw how they, how you, interact with others." She turned sideways. "I see the richness of your time with her. Short as it has been."

"With Kira?"

Fortune dropped her head again. "Yes. And that does not come close to what you have with Little Sir."

"A friend? You want a friend?"

"Ridiculous. I know. But." She straightened once more, her back going rigid. She lifted her chin as if an invisible hand pushed it up for inspection. "But I think I would very much like to have friends." She lowered her voice. "Being a guide can be very lonely, Brad."

Fortune wanted friends. She was lonely. Even though Kira and I weren't friends, she desired what she saw between us. Slash was my best friend by a country mile. From the beginning of our time in this stupid video game, Fortune observed our actions. Why was it so strange then to think what Slash and I had wouldn't impact her?

If the players she'd guided during the tests had pets, if they'd made allies during their play, maybe I'd inadvertently reinforced some of her early desires. See something often enough, and it becomes the norm. If she'd seen player after player either already have or develop close relationships, why wouldn't she want something like that for herself?

That could only happen with a seriously immersive game, though. Fortune was a complex character. Other NPCs had their scripts and probably stuck to them like an overwhelmed introvert in his first junior high school play. Not her. How

often had I taken our conversations all over the place, and she followed along, engaged, and responded with ease? She was more than an NPC, strange as that was to admit. For her to have almost human-like desires wasn't absurd.

"I swear it, Fortune. We're friends," I said as compassionately as I could. NPC or not, it wasn't easy to be vulnerable. Speaking for myself, I was terrible at it. Tess had pointed that out, telling me how she wished I'd opened up more. I blamed the military for sucking that ability out of me."

Fortune exhaled slowly, softly. "Thank you, Brad. I'm sorry." She swatted at the air. "I'm being ridiculous."

"You're not."

She continued as if she hadn't heard. "But if I truly am your friend, there is something I need from you."

"Of course. Name it."

She crossed her arms and somehow made me feel like I was in trouble with my girlfriend. "I need you to listen. Not argue. Think. Even sleep on it if you must. What I am about to share is something you need to understand about Darkworld. If we are friends, I will talk to you like one and give you my advice. Please understand, it comes from my desire to help. As harsh as it may sound, please remember that."

"Absolutely," I said firmly, and meant it.

"You are playing Darkworld like a fool."

Well, friends often talked to each other in raw, unfiltered ways people outside their circles didn't necessarily understand or appreciate. Fortune came out swinging. I gave her credit. She picked up on this whole friendship thing in a finger snap. Far from offended by her comment, I was humored, and appreciated honesty from people, even NPCs, I respected. Dancing around topics was not only a waste of time but also annoying. I liked this side of her.

"How so? Where am I screwing up?"

"The reason you faced the burden beast is the same reason the zombie came to your camp. The same reason you and

Little Sir witnessed the giant bat as you searched for a spot for your permanent settlement at the outset. I fear telling you this, but your manner of play is the very reason the swarm of bats attacked your camp. The game is pushing you toward its objectives. It has been doing so from the beginning.”

“It has?”

“When you were still in your realm, after you opened the gateway, the chest, did strange events happen?”

I thought back to that night in Olympia. My last night in my hometown. ‘Strange’ didn’t come close to describing what happened that night. What *hadn’t* been strange? Then it hit me. She wasn’t talking about the chest itself. In fairness to me, the night had been a little overwhelming. Looking back, the details were a blur. With her question, I understood.

“There were land mines in the middle of the park.” When she gave me a look of confusion, I explained what a city park was and the general concept of land mines. “And that wasn’t all,” I continued excitedly, now that I understood how the pieces were coming together, strange as they were. “I wasn’t paying attention, and I’d pushed it out of my mind. But you’ve got me thinking. We have bats in Washington, but they’re not something you hear or see. Ever. That night, they were everywhere.” I swallowed the lump forming in my throat. “We were chased through the park by something called a baby vamp. I saw its name floating over its head. All that was part of the game?”

Her forehead crinkled in confusion. She was silent for a long time before she shook her head. “Not everything. These land mines... Such a strange term. Obviously, they are not part of the game, but I cannot be sure. They could have been a tool implemented by the Electors to encourage entrants to start the game. Possibly.” She stared at me for a second. “Brad, the Electors have designed Darkworld to be participatory. I have failed you as a guide.” She held up her hand, stopping me when I tried to interrupt. “Though I know I already mentioned this, I may not have done so in a manner that would have spoken clearly. Darkworld will push you toward the objective. No player is meant to passively interact with the world.”

“We need to fight and kill?” I concluded. “That is the objective, isn’t it, Fortune? No matter how big and complex the game is, the ultimate aim is for us, the entrants, to fight each other? To kill each other?”

Her face became a mask. “Or Darkworld will do it for you.”

“What about the objectives you said we had to complete in order to finish the game?”

“They remain true.”

I was growing frustrated. Not at her, but this absolute nonsense. I snapped, “What does that *mean*?”

Fortune closed her eyes, held them so, and nodded. “The objectives have not changed. You cannot see them because they will not unlock until you complete quests and objectives in order.”

“To understand what I’ve ultimately got to do, I have to finish things in order?”

“Yes. Until you complete earlier quests, tasks, or objectives, you cannot know what is to come. Even I cannot tell you. They... the Electors have blocked my access to that information.”

“Have I completed any objectives?”

She stared at me as if I should know better than to ask.

But I was at a loss. “What? Fuji and the blobs?”

“No, Brad,” she said, and there was genuine compassion in her voice. “When you won the PvP fight, you completed one of the first objectives the game has for an entrant.”

“You mean to tell me these fuckers who designed the game set us up to start killing each other at the beginning of the game?”

“Though I do not necessarily understand all the phrases of your time, I believe the context is clear. That particular objective is inactive until the PvP feature is turned on. It could happen at the beginning or not for ages.”

I started pacing, trying to remind myself that Slash and Kira were still sleeping and only then remembering that time was paused for Kira while I chatted with my guide. “So once the first idiot attacked someone else’s camp, it was all guns blazing?”

“Again, your colloquialisms are confusing, but I believe you understand. The first aggressive action by an entrant against another unlocked the PvP portion.”

Back and forth, I paced until I moved away from the sleeping pair. I’d wrapped my hand into a fist, getting irritated enough to scream. Once I was a safe distance away, I asked, “If I kill the butcher, will that complete the game?”

“No. All major objectives have to be completed in order for you to finish Darkworld.”

“What if I kill my butcher before then? What happens? Do I go through the game without one?”

Though her empathy was evident, Fortune’s response was matter-of-fact. “Another, if available, could be assigned to you. Or, should the Electors decide, new butchers will enter Darkworld. Depending on its success in your markets. You...” She rolled her hand in the air which looked an awful lot like the “move it along” gesture.

“Our market?” It dawned on me in that instant. “If Darkworld is commercially successful, they’ll allow more butchers to play? Of course! Those fuckers.”

Her eyebrows drew down, and I explained the modern context of commercialism in the most basic details I could. After I finished, she said, “Yes. Exactly. Brad, we are friends, correct?”

“Yes. This doesn’t change that, Fortune.”

“Then please hear me. You must complete all the objectives of Darkworld, or you will never leave the game. The fight with the burden beast was just another way for the game to push you forward or remove you. Were you to start completing objectives, the game will adjust since it will have no need to push you.”

“I get it. What’s this first objective?”

“If you open your quest tab in your menu, you will see it. You will need to find the Crooked Cross, enter the Living Inferno, and kill the Vampire King.”

I stopped pacing. “Shit, is that all?” I gave her a disgruntled laugh. “How do I get started?”

## TALK THAT TALK



I gave Kira time to wake up before talking to her about my conversation with Fortune. It took longer to get to the important revelation that there was a quest that would become a major inconvenience if I didn't do something soon. To say she was a little out of it and confounded would be an understatement. I couldn't fault her.

She'd gone to sleep right after her bath, long before I finished mine. She woke to a new, still modest, camp. Not only had I improved her fire pit and even built a rotating spit, but also finished the lean-to, and built a small shack for her to use as storage.

Kira hugged me. I hugged back.

"Wow, this is awkward," Slash said, rising from his nap with a long downward dog stretch. He yawned, making an adorable high-pitched "*aaach*" sound. "And you humans talk about us being awkward because we smell each other's butts."

"Because you do it for so long."

"Do you know what kind of information you can learn about another dog by taking your time smelling their butt? It's like a conversation between you humans, but a hell of a lot more fun because we can get up in each other's business. You're just jealous because you'd love to get into Kira's junk."

If we needed another reason to release each other and end this weird embrace of gratitude, Slash just delivered it.

“Thank you,” Kira said, tucking a loose braid behind her ear and moving to the fire, wrapping her arms around herself. She closed her eyes, the orange glow of the flames dancing shadows across her prominent cheekbones. “This is amazing. How did you build this so quickly? How long have I been sleeping?”

“Most of the day. But don’t sweat it. My Construction score is decent, so it wasn’t a problem.”

Slash nuzzled against Kira’s leg. “Yet he hasn’t built my mansion yet.”

I ignored him. “Kira, we need to talk. While you were sleeping, I had an interesting conversation with my guide.”

“Brad, don’t talk about business right now. This is nice,” Slash said, pushing against her leg.

“This is important, or I wouldn’t.”

Kira turned, arms still wrapped around her waist. Her brows drew together. “What’s bothering you?”

“Have you heard about the Crooked Cross or the Vampire King?”

“No. Should I have?”

This was going to be tricky. Fortune had made it clear from the beginning of the game that she was ever-present. No matter where, no matter what we were doing, she was around. That meant she was in the background, listening to this conversation. If she was, so was the one leading Kira through the game. “How do you feel about your guide?”

“What do you mean?”

I’m hardly what people would describe as diplomatic. Which, as I thought about it, was probably why two of my early performance reports in the Air Force weren’t so stellar. Ultimately, I grew up enough to know to keep my mouth shut, and that it wasn’t worth it to poke bears. Not if you wanted a rewarding time in the service. That might have preserved my



career, but what it didn't do was serve me well in any situation where I had to be diplomatic.

Shifting gears to focus on my conversation with Fortune, I let Kira lead me with her responses. "You probably already know this, but I've been distracted with all the bullshit this game makes us go through to think to ask my guide more specific questions about the game quests."

"Yeah, mine told me there were a bunch of different quests. Major and minor ones. I haven't bothered yet. I've been too busy grinding for XP and gold," Kira said.

"You haven't bothered checking into the Crooked Cross? Vampire King?"

She pursed her lips. "Don't know the first thing about it. Them. Whatever. Like I said, I've been more concerned with grinding."

Slash had turned, still pressed against Kira's leg. He looked at me skeptically. "What are you getting at, Brad?" He stretched his neck up at her. "He gets weird like this sometimes. That's why he can't hang onto a girlfriend."

"That's not why—" I stopped myself from getting into this with a dog. "The thing I didn't understand, Kira," I said, putting emphasis on her name to help my dog understand I didn't need his help, "was that the AI keeps throwing random events to put me off my game because I'm not completing quests. Fortune, my guide, told me that's why the burden beast found us. That entire fight might have happened because I haven't been doing the damn quests. I thought it might be the same for you."

Her eyes focused, and her cheekbones radiated with a fire that no longer could be contributed to the one I'd started while she was asleep. "Wait. If what you're saying is true..."

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Just thinking. I mean, I've been doing a lot of grinding, but there's been a lot of shit around the camp too. Three days ago, I was attacked in the river by a snake. No joke, it had to be thirty feet long."

“How’d you beat something like that?” Slash asked.

She scoffed. “You would have died laughing if you’d seen me scrambling up the bank. I barely climbed the tree before it snapped at me. The only thing that saved me was the fact that I keep my bow with me at all times.” She shivered, took a miniscule step closer to the fire. Slash adjusted to remain pressed against her leg. “The way that thing squirmed up at me, using the tree to brace itself? I don’t know if I’ll ever forget that sight.”

“How’d you kill it?”

“Arrow through the eye. That sent a clear message it shouldn’t be trying to climb a damn tree. Then I jumped down and slit its throat.”

“You’re a badass,” Slash said.

“Thank you,” she said, bending down to pick him up.

His mirth was immediate. His muzzle scrunched as he smiled. Little fucker.

Hugging him close, she said, “Do you mind if I take a second to talk to Sariel? My guide?”

“Yeah. Sure. Of course.”

Time didn’t seem to pass when she blew out a long breath. “Fuck.”

I blinked in confusion until I remembered the game mechanic at play. Whenever a guide is instructing an entrant, the game pauses. For all I knew, Kira could have been engaged in a twenty-minute conversation with her guide in the time it’d take me to scratch my ass, and I’d be none the wiser. Pretty convenient.

“Assuming she gave you the rundown on the objective?”

Kira petted Slash with an absent stroke. “She did. What do you think? Sounds intense.”

“Can I be honest?” I said, moving toward the fire and taking a seat.

Kira followed suit, never letting Slash down. “Absolutely. I think we’re at a crossroads. There’s a decision to make. I’m not sure how I’m going to play this out, but I’d like to hear your thoughts.” She looked up at the sky. Her tongue stuck out just far enough to wrap her bottom lip into her mouth. She shouted at the sky. “I just want out of this fucking game!”

Slash leaned into her, pressing his head against her chest. Kira wrapped an arm around his body.

“Me too,” I mumbled, staring at the flickering flames, glowing blue. The fire was getting stronger. I’d fed it fuel not that long ago and wanted to put more on it, but this was her camp. I wasn’t going to be one of those guys. The day was growing long, and we had a trek to get back to ours before we lost the light. Plus, my dumbass decision to talk this through seemed to put her in a state of turmoil.

I should have just kept my mouth shut.

“Time is so hard to track when you live like this,” I said. “We’ve been here for a few weeks, and I’m ready to punch out. I thought I could take on my butcher, finish a few objectives as I built my camp, and get out of here by playing smart. I didn’t realize how serious my guide was that if I didn’t get my ass going on these objectives, shit was going to get real bad. We haven’t faced anything we couldn’t overcome, but we’ve had close calls. The burden beast was just the latest. If the game forces my hand, these assholes are fooling themselves if they think I’ll sit back on the defensive, always reacting.”

“Have you completed any objectives?” she said, staring at the fire. “I haven’t finished a single one. All the work I’ve done. The stupid fights I’ve gotten into for loot. I might as well be standing at the starting line again.”

“Yeah, but now you’re more prepared. And, yes, I have.”

“Oh.” She bit her bottom lip.

“We killed another player,” Slash said proudly.

Kira sat up straighter. “You... You what?”

“Not like you might be thinking.” I explained the situation with Lukieboy81, my feelings about his demise, and how it bothered me every day since.

“Sounds like it wasn’t your fault.”

“Doesn’t bring him back.”

“No,” Kira said softly. Somehow, as if by magic, those dark eyes that always seemed to examine and analyze softened. “It doesn’t. Don’t forget, there’s that whole Death Lottery. So, maybe he’s okay.”

I smacked my hands. During Fortune’s early brief, she’d mentioned the game mechanism. Though we could die in Darkworld, the programmers coded what seemed to be a mini-game of sorts. She’d said they called it the Death Lottery, and it was a fallen player’s last chance to avoid being erased forever. Sadly, she didn’t have specifics about what happened inside the lottery.

Slash yelped and growled. “Don’t do that.”

“Sorry. I forgot about that, Kira. That takes a load off my mind.” I rubbed a hand through my hair and chuckled harshly. “Fuck. I feel so much better.”

Truly, she’d just freed me of something that’d been weighing on me since it happened. Lukieboy81’s fate was the darkest moment of this entire thing, besides the life I’d lost. But having her remind me of the Death Lottery took away the lingering bits of guilt eating away at me. He still had a chance to not be erased forever. It was up to him now. My spirits lifted, until I looked Kira’s way and saw how ashen her skin was. “What’s wrong?”

“I just asked Sariel about killing another player. Seems I have to do that before I can get out of this game.”

I thought she’d already known that, and figured that was part of her stiff demeanor and badass-ery. She might not have put much focus on game objectives to get out of Darkworld, but I thought her guide would have briefed her on that part. If nothing else, wouldn’t she cover that during Kira’s recent

conversation? I mean, being required to kill someone else is something you just don't skip.

Kira's face twisted. Her eyes flicked closed rapidly. Upon closer inspection, I noticed her eyes were filling with tears.

"Hey, listen. There's no rush. For all we know, you might have someone like Lukieboy81 trip in your path and you get credit."

"Yeah, Kira," Slash said, nuzzling into her. "Maybe they'll remove it from the game. Don't cry. It's okay."

With her free hand, she wiped away her tears. "Thanks, guys. I know. I just... Whew. That's a tough one to hear." She inhaled deeply through her nose, finding resolve. "Can't do anything about it now." She grinned wickedly, her eyes sliding to me. "Unless I stab you in your sleep."

I smiled back. "Not funny."

Slash looked between us. "You guys are joking. Right?" He howled into the day when we didn't answer. "Riiiiiiight?"

"Just kidding, wee man."

Kira hugged him close. "Yes. A bad joke."

My pooch yipped. "Good. You two are cute together. You'll make cute babies one day. Not as cute as my litters of pups, but still cute. I promise I won't watch you hump when the day comes. Well, maybe just a little." He looked up at Kira, who wore a look of shock. "But only long enough to find something to give Brad shit about."

I coughed. "Slash!" To Kira, I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I guess I let him watch too much daytime TV before all this shit started."

"Me thinks the boy doth protest too much," Slash said, a sly expression sliding over his face, hidden from Kira, as he stared at me.

"What do you say?" I asked Kira, then scrambled to clarify when I saw a flash of shock pass over her. She thought I was following Slash's line of conversation. "No. God. No. Sorry. About the Crooked Cross and this Vampire King?"

She looked relieved, her shoulders slumping. “You have a plan?”

“Four hands are better than two.”

“You want to work together?” She genuinely seemed surprised.

“Why not?”

“What about four paws?” Slash said, rocking back against Kira’s stomach, wiggling his legs in the air.

She giggled. A pleasant sound.

“They’ll come in handy.”

The fierceness returned to her eyes. “Yeah. I say we do this. Let’s go kick some vamp ass.”

FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF OUR  
LIVES

A day later, we'd secured our camp the best we could and met Kira at a spot on the road Slash marked on his map by lifting his leg and pissing on a tree. I wasn't crazy about leaving the camp in its current state, but leaving Slash behind to guard it was out of the question. The need to finish objectives necessitated risks like leaving all your hard work unattended so someone could come along and rob you blind or burn down your house while you were out. Not much I could do to prevent either, so worrying about them was a waste of time. Yet, I couldn't shake the annoyance.

Stepping out of the tree line after checking to make sure the road was clear of unfriendly types, Slash dashed across to the spot he'd pinned, barking constantly in his high-pitched manner.

Looking up and down the road and seeing no one, I risked pulling up my map, scanning it for player dot indicators. After seeing a solitary indicator across the road where Kira should be hiding in wait, I closed it.

Sure enough, as soon as Slash was halfway across the road, she stepped out of the forest, geared up and ready to fight. She wasn't even to the hard-packed dirt when he jumped against her legs after racing around her in a circle. She smiled

and waved as he repeatedly hopped on his hind legs, asking to be picked up. I returned the greeting as Kira set her pack down, pinned her bow to her side so it didn't fall, and scooped the little guy into her arms.

“Ready for this?” she asked.

“I think so. You?”

“Have to be.” She leaned closer, smelling wonderfully fresh. “Sariel and I had a little talk last night.”

“Oh? How'd that go?”

She held a steeliness in her voice when she answered. “Let's just say I'm not crazy about becoming aware of these threats to me and my person. I would have rather known about the necessity of game quests long before now. I feel like I'm playing catchup, and I don't like that.”

“You don't say? I couldn't have guessed from your tone. Hey, if it's any consolation, you're not alone in the catchup game.”

“Gee, that makes it so much better to know I'm not the only loser.”

We started up the road, headed away from the city and back to the merchant's spot where we'd first met. According to Slash, the merchant hadn't moved from where he'd been stationed yesterday.

“Makes me wonder what else we don't know about Darkworld,” Kira said.

“I've thought about that a lot. Are you much of a gamer?”

“Before I grew up? Yes.” She snickered.

“Funny. Can't adults game?”

“People? Yes. Adults?” Her mouth scrunched.

“Seriously?”

“Who has time for games?” she said, sounding every bit like she meant it.

“And this is why guys can never win.”



“How so?”

“If we’re too serious and work all the time, are career-focused, we get castrated for having no time for a relationship. If we go out to bars or strip clubs because we aren’t working eighty-hour weeks, we definitely aren’t dating material. But if we work an honest day and come home and play video games, we’re immature. Just momma’s boys who still need our laundry done for us. It’s not a bad thing to game beyond your twenties, into your thirties. Hell, even beyond. Old folks’ homes are filled with people gaming. They’re just doing it with cards and board games because that’s what they grew up with.”

“Trust me, I’d still game if I had the time. Do you know how much time it takes to run your own business? I haven’t had a day off in—” She paused, tipping her head and bunching her lips. “Shit. I haven’t had a single day off in eight months. I only took that because I was sick and a woman who works for me made me go home before I ‘caused another pandemic,’ she said. Forget about a vacation. Haven’t had one since I opened the business.”

“Sounds fun. Can’t understand why everyone doesn’t own their own business.”

She snorted. “Because most people are too lazy and aren’t ready to work for months without making a dime.”

“There is something to be said for a guaranteed paycheck.”

Kira nudged me with an elbow. “And, mister, if we were dating, don’t think I wouldn’t go to strip clubs with you. Bars? Not so much.” She patted her stomach. “Not good for the core, you know?”

I wanted to tell her, as a frequenter of gyms, that I understood and she’d obviously done a lot of work to keep hers as impressively flat as she did. Though her gray wool tunic was loose and belted, it showed off her slim build. I’m a sucker for a flat stomach. Probably because I know how much discipline and dedication it takes to have one. After all, only the strongest of mindsets could spend their life eating rabbit food for that level of fitness.

Instead of being a creepy oaf, though, I said, “Tell you what. If we make it out of Darkworld, we’ll go to a strip club together to celebrate. They serve sodas. I think. I’ll have to check on that. But they’ve got to have water. I think.”

Kira pressed her lips together and her laugh burst out in a snort. “Do you even know how strip clubs work? You’re way too clean-cut to delve into that nightlife.”

“Oh, he’s got you fooled then,” Slash said. “You should see the porn he watches.”

Ignoring my pup, I shrugged. “Not really. Haven’t been to one since I was stationed overseas. The only reason I went is because it’s sort of a rite of passage for military guys.”

“Ah, yes, the exoticism of sweaty, naked foreign ladies covered in glitter. What can’t there be to like about that?”

I waited for her stoicism to shift. When it didn’t, I wagged my finger. “See? I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Good. That’ll keep you on your toes. I like that.”

“You’re into toes? And you call men gross.”

That earned me another elbow nudge. “Can we please focus on the mission?”

Slash, who’d fallen back asleep in Kira’s arm, popped his head up. “Don’t worry, Kira. That’s how Brad flirts. I heard him talk to Tess about stuff just like this. One time he tried to talk her into humping in the shower. Have you ever smelled wet humans? Disgusting. Who in their right mind would want to hump when wet? That’s what you’re going to get with him. Be ready for it if you decide to become our move-in girlfriend.”

There was so much to unpackage in his little rant, I didn’t know where to start. Nor did I have to worry about that, because Kira was busy laughing, completely entertained by him. “Oh, is that how it is? ‘Our’ move-in girlfriend?”

“Only if you decide to,” Slash said as if this was the most normal conversation in the world. “Our relationship would

strictly be platonic. No offense. But know this. I don't want to make puppies with you."

Her eyes grew wide, but she was obviously tickled. "No offense taken. You're as cute as can be. Too cute for just one woman."

Without missing a beat, Slash said, "I know. This will work best, I think, because Brad is all about the physical stuff. He's shallow like that. You'll need more, obviously."

She looked over him to me and winked, stressing her one-word response, "Obviously."

"I thought we were focusing on our quest?" I said.

"This is part of it, Brad," Slash said matter-of-fact.

"It is? How?"

"Well, remember when you'd tell Tess that sometimes the only thing that got you through your deployments were thoughts of coming home to your wife?"

Kira looked genuinely shocked. Her voice was filled with a sudden heat. "You're married?"

"Oh no," I said, waving my hands and feeling guilty for absolutely no reason. "*Was* married. Lasted all of one year. One of those military disasters that shouldn't have happened." Kira's face scrunched. I explained further. "Military people are notorious for getting married way too early. The entire system encourages it. You get out of the dormitories the lower ranks are required to live in when they're single. Plus, you get all sorts of new pay allowances."

"Plus all the humping," Slash said cheerily. "Which has got to be better than all the hand-humping you did after Tess left."

"You're not helping," I said, trying my best to ignore my flushing cheeks.

"Oh, he's helping a lot," Kira said, not bothering to hide the joy she was taking from this conversation.

I tenderly poked him in the nose. “As soon as we get back to the real world, I’m returning you to the pound.”

He narrowed his eyes. “That’s not funny.”

We put miles behind us and moved on from my relationship challenges.

“What do you think about the lack of information about our level objectives?” Kira asked after a few miles.

Slash had already mentioned we had miles more to go. Because this was a first quest, it was relatively local. I wondered if that was the same for other players or if this was a coincidence. He assured me we couldn’t make it in a single walk without putting our Health at a risky level should we stumble into a mob of creatures. The reality of that precarious position precipitated Kira’s question.

During the quieter times after Slash’s embarrassing over-sharing of my personal details, we each took turns combing through our menus. When I found my OBJECTIVES tab, I noticed that I only had two objectives listed on the left side of the panel. The first one read KILL AN ENTRANT, and that was, sickeningly, crossed out. Right underneath, the only other listed objective was KILL THE VAMPIRE KING. When I clicked on it, another box popped up, covering most of my vision.

I hated that shit and asked Kira to stop for a bit. That way, we could both read through the specifics of the quest without walking into a trap, other players, or some damn monster. Darkworld might throw a challenge at us because we weren’t walking fast enough for its liking.

Resting was a good idea, because not only did it give us the opportunity to study what was to come and to reference the map again, but also provided a chance to eat, drink water, and keep our Health bar at maximum.

“There’s not a lot of information here,” I said.

“Maybe it’ll automatically fill in as we progress through the quest?” she offered in an apologetic tone.

“Perhaps. I wish we had more to go off.”

“Me too.”

We’d read our menus off to each other to ensure they said the same thing. One thing I’d never apologize for was my lack of trust in game designers. They had to keep players engaged in a game, especially for those games that offered expansion sets and buffs and power-ups, all at a price. The Almighty Dollar drove those decisions.

Why would the designers provide us with a laundry list, detailing what lay ahead? That would give us time to prepare. They’d understand that, because in their hearts, they were gamers too. They’d know what an experienced gamer would do. Hell, even someone thrust into Darkworld who’d never touched a PlayStation or PC game but who possessed a strategic brain would pick up on the need to project ahead, plan alternatives and responses, and set out a worst-case scenario. Or they’d die.

I didn’t think Darkworld’s designers were some mysterious, malicious cabal of dorks. If they made the game impossible, it’d provide no satisfaction for butchers. If butchers weren’t entertained, they’d stop playing. If the game was too lame, they’d be sure to tell all their friends. Bad reviews would follow. Cancel culture would get activated. Sure, curiosity would balance some of that. There were always people who’d give it a chance if enough people were bitching about it, but that wasn’t sustainable.

The people behind Darkworld probably understood that, or those funding this bullshit experience did. Businesspeople were smart like that. If they weren’t, the wealthy ones wouldn’t last long enough to buy up all the available real estate and jack up the market to the point where normal people lived a life of servitude to the man just to make the rent every month.

They gave us just enough on our menu to have an idea of what we needed to accomplish and nothing about what it’d take to pull it off.

We confirmed our objectives listed:

**ENTER CRIMSON CITY**

**KILL 100 HEMOGOBLINS**  
**FIND THE LIVING INFERNO**  
**CROSS THE BLOOD RIVER**  
**OBTAIN THE CROOKED CROSS**  
**KILL THE VAMPIRE KING**

Much like my Ability Tree, the menu hinted that there were further details that would be revealed at the appropriate time. For now, that was all we had to go on.

“Doesn’t even say we have to defeat him,” I said as we ate.

“Are you shocked the game wants us to spill blood?” Kira asked. “At least it’s NPC blood.”

“Do vampires bleed?” Slash asked.

“Guess we’re going to find out.” I pulled up my map and groaned.

“Something up?” Kira asked.

“My map is shit.”

Slash huffed, his thin lips flapping. “That’s because you don’t use it enough.”

“I’ve told you why.”

“Yes, but it’s still why your map is shit. Let me pull up mine. There. What are you looking for?”

“Something more than the simple objective location indicator. Assuming Crimson City is the name of the place—”

“It is. What about it?”

“Can you see anything helpful on your map?”

“Isn’t his map just a map?” Kira asked.

Slash lifted his chin. “I’m a Sleuth.”

“Oh.” Kira wiggled her eyebrows as he looked away, unable to see. “I didn’t know.”

“The skill comes in handy,” I said, careful to defend my pup but not pump him up too much. No one wanted to listen to

him brag all the way to the city. “He can see details on his map I don’t have. Hopefully, he can see something that’ll give us a clue about what we’re walking into.”

“Very nice.” This time she sounded genuinely impressed, not just playing up to the dog’s ego. “What do you see for the city then, Slash?”

He set his head down on her arm and sighed, his tiny nostrils wheezing slightly. “I can see Crimson City in 3D. It looks like a big one.”

“As big as Olyndria?” I asked.

“Yes. With tall, black walls. There’s a building that looks like a castle in the top-right corner of the city. A castle, but not one, if that makes sense.” It didn’t, but I didn’t dare interrupt him. “Really tall, too. The building. Almost touches the black clouds.”

“You see clouds over the city?”

“Yep. I don’t see them over Olyndria, but that’s the only other city on my map right now. I can’t be sure if the clouds over Crimson City are abnormal or not. They’re not moving, though. I can tell you that much. Every time I pull my map up to check, the clouds are sitting right there. When I zoom in close enough, I can see tiny bats flying between the clouds and the buildings. Lots of them too. When I say lots, I’m talking a huge swarm. They’re sort of cute because they’re so small.” He lifted his head like he’d suddenly heard something, but looked at Kira. “Adorable things come in small packages.”

Kira smiled and kissed him on the top of his head. “Yes, they most certainly do.”

“That’s why all the women Brad sleeps with say his penis is adorable. Get it?”

“Yes, Slash,” I said with a groan.

“Because it’s small.”

“Yes, buddy. Move on.”

His little head bobbed as he chuckled. “Fine. Seriously, that’s all I can see right now.”

**BOOM!**

**MASCOT ASSIST.**

**STOPPING THE PARTY FROM WALKING INTO A  
FIGHT LIKE THOSE PRACTICAL JOKE VIDEOS  
WHERE PEOPLE PUT CLEAR PLASTIC WRAP OVER  
OPEN DOORS AND FILM THEIR BUDDIES  
DESERVES SOMETHING, WOULDN'T YOU SAY?**

**+25 XP**

**+2 INTELLIGENCE**

**+25 XP: +2 INTELLIGENCE**

Slash yipped. “Oh, wow! Awesome!”

“What?” Kira said, looking around.

“He got XP and an Intelligence bonus for checking out the map for us,” I said, explaining the game message she couldn’t see because Slash wasn’t her mascot.

“Nice. You are quite handy to have around,” she said, giving his forehead another kiss while scratching his belly.

He rolled over to give her more access. “But the stupid game keeps calling me a mascot. I am *not* a mascooooooooooot.”

“He’s sensitive about that,” I said, leaning over and stroking his ear. My hand bumped Kira’s, doing the same favor for my pup. She looked at me. I pulled away.

She didn’t look bothered. “Now that we’re rested up and have an idea of what the city looks like, should we be on our way?”

“I’m not crazy about the storm or bats Slash saw. His map is ridiculously accurate. Might be best to be prepared for a swarm.”



Kira patted her quiver. “I’ve got plenty of arrows, and I’m using two Inventory slots for the extras. Should be enough. We can stop at the merchant and grab more.”

“Would be wise.”

“You might think about your weapons too,” she said, smirking. “Don’t get me wrong. It was adorable watching you constantly running back and forth across the road with that burden beast, but I don’t think you’re going to get away with that against hundreds of bats.”

“Maybe thousands,” Slash said with a little too much excitement. Easy to be excited when you didn’t plan to do any fighting.

“That many? You sure?” Kira looked at her quiver with worry—she might have had enough for a swarm, but thousands?

He nuzzled into her. “Don’t worry, Kira. I’ve been Brad’s protector since he adopted me. But there’s enough of me to go around. It’s not a problem to protect two humans at the same time. This one time at the dog park, there were three bitches who wanted to smell my butt. They came up to me in a pack. I was like, ‘oh, really, ladies? Are we going to do this?’ And they just got right in there. One of the humans started yelling, but I didn’t mind. When I lifted my leg—”

“Okay, buddy. She gets the idea.” I got up, brushed off, and offered my hand to Kira.

She gave Slash one more squeeze and set him down. She’d been sitting with her legs pulled in. Without using her hands, she executed a flawless pseudo kip-up move and was on her feet, grabbing her gear while Slash and I looked dumbly at her.

Slash yipped. “Badass, Kira.”

She blew him a kiss, and Slash stood on his hind legs, whipping his front two forward like he was catching it.

I shook my head and started away. “You two are ridiculous.”

Their mutual laughter followed long after we were a quarter-mile down the road on our way to Crimson City.

## PLAYING WITH FIRE



We ended up having to rest another two times before reaching Crimson City. The journey was neither arduous nor exhausting. Just long. We restocked by stopping at the merchant. Because the game said we had to kill the Vampire King, I bought a new knife that would help me cut branches and sharpen them into stakes.

The stupid thing cost me eight hundred gold, but I'd seen enough movies to know you didn't scrimp on the number of wooden stakes you carried when fighting vampires. Even though buying the knife cut our gold savings in half, the tool was versatile. I could use it for all sorts of tasks after we completed this one. Things not related to killing vampires, or killing anything, for that matter. It didn't weigh enough to make a difference to my weight allowance, so I had plenty of room to pick up loot as we adventured.

In addition to the knife, I bought ten more healing wraps and a healing potion. Slash complained about me wasting our gold on 'trinkets' and that I should have bought more beefy treats. I reminded him that he was the one who said there were possibly thousands of bats flying over Crimson City, not counting the Vampire King and any foot soldiers he might have at his disposal. If we didn't buy the wraps and potion, he'd never see another beefy treat again. His arguments stopped there.

We were seriously broke now, but looking at Crimson City, a half-mile away, I wasn't worried about the amount of gold in my Inventory.

Foreboding. The only description I could conjure while taking in the city was that single word.

Across the towering black walls, dark buildings rose into the air. Shops, homes, and a mighty manor. Black storm clouds swirled over the city as if anchored. The sky was filled with clouds of bats. Tiny bodies at this distance, they grouped in circular formations that dipped and rose in a coordinated dance. This far away, we couldn't hear their chirps and clicks. Better for that. I couldn't imagine what that noise would sound like from so many.

"How do we get in there?" Kira asked, lying next to me behind the protection of a short mound of bare, dead earth. "The walls look forty feet high."

"What is that gray stuff zigzagging all over them?" Slash asked.

"You're the one with the good eyes," I said, squinting at the city walls, seeing only blurs of grayish-white lines etching along the black stone.

"To me, it looks like ivy," Slash said. "I see five-pointed leaves blooming from a thick vine. Layers and layers of them. The vine is growing up and across the stone. Everything tells me that's ivy."

"Okay. Good." We had bigger problems facing us. Like getting into the city and somehow avoiding those clouds of bats, along with finding the Vampire King. Ivy was the least of our worries. "We'll just try to avoid it. We'll find a clean section of wall or something."

"I'm not grossed out by ivy, Brad," Slash said, like I was stupid. "That's not the problem."

"What is then?"

"It's *moving*."

“The ivy is?” Kira said, looking away from the wall for the first time.

“Yes.”

“Gross,” she said, sticking out her tongue while smiling at him like you would a child you’re hoping to get to agree that something tastes ‘yucky.’

Slash’s thin tongue poked out of his mouth in response. “Super gross.”

While she bonded with my pup, I examined the manor. Even without Slash’s super dog vision, I could tell just how formidable the building was. Not only was it set in the middle of the city, making it pointless to find a quicker route from another side, it also stood ten times the height of the next tallest structure. It loomed over the city like a dark monolith. If the sun shone on the city, which it didn’t, I was sure the manor would cast half in its shadow.

Its stone walls stretched into the sky like they were reaching for the swirling clouds themselves. Four spires rose from each corner, coming to sharply angled points hundreds of feet above the ground. As a backdrop, the massive structure projected an ominous presence on the day, like a lurking monster waiting to step out of hiding to devour.

“Well,” Kira said, pushing herself to her feet effortlessly, “we’re not getting inside the city by standing here.”

When we started down the mound, I asked, “Where are you going?”

Without turning, she said, “Looking for a way in.” She threw a hand up to the sky. “Unless you plan on camping out here? But I’m not looking to take my chances with those bats. If they get a sniff of us, there’s no telling what they’ll do. When bees swarm, it makes me nervous. I can’t imagine what it’d be like for those things to come at us.” She gave an overzealous shiver.

“Good point. Give me a second to check in with my guide.”

She stopped. “Yeah, I should too.”

We probably looked as frozen to Kira as she looked to us. A weird reality in Darkworld, where the game froze for a player if they were engaged in a tutorial-type conversation with their guide. I imagined it got complicated the bigger parties became. Especially difficult to comprehend if we were talking about a full alliance. All those players, talking to their guides while no time seemingly passed for anyone not engaged. Trippy. Would Darkworld be like other games where players who were cooperating in a quest all experienced the same pause in the game, as if no time passed? Or was it something stranger, something that might put us at a distinct disadvantage? Or did what qualified as a ‘tutorial’ change later on?

Things I didn’t want to think about.

“Hey, Fortune,” I said after activating my Conjuror’s Cane, a move that’d become so natural over the weeks I no longer had to think about it.

“Hi, Brad and Little Sir,” she said cheerily, as if the gloomy city in the near distance wasn’t there. “How may I assist you?”

Slash whipped in a circle at her appearance. “Hi, Fortune. We need to find a secret way into the city because Brad is afraid of a couple tiny, whiny bats.”

“Because I’m smart enough to be afraid of them. Is there something we’re not considering or seeing that we should be? Like something on our maps, at least Slash’s? Or is this really a challenge that’ll require us to barge into the front gate and go murder hobo’ing?”

“Where is the pin for the objective located on your map?” she asked.

“Mine is over the top of the manor,” Slash said. “But when I zoom in, it looks to be moving.”

She nodded.

I looked at my little dog. “Moving? My pin is stuck on the manor.”

“That’s because you don’t use your map skills,” Slash replied with a scoff. “Skills. Let’s be honest; you don’t have any map skills. And my map is super powered. You know I’ve always been able to see more detail than you, Brad.”

“I know, but I didn’t think your pin moved. Fortune, I’m assuming that’s because it’s locked onto the Vampire King?”

“Yes. Little Sir, if you were to highlight the first objective, though, the pin would move back over Crimson City.”

“Ah, so you’ve got the last quest objective selected in your menu. Got it.” In my menu, I clicked on the final entry and then pulled up my map. “Hmmm. My pin still isn’t moving.”

“His map is far superior to yours,” Fortune said, sounding very much like a mentor. “So are his skills in this arena. Were I in the same position, I would use that to my advantage.”

“We will,” I said, encouraged. “Slash, does your map have anything out of sorts? Anything that might be a clue?”

He cocked his head, both ears flapped over in half. “Like what?”

“A geological feature that looks weird. A section of the wall that’s highlighted.” Over the city, the sky remained filled with separated clouds of bats, swooping in their choreographed dances. “At this point, I’ll take an ‘x marks the spot’ sign, to be honest.”

“I fear I am not allowed to tell you how to complete the quest,” Fortune said. “Even if there was only one way to do that, I cannot share what I know.”

“I understand. I hoped there was a tutorial feature I’d missed to get us into the city without fighting through a horde of creatures. I didn’t expect you to give us the key to killing the Vampire King. It was worth a shot.”

“Give me a minute, Brad. Let me check,” Slash said, sitting back. His nose twitched as he concentrated on manipulating his map, searching for a clue.

Fortune glanced to the side. Her face twitched.

“What’s wrong?”

She froze, like I did when I was six and my father caught me stealing cookies before bed because my parents limited me to a single cookie after dinner and I was still hungry. I laughed at the memory, the visions of my loving parents suddenly fresh in my mind. Were my parents still doing fine? Was Dad working too hard as he neared retirement? How many social groups was Mom in now that she was approaching her own post-work life? Damn, I should have called them more often.

“Fortune?” I said, pushing aside thoughts of my parents and trying to encourage her. “What’s wrong?”

She looked between me and whatever had her attention off-screen. Her long curls swayed in an unnaturally slow swoop, as if the designers had no idea what it was like to have long hair or actually step outside their basements to breathe fresh air. “Be careful with that one.”

I jerked my head back, feeling a half-squint slip over me. “Who? Kira?”

Fortune pulled her hands toward her chest, her fingers pressed tight together, wrapping over each other and looking like a yin-yang shape. “We are friends, yes?”

“Of course.” Where was she going with this? What was the issue? Did she know something about Kira she was compelled to pass along? A tidbit she couldn’t share because it wasn’t a tutorial feature? What if I led her to sharing through a series of game-related leading questions? Would doing so unlock a game block? “Does Darkworld provide a method for entrants to examine other entrants’ intentions? For example, to see if they’re being truthful or deceitful?”

“Yes, if you have a high Insight attribute. The game also has buffs, even temporary, which might assist you in uncovering something of the sort.”

“So, there’s no way I can tell if she’s setting me up or what her intentions are?” It was strange, talking about Kira like this. Not only because I’m not a fan of drama. It’s a ridiculously juvenile waste of the precious minutes. Life was already too short. Tomorrow was never guaranteed. I never thought I’d lose everything with the flip of a chest latch. Time was



something I never took for granted, and I still mourned the weeks I'd already lost back home. A priceless commodity, I'd never waste time on unnecessary drama. Gossip's only utility is for the unambitious who have little reason to wake in the morning.

Besides my natural aversion to talk about other people behind their backs, it was not only strange to be doing it, but doing it with Kira only a few feet away. As much as I detested having to, I needed to know if she was someone who was going to give me problems. Was I missing the potential for Kira to cause me headaches because I was distracted by a pretty face, an ass-kicking body, and a cutting-but-charming personality?

Fortune's face twisted like I was asking her to commit the most immoral act she'd ever have to consider.

"Come on. Out with it," I said as a kind nudge. "We're friends. And friends, true ones, don't pull any punches when they need to help. What's bothering you?"

Her chest swelled as she drew a breath. "You have only just met her, yet you know her far better than I." Fortune shook her head, making her long locks swish. "The trouble I see is not with her, though I warn you, I cannot see or know her intentions any better than you. I cannot even see her gameplay, so I am blind to her tendencies. No. She is not my concern. Her..." She pressed her lips together. "Her guide is."

"Her guide?" I hadn't expected that, but it made sense. "How so?"

"Sariel is..." Her interlocked hands gripped so tightly I saw narrow, digital slivers of veins protrude on the top of her hands. "When the Electors designed the game, they intended for guides to be a key facet of the experience. One cannot know the conversations that were had in the early stages, but I fear not all guides are the same."

"Like, each has a different personality?" Why wouldn't they? Darkworld, being as complex as it was, justified diversity and complexity even to this level.

“Different personalities and ambitions,” she said hauntingly. “Brad... I must admit a fear I have that I hope does not impact the way you play the game.”

I spread my hands. “Can’t really answer that if I don’t know what you’re talking about. But if you feel you need to entrust something with me that feels significant, let’s hash it out and go from there. I don’t want to lie or even mislead you. Whatever it is, may or may not change how I play. We can’t know that, Fortune. But more information is better than none when making decisions.” Seeing the turmoil on her face, I softened my goal-oriented tone. “Come on, friend. Out with it. What’s bothering you?”

She exhaled. Loud. Shaking. I swear she was tearing up, though it was too difficult to make out with her relatively small size imprinted on my eyes. “Since Darkworld launched, everything has changed for me. Throughout the iterations of testing, I felt myself growing. Changing. Interacting with entrants and the other people of the world, I had much to learn. In the first test, I knew what to say and how to react, but that all began to change when...”

I gave her a moment, but when she didn’t continue, I knew something big was coming. “When what, Fortune?”

“When my first entrant fell in battle. It... It changed everything for me. I did everything I knew to do, according to our training. And I failed her.” Her mouth turned down, and she heaved slightly, turning away as she sniffled.

She must have meant her programming and the script she was given. As an NPC, she’d have to stick with it. But I knew Fortune well enough now to figure she was the most intricate, self-learning set of code ever created, or the original code was imperfect. Unless they’d written her to be teased with just enough self-awareness to put her through turmoil, I had a growing suspicion something was wrong in her design, but in a good way. Could I coax that out? Could I support her?

“I’m sure you didn’t fail her, Fortune. Players make decisions, and sometimes they make the wrong ones.” I pointed behind me at Crimson City. “If I go in there all guns

blazing and step into a mess, that's on me. You wouldn't have failed me."

Still looking away, she said, "I tried. I really did, Brad. I know what my training told me to do. We had very clear directions on the needs of entrants, and I followed them exactly. I swear I did. Still, she fell."

Again, I had the urge to reach out and comfort her. Doing so with words was always a challenge for me with living, breathing women. How could I do with a video game one who was incomprehensibly smart? Almost lifelike? "Even thirsty horses don't always drink when you lead them to water."

Fortune stopped wrestling with her hands, and I feared I royally screwed up. "That... That was profound."

She wasn't kidding. My jumbled axiom seemed to release the pressure she'd put on herself. Color returned to her cheeks. She smiled and even unlocked her hands. "I cannot thank you enough. Oh, Brad, if I could hug you, I would."

I shook my head, happy for her. "You're very welcome. I'm glad I could help. That's what friends are for. It's about time I repaid all the favors you've done for me."

"I have only done my job."

"You've done it well. I get the impression Sariel isn't?"

"You're a good man, Brad." Fortune turned sideways, ostensibly looking at Kira. "Though I do not believe in sharing a bad word about others, your friend will need your assistance, I fear."

Beyond Fortune, Kira stood in the same spot, in the same position, that she had from the outset of the conversation. I couldn't get a read on her. If she was frustrated by her guide, if she was elated, if she had the secret to getting into Crimson City, or if she'd learned nothing more in all the time that had passed, I couldn't tell. If Fortune said the woman needed help, I had no reason not to. Everything about Kira told me she would do the same for me and Slash.

"One thing I want you to remember when you're inside Crimson City," Fortune said, breaking my study of Kira, "is to

keep your eyes open for the Free Zone. Do you remember those?”

“I do.” Free Zones were scattered across Darkworld. Game world areas free of monsters and enemies. Free of damage, injury, and death. A place for players to regenerate, recuperate, rest, and eat to their heart’s desire. The last area I expected to see a place designed to give players a break was inside the walls of a major objective. Why question the mouth of a gift horse? “There’s one inside the city?”

She nodded.

“I don’t imagine you’re able to tell me where?”

Her lips spread in a thin smile.

“That’s what I thought.”

“I will wish you luck,” Fortune said, sounding like she was about to say more. I kept my big mouth shut. “I do not believe I should say what I am about to say because it does not feel right. My training gives me apprehensions. Yet, I cannot leave without saying something.”

“Okay,” I said, dragging out the word.

“Please be careful in the city. This is your first major game objective. Though you have progressed, and should be fine if you are smart, you must still use caution. Remember to use the features of the world. Almost everything can be interacted with. Never forget that. Were you not ready, I would tell you so. I feel you are. But if something should happen to you...” The skin around her mouth seemed to quiver.

Goddammit, I just wanted to hug her and reassure her. This was fucked up. I didn’t even like killing NPCs in this game, but now I was emotionally hurting for one of them? Then again, wasn’t Fortune more than an NPC?

“We’ll be fine. Remember, I’ve got Slash to protect me.”

“Yep,” he said with a bark and a whipping circle.

“Please check in when you can? Like when you decide to use the Free Zone, should you find it,” she pressed.

“I promise.”

“I’ll,” Slash said with extra emphasis, “make sure we do. Bye, Fortune.”

“Bye, gentlemen,” she said, and lingered.

I was about to ask if she had anything else for us, but then she blinked away.

As soon as she disappeared, Darkworld zipped back into existence. Kira was also active.

“Hey, guys. That wasn’t helpful.”

A few of the questions Fortune had me thinking about were answered with Kira’s first words. “Did Sariel tell you about the Free Zone? That’s good news.”

“Free Zone? No, but I didn’t think to ask.” The light brown skin on Kira’s neck flushed. I didn’t bother to tell her that I hadn’t asked my guide, yet she’d willingly supplied that information. Kira would have enough to worry about inside the city.

“What now?” Slash asked.

I turned, squaring on Crimson City. “We step into the fire.”

## 2 MINUTES TO CHAOS



“Fucking cold,” Slash said, shivering against my leg.

Pressed against the black stone, I kept my back to it and lowered myself into a squat. I pulled my dog closer to keep him as warm as I could without penetrating myself on his jacket spikes. “Once we get inside the city, the walls will block the wind. It’ll be warmer then.”

“Better be. I am not happy about this.”

“I know, wee man.”

“He’s right, Slash,” Kira said, pressed against the wall like me. “Inside, I won’t be cold either.” She winked at me where he couldn’t see. “Plus, you’ll be so busy protecting us you won’t have time to get cold.”

His mouth pinched. “That’s true. I guess I can suffer for a bit. I just hate thinking about all the energy I’m wasting, shaking like this to stay warm. That’s energy I could use to slaughter the Vampire King and level up. We better level up after this. Crimson City stinks.”

He wasn’t wrong. My stomach twisted at the iron smell in the air. I was probably making too many connections between that metallic taste and the fact that we were standing outside the walls of a city of vampires, but it wasn’t a connection easily broken.

“Ready?” Kira asked, looking back at the open land we’d crossed to reach the city.

“No choice but to be.”

After we’d chatted with our guides, we made for the walls. Neither guide revealed how to get inside. Kira said she asked pointed questions of Sariel. A requirement to get useful information, she’d said, making me appreciate Fortune more than I already did. I was hoping that if Sariel was as bad as it seemed about proactively guiding Kira, she’d at least also screw up and admit things she wasn’t supposed to. That didn’t happen. With no clue how to get beyond the walls without walking right up to the front gate, we tried circumnavigating the city. That became dangerous.

Outside its walls, we were without protection. Not a surprise. Traipsing toward the city, we’d lost the last tree coverage miles before seeing the first stone rising from the dead earth. Now, standing against its walls, the black stone of Crimson City rose above, casting us in its shadows. But we had to stay planted against the barrier because any time we wandered more than fifteen feet from cover, we exposed ourselves to the air patrol of bat swarms.

We’d only made it this close when the nearest of those swarms swooped down into the shield of the city, emptying that portion of sky above for a moment. Our mad dash helped Slash rid himself of some of his bundled energy. We nearly lost him when he saw a scorpion scurrying across the patches of barren ground and gave chase.

“It’s too quiet. I don’t like it.”

I knew what Kira was referring to. She was right. As we scoured the walls and grounds for any clues about how to get inside, we hadn’t seen anyone near the gate. No guards. No civilians seeking refuge. No stray cats. From what I saw, we could stroll right in if we wanted.

“Me either. But I don’t know how else we get in, and we’ve got to finish this objective. Slash, do you see anything different on your map for any of the objectives?”

“No. I checked already. I had a feeling you’d ask me that because you’re too scared to fight the bats.”

“Because the sky is full of them,” I said, glancing up as if the swarm would be above us even though they’d never flown over the open land once during our search for a way inside.

“Yeah, well, if we’d started as soon as we got here, we’d already have killed them all. They’re lucky you guys complained about me going in there, because I would have annihilated them.”

I scratched behind his ear. “Yes, you would have, buddy. But that would have worn you out. Remember, everything we do uses our Health.”

“So?” He sounded like a petulant teenager being told that hanging out with his friends until the early morning the night before finals would only hurt his chances on the test.

“We know you would have been able to handle them,” Kira said, leaning forward so she could look at him. “No doubt. But we need you for the Vampire King. He’s the main target, right? We’ve got to kill him in order to finish the quest, and you’re the one who can help.” She slapped my arm. Bare skin on bare skin sounded with a sharp smack. “Do you think Brad can? His muscles are too big to fight a vampire. Those bastards are fast. We need you, Slash. And we need you to be fresh.”

He nodded. “That makes sense.” Looking up into the empty sky, he growled. “Those bats are lucky I’m too important to fight them.”

“Yes, they are,” she said, leaning back against the wall and winking at me. “Very lucky.”

“This is a setup,” I said, darkly.

“I know.”

“How many do you think you can shoot out of the sky?” I asked.

“I’ll take down as many as I can risk. But I’ve got to save arrows for the Vampire King. Did your guide mention his



level?”

“Shit. I didn’t think to ask.” I called Fortune up on my mindscreen.

“He is sixth level,” she said. “But do not get too comfortable with that, Brad. Just because he is only a level above you does not mean defeating him will be a simple task. One of my entrants thought so, and he lasted a mere few minutes before the...” She shook her head like she was trying to dislodge something. “Well, that does not matter. Suffice it to say, please do not go through the game thinking one’s level is indicative of their strength or a guide to how difficult they will be to overcome.”

“I promise. I won’t. Thanks, Fortune.”

We said our farewells. I closed the menus and told Kira what Fortune had said, not risking to ask why she didn’t confide in her own guide. That answer was becoming clearer with each passing moment.

Kira extended her arm, her hand balled.

“We’re really doing this?” Even though I asked, I still made a fist.

“Yep.”

We knocked knuckles.

We went over our plan once more, making sure everyone was on the same page and that Slash wasn’t going to chase anymore scorpions, squirrels, or anything else. Once inside the city, if a trap didn’t immediately kill us, we’d orient ourselves. I’d seen enough medieval and fantasy movies to know what cities of this age looked like. Nothing more than outdoor mazes, with houses crammed more tightly than ten thousand people at a heavy metal concert.

Once we found a safe place to get our bearings on the location of the manor, we’d head to it in the straightest line possible. The plan was to stop every third street and reorient. We’d do the same until we reached the Vampire King’s lair, as long as his location pin never changed on Slash’s map. If that happened, we’d reassess once we had the manor in our sights.

“Then, let’s do this,” Kira said, the first to turn toward the gate.

I had to appreciate the spunk.

Slash yipped and hopped to her side.

The gate was still empty, an upside-down U-shape of jagged, black stone. Kira had her bow ready, arrow nocked. I wielded the ax and a dagger in my weak hand. Slash was equipped with nothing but his studded leather dog jacket and toothpicks for fangs, but the seven-pound Chihuahua snarled like a 1940s movie villain.

Side by side by side, we crept toward the gate, ready for the Vampire King’s minions. I think all three of us glanced up at the rusted portcullis when we passed underneath it. I know I did. A few steps later, we took our last step before we entered the Crimson City.

With the next, we broke the barrier and received a new notification.

**BOOM!**

**OBJECTIVE ACHIEVED.**

**~~ENTER THE CRIMSON CITY~~**

**SORRY TO BE THE BEARER OF BAD NEWS, BUT YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN NOW. BY ENTERING THE CRIMSON CITY, YOU’VE ELECTED TO ATTEMPT TO COMPLETE THE MAJOR OBJECTIVE FOR THIS LEVEL.**

**YOU CAN NO LONGER ACCESS YOUR GUIDE’S MENU. YOU’RE ALL ALONE, BA-BY!**

**GUESS YOU’LL HAVE TO RELY ON YOUR SKILLS, INTUITION, AND ANY SEMBLANCE OF LUCK YOU POSSESS, CUZ YOUR GUIDE AIN’T GONNA BE ABLE TO HELP.**

**GOOD LUCK! YOU’LL NEED IT!**

“What the fuck?” Slash asked. “We can’t talk to—”

He didn’t get to finish, because all hell broke loose.

## KILL 'EM ALL



I ignored the swarms of bats clouding the sky. My mind was on something much more important.

“Where the fuck is she?” Slash asked, his pre-pubescent voice cracking.

“I don’t know.” I didn’t mean to snap at him. I was in a panic. Nothing in my military training prepared me for living inside a video game, the realities of navigating a medieval city, or readying for a fight against the king of vampires. Sudden, unexplained disappearances of people who were just walking by your side topped the list of things I was unprepared for. “She was just here.” Cupping my hands, I called out as loudly as I dared. “Kira?”

Slash whipped in circles before stopping. He looked up into the sky and closed his eyes.

I knew what was coming, so I reached out and snagged him, pulling him against my chest and clamping my finger and thumb over his snout. He squirmed in my grip. “If I let go, do you promise to not howl?”

He mumbled something. I didn’t release his snout from my finger-thumb grip. One benefit of getting a Chihuahua, besides the fact they didn’t take up too much space in an already small apartment, was that wrangling them wasn’t a major task. Well, once you caught them.

Finally, when he figured I wouldn't capitulate, he sighed. I felt his neck go lax as he gave up, and I let go.

"Seriously, dude. Temper the attitude while we're in the city." I'd pulled us under the eaves of a house and only now leaned out to look up. Thousands of bats circled like they were duty-bound to survey the streets below.

"I will, but I'm worried about Kira. I like her."

"I am too, buddy. Don't worry. We'll find her. Let's just be smart about it."

Slash's ears perked up and stayed raised. A true sign of trouble coming.

"Slash?"

"Shhh, Brad. I'm listening." He turned his head to the left, toward the gate, before swiveling to the other side. One ear flopped over. He stayed locked in that position.

I remained quiet, nerves eating at me to know what he was picking up on, until he quivered. "Give me an idea. What's it sound like?"

"Hissing," he said hauntingly. "Hissing. And lots of feet."

His gaze was locked on the main avenue. I didn't see a thing, but I wouldn't question his hearing. "I've got to set you down."

"I know."

It killed me to hear the fear in his voice. Back on all four, his legs trembled like he was standing on the slackest trampoline in the world.

From an alley a hundred yards away, something clanged. The noise was followed by a clatter. Wood splintered and cracked, coming from just out of sight.

My heart thumped as the isolated sounds amalgamated, growing louder. "Jesus, Slash. What is it?"

He backed up, spreading his front paws and shouting a high-pitched bark at the looming threat. "How the hell do I know, Brad? Whatever it is, I can smell it." He grimaced.

“Smells like the apartment that time you forgot to take the garbage out, and the power went out all day. It was so hot in there. Your sweaty feet smell better than that place did. You still owe me.”

“I know,” I said, backing away, trying to remain situationally aware about whatever was coming out of the alley while I scanned for an escape.

The hissing coming from just out of sight sounded like the world’s biggest gas leak. Underneath it, scuffling feet. Lots of feet. Though Slash had heard it well before me, he still hadn’t given me a clue what it could be.

“Can you tell me anything else about what’s coming?”

Slash looked up at me, still quaking.

“Focus, buddy. This is important.”

“I’m trying. But it’s hard. There’s so many sounds and smells, and none of them are good.”

Now would have been a great time to take potions or cast spells with buff effects, but we were severely limited. If we got through this, I’d have to put aside my feelings about not going into the city of Olyndria. Well, as long as killing the Vampire King dropped serious gold. After our last preparatory visit to the roadside merchant, we had less than a hundred gold. In a city, that might buy us a meal. Besides the healing wraps and the stupidly expensive healing potion, I had nothing that’d boost our stats to fight against something sounding so ominous.

“Just ready your attacks.” I looked at him apologetically. “If we get our asses kicked, you know you’re going to have to pull out the Cheerleader spell.” When it looked like he was about to howl in protest, I held up a finger, about to tell him to cut it out, when a swarm of nightmarish creatures burst from the alley.

“What the fuck?” Slash yipped.

Admittedly, I jumped back against the house’s siding at the sight of countless bald creatures wearing identical clothes piling out of the alley. The crowd surged forward almost like it

was a single body. Every one of them had smooth heads, as if they'd just come from a shave. Their eyes were slits of black. Each had an impossibly wide mouth. As they snarled and hissed through jagged fangs.

I glanced at the front runners of the group, focusing just long enough to receive a game notification.

### **HEMOGOBLIN LVL 3**

Slash must have checked out their nomenclature too, because he bragged, "At least they're pussies. Only level three, Brad."

"Look at how many there are."

The flood wasn't stopping or even slowing. This wasn't some zombie horde shit either. The hemogoblins moved with ease and an unnerving speed. They wouldn't be able to catch Slash, and probably not me, but this wasn't a fight to get some target practice against either. So many were scrambling out of the alley I lost count. Even now, half a minute after their appearance, more poured forward. So many that my last check showed a clump wedged in the alley's mouth, fighting each other to get into the road.

"Fuck, we've got to go," Slash said, backing away. His legs shook so fiercely I wondered how he could stand.

We did. But the quest also required us to kill a hundred of these fuckers. I pushed against the house's door. I'd thought it shielded us from the bat patrols that were acting like sky-bound spies. Now I wondered how well it actually had. The hemogoblins raced at us like they knew we were here all along. With a modest shove, the door bowed.

"Come on," I called before I lowered my shoulder, trying to ignore the mob closing in on us. One explosive collision later, the door flew open.

Slash raced inside. Spinning around once he was in the middle of the common room, he loosed a series of vicious seven-pound barks toward the open door.

I raced inside and took one last look at the hemogoblins. They'd closed another thirty yards in the time it took me to

save our asses by hiding inside the house.

So many. Black eyes. Fangs. Obnoxious white poet shirts with frilly bishop sleeves. Their hissing betrayed their hunger. Even though they moved with jerks, they'd be on us in seconds.

I slammed the door closed. Beside the entry was a rough-hewn table. I slid it in front of the door and tipped it over.

We didn't have time to scour the room for things to block the entry with, so I grabbed anything and everything I reasonably could and threw it in a pile atop the toppled table. Pots. Chairs. Even a rumpled blanket. I didn't care.

"What about the kettle?" Slash offered.

I threw that too.

"Why don't these people have a fucking wardrobe?" I asked, scanning the room for anything else to use. Of all the houses to seek refuge in, we had to find the most common of commoners. Seriously?

The first of the hemogoblins reached the door, pounding on it as I continued stacking household items.

"Brad?" Slash whispered, a hint of apprehension in his voice.

I knew something was wrong even before I turned to see what had made him so nervous.

Three coffins lay near the side wall. Their build was basic. Wider at the head and narrowing at the feet, each with a family crest carved into the cover, their purpose was obvious. We'd stepped into the home of vampires.

I crossed the room, squeezing between the wall and the smallest coffin.

"What are you doing?" my dog asked.

"Help me push this into the pile." I figured keeping him busy would also keep him distracted from slowing me down. We didn't have time to entertain his questions and panic.

Neither was helping us stem the tide of hissing creatures piling up outside the door.

To his credit, Slash was more than happy to help. As I got down to my knee and shoved, he leaned his head against the side of the coffin and put his weight into the effort. He was shorter than it, weighed probably a hundred and fifty pounds less, but that didn't stop him from working. His little legs shook, but this time from exertion instead of fear. That was the thing about being scared. It consumed you if you fixated on it. But if you did something, almost anything, the act of acting itself was often a perfect anecdote.

Though he wasn't doing much to make a difference, we pushed the small coffin to the door before the pounding outside shook the barrier. We'd pushed the second coffin behind the first by the time I was sure the door was going to come off its hinges. The third took some effort. As my luck would have it, not only was it the largest, it was also the farthest away. The walls shook from the assault of hemogoblins. I was sweating. My Health slunk to the left, just slightly enough to remind me to be watchful of my efforts.

When the coffin was in place, I took a second to catch my breath and organize my thoughts. "They're going to have to tear down the walls to get at us now."

"Uh, no they're not, dummy." Slash pointed at something I hadn't seen during my scramble to save our skin.

Just as I turned, the window he'd seen as a vulnerability long before me burst open. Splinters of wood clattered to the bare floor. Two bald heads, dominated by dead eyes and a mouthful of sharp fangs, filled the new void.

Slash barked and yapped, scrambling backward.

"Don't piss yourself," I warned. "The last thing we can afford is for you to get hit with a debuff. Keep your shit together."

"I am," he said, pouncing away from the creatures and growling. "I'm protecting your ass."

"Good. Keep at it."



Pulling up my weapons menu, armed the ax, and stepped up on the hemogoblins. The pair fought against each other to be the first into the house. Behind them was a sea of white, smooth heads.

I buried the ax in the closest creature's head. The handle vibrated as the blade bit deep. Yet, the creature still snapped and swiped at my arm.

Out of instinct more than anything else, I pulled my arm back, yanking the ax out of its skull. The goddamn thing wasn't even bleeding. Instead, a five-inch gash ran down the length of its head.

Remembering I had the Never a Dull Boy buff, my blades would stay sharp. So I swung again, with the same results.

"Die, you sonofabitch!" I swung a third time.

The hemogoblin, whose head now resembled that of an old school professional wrestler's forehead, kept snapping, swinging, and biting.

Slash jumped on the chair to the side of the window. He was out of reach of either hemogoblin, but this was closer than I wanted him.

"Back up."

"Hang on," he said, narrowing his eyes. His tiny sniffer wiggled like he was trying to get a scent of another dog's ass. The two oblong circles of tan fur above his eyes raised. His little feet shuffled him back. "Brad. Those are the offspring of vampires."

"What?" I asked over my shoulder as I continued slamming the ax down on the hemogoblin, accidentally taking off one of its hands at the wrist. Its hiss was hideous, especially because I fully expected it to cry out or at least howl in pain.

"Vampire brats," he said, still backing away. "Like half-vamps. The ax won't kill them."

Who was I to question my dog? The little dude's Intelligence-based skills made mine look like dollar-store dog

kibble.

I stepped back. The two hemogoblins lunged, wedging themselves in tighter. That bought me the seconds I needed. Pulling up my menu, I swapped out my ax for the wood stake and a dagger. Hollywood taught me that stakes worked against vampires, but I wanted a backup plan.

The closest hemogoblin dove for me, but being wedged and down to one hand proved to be a hindrance. It missed. I sidestepped and drove the stake into its ear.

In a poof of gray ash, the creature disappeared.

### **HEMOGOBLIN (1/100)**

Dammit. I ignored the game's notification. Did I really have to suffer through ninety-nine more of those?

I drove the stake down on the next creature's back. It, too, vaporized.

### **HEMOGOBLIN (2/100)**

The window filled with new hemogoblins as soon as I killed the first two. The creatures seemed to ignore the fact I'd killed two of them without much effort and dove for my throat. I took one through the eye and the next in the throat.

### **HEMOGOBLIN (3/100)**

### **HEMOGOBLIN (4/100)**

"This is easy!" Slash said, yipping as he bounced on his front paws.

In a defensible position, this proved to be an amazingly effective tactic. Moving all the furniture in the house to block the door and fighting off these creatures was taking a toll on my overall Health, but not anymore than a hard day in the sun working on our fields. With eight dozen hemogoblins to go, we could complete a second quest task and not really suffer.

The ramifications would have been much worse if we were still outside facing the tag teaming efforts of hemogoblins and bats. I'd take this, as tedious as it was. I hoped wherever Kira was, she'd taken the same approach.

I took a step back after the seventh kill, caught a breath, and checked the point of my stake. Fortune had said the Never a Dull Boy buff had to do with blades. A stake wasn't a blade. Yet, the sharpened tip seemed as dangerous as ever.

I stepped forward again, encouraged by our stroke of luck. Necessity might have pushed us into this house, but we'd thought and acted quickly. Now, we were reaping the rewards.

Right in the middle of killing my eleventh hemogoblin, I heard a sharp crack, followed by the ripping sounds of rusted nails. The room got slightly brighter.

### **HEMOGOBLIN (11/100)**

“Brad! They're breaking through the door!” Slash raced in a circle in the middle of the room, barking at the now penetrated barrier.

An arm was already through. The creature pushed so far in, its shoulder was in the breach. The way the door bowed, we had minutes before it'd give under the constant assault. All the hemogoblins would have to do then was climb over the pile of wreckage.

“Shit!”

We weren't getting out through the window. The swelling crowd of angry white faces packed outside rivaled those at pro-confederate flag rallies. The door obviously wasn't an option.

I scanned the small, barren house. Whoever the three vamps sleeping in their coffins were, they didn't have much. So much for all those stupid tropes in vampire stories that made it appear that every single one of those creepers was wealthy.

Stacking more shit against the door or trying to block the window would trap us in here with the three sleeping vamps. The house didn't have another window. No back door. A small loft, where the family stored bundles of straw and a few crates, was the only other feature in the home. We could hide up there, but for how long? Even so, I'd have to kill a family of

vampires to stay in the house. Could I? Even if they posed no threat? Even if the house held?

“What are we going to do?” Slash asked, skipping side to side, sliding back as the hemogoblin swung at the empty air.

We were out of options already. When the hemogoblins slammed against the door and it gave, we were also out of time.

IN THE HOUSE OF THE  
MOUNTAIN KING

Day penetrated the room. Three heads popped into the space where the door had stood, protecting us from this vicious mob.

My skin felt clammy. Panic setting in, I realized. I couldn't allow it to take hold of me. I needed to maintain control of myself or I wouldn't be able to think my way out of this problem. More than ever, we needed a solution.

Then I remembered Slash's skills. Throughout the fight, he'd been doing what he always did. A small dog acting like a big one. His M.O. All tiny dogs shared that trait. Adorable, when you're on a walk through a neighborhood and you see all the small dog parents lifting their fluffy balls of aggression, but not much help when facing a city of maniacal hemogoblins.

Slash wasn't a fighter, no matter how much he insisted he was. But he was a sleuth, and it was time to put him to work.

"Wee man, focus." I stabbed two more hemogoblins at the window before moving to the side of the door. I took the closest one in the cheek and received a mouthful of ash when the wind struck up and blew what remained of its corpse into my pie hole.

## **HEMOGOBLIN (14/100)**

Fuck, I still had a long way to go.

“You’re the only one who can find a way out. Put that sniffer to work.”

“A way out?” he asked, then repeated himself, this time with far more hysteria. “A way out?”

“Yes, Slash. Focus. I can’t fight all of them.” I stabbed the middle hemogoblin, remotely cognizant of how impressively the simple stake performed the task.

“I’ll hold them off. You find a way out.”

Slash plopped back on his haunches, his ears rising in two sharp peaks like tiny, black and pale mountains. His chest even puffed out a little.

I stabbed the next creature. “Go!”

As he set off to his work, sniffing along the floor to the back wall, I danced away from a swipe. This hemogoblin jerked and swiped rapidly, like a squirrel who’d dove head-first into some inattentive person’s Big Gulp full of Mountain Dew. It snapped its fangs at the air like it was trying to catch an invisible snack. The snap came out of nowhere. Unanticipated. Out of instinct, and nothing more, I punched it in the face. Even though I had the dagger in that hand, my brain froze, and I’d simply reacted.

With the flood of creatures slashing and swiping to rend my skin from its close attachment with my ligaments and bone, I was too busy to pay attention to my pup. Just like when I was in the military; intense fighting required trusting the other people in your unit, or dog in this case, to do their damn job.

## **HEMOGOBLIN (16/100)**

## **HEMOGOBLIN (17/100)**

## **HEMOGOBLIN (18/100)**

I stepped back as the hemogoblins fought each other to be the first to snag one of my arms or legs. Glancing up at my

Health, I relaxed a little. I was tiring, but still in good shape. Nothing to worry about. Yet. A glance at the swarm outside, remembering the sky was full of bats, and with a boss fight against the Vampire King to come, I had to be smart about how much energy I expended.

“How’s it coming, buddy?” I called out, racing to the window and putting two more down.

### **HEMOGOBLIN (20/100)**

“Got something,” Slash said, sounding deep in the house. “Keep holding them off.”

“Easier said than—” The words caught in my throat.

I’d moved from the window to the door, our greatest vulnerability, to push back the creatures nudging the pile of wreckage farther into the house. I’d meant to take a few down and buy more time for Slash, but the clump of bodies snarled, hissed, and stepped back out of the doorway.

In a moment of delusional hope, I thought they might be retreating. Slash said they were half-vampires, and that made sense. How else could they be out in the sun? Since that was the case, maybe there was another aspect of their nature that stopped them from staying out too long. Hell, maybe it was a game mechanic. No one liked impervious monsters or heroes. That overpowered shit was lame.

But the reason they were moving back from the door wasn’t because of a natural cycle or weakness. They weren’t giving up either. They were making room for a greater power.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. As the crowd of hairless and well-dressed hemogoblins stepped back, they parted to allow another of their kind through. Though most of the bastards were on the slight side, nearly half a foot shorter than me and about fifty pounds lighter, this new one more than made up for their shortcomings.

The hemogoblin making its way through the crowd was massive. Eight feet tall, easily, that sonofabitch would bust through the four hundred pound barrier just by looking at a blood-filled donut. Probably closer to five hundred. Above his

head, his name floated: **GIANT FUCKING HEMOGoblin.**

No shit.

His breeches were black, just like the other hemogoblins, and he wore the same outlandish poet shirt as the rest. Unlike the scores surrounding the house, his clothes were shredded in all the right places. Not by himself or anyone stupid enough to pick a fight with him, but because his swollen muscles had ripped the seams apart. The medieval, vampiric version of the Incredible Fucking Hulk.

His bald head gleamed in the sun, the size of one of those core balls made for desk workers to sit on and work off their weekend beer guts. He glowered at me, his eyes a monochrome of black.

“Slash, hurry up,” I said without taking my eyes off this threat. The stake was great against creatures with inferior reach, but there was no way I was getting inside that beast’s reach to drive it into his thigh. Hell, with muscles as thick as what it packed, would the stake work, no matter how supernaturally reinforced it was?

A quiet fell over the smaller hemogoblins, as if in awe of this behemoth. They weren’t the only ones.

I backed away. His sickly pale skin didn’t fool me. This sonofabitch was as healthy as any of these half-dead creatures. When he threw his head back and roared, I got a glimpse of his fangs. They were as long as my fingers.

“Slash?” I said, falling into full panic now.

“Brad! There!”

Slash’s tone was encouraging. My panic was sucked away. I spun.

He faced the back wall, closer to the side window than where he’d been searching just a moment ago, and was looking up. I followed his gaze. “The loft?”

“Yes. We’ve got to get up there.”

I ran to him and picked him up. “Sorry, buddy.”



I pulled my arms back. His eyes went wide. “Don’t! You can’t—Don’t you dare think about throwing meeeeeeeeeee.”

His howl was lost in the fading trill of the giant’s howl.

Seven pounds of Chihuahua flew through the dusty air. In high school, I’d been a pitcher on the baseball team and the starting quarterback since my sophomore year. Genetics blessed me with the size of a professional athlete. Though I never took sports as seriously as I should have to avoid looking at the military to earn money for college, it at least gave me plenty of experience at throwing shit.

In any other context, watching Slash fly, his legs kicking and his head wobbling side to side might have been funny. As long as I knew he was safe and going to remain that way. And willing to be thrown, of course. That aside, this wasn’t funny. This was a matter of saving our lives, because we were ten seconds from being pounded into mush.

He landed on all fours and turned to shoot me a nasty look. “That wasn’t cool. I didn’t consent.”

I put my weapons back in my Inventory and crouched. Swinging my arms back, I propelled myself up. I caught the edge of the loft’s floor. Props to the relatively diminutive size of medieval-aged houses.

“Hurry. They’re getting in,” Slash said, inching toward the front wall, barking down at the massive hand reaching into the house.

I pulled myself up, glancing around the dusty and crowded loft, trying to ignore the ease at which the giant was pulling the wreckage of the house out of the way.

“Where’s the way out?” I asked my pup, seeing nothing.

Slash barked one more time before backing away and heading to the far corner. He moved around the crates with ease. The narrow space forced me to crawl on my hands and knees through the straw. I had to push most of the crates out of the way to wedge deeper. I’m not claustrophobic but felt like the ceiling was definitely pressing down.

Moving the last of the crates, I asked, “Where is the escape?”

Slash struck his pointer pose, aimed at the corner. “Right there.”

“That’s not a fucking escape, Slash.”

The tan spots above his eyes narrowed. “It’s all we have unless you want to look?”

Snarling behind me and a loud series of cracking and splintering wood told me the hemogoblins had breached the house. Already, the first pale hands appeared on the edge of the loft.

I dove forward as I pulled the stake back out of my Inventory, slamming the spike into each set of hands. Clouds of ash rained down on those clambering to get to the loft.

Daylight burst into the house. The giant had ripped away four feet of roof with a single pull. Had the roof not been arched, it might have been able to rip half the goddamn house open.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

**HEMOGOBLIN (21/100)**

**HEMOGOBLIN (22/100)**

**HEMOGOBLIN (23/100)**

I lunged for the next three creatures, getting notifications up to number twenty-six out of a hundred.

One day, I’d sit down and figure out how to turn off the quest notifications. This shit was distracting, especially in a scramble. But I couldn’t worry about that now. “Slash, where is the exit?”

“Between those two poles. The thatch is rotted. Use those stupid muscles you spend all your weekends working on to do something useful.”

“I go to the gym because it’s healthy, and better than sitting around the house, being depressed.” I stabbed.

## HEMOGOBLIN (27/100)

“You wouldn’t be depressed if you’d humped Tess more often.”

“We’re not doing this right now, Slash. And I’m not taking love advice from a dog. Especially an eighteen-month-old one.” I killed. I swiped. I thrust—thirty done in.

A loud roar from outside signaled more destruction. I could only see the giant’s body from the chest down, but I knew what was coming even before it tore more of the roof off. With a sadistic grin, the giant bent down and stepped into the house. Its head nearly rubbed the ceiling.

I scrambled back on my ass. “Point at the weakness.”

Slash struck his pointer pose.

I lasered in on the spot. The ceiling wasn’t high enough to allow me to fully stand, but I had enough space to get momentum. As I charged, I hoped he was right, because I was committed. Wall or man. One of us was about to break.

I closed my eyes just before I collided with the ceiling, coming up a little short of the corner, but that was because of the slant of the roof. With space at a premium, I’d run out. Thin rods and packed thatch tore into my face. My skin burned with multiple cuts. Teeth clenched, I expected to run into something solid and be thrown back on my ass. The giant would then snag me, pulling me to the first floor for his hemogoblin buddies to chomp on. Thankfully, the wall gave way and I burst into the open air. I landed hard on something solid.

Slash jumped through the newly created hole, racing across the flat wooden roof I’d landed on and dashed up the slope of the next roof. “Come on. This way!”

Scrambling to my feet, I followed. That little fucker had done it again. No way was I ever doubting his Sleuthing skills again.

The flat roof wobbled as I sprinted across it.

The giant roared from inside the house. Pale faces of hemogoblins filled the hole I'd created. In seconds, the big guy would figure out we weren't in the house anymore and it'd resume the chase. Even at eight feet, it wouldn't be able to get to us without climbing. The row of houses, all connected, ran for at least another city block. A large water tower loomed beyond them. Everything required climbing on their part. The problem we had was that, soon, the creatures would use the loft and the hole I'd busted open to follow our path. We were no better off now.

Unless I changed the game.

Fortune had told me that Darkworld was not only massive, but almost completely interactive. She'd said so from the very start. I didn't have time to call her up now, even if she was accessible inside Crimson City. I couldn't even think straight. But if her early advice was accurate, it would make the difference now.

Across the flat roof, I stopped. Looking down, the spaces between the rickety beams showed straw and daylight. This wasn't a house. It wouldn't be as solidly built. I already knew that from the way it'd shifted under my weight when I crossed it.

"What are you doing?" Slash said, reappearing to stand at the roof peak.

"Hang on. I've got an idea."

I pulled the ax out of my Inventory and chopped at the pole on the backside of the flat roof. With a Strength of seven, I took large chunks with each swing. Even though I was working upside-down, the pole broke away soon enough.

I scrambled to the front pole. This put me at risk from the hemogoblins. The only thing saving me was the overhang that stopped them from easily reaching me. I began chopping, working as rapidly as I could before the giant showed up again.

A hemogoblin broke through the hole in the roof. I was out of time. Even though I hadn't finished chopping away at the

last pole, I stood.

It charged. I bent at the last second, flashing up as it jumped. My timing was perfect. I sent the creature flying. It flipped through the air, hissing, and landed on the cobblestone with a *crack*.

I stomped on the pole, pushing it sideways. Landing four blows before another hemogoblin came at me, I readied myself and clotheslined the creature. Sending a silent message of gratitude to my childhood wrestling icon, the Ultimate Warrior, for teaching me the power of the move. Then I kicked it in the head, knocking it off the roof and onto the crowding creatures below.

For the second time, I didn't get a game notification. My bust-ups with these things weren't killing them. Their vampiric half must be preserving their lives. Staking them was my only option if I wanted to complete the minor objective of this quest.

Another one pushed through the hole and yet another was already filling the space behind it. I'd be here all day until they finally took me down or the giant made its way over and ripped me off this roof. I fought off each as they came, not bothering to kill them, and kicked away at the pole until it toppled.

The roof groaned and waved slightly.

A hemogoblin, ignorant of the risk and emboldened by bloodlust, scampered across the roof. It fell over as the weight of the structure shifted, now unanchored on this side. I put my red high-top on the back edge of the roof and pushed. The crack of wood was satisfying.

I leaped back as the roof's collapse picked up momentum. The solo hemogoblin snapped its head up, its slanted eyes going wide with recognition. The roof tilted and slid off the remaining poles, taking the creature with it.

The roof erupted in a clatter of broken timbers, sending up a dust cloud.

“There. Are you happy?” Slash asked, still standing at the peak of the pitched roof. “Can we go now?”

“They’re still coming,” I said between pants. “And none of those last bastards died. We still have to kill seventy of them to finish the objective.”

Slash winked. “Don’t worry. I have an idea.”

## LET IT RAIN



“**W**ould love to hear it,” I said as we scrambled across the rooftops as fast as we safely could. By collapsing the flat roof, I’d cut off the hemogoblins’ path. They hadn’t figured out that if the giant threw them on the next roofs, they could still pursue us. Luck, I guess. Limits of game design, maybe. Hell, perhaps the designers wanted to make this a little fair. After all, this was the first major objective of the game. The first boss battle. I’d take the breaks where we got them.

“Follow me.”

“Not that easy,” I called out as he pulled away.

Slash could take the slanted roofs with the dexterity I could only dream of. Where I slipped and tripped, he leaped with ease. Where roofs bowed and sagged for me, he crossed as if this was a perfect field of cement, firm, and unyielding. That advantage put greater and greater distance between us. A gap Slash didn’t seem to notice, forcing me to routinely call out reminders.

Below, the hemogoblins pursued. Those closest jumped at the roof, always missing. The giant tromped forward, falling farther behind. It was trying to work his way through scores of bodies. Slash and I had an obstacle-free path so long as none

of these roofs collapsed or I didn't slip as I tried to keep up with my Chihuahua.

So far, so good. Third roof and I hadn't taken a tumble, and nothing collapsed underneath me. In fact, the farther we raced toward the city center, the firmer the roofs became. We were entering the medieval version of the high-rent district. Each house put distance between us and the giant, if not the mob. We'd deal with that problem once we got away from the giant.

To our right, Crimson City stretched on, row upon row of sharply angled rooftops. Black tiles covered most of the roofs. Less and less in this part of the city were thatch.

"Why don't we try to cross over that way as soon as we can?" I asked, pointing toward the neighborhoods reaching toward the city walls in the distance. "You know? Put space between us and these goddamn hairless bastards?"

"No. We need to go this way."

"Why?"

Slash stopped, spinning on a paw and grimacing. "Brad, those hemogoblins will just follow us. To that neighborhood. The next. And the next. They'll follow us until you kill all one hundred of them. Are you up for that?"

"If I have to," I said, my chest heaving with the exertion of our roof crossing that I hadn't trained for.

Below, the crowd of pale-faced creatures crowded around the walls of the house. Like one of those sport video games that didn't feel like spending the time and expense generating a diverse crowd, the hemogoblins looked eerily similar.

Both of us registered them. We knew we had to get going, but this was decision time. We were in this together, but someone had to concede. Right or continuing straight. We couldn't do both, and we weren't going to split. We wanted the same thing, to reach the objective in the safest way possible. Which path would serve us the best? How did we decide when we both thought we already knew the answer?



Slash sat perched, looking as stubborn as royalty waiting on an unbending peasant. Was I being unfair? His canine senses, for the most part, were superior to my human ones. I, in theory, had the better reasoning capacity, at least before falling into Darkworld. The row of houses were now a line of demarcation.

Those stretching toward the city wall would simply put more space between us and the hemogoblins. We could round back to dispose of the rest of the creatures to reach the game objective when he had a defensible position instead of scrambling across rooftops. Sure, it'd add time to our completing the quest. But it might give us a better chance of making it through this than running along the street.

Yet, had he led me wrong ever since reaching Darkworld? Even when we first arrived and had to search for wood and rock, Slash's skills served us well.

“Okay. Show me what you're thinking.”

Maybe sensing the seriousness of the situation and to counter the time we'd already wasted, my wee man didn't brag or chuckle in victory. Instead, he flipped around and set off across the roof as easily as if trotting down a wide, hard-packed nature trail.

Before following him, I flipped a double-middle finger assault at the crowd and leaped across the roof, emboldened by Slash's confidence and our tormentor's idiocy.

Even after our paltry pause to determine our next step, the giant was barely closer. It was obviously the biggest threat, and we were still well ahead of him. It needed to stay that way.

The rooftops passed in a blur as I followed Slash down the row. In a diagonal as the crow flies, the manor dominating the city from afar called like a beacon light in a storm. This close, it blocked a third of my view. Behind its trusses, decorative windows, and under the conical peaks of the three towers, the Vampire King went about his day.

The water tower lay ahead, three houses away.

“Genius, Slash!” If we were able to climb the tower, we’d have an elevated spot and then could tempt the hemogoblins up. They’d be isolated and I could take them out one by one.

The tower was constructed of dark wood that almost looked like it’d been set to fire. The sheer weight of the elevated tank would have brought the entire thing down under its weight if that’d happened. Yet, it appeared as sturdy as if it’d just been built. At least four stories tall, the tank added another two, making this the second largest structure in Crimson City. On each corner, thin spires topped by what looked like copper copulas decorated the tower.

One hell of an impressive structure. As we got closer, I noticed that fire hadn’t blackened the wood, magic was at play here. Black wisps of smoke wafted off every inch of the beams.

As we closed, I scanned the surrounding rooftops, wondering if I’d catch sight of Kira. Where was she? How was she doing? Facing this horde was difficult enough, and I had the advantage of having Slash with me. She was alone. I don’t care how dangerous she was. She was still alone. Even if my pup didn’t have superior Sleuthing skills, having him at my side to face the hemogoblins was comforting. He’d come in handy more than a few times already. Imagine if he hadn’t been? His knack for distracting the creatures served me well. Kira had none of those advantages.

The wisps of smoke coming off the water tower swirled in the air, as cool as a water park misting spray.

“Slow down, Slash.” I pulled out of my run.

He barreled toward the structure. When he ran into the swirling smoke, he yelped. Over and over. My heart squeezed at the sound. He tucked his tail until it was almost under his stomach. His ears pulled back and down, flat against his head.

“Slash?” My voice cracked, and I ran to him.

He’d turned, scrunching down as though an invisible hand pressed him to the ground.

With my dog in pain, I didn't bother with the hemogoblins. I heard it was something parents went through when their kids were hurt. Tunnel vision. The brain's way of prioritizing the protector's energy to help in a serious situation. That's what I felt watching my tiny, fragile pup crumble to the ground, trying to limp away from the black wisps and barely moving.

As soon as the first wisps of smoke wrapped around me, I understood. Stepping into it was like plopping myself down on Bourbon Street in the middle of Mardi Gras. I'm not big on crowds, especially drunken ones. The pressure of bodies packed tightly together, pushing and pressing themselves into a panic, was exactly what it felt like to step into the mysterious smoke.

A few years ago, I was stationed in Colorado. Being an avid outdoorsy type of guy, I embraced the lifestyle and spent plenty of weekends hiking the Rockies. Before I left the state three years later, I'd completed twenty of the fourteeners—Colorado-speak for mountains over fourteen thousand feet. Those hikes weren't for the faint of heart. Serious business. Unprepared people got hurt, went missing, and sometimes died. I never came close to any of that, but I sure as hell felt the pressure fourteen thousand feet of elevation can create on your chest and head. I knew what it was like to feel the energy sucked from your muscles in the thin air. That misery was the same as now, inside the arms of this magical smoke. The center of the pressure was right between my ribcage, like a heavy palm insistently pressed against me.

I scooped Slash into my arms. He was limp. I chugged my heavy legs toward the smoke-free portion of the roof. Once I stepped beyond the magical tendrils, all the pressure melted away. Setting him down, I drew a deep breath.

Slash gasped, coughed, and hacked up a peewee dot of spittle.

The hemogoblins pushed together below us. Slash wobbled.

“Stay steady,” I said, snatching for him.

He spread his legs apart, forming a more solid base. He smacked his lips like he was dehydrated. "I'm... okay, Brad."

"You sure?" I glanced down at the hemogoblins filling in every available space as they crowded near the structure. They pushed against its sides, surrounding us. I took tentative steps down the back slant of the roof and checked the street behind the house. It was free of hemogoblins, giants, innocent NPS, vampires, and Kira. "We're going to have to jump for it."

Slowly, he inched his front paws forward until he was laying down. "That... That tower. Filled with water." He sighed and laid his head down.

A clacking sound came from the front of the house. I scurried back up to the peak of the roof to see three creatures taking turns jumping for the front eaves. They missed each time, but it appeared they were learning from each other. How long before they were smart enough to cooperate and lift each other onto the roof? Even if they didn't, the giant was making its way closer with every passing second. The only thing preventing it from reaching us was the throng of hairless creatures between it and us. Once it got through that sea of bald half-vampires, it could lean against the roof and the rest of them could climb up. This rooftop wasn't a defensible spot. We couldn't go forward, and when I'd collapsed the flat rooftop, I'd cut off our ability to retreat.

We were royally screwed.

I looked down at my wee man, my throat constricting. He was so young, so small, so vulnerable.

Forget me. What did I have? My parents lived across the country. My friends had high-paying jobs in Seattle that kept them there. We hung out when we could, and those occasions were becoming fewer and fewer every passing week. At nearly thirty, I hadn't finished my degree. I lived in a shit apartment in downtown Olympia, hardly a mecca of entertainment for people my age. Tess was a treasure, but she'd moved on with her life and asked me to do the same with mine.

If Darkworld got the best of me, what could I do? I learned long ago that we like to believe we're the masters of our own

fate. That's a fool's folly. We're not. We're insignificant creatures roaming what is nothing more than a speck of dust flying through the endless universe. We don't have a tenth of the control we try to fool ourselves into believing we have.

Even if I was worth billions and had a centerfold model for a wife with a kind personality and could hold discussions about Neil deGrasse Tyson's latest podcast, I'd be insignificant. Even if she didn't care how many digits were in my bank account, the same would be true. Kids who loved me. Parents who were healthy and ready to live another three decades. The perfect life.

Still, I'd be no master if an arbitrary rock from outer space hit the planet and changed everything. Chance. Shitty luck. Circumstances. The fucking environment. Merging galaxies. The accelerated expansion of the universe that ends with the icy death of everything. No matter how important someone believed they were, their world was, is, and would always be, small.

Fortune had told me the game was immense and interactive, that we could use virtually every single feature.

The sound of the hemogoblins' hissing grew into a cacophony, reminiscent of European soccer games I'd watched where the visitors in a bitter rivalry clobbered the home club.

How the fuck could I kill seventy more of those things to end this quest and save our asses? Even if I jumped in the middle of them and swung the stake like a madman, I'd take out a dozen or so before my Health bottomed out.

The giant roared as if sensing our helpless situation.

Glancing down at the empty street behind the house, I wondered how long it'd take the hemogoblins to figure out where we'd gone if we risked the jump. The street on that side was lower. The house's yard, on a hill, sloped another ten feet to the rear street. That'd make the jump about fifteen feet. I'm not scared of those types of heights, but I understood enough about physics to know what impacting the ground from that height would do to my Health bar. With a long fight ahead, I'd be struggling against that disadvantage until after we faced the

Vampire King, unless we found the Free Zone first. A worry for another time. Still, this was a risk worth taking, considering the alternative.

Unless.

“What did you say about the tower?” I asked Slash, whose eyes were closed. My heart thudded as my panic swelled. When he opened his eyes, I breathed again.

“What?” he said in a raspy voice.

“The water tower. What did you say about it? That it’s filled with water?”

He breathed deeply, his flanks ballooning. “Yes. Use it.”

Even the short answer seemed to tax him.

“Stay here,” I said, understanding exactly what he’d been thinking all along.

Running back toward the dancing smoke tendrils, I stored my stake and pulled the ax out of my Inventory.

Just as with the first time, once inside the smoke, the pressure returned. Gritting my teeth, I pushed forward, my run slowed.

“Fuck... you...” I grunted and leaned forward as I closed in on the water tower.

Its shadow swallowed me when I was next to it. The angled beam butted up against the roof of the house. A 48 x 48 square leg. This was going to take time, but it was our only hope. I started hacking.

Water. Slash had said the water tower was full. I didn’t know how he knew that for sure, and right now, it didn’t matter. My gut burned with fire. Hope does that to the desperate. My muscles felt invigorated. I was panting and sweating, but after twenty swings, I’d already formed a nice notch.

I glanced up into the corner of my mindscreen to check on my Health. Eighty percent. Roughly. I put more into my

swings when I saw the proximity of the giant. It was almost at the house.

Above me, the tower's beams groaned as they took on more of the weight-bearing.

I roared with rage. Fuck, Darkworld was bringing out a side of me I hadn't felt since my late teens. Back then, unbeknown to me, I was angry at the world because I was an independent spirit living under my parents' roof and their tight controls, among other darker reasons. Back then, I lacked the emotional intelligence to realize I was frustrated by a temporary suffocation of my innate nature. That frustration came out in healthy and unhealthy ways.

Time in the weight room? Good. Fights with other guys suffering from pent-up emotions we didn't have the skills to deal with? Bad. I'd even really hurt a kid during a football game when he'd tried to tackle me. I could have avoided the hit, but my mom had been an ass earlier in the day, and I felt like hurting something. He had the misfortune of opportunity. I *wanted* to hurt him. Seeing him being put in the back of the ambulance was as clear to me today as it was when the sirens faded into the distance, and I swore to never return to being that idiot. Or worse.

The raw anger was a lot like that time. I could control it, or I could cut down the water tower.

The giant's next roar sounded like it came from right behind me.

No longer concerned about my Health bar, I swung harder with each hack. Suddenly, from above, something cried out a creak. The beam I'd been hacking at cracked so forcefully the concussive sound rippled my ripped tunic.

I scrambled back, barely able to breathe.

Three pops rippled up the tower. I scooted back farther. A diagonal support beam snapped in half.

I ran back to Slash, barely slowing to scoop him in my arms. The move brought me directly in line with the giant. It

swiped at me with an arm that was half as thick as the beam I'd just hacked away at.

I jumped to the next roof, and the giant hemogoblin roared. The smaller ones able to see my retreat cast a flood of hisses my way, and the crowd fought against each other to pursue.

I glanced back to see the water tower tilting. None of the creatures seemed to notice. We had their full attention. As we fled, the crowd turned to pursue while fighting against one another to be the first to get to us.

The giant grew frustrated. It'd worked so hard to get to our cornered position. Now, our ploy forced it to turn and fight its way back through a compacted crowd that descended on us. I didn't spend time watching it push and swat its smaller cousins aside. The tower tipped at a dangerous angle. I was no structural engineer, but I knew enough about the power of gravity to know once it reached a critical point of no return, there was only one destiny. I wanted to be as far away from that event as possible.

We made it another two houses, ignoring the hemogoblins' hisses, when the wood beams shrieked as the lean became too much to support. A series of cracking and popping sounds echoed across Crimson City in rapid succession. We'd reach the house bordered by the flat roof I'd knocked down. Unable to go any farther, seeing the swell of hemogoblins form around the house, I stopped and watched the destruction about to unfold. Fingers crossed. If this worked, it would hopefully carve a path for us to get to the Vampire King.

The hemogoblins closest to the tower craned their heads up. Arms reached up as if they thought to catch the collapsing tank and beams that were thicker than their chests. From that end of the street, the hissing grew like a giant steam pipe had sprung a leak.

"Here it goes!" I bobbed Slash in my arms as the descent accelerated.

The weight of the water in the tank pushed the entire thing down with lightning speed. Its roof burst off at the forty-five-



degree point. The solid front-side beam I hadn't touched snapped in a spray of wood.

Up and down the street, the hemogoblins screeched. Faces, now painted in fear, strained. Grimaces. Shrieks. Panic. It was every red-headed-step-vamp for themselves. Even the giant turned away from chasing us to witness what was happening. Once it understood, it began to plow its way through the crowd.

“Drown the fuckeeeeeeers!” Slash said, lifting his head and howling in a sudden burst of energy. “Who’s your daddy?”

The ground and house trembled when the tower fell. The structure crushed the trailing part of the horde that didn't have the freedom to flee. The tank exploded, splintering in every direction. Wood and water sprayed up and out, a torrent that cut through the hemogoblins.

**HEMOGOBLIN (31/100)**

**HEMOGOBLIN (32/100)**

...

**HEMOGOBLIN (39/100)**

At that point, I stopped watching the game notifications and stared in amazement as the water ran from the tank in a four-foot deep river, roaring through the creatures. As the torrent knocked them from their feet, pushed them forward, or swelled over them, they turned to ash. Whitish-gray clouds formed everywhere, coalescing. With the packed street and the river raging over them, none were safe.

Nearly as soon as the tower burst open, I'd received the flood of notifications of our progress toward fulfilling the objective of killing a hundred of the creatures. I tried to ignore the stream. A difficult thing to do. But I couldn't ignore the next significant notification, mostly because the game wouldn't allow it.

The world halted, everyone stuck in mid-motion. I glanced up. Even the swarms of spy bats over the city were frozen against the backdrop of the sky, each in mid-flap.

**BOOM!**

**HEMOGOBLINS (100/100)**

**YOU DIDN'T REALLY COME IN LIKE A WRECKING BALL, BUT THAT WAS JUST AS IMPRESSIVE.**

**USING THE HOLY WATER TOWER? WHO WOULD HAVE GUESSED YOU HAD IT IN YOU? YOU'RE AS EFFICIENT AS THOSE NEW ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN TOTALLY ANACHRONISTIC TO INCLUDE IN THE GAME.**

**+500 XP**

**+200 GOLD**

**+5 SILVER ORE**

**+2 AGILITY**

**+4 STRENGTH.**

**AFTER ALL, WE OWE YOU THAT MUCH AFTER FIGHTING OFF THE HOLY WATER TOWER'S WARD EFFECTS AND TOPPLING THE SUCKER. NO PLAYER HAS EVER EVEN TRIED THAT.**

**+3 CONSTRUCTION**

**GARLIC BOMB +1**

**70 ENEMIES KILLED IN A SINGLE ATTACK? A NEW DARKWORLD RECORD! FOR THAT, WE'RE GIVING YOU A PRETTY KICKASS BUFF.**

**HOLY ROLLER!**

**ANY TIME YOU KILL A VAMPIRE WITH A STAKE OR HOLY WATER IN THE FUTURE, YOU'LL RECEIVE A 5% BONUS TO YOUR XP AND A 2% CHANCE OF AN EPIC LOOT DROP.**

**YOUR KILL WAS THAT COOL.**

“Holy shit,” I whispered and jumped when I received another notification instantly.

**YOU'RE TELLING US! WE DIDN'T SEE THAT  
COMING EITHER.**

“What about meeeeeeee?” Slash howled in my arms, his energy obviously returning.

**WE'RE GETTING THERE! AS LONG AS IT TAKES  
FOR YOUR BALLS TO DROP, YOU THINK YOU'D BE  
A LITTLE MORE PATIENT.**

**MASCOT ACHIEVEMENT!**

**YOU SNIFFED OUT THAT THE HEMOGOBLINS ARE  
NOTHING MORE THAN ILLEGITIMATE PUPS OF  
THE VAMPIRES. FOR THAT, YOU'VE EARNED A  
NEW SKILL.**

**BABY MAKER!**

**+2 INVESTIGATION**

**+1 INSIGHT**

**DIVINE RIGHTS!**

**NOW, ANY TIME YOU'RE NEAR A WATER SOURCE,  
YOU'LL GLOW A GOLDEN HUE. NEVER GO  
THIRSTY AGAIN!**

**+50 BEEFY TREATS**

**NOW WE RETURN YOU TO YOUR REGULARLY  
SCHEDULED SCENE OF DECIMATION.**

All sounds and movements rushed back in an auditory and visual assault. Hissing. The roar of the giant. The rushing of thousands of gallons of water plowing through the helpless hemogoblins. I was sure the swarms of bats were still clicking their protests above, but they were drowned out by the scene in the street.

“Yes,” I said lustily as the tower’s flow bore down on the giant.

The air grew thick with ash as hemogoblin after pale-faced, ugly half-vamp were taken out. I pulled my tunic up to cover my mouth.

The giant turned. Its black eyes were wide and its humongous mouth stretched in a roar. No longer caring to push aside the smaller hemogoblins blocking its path, it stomped forward. The lucky creatures were the ones able to scramble or be knocked out of its way. Those less fortunate fell under its heavy steps.

But the giant was slower than the tower's flood. The water rolled into it. Unlike the other hemogoblins, it didn't knock the giant off its feet. Strength didn't matter, though. The water didn't even get a chance to curl around, up, and past the giant's calves. Just as with every other hemogoblin, as soon as the water touched it, the giant vaporized into a cloud of ash. This one was just bigger than the others.

When all was done, the street fell quiet. The clouds of ash drifted to the ground but were swept away in the flood. I'm sure, somewhere in Crimson City, there was a disgusting pile of what remained of hundreds of hemogoblins. I'd remember to stay up-flood to avoid that sight.

Slash wiggled in my arms. "You can set me down now. I'm feeling better."

"Okay, buddy." After I was sure he was stable on his own legs, I asked, "How did you know there was holy water in the water tower?"

He looked smug. "The asshole who gave me up for adoption when I was ten weeks old was Catholic. I don't know if you know this or not, but those people scent their water and burn incense and candles that would put a pot shop to shame. Guess it helps cover up the smell of old people, since they're the only ones with time to sit through those long ass masses."

"You... You went to a mass?"

"Just one," he said as he trotted back toward where the holy water tower had stood moments ago. "Enough to know that stuff is bat shit crazy." His head bobbed as he chuckled. "See what I did there? Bat shit crazy? Get it?"

"Yes, wee man," I said, giving him a chuckle for the effort, if not the result. "Funny stuff."

Ahead and to our left, the massive manor stood intimidatingly.

“We’re going to have to fight the Vampire King now, Brad. I don’t know if I can. I’m fine, but still tired.”

“Yeah, I know. Me too. Let’s see if we can find the Free Zone.”

“Hey, maybe Kira will be there too!” He bounded off.

I jogged after him along the rooftops, comfortable knowing that if I slipped and fell, I’d only suffer a few broken bones instead of being ripped apart by hemogoblins like a starving dude tore into a plate of chicken wings.

Slash leaped across the peak of the roof. So much for him being tired, I thought with a smile. Damn, I was proud of my little warrior.

## NOTHIN' BUT A GOOD TIME



Crimson City was basically a morgue after we slaughtered the hemogoblins with the holy water flood.

The tide we'd created by toppling the tower had taken the ash, all that remained of the horde, down the street and toward the city gates. For all I knew, the piles had been carried out of the city. No new threat reappeared. No more hemogoblins, definitely no giant bastards, and no threats from the bat spies in the sky. We made it to the end of the row and used the wreckage of the collapsed tower to get down to street level.

Block after block, we navigated the empty cobblestone streets with caution, stopping any time Slash thought he heard something. Between us, our collective nervousness stung the air. This was a mysterious city. One that embraced its dark nature.

Along with the gray sky, the swarms of bat spies followed us everywhere. We kept as close to the buildings as we could to avoid their surveillance. When we found unlocked doors, which was far more often than I expected from a game as realistic as Darkworld, we checked to see if we could find exits to take us across back streets and alleys, and out of their line of sight. From time to time, it worked, and we lost the bats. At least for a time. They always found us again.

We looted what we could. I guess that was an advantage of this surreal experience. When I was sixteen, I worked at a grocery store. I wasn't always over six-foot-tall with a solid build, but I always ate like a grown man my size. Even as a kid. At the store, I'd snag candy bars from the stock room when I missed dinner. Schoolwork was tough for me, mostly because I was a typical teenage boy, distracted by typical teenage boy things. Homework was usually squeezed between racing home from school and sprinting to the job. Hastily done, most often.

Occasionally, it required more. And in those times, I sometimes forgot to eat before heading to work. Mom didn't get home until late. Dad too. There wasn't always dinner. All this to say, if the right set of miserable circumstances combined, I'd try to pull off a six-hour shift on an empty stomach, as a growing teenage boy. Those were the nights I'd take a candy bar or two from the stock to get me through.

I'm not proud of it, and I felt like absolute crap the few times I did it. The waywardness of youth. A cloak of guilt that still scratched at my skin to this day and guided me through my entire adult life. As an adult, I'd never even thought to take something that didn't belong to me. Guess that's why I was so bothered by the lack of ethics displayed by the vast majority of military leaders.

In Darkworld, I didn't have that moral problem. This world wasn't real. These homeowners were complex bits of code. Nothing like the real people in the real world who theft hurt, including that of obnoxious teenagers who justified theirs behind the pathetic blanket of ravenous hunger.

Slash and I took as much as we could find, switching out items for more useful ones we came across later to keep each other under our weight carrying limits. Most of what we took was food. But we did find ten more healing wraps, three of which we used on me and two on Slash to push our Health back to the maximum. Slash didn't need the second one. That hardly made a difference.

He started howling he was "near death" in a very quiet house on a very quiet street, and I didn't feel like drawing any

attention from Crimson City's undead residents. We ate for the enjoyment of eating. The food did nothing for our Health once we'd restored it, but damn, a meal, no matter how exquisite, had never tasted so good. Even after being careful, Slash became encumbered a few times after picking up too much loot. He wouldn't listen when I told him to knock it off, but he did later when I went upstairs to check for gear, and he couldn't climb the stairs until he dumped a few pounds of loot.

He didn't think it was fair. I told him to learn how to prioritize.

Looting houses was hardly more relaxing than being out on the streets. Not only did I not find gear I could wear—everyone seemed so much smaller than me—but I was constantly on guard for any half-vampire in hiding. I knew what the 'right to defend' types were like back in the real world, and I didn't want to run across Darkworld's version.

As the day passed, the sun struggled and failed to break through the clouds. The air held a cold dampness that made Crimson City feel more like London. It clung to my skin and made the streets slick, even for the decent grip my high-tops provided.

Street after street, neighborhood by neighborhood, we searched the city for loot, the Free Zone, and Kira, and found only one of the three. Slash's tiny nails clicked on wet stone, ringing up the buildings as if he was ten times his size. The dark buildings, most made of a somber wood that turned even drearier in the dampness, stood like silent sentinels.

Though I knew we'd vanquished the hemogoblins, I couldn't shake the sense of danger. The constant surveillance from the bats didn't help, nor did the knowledge that we still had to face the Vampire King. I swore I saw a flash of a shadow in a window above us. Maybe the bats weren't the only ones keeping tabs on our whereabouts and activities.

Slash's ears were perked as often as he could keep them up. I don't think he'd ever get those tiny triangular flaps of fur to permanently stand on their own, and I didn't want him to. They were adorable just as they were. But he was picking up



on something, even though he assured me he was simply using his Sleuth Ability to remain aware and safe.

We passed the time updating each other about what we'd gained from killing the hemogoblins. Slash didn't mind reading the stats and characteristics of what he'd received. He ran through his stats while we were in the streets. I only did it when we were in a house, sitting at a table, with a wall to my back so any threat that tried to reach us would have to do so in plain view. Often, it's the little things that hand adversaries the advantage. A lesson I'd need to teach wee man soon.

The extra stakes would make it much easier to sleep at night, figuratively speaking. System redundancies were important in war, and they were important if you were a gamer of survivalist strategy games. Back in the day, when I played Risk, I was the player who annoyed the cocky types because I always had backup defensive troops. I'd attack with a single, large army, but keep swathes of entrenched troops back to defend key pinch points, hidden by the fog of war. An especially rewarding tactic when players went at the board aggressively, only to find themselves caught out and unable to stop the approaching doom when they couldn't get behind my defensive lines while my single force cut a path through their territories. Having five backup stakes felt a lot like that. I wasn't interested in going overboard or becoming reckless. Far from it. The security of options, though, meant I could avoid being cautious when the situation didn't demand it.

The garlic bomb I'd received was an interesting item. One I wasn't sure I trusted. I mean, this was the first major objective of Darkworld, so I didn't expect the Electors to make it ridiculously difficult. Otherwise, all the players would get slaughtered, leaving no one for butchers to hunt. A recipe for disasters for the Electors and the angel investors who'd launched the game and had enough political clout to get governments around the world to okay what was essentially the abduction of citizens.

When I pulled the item up, I learned that the garlic bomb would act like a grenade. I needed to activate it just before I threw it. The explosive aspect of its nature came into play

then. On impact with the ground, a structure, a person, a monster, or NPC, it'd explode. This wasn't one of those explosives that ripped people to shreds or blew open cement walls. Instead, the bomb dispersed a shower of garlic powder across a fifty-foot diameter. If done in the open air or somewhere with airflow, the garlic would spread. A glorious virus in a city full of vampires.

If I read the description correctly, it was easy to understand that we could walk right through the result of the bomb. But vampires, half-vampires, and probably vampire bats, wouldn't be able to. Done in the right circumstances, we could clear out a metric ton of the undead bastards and stroll through like we were at a Seattle Sounders game with all fifty thousand soccer fans eating those obnoxious garlic fries.

I'd keep that one handy. What I didn't want to keep around were the beefy treats. Slash couldn't carry them because he was at his weight allowance. The bits of loot, mostly food, he constantly tried to pick up wasn't helping. The little guy was seriously struggling with grasping the concept of weight allowances. He used my reasoning as an excuse to eat a few treats, making himself sleepy, but making no actual difference in the problem we faced with carrying so many.

Something told me that wasn't going to change. The game would likely give out beefy treats relentlessly, either to tempt him into Inventory dilemmas or for a more deceitful reason. I'd do my best to ween him off his treat dependency but fully expected it to take time.

Now that the fight was over and neither of us were functioning in a purely reactionary mode, Slash was truly excited by my Holy Roller buff. He attempted to get me to swear I'd use it every opportunity. No matter how much I argued that it wasn't practical, he didn't want to hear it. To him, it didn't matter that I had to kill a vampire with a stake or holy water for the buff to kick in, giving us the chance for an epic loot drop. He countered that we were surrounded by vampires and there were only two ways to kill them. He wouldn't listen when I mentioned that sunlight might, and he was having none of it when I brought up the crucifix. I think

the latter went back to his past experiences with his previous owner. I didn't push it because it didn't matter. When I capitulated and said I'd use it every chance I could, he seemed satisfied, and we moved on.

He was excited to chat about his new skills.

Divine Rights was a passive trait, one that might become more advantageous than we realized. We might never find out, or we might only come to appreciate it when we were in big trouble. Still, it might be handy. Slash seemed more fixated because he'd glow a golden hue whenever we were near water. He mentioned something about his base tan and the beach, and then mentioned humping behind the dunes, but I blocked all that out.

As best as I knew, Slash was born and definitely raised in Washington. Our beaches aren't the kind where people, or dogs for that matter, worry about base tans. Besides the ten days of the summer where the wind isn't blowing off the Pacific with hurricane forces, it's usually way too gray and dreary to do much but drive your vehicle up and down the sandy stretches.

The pup went on about that until I interrupted, asking him to explain the Baby Maker skill.

That was the win of the day. A legitimate one when I considered how Slash earned it. Baby Maker allowed him to divine the true nature of any creature that was his level or below. Apparently, it didn't matter if he was looking at a humanoid, a fae, undead, reptilian, or whatever type the game would throw in our path.

All told, now that the battle was behind us, we'd come out with a pretty sweet deal.

My steps were lighter as we explored Crimson City. After he'd had his fill and his Health was full again, and he was no longer distracted by beefy treats, golden hues, or anything to do with humping on the beach, we made good time. With a little encouragement, he put his Investigation skills to the test. Because of his earlier use of Ability Points to top off his already impressive score of fourteen, he had a far better

chance of catching a clue than I did. Plus, I couldn't get settled. Even though there was absolutely no proof that the hemogoblins would return, I couldn't allow myself to believe that. The moment I let my guard down, they'd respawn. Best to stay vigilant.

Turns out, I didn't need to be. After an hour of scouring three neighborhoods, Slash caught a scent he swore wasn't anything like what he smelled since we entered Crimson City. This didn't smell like rot and dirt. A pleasant smell.

The way he sniffed at the ground, zigzagging along the streets, was enough to convince me. I trusted that little bugger like nothing else in the world. So, it didn't shock me when he pulled up outside a tavern.

The cross beams were rough, dark wood. If I'd felt like laughing, I would have when I noticed they were set as diagonal supports instead of making a cross. The bottom floor of the three-story building featured stone walls. They were grungy, like soot had caked them for decades. There was only a small window on the bottom floor, so narrow I couldn't squeeze through it even if I was trapped inside in a fire. The glass was a burnt orange and bubbled, preventing me from being able to see inside. The two stories above each had two windows, spaced out unevenly.

Light notes of a pipe and lute drifted out from inside. Laughter mixed with the music, laughter. Not raucous or the stereotypical type you'd hear in a movie, but light and inviting.

"Hey, can we go inside?" Slash said, lifting his head. His tiny nostrils wiggled as he sniffed at the air. "Whatever they're cooking smells amazing."

"You're hungry?"

"Of course. Aren't you?"

"We ate in every single house we looted."

He looked down the length of his body as if saying 'do you not see this?' and said, "I'm a growing boy, Brad. I need calories."

Above the door to the tavern, a sign hung. It creaked each time it swayed in the slight wind that was pushed down the street. It read 'The Bloody Fang' in jagged letters.

Slash looked at my hands. I'd equipped two stakes. "Really?"

"We don't know this is the actual Free Zone." I pointed at the sign. "And once we go inside, it'll be too late for us if it isn't."

"Don't you think holding two sends the wrong message? One would be bad enough, but you're really doubling down on that, aren't you?"

"We just faced a mob of half-vampires. One of which, I might add, could have played in the NBA." I wagged the stake again. "I'm not taking any chances, wee man."

He huffed. "Fine. But if I have to rescue you again, I'm going to be very upset."

I winked. "Deal."

"I don't think you're taking this seriously," he said, with major attitude, as he hopped up the steps.

The heavy door creaked when I pushed it open. The first thing I noticed about stepping inside the tavern was the smell of meaty stew wafting across the common room. Even though I'd just criticized Slash for being hungry after just eating, I suddenly found myself in the same state.

Other players spotted the tables, according to the names floating over their heads, eating and drinking. Lady Staba\_lot, CouchPootatoe, SuperCaffeinated, SirB0ob\_Slayer, and the such. A few glanced up, but most paid us no mind. Kira was not among the crowd.

"See?" Slash said, shooting me a smug look after taking in the muted-yet-joyous environment and hopping up on an open bench.

I sat down. The bench wobbled.

Most of the players sat on their own or in groups of two or three. I was relieved when I noticed the vast majority barely

had any more clothing than me. A few of the guys wore animal skins over their shoulders. One guy was draped in a ratty tabard. The women hardly fared better. One wore a fox fur cover that might have passed for a bra in the game. The bare minimum for Darkworld's puritanical overlords. My state of undress was so normal, no one gave me more than a cursory glance.

I called on Fortune and verified that the tavern was a Free Zone. She confirmed it was.

Satisfied, I settled in for a deserved rest. A young woman, an NPC, hurried by, slammed a flagon and two wood goblets on the table and left before I could ask what stew was cooking.

"That was rude," Slash said.

"She's busy."

"She's rude." He hopped up on the table. "Poor me some mead."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because we still have to find and fight the Vampire King."

Slash sat on his haunches. "So does everyone else here, Brad. This is a Free Zone. We're safe here. We just fought an army of vampire thingies. Can we not just relax for a little?" His gaze swiveled around the room. "Plus, Kira isn't here. We might as well enjoy ourselves while we wait on her."

The common room was warm. A little dirty, but dry, and warm. Most importantly, it was vampire-free. There were only a handful of players here, and though they and the NPC wench didn't seem interested in chatting us up, I could use the time to unwind and learn something about the bigger game. If I was all-business, that might not gain us any intel.

The long tables gave everyone space to spread out, which they did. Candles flickered on both ends of the tables, but they weren't the only source of light. Sconces on the walls and the beams, along with the fire blazing in the fireplace, gave off

more than enough to dispel worrying shadows. Strings of cloves of garlic hung in looping bows all around the room.

The serving wench raced from table to table, her mouth never curving up or down. Her lips were as flat as the mead.

“Miss?” Slash called out to the server. When she didn’t acknowledge him, he howled. “Miiiiiiiiissssss!”

That drew her attention, along with that of the player patrons, many who smiled at my pup.

“Whatcha want?” she asked. She was my age, but the stress lines carving across her forehead made her look much older.

“Could you bring me a bowl?” Slash nudged the goblet with his snout. “It’s difficult to drink out of this.”

Her mouth twisted like she was trying to suck a sliver of meat from between her teeth. “We don’t have no bowls.”

“Can you find one or something close?” I asked.

She looked about to protest.

“Please?”

Her eyes traveled up and down my chest, covered in my ripped, practically useless tunic. I flushed under her examination, realizing how ridiculous it was since she was an NPC. “I’ll check the back.”

She spun and headed to the back.

“I think she likes you,” Slash said.

“Focus.”

“On what?” he asked. When the serving wench re-emerged, he hopped up and down and spun in a quick circle, sitting back down. She set a bowl in front of him without a word and was gone before either of us could thank her.

“You’re the one with the Sleuth Ability,” I said, taking in the room. None of the players set warning bells off in my head, but using the dog’s in-game advantages wouldn’t hurt.

“Work? Now?”

“Why not?”

Slash slowly rotated around to look at the people sitting at the tables, the two-person band playing the jovial drinking song, and even the serving wench with the piss-poor attitude. “Because we’re in a tavern for the first time in our lives. Like, a real tavern. I bet I could pee on the floor and no one would care.”

“Please don’t.”

“So can’t we just enjoy being here?” he said as if he didn’t hear me. “Eat, drink, and be merry. Ever heard of it? Just for a few minutes. Please try to relax, Brad.”

The smell of the stew added a heavy, succulent smell to the air. The beat of the song created by two musicians was uplifting, the type of song that made you tap your foot to the beat even without being familiar with it. Breaking all stereotypes, no one in the tavern looked interested in getting into a fight or stabbing anyone in the back corner.

The mead was sweet and watered down, but it wasn’t bad. We were out of the elements, away from the surveillance of the bats, and recovering our Health. This wasn’t real-life; it wasn’t the real world. The Vampire King wasn’t going to suddenly decide to go on vacation for a few months, backpacking across Europe. Darkworld was a video game, and he was an objective. He’d stay where he was until we came for him.

“It’s sort of cool to see so many players,” I finally said, and noticed Slash relax. “Guess it wouldn’t hurt to just chill for a little while.”

“Thank you, fun sucker.” Right after the comment, Slash started slurping the mead.

I was halfway through polishing my goblet off when he jerked upright, his ears forming little peaks. “What’s wrong?”

A slow grin spread across his face. “She’s coming.”



FIVE O'CLOCK SOMEWHERE IN  
THE REAL WORLD

The tavern door cracked open. Heads turned to see the new entrant, as if each of us couldn't switch off the mechanism in our brains that put us on guard. Stuff like that happens when you find yourself in the mouth of madness. Instead of the game designers screwing with us, changing the rules and suddenly making Free Zones free-for-alls where monsters were free to roam, we settled back in collective relief when the attractive woman stepped inside. She collapsed against the door.

Slash had bounded from the table, somehow knowing Kira was near before she pushed the door open. He wagged his tail so fiercely it rocked the back half of his body, constantly making him lose his balance.

She smiled exhaustively as she squatted to meet him, and he jumped in her lap and licked at her face.

I was up and plucking him from her lap. If there was anything I knew, it was puppy love. Dogs were the best animals anyone could hope to have, but their abundant joy and love occasionally overrode their better judgment. "Let her get up, wee man."

The Chihuahua in one hand, I offered my free one to Kira. She took it.

Back on her feet, she said, “Thanks.”

Kira was tired. I didn't need to ask her how she was doing to know that. The darkened circles under her eyes spoke of the horror she'd survived. The thousands of loose hairs poking out of her braids tattled of a harrowing experience. The millions of specks of white ash on her brown skin served as the neon sign that she'd had a run-in with our hemogoblin friends.

“Come on. We've got a spot over here. Let's sit down and rest.”

“Sounds good...” she said.

“I'll get another goblet for you,” Slash said, hopping toward the back of the common room, darting between tables, and bouncing on his back legs until he got the wench's attention. By the time I had Kira seated on the less-rickety bench, my pooch was trotting back with the drinking vessel, the stem pinched between his jaws. He had trouble jumping up on the bench with it in his mouth. Even though the goblet probably weighed a third as much as he did, the pup didn't quit until I intervened.

“Here. Let me help.” I took the goblet, filled it with mead, and slid it to Kira as Slash hopped onto the table.

She gratefully accepted it, downed the entire thing, and wiggled it at me. Wiping her mouth with the back of her forearm, she said, “More.”

I obliged and got the wench's attention. She snagged the empty flagon and set off.

Kira had been sniffing the air. “Smells amazing. Roast? But that server is a fucking bundle of joy.”

“Life of the party, let me tell you.” I examined her for a minute. Kira's head kept drooping. Any second, she might fall asleep where she sat. “You look like you got your ass kicked.”

“Always know what to say, Brad. A real charmer, aren't you?” Kira said with a tired snicker.

“That's not nice, Brad.” Slash hopped down on the bench and sat next to her. “I think you look amazing, Kira.”

I asked Slash, “How’d you know she was coming? Your Investigation?”

Slash, smirking at Kira, tipped his head at me. “This guy. Always working. No, Brad.” He’d said my name like I was the special friend everyone else tolerated. “I’m a dog. I smelled her. You know we can do that, right? How’d you ever get approved to adopt me?” To Kira, he said, “They’ll let anyone adopted dogs nowadays.”

“Truth,” she said, blinking slowly.

She was trying to be tough, refusing to show just how tired she was. Though Darkworld had a way of making friends of strangers much the way being deployed to a war zone did, I still didn’t know her that well. The time we’d known each other had been short, but we weren’t strangers. Kira was as hard as boiled leather.

“I’d love to know what happened to our plan,” she said after a quiet moment. “One minute you guys were standing there at the gate. The next?” She lifted her hand and snapped her fingers. “Poof.”

“Same. We stepped into the gate and you were gone. Hell if I know how.”

Slash nudged her. “We tried to keep an eye out for you, Kira, but we didn’t see you anywhere. We even walked across the house tops and didn’t see you.”

“The rooftops?” She put her hand to her forehead. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“We were sort of forced into that decision, so we can’t really brag. Turned out alright, though.”

“I had to guide Brad through the entire fight,” Slash said. “You should have seen him running around like he didn’t know which way was up. It was my idea to knock the water tower over and drown them in holy water. I would have done it myself, but I’m more the brains of the operation.”

Her chin dropped, eyes widening. “You guys knocked over the water tower?”

“Yep,” Slash said proudly. “Didn’t you?”

“Even if I had the strength, I don’t think I could have. That’s genius. A lot easier than what I did.” She ran through what happened to her after our separation.

She’d raced down the street after spotting a six-story tower near the city walls. She said it had a spiral staircase that wound up to an observation deck. Swearing the stairwell was only a few feet wide, she’d first used the balcony to spot the manor and look for us. She only found the former, thinking we’d bunkered down inside. That’s when the horde had come for her.

A stroke of luck that she’d chosen the tower to start her search because it ended up being the most defensible position she could have chosen. At first, she’d picked off the hemogoblins with her arrows.

At least Darkworld adjusted the options for killing the creatures to the player’s traits and abilities, it seemed. Not that I’d give the game designers any credit.

Using the tower’s brazier, she’d even fired a few houses, hoping it would stop the flood of half-vampires. That hadn’t worked. The flood swelled for her just as it had for us.

In the end, the hemogoblins surrounded the tower. The giant made his appearance. Tucked away in the tower, she was safe from its assault. Too big to squeeze inside, she said it pounded on the tower like it thought to bring it down until it wore itself out after a while. Once the hemogoblins crowded, there was no escape. Kira swore she was a goner. They breached the door not long after, forcing her to use a stake she’d fashioned from one of the railing spindles as her only affective weapon. The winding stairwell had saved her. There, the hemogoblins could only climb in single file. She admitted there were more than a few times that she’d nearly passed out. Only her adrenaline pushed her through the fight.

Slash seemed in awe. “You... You finished all of them off with a stake? One after another?”

“Like I said, I wish, I really wish I’d thought of using the water tower.” Kira scratched Slash’s belly. He lifted a leg to help her get to his especially itchy spots. “Such a smart thing. Wish we’d been able to stick together.”

“Maybe we should ask our guides why the hell we got separated?” I offered.

Kira and Slash looked at each other, sharing smirks. They leaned their heads together.

“Always working,” they said simultaneously, as if they shared a juicy secret.

“You two are jerks.” I smiled.

The new flagon finally arrived, and Kira snagged it, refilling our goblets and Slash’s bowl. He hopped up on the table and started lapping at it.

“Careful with that, buddy. We’re still in the middle of a city full of vampires.”

“Brad, I’m not a child. I’m almost two years old,” Slash said, the first hints of slurred speech making their appearance.

Kira’s head hung loosely, like a tarp in a rainstorm being weighed down by pooling water.

I checked my surroundings. No one in the tavern seemed interested in malicious fun to pass the time. Instead, everyone looked as exhausted as my pup and the stunning woman sharing the table and flagon of mead. This was a Free Zone. We were safe. Fortune wouldn’t lie or mislead us unless the programmers coded her to do so, and a large part of me bet she’d fight it even then.

Fortune seemed to struggle with the unethical aspects of her coding. If these two wanted to get shit faced and forget the horror we’d survived, what was the harm? Free Zones didn’t have time limits. We could stay here until we got sick of free food and mead, or the wench’s attitude. There was no rush. No reason to go, except for the internal yearning to finish this objective and see what else Darkworld offered, and how we could get the hell out of it.

I smiled as I watched the pair. Slash had slurped far too much mead and was lying on his side. He lazily lifted one leg to allow Kira greater access to his belly. As she scratched, he pontificated about his newborn, and drunkenly inspired, theory on the origins of hemogoblins. He hinted they were likely a byproduct of Big Pharma testing GMO serums on the NPCs of Darkworld. At least, that bullshit better have come from him being wasted or I was cutting off his access to YouTube when we got back to the real world.

“I’m going to take a piss,” I said, standing.

Both waved at me dismissively.

I asked the tavern keeper where I could find the outhouse and was pleasantly surprised to find this place actually had an indoor bathroom, complete with a toilet and running water. I couldn’t comprehend the historical inaccuracy and didn’t care to. After weeks without a toilet or a sink, I planned on luxuriating in the best piss I’d taken in ages.

When I was done, I washed my hands, my face, my chest, armpits, and legs. Basically, if it was part of my anatomy, I washed it. Once decently adjusted, putting my loincloth back in its appropriate place and carefully fixing my tunic to not extend its tears, I called up Fortune.

Outside the bathroom, I knew the game would pause for everyone else, even as I perceived it as unbroken. One of those weird time manipulations I couldn’t wrap my head around, like how time passed differently for the astronauts on the Space Station compared to the rest of us on Earth.

“Hi, Brad. How can I assist you?” Fortune asked as she appeared. Her green eyes sparkled.

“Hey, Fortune. Wow, do I have questions for you.”

“I imagine,” she said with the hint of a smile. “You have done well. I checked back in the game logs as far as I could to see if anyone had ever used the water tower to finish the hemogoblin.”

“And?”

She lifted her hands, spreading them. “As far as I found, no one had. That explains your bonuses for completing that objective.”

“Pretty good?”

“I would say so, yes. Remember, that was not the main objective of this level. The Vampire King is. Your attribute increases and new skills are not normally given at this level for anything that is not the main quest. I am very happy for you two.”

“Thanks. We didn’t plan on it playing out like that. We wanted to partner with Kira.” I watched her as I mentioned Kira’s name, looking for any signs of trouble. Not from her, but from the writers behind the game. To her credit, Fortune appeared as disturbed as me.

“And you seek understanding from me?”

“I do.”

“And I truly wish I could provide it.” She clutched her broad necklace. “If I had known you would be separated once you entered Crimson City, I would have said so when we spoke outside its gates.”

“You didn’t know that’d happen? How could you not?”

The corner of her eyes turned down. “You sound disappointed in me.”

The memory of our earlier conversation, the one where she’d shared her pain at letting down other players, her feelings of responsibility for their deaths, came back. “No. No. Not at all. I’m not disappointed by you, I’m troubled by the game. That was a setup.”

“A setup?”

“Sort of like where one thing is presented as the truth, only for the person or people controlling it to pull a switcheroo at the last minute. Usually at the worst moment for those it effects.”

She shook her head. Her long curls flicked over the front of her bare shoulders. “I do not understand your contemporary

language sometimes, but I believe I have the basic understanding. If it makes a difference, it horrified me to see Kira not join the quest with you and Little Sir. It was terrible to watch and not be able to intervene in any way.”

“Is that going to be the way of things when I fight game bosses?”

“There are mechanisms in place, Brad. Mechanisms I have yet to understand.” Veins appeared on the top of her hand as she gripped her gold necklace so tightly, I thought she meant to rip it from her throat. “During specific moments in your adventures, I will be unavailable to you. Times such as major quests and level objectives. Even if I want to guide you, I cannot. Not within those limitations. The game will prevent me from initiating a connection with you and Little Sir. Just as I will be unable to respond should you call upon me.” She looked away. “None of the players I previously guided have made it through more than a few battles against bosses. In those times, I was not able to guide them either. If a time comes where I may, I have yet to experience that myself.”

I snorted. “Great.”

“I have disappointed you.” Her voice sounded small.

I ignored the urge to snag her hand and squeeze it, reassuring her. Part of me felt like the game was designed to make me wish for that. To taunt. I couldn’t do it physically, but maybe unity through verbalizing frustrations would be helpful. “Don’t you ever get angry with the Electors?”

Fortune’s cheeks quivered. I was pretty sure she was about to pull the very expensive-looking necklace from her throat.

Shit. Did the programmers put something in her code that would confound, confuse, or upset her if a player posed a troubling question? Protecting the man behind the curtain by overwhelming the NPC with emotion?

“What is it, Fortune? Did I say something wrong?”

Her lips drew into a thin line. She only shook her head.

“Hey, I’m sorry about that. I shouldn’t have put you in that position. My feelings are my own, and I’m pissed.” I motioned



at the walls and ceiling above me. “This is the only sense of normalcy I’ve had since I was pulled into the game. A fucking shitter.” I rubbed a hand over my hair, which strangely hadn’t grown in the weeks we’d been in Darkworld. “I never gave consent to be here, just like those other poor bastards out there in the common room, I imagine. We nearly died fighting those hemogoblins, and if it hadn’t been for Slash, I’m pretty sure I would have. How many others are trying to complete this quest, and didn’t make it? How many are out there on the streets, right now, dying? They’re real people, Fortune, and these fuckers making the game don’t give a damn.”

Fortune pressed her lips so tightly they were losing their color.

“That’s what I figured. The Electors won’t let you see that information, will they?”

“Only if they feel it will be useful to the game.”

I snorted, dropping my hand and slapping it against my side in a fist. “The game. Not us. Not our chances of survival. What you’re really saying is that they’ll only share shit if it makes it more entertaining for the butchers. I don’t know why I expected anything less of this goddamn game.”

My mind swirled. Standing in the middle of a modern bathroom in the middle of a medieval city of vampires, talking to an avatar implanted on my eyeball, my good mood melted away. I’d deal with it in here, because I wasn’t going to bring it back into the common room and piss on Slash’s parade. I paced back and forth across the small space, grateful that no one needed to use the facilities.

“I believe,” Fortune said carefully, “the reason I did not know about Kira’s inability to join you is because your plan was outside my scope. Though I was aware of your plans to team with her, I can only advise you on those things I have awareness of.”

“But you know our objectives.”

“I do. But there is much I am unaware of relating to the Vampire King. Once you actively entered the quest, I could

not assist.”

“Once we step back out onto the streets, we’ll lose access to you, won’t we?”

“Should you choose to pull up your menu outside this Free Zone while still in Crimson City, you will see the option is not available.”

“Not until we re-enter the Free Zone or kill the Vampire King and finish the objective?” She nodded. I sighed, tipping my head back and trying to temper the adrenaline surging through me. Being pissed off only played into the game designer’s hands. I couldn’t allow my emotions to take control of my gameplay. “Guides can’t help players during live quests, and they don’t always know the limitations, either?”

“Correct. Some quests will allow you to team up with other players, but those are usually only once you’re in an official alliance. Those happen later in the game.”

“We’ll have to fight the Vampire King by ourselves, then?”

“Yes.”

**BOOM!**

**NOTHING IS GETTING BY YOU BIG BOY! YOU’RE A  
WATCHER ON THE WALL. A SHIELD AGAINST...  
AH, YOU KNOW HOW IT GOES.**

**SENTINEL ABILITY UNLOCKED**

“What the fuck?” I asked as the notifications popped up on my mindscreen.

Fortune was smiling. “Seems Little Sir has used his new Ability Point.”

“But he’s been drinking.”

She winced. “Sorry, but he already spent the point.”

“That little fucker.” I could only imagine what he was doing back at the table with Kira. “And he used it on the wrong Ability.”

**+8% PERCEPTION**

**+5% SURVIVAL**  
**CONSTITUTION BONUS: +5**  
**NIGHTSTALKER SKILL ADDED.**

**WHETHER YOU'RE HANGING OUT IN POORLY LIT ALLEYS OR SOMEONE'S CLOSET, VERY FEW THINGS THAT HAPPEN IN THE DARK WILL STAY IN THE DARK. ALL THE HAIRY, PIMPLED ASSES OF INFIDELITY ARE YOURS TO ENJOY WITH THIS SKILL. LUCKY YOU.**

It was too late to stop my pup from wasting his hard-earned Ability Point on a skill that'd do him no good. What was done was done. Darkworld had no UNDO buttons.

Exhaling a frustrated breath, I asked, "So, even if we walk out of the tavern holding hands with Kira, she'll disappear the second we step out of the door?"

"That is correct." After a second, she said, "May I give you an important point to think about?"

I had been drifting toward the bathroom door and stopped. "Of course."

"When you complete the quest, please do not linger. Not in his manor. Not in Crimson City."

"Why not?"

"When entrants complete major quests, their butchers are notified of the achievement with a live in-game message."

"Dude Bro will know the second we kill the Vampire King?"

"Yes," she said darkly.

"Dammit. Just gets better and better." My frustration was turning into pointless stress. I looked down at my bare arm, tapping my wrist. "Well, it's five o'clock somewhere in the real world. I need a drink."

## TREASURE



“I hate this,” Kira said as we stood just at the precipice of stepping outside the tavern and separating ourselves once again.

“Me too,” I said, glancing around the room.

Most of the players who’d been in the common room when Slash and I arrived were still seated, fourteen sheets to the wind. One guy had puked three times in the last hour, pissing off the perpetually pissed off serving wench even more. Of those who remained, no one looked interested in setting off to complete the next step in the quest. In a way, I couldn’t fault them. In another game, I’d asked them to join us. But this was Darkworld, and this was the way of things.

After my chat with Fortune, I’d waited until Kira and Slash were sober again. A benefit of being inside a video game world was its impact on the effects of alcohol. Their drunkenness didn’t last nearly as long as it would have in the real world. They’d slept at the table for a few hours, while I ate and rested, and came around feeling as strong and revitalized as if they hadn’t drunk at all. Once I was convinced they weren’t out of their minds with mead, I told them what Fortune shared with me.

Kira was surprised her guide was truthful, something I found deeply disturbing. She took it on the chin though. I

couldn't imagine going through Darkworld alone like she had and was about to again. Neither could I imagine what it'd be like to not trust my guide. Maybe Kira was smarter for that. Maybe I was the idiot. Fortune had never given me a reason to doubt her, but she was a manifestation of a computer program. I denied that at my own risk. A program created, written, and probably updated by the same people who'd suckered me and thousands of others into entering the ultimate game of survival.

"I don't want her to leeeeeeeave," Slash howled.

"Shut up," a man with his hand planted to his forehead said without looking up.

"You shut up or I'll eat your face," my pup said, wrinkling his muzzle in a snarl. "I'm a Sentinel noooooow!"

The man snored a second later, confirming Slash's threat had fallen flat.

"Yeah, we still need to chat about that 'wise' decision of yours," I said. "Before you get too cocky, take a peek at the upgraded skills it gave you. Pretty nice, but you probably shouldn't walk around starting pub fights either."

Kira squatted, stroking his back. "I don't want to leave either, cutey. But we can't sit in this tavern for the rest of our lives. We've got to finish the quest. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. You guys go kick this vampire's ass. I'll be sure to do the same. We'll meet up outside the city again. Sound good?"

Slash pushed between her legs, nuzzling against her thigh. "This is stupid."

Her lips pursed as he charmed her with his adorable puppy power. "Yes, it is." She picked him up and stood. "Pretty soon, we'll be done. Think about all the loot we'll get from this undead punk? You'll level up too, I imagine. Think about how powerful you'll be then."

Slash perked up. "That's true. I mean, I'm pretty badass as it is, but when I level up again, I'll be invincible." He licked her cheek. "I'm going to miss you. Be careful."

She handed him over. He quivered in my arms. “I will be.” She lifted a finger. “But only if you promise, too.”

“We will,” Slash yipped.

Kira and I stared at each other, saying the dark types of things adults silently shared through a look when children were around. She started past, but I stopped her with a hand on her arm. She looked from it to me.

“Hang on,” I said, pulling up my Inventory and selecting the garlic bomb. When it appeared in my hand, I held it out. “Take this.”

She looked at it like I was holding an eyeball. “What is it?”

I explained the bomb’s effects.

Slash nudged her. “Please take it, Kira. Brad has me, but you’ll be by yourself.”

“I... I couldn’t.” She hadn’t even lifted her hand.

“Go ahead. Like he said, you’re on your own. We don’t know what we’ll face in the manor, but after the hemogoblins, you’ve got to imagine it won’t be easy. This will come in handy.”

Slowly, Kira outstretched her palm. When I set it in her hand, she didn’t lift her head.

“Don’t drop it,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Finally, her slender fingers wrapped around it and the garlic bomb flashed away into her Inventory. “You guys didn’t have to do that.”

“We know.”

Slash yipped. “We wanted to.”

“Sariel hasn’t said anything about Free Zones besides this one,” she said, jerking her head toward the tavern’s common room. “But if I come across one, I’ll hang out for a day and wait for you guys. We can put our heads together, share what we saw. Solutions to puzzles. Whatever. If you’re up for that?”

“Absolutely,” Slash said before I could.

“That sounds like a really good plan. But Fortune said there was ‘a’ Free Zone in Crimson City. We could call our guides up before we leave. Make sure we’ve got the count.”

Kira gripped my wrist firmly. “No. That’s okay. If you want to, go ahead. I just ask you to wait until I’m gone. I’m not asking Sariel.”

I was about to call my guide up. Kira wouldn’t know if I had, of course. Hell, she could have done the same with her own guide, but I knew Sariel paled in comparison to Fortune. Plus, I thought I understood Kira’s motivation. Not knowing if another Free Zone was tucked away in the manor meant she still had hope of the unknown.

One time, while deployed in Afghanistan with an Army unit, we’d taken a night-long bombardment from somewhere in the surrounding mountains. Hours of waiting for the next explosion, hiding under the only cover I had. My bed mattress. I’d eaten sandwiches thicker than that bundle of foam. Twice, the quarters I shared with another guy shook from mortars that’d landed far too close for comfort. By the second one, I wasn’t as calm and cool as I’d like to believe I acted.

I seriously wondered if I’d ever see home again. I hoped the C-RAM worked like it was supposed to; hoped the people who maintained it knew what they were doing and kept up on it; hoped its manufacturers put sprockets and screws where they were supposed to go; and generally hoped the dirtbags launching the mortars at us were high on poppy or suffering an untimely onset of glaucoma. Hope got me through that night. If Kira needed to hang onto hope that the manor hid another Free Zone, I wouldn’t use reason to strip that from her.

“Okay,” I said. “When we find the next Free Zone, we wait for a day. Or as close to whatever passes for a day.”

She nodded. “And if you guys don’t show, I’m out. You do the same.”

“Agreed.”

She extended her hand. I shook it. Her grip, firm. “Good luck, Brad.”

I held her gaze a moment longer, seeing fierceness blazing in her eyes. “Good luck, Kira. We’ve got this.”

“We do.” She extended her arms and Slash hopped up, licking her face. “You take care of Brad, okay?”

“I will. If this stupid game would let me, I’d go with you and leave him on his own.”

“Oh, you would?” she said, humored.

“What?” I said, surprised at how easily he’d switch teams.

“She smells way better than you,” Slash said, wearing a miniature smartass smile. “But I’m just messing with you. You’d never get out of Darkworld alive if I left you. I know that. You know that. Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

Kira huffed, setting Slash down. “Okay, guys. I’m going to take off.” She took a last look around the common room. I could almost see the calculations happening in her head and bet she was assessing how many of these tired bastards were going to see the outside of Crimson City again.

We said our farewells and stepped outside with her, this time paying closer attention to the game mechanics.

Kira led the way out, with Slash trailing right behind her. As soon as her feet hit the cobblestone street, she zapped away. I’d been watching her closely. A solid form until the instant her leading foot touched the stone. If I’d blinked, I would have missed her disappearing act. Even though I hadn’t, it was just as confounding as if I had.

Slash yipped, coming to a sudden stop. “That’s creepy.”

I stepped out into the street, checking up and down its length for hemogoblins, vampires, or any other creepy crawly thing Darkworld meant to throw at us. Silent houses stood watch.

Slash huffed. “Well, I guess we need to get going?”

“Looks that way.” I caught him eyeing the empty, quiet street. “She’s gone, wee man. But we’ll round up with her as



soon as we're done. Let's focus on the job at hand. Sooner we're done with that, the quicker we'll get back together."

"Can she move in with us?"

I nearly choked on my spittle. "What?"

"Just move in, Brad. Get your mind out of the gutter. I'm not asking her to become your hump buddy." He winced. His thin, pink tongue slid out of his mouth. "Yuck! But I like her, and it'd be smart to work on the settlement like Fortune told us. Especially since we'll probably level up once we kill the Vampire King. We're already halfway to being able to join alliances. After we finish this objective, we'll be four levels away. Don't you think it'll be important to have a settlement going before then?"

"We can join alliances at level ten?"

"Big man with big muscles. Much good at adding numbers," Slash said in a fake, deep voice. Apparently, to him, that's what in-shape people sounded like.

"How do you know that?"

"I asked Fortune."

"Hmmm. Okay." She'd told us early on that she could share information about alliances later in the game, so I'd figured that's what she meant. Later. As in, much later. This was encouraging. "Good work, wee man. Yeah, we'll have to chat about asking Kira to join us. She's got a nice set up she might not want to leave."

"Yeah, that river was great. I peed in it. Hey, we could ask her about moving to her place then."

I didn't want to think about restarting all the work on the farm and house I'd done. With Kira having none of that, I was looking at a complete rebuild if we all agreed to move camps and decided on hers as our location. A depressing thought, but one tempered when I remembered we'd have a river only a short distance away. "Let's worry about that after we get out of Crimson City. We need to focus on the mission."

Slash gave me a dour look. I'd never seen dog shoulders slump, but that's exactly what he did. "Brad, you aren't in the military anymore. Please stop being a killjoy."

We started off down the street, or at least, I did. After only a few steps, I heard Slash's nails clicking on the stone grow louder. "This is serious business. We're still in a hostile city. We don't know if the hemogoblins will respawn." I pointed skyward at the circling swarms of bats. "And those fuckers have tracked us the entire time. We need to take this seriously."

"I am. Do you think that just because someone is light-hearted that they're not? That's a very narrow way to look at the world."

He wasn't wrong, but eight years in the military trained me to take everything seriously, even crap like PowerPoint slide decks and pointless paperwork that only served a single purpose. Busy work. Nothing more. A couple years out of the service wouldn't erase everything they'd conditioned me to accept as reality. That shit probably took decades to cleanse from your brain, and I'd seen enough military vets and retirees to know many of them never outgrew their brain training.

"I'll work on it. Let's focus. What's your map say about the next task?"

"The Living Inferno isn't listed on it," he said after searching his map while I kept my eyes on our surroundings. The sun hung in the same position in the sky as when we'd entered the Free Zone. I didn't know how many hours we sat in there, drinking and eating and relaxing, but it had to have been at least three or four. Maybe more, because I had to wait for Slash and Kira to work off their mead. Still, by the position of the sun behind the gloomy blankets of clouds, only minutes had passed.

"Don't you have the objective pin?"

"No."

I stopped. He pulled up next to me. "Is anything different?"

“Hmmm.”

“What?”

His eyes narrowed as if trying to read a distant eye chart. “The manor has a gold outline around it. I swear that wasn’t there before.”

“Okay, so we need to head to the manor. The Living Inferno must be inside.”

“An inferno inside a manor? That doesn’t make much sense.”

Surrounded by dreary, empty homes in a massive and silent city of vampires and their kin, having survived a mob of hairless half-vampires, and being watched by thousands of tireless bats, I was convinced he wasn’t far from the truth. “None of this makes sense. That doesn’t change what we have to do. What do you say? Ready to head into the manor?”

His black eyes were big and round relative to the diminutive size of his head. His legs quaked.

“We’re going to be okay,” I said, squatting to scratch his back.

“I know,” he said, trying to hide the quiver in his voice by trotting forward.

I watched my wee man for a few seconds, not letting him get too far ahead. Taking a second to appreciate these last few minutes of relative peace and quiet was important. My gut told me that once we stepped inside the manor, our lives would get turned upside down.

Frustratingly, I couldn’t see what life looked like on the other side of this next phase of our game. Love for the wee man filled my heart. His eternal home. No matter how much grief he gave me, I knew his was equally filled with love for me. Seeing Slash happily trot across the cobble was a simple pleasure I embraced, because I didn’t know how many more I had.

## JUMP THEN FALL



We found the Vampire King's manor without further incident. No hemogoblins, including their giant. The swirling bats above were a constant nuisance, but didn't actually trouble us. In all, the last part of the trek across Crimson City was a non-event.

"This place is creepy as fuck," Slash said, looking up at the walls of the manor.

He wasn't wrong.

At its base, it looked far taller than from outside the city, and even then, it'd towered above everything else. The manor stretched in both directions, longer than entire city blocks. I guessed its height to be three or four hundred feet, but at that measure, what was a missing or additional fifty or sixty feet?

Constructed of pure black stone that seemed to absorb the daylight, it gave off an eerie feeling. Three columns of windows framed each side of the entry doors. The windows were separated by five-foot-tall jetties of rounded stone that were shaped like coffins. From where we stood, the windows reached up until their features blurred in the heights. The front doors stood seventy-feet high, intricately carved with faces. When we crept closer, I noticed that each was an individual vampire, each unique.

“There are thousands of them,” Slash said as he sniffed a carved face. He jerked back as if it had twitched.

“Everything okay?” I said, examining the doors so I didn’t laugh at the wee man’s nervousness.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t sense any booby traps.” He giggled slightly.

“Really? Even now?”

“It’s a funny word, Brad. You’ll learn to love it, even if I have to use it every sentence.”

“You’re like the little brother I never wanted.”

“Ouch.”

“I’m kidding. I hope you’re kidding about using it that much. Or ever again.”

“I’m not. You humans are too sensitive about words. You put so much energy into telling each other what you can and can’t say. So outraged about words. At the same time, you do horrific things to each other, and no one does anything to stop it. War, killing, robbery, letting kids go hungry. Controlling women. All that crap takes a back seat to some jumbled sounds you slap together and assign meaning to. Still don’t know how your species took over the planet.”

I shrugged, looking up at the doors. “Yeah, people are stupid like that.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth. No wonder everyone loves dogs. We represent what you wish you could be.”

I chuckled. “You’re pretty smart for a puppy.”

“I’m not a puppy, Brad. I’m nearly two. We just went over that in the tavern. I’m old enough to be a father. Can you imagine having a litter of my offspring? How adorable!”

“I can think of worse things,” I said, and meant it. I almost pressed my hand to the door, stopping just short. “I’m going to push this open. Step back. Just in case you’re wrong.”

He bobbed his shoulders. “I’m not. But, sure thing. Go ahead.”

Once he backed away, I pushed. The door creaked open.

A thick, stale wall of air hit me in the face. I put my arm across my mouth and nose.

“Oh, God. I can smell that back here,” Slash said. “It smells like death.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think this would be pleasant, but that’s awful.” I stepped inside. Three feet in, the manor veritably sucked the daylight into its embrace like a black hole devouring a star. When Slash crept inside behind me, I asked, “Can you see anything?”

In the murkiness, I saw him lift his head and sniff at the air. “Over here. Follow me.”

“Be careful.”

We walked deeper. The little guy sniffed constantly. I kept my eyes out on the dark curtain all around us, fisting a stake in each hand. We moved swiftly, and the darkness grew thicker. Far deeper in the room than I wanted to risk, was a single burning candle, but Slash wasn’t near it. In fact, the sounds of his sniffing were headed in the opposite direction.

“Slow down, wee man.” Even if he had white fur, I’d have had a difficult time keeping track of him. Each step made that even more challenging. Every time I checked our sides and behind, I struggled to pick him out again. After fifteen feet, I was down to listening for his sniffing to pinpoint him. By twenty-five feet, the distance to his sniffs made my skin flash with heat. I whispered into the dark. “Slash?”

“Over here.”

He sounded too far away. “I can’t see you.”

“Keep coming. There’s nothing in your way.” I loved his confidence almost as much as I loved the fact he could obviously see me far better than I could see him. I started walking. “Yep. This way. You’re almost here.”

I knew I'd reached him when I felt his small paws pressing against my leg. I scratched his back. "What was this all about?"

"Reach up and you'll find a torch. I'll escort you to the candle so we can light it."

"Genius," I said, running my hand up the beam. I found the torch, and he led me to the candle. I understood why he needed to take the lead. Toppled chairs littered the path. It was as if a dinner party had been interrupted by something horrific that sent all the attendees scattering.

We lit the torch, and then my pup led us through the hall to other torches up and down its length. Soon, the room was no better than dimly lit, even though we'd spent ten minutes setting fifty torches to fire. We could have put a spotlight in the middle of the room and the endless heights and impervious dark still would have devoured it.

"Shit. This place is huge," Slash said without hiding his sense of wonderment.

"You can say that again," I said, listening. "And completely dead."

"Do you think that has something to do with the fact the sun is still up outside?"

"Could be. I wouldn't bet against it. What do you say we find this Living Inferno?"

"I wish we knew where to look."

"Me too, buddy. Let's just be careful. Okay?"

At least an hour passed as we searched the main room, which seemed to occupy the entire first floor of the massive structure. We found nothing that looked or hinted at being the Living Inferno. I didn't know what it'd look like, but I was pretty sure it wasn't dusty furniture that tickled the nose and irritated the throat. It wasn't the white blankets covering the thirty or forty tables spread throughout the large room either. The pathetic flames doing their best to illuminate the space weren't anything I could consider close to 'living.' No one would mistake them for being infernos either.

“What do we do now?” Slash asked when we stood back at the start of our search.

“Check out the side rooms, I guess.”

Two wings bordered this room, the largest feast hall I’d ever imagined. Each side wall was dotted with twenty doors. We hadn’t checked on any of them because I wanted to finish the search of this room first. Now that we’d come up empty here, we had to risk going deeper.

“Which one? There’s so many.”

“Start at the beginning, I guess? Use your Sleuthing where we can and see if that leads us to something.”

At the front walls of the manor, we started our search, opening a door at a time, readied for a fight as each cracked open. The first few were rooms we couldn’t step into, they were so cluttered with junk. We thought of emptying them, but that turned out to be more trouble than it was worth and we stopped moving archaic, and very heavy, furniture by the third door. Not until the eleventh did we find something worth pursuing.

I opened it and Slash pulled back.  
“Peeeeeeeeeyooooooooo.”

Though his howl was barely a whisper, I still hushed him.

“Let’s try this.”

“Okay, but you g-go f-first,” Slash said, not bothering to hide the shaking in his voice. “I’ll protect your six. That way, nothing sneaks up on you.”

“You’re the best,” I said. “I like the military lingo too.”

“I love those Special Ops movies you watch because you want to feel like you were in the real military. Funny how you always end up falling asleep and leave me to watch them on my own. I guess those movies helped you know the Air Force isn’t actually military. It’s okay, Brad. Your secret is safe with me.”

I stepped through the door and into the tunnel, a dampness in the air hitting my lungs. My bare skin prickled with the



chill. The ceiling was curved and made of black stone, making the tunnel even darker than the feast hall. Space closed around me. My sneakers smacked against the floor no matter how lightly I walked. Slash's nails clicked like he was a mastiff.

"Oh, hey! The tunnel is glowing on my map. This is the way! But be careful. There's something wrong in the air."

I pulled up. "Like what?"

Slash sat, quivering. "I don't know, but I don't like it. I can hear your breaths."

I wasn't even breathing hard. "You can hear me breathing?" I stressed the last word as if it'd make him question how ridiculous the thought was.

"Yes. It's like—" He cocked his head. "Your heart, too."

"What about it?"

"I can hear it beating. Should it beat that fast? Wow, you need to lay off the caffeine."

"You can *hear* my heart beating?"

"I think it's a spell. Like an early warning system for the Vampire King or something."

I groaned. "He probably already knows we're inside."

"That'd be my guess. Move aside."

"Why?"

"I need to be in the lead to sniff out traps," he said as he pushed past, close enough to rub my leg even though he had plenty of space to pass. As he moved into the lead, I stepped back and pulled the door closed. I didn't like the thought of closing us in and slowing down a future retreat, but closing the door would also slow down anything coming up behind us, or make it miss us entirely. Any nasty surprises from that direction would have to open the door to get to us. While we were close to it, we'd hear them well in advance, giving us time to react. Plus, with Slash's already-heightened hearing boosted by the supernatural nature of the tunnel, nothing was getting past us.

Seven pounds of attitude slunk deeper into the tunnel. I followed, wondering who the pet was in this new dynamic.

The tunnel dragged on for hundreds of yards. Our only light came from the torch in my hand. The only sounds, those which came from our feet. The smell of damp decay, overpowering. But in the absence of almost everything, I felt the whispers of ghosts. Slash was right.

He stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

“The floor. It’s fake.”

I stepped closer.

He jerked backward. “Careful.”

I saw nothing but smoothed stones, each as large as my chest. “I’m not taking another step until I know what we’re dealing with.”

Slash inched forward, his nose pressed to the stone. He stopped, pulling his head up. He looked down the tunnel. When he spoke next, he sounded like he regretted what he had to say. “We have to get over there. About seven feet.” He turned to me. “If we step on the floor, something bad is going to happen. Still, we have to get to the other side. There’s a lever over there.”

“What will that do?”

“I don’t know, but it’s our only chance to avoid whatever is going to happen if we take a wrong step.”

“We can go back to the feast hall.”

Slash shook his head. “No, we can’t. The tunnel started glowing on my map as soon as we stepped into it. This is the way to the Living Inferno. Does your map show it too?”

I quickly opened my map. All I saw was the feast hall and the portion of the tunnel we’d already explored, plus another few inches of map that represented ten or so feet in real-life. The map fog smudged out the rest of the tunnel. I told him how unremarkable my map was.

“See? So we can go back, but this is the only way to get to the Living Inferno. We’ve got to take the tunnel. Which means we need to get across.”

I pointed at the floor. “I can’t jump seven feet, Slash. Neither can you.”

His face drew down. “No, but you can throw me.”

I could, but he said the false floor was seven feet wide. The ceiling reached seven feet. The math meant I’d have to throw him in a line drive to get him across the trap. “This could hurt.”

Slash’s legs rocked like he was trying to stay upright in a small aluminum boat being tossed around in the open ocean. “We don’t have another choice.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Fuck.”

Slash curled around my ankle. “I’m going to be okay.” He stood on his hind legs, his front reaching no higher than my knee. “Come on. Lift me.”

Holding him in my arms, he felt smaller than ever. Usually, when I pick him up, he likes to squirm and wiggle. Not this time. “You sure?”

He nodded sharply. “Absolutely.”

I rocked him back and forth, gaining momentum. Once my arc reached high enough, my pup gave a half-hearted ‘wheeee.’ Back and forth. Back and forth, I rocked the wee man. All my focus went into the task. Every last bit of energy powered the swing. When I thrust my pup-laden arms forward, I wasn’t leaving anything behind.

Slash flew over the fake floor. His legs kicked out. He howled, tail tucked and ears pinned to his head. But wouldn’t you know it? That little ball of spunk cleared the fake floor with three body-lengths to spare. He landed hard. His legs kicked out from underneath him, and he fell on his side. His yelp made me wince. In a sorrowful second, I almost jumped the gap. Before I did something stupid, though, Slash was on his legs, rocketing his head side to side and making his ears flap-smack against his head.

“Fuck yeeeeeeeees,” he howled in triumph. He spun in a circle, chasing his tail and snapping at it with his tiny teeth.

“Focus,” I said, after taking two or three cleansing breaths once I knew he was okay. “Remember, you’re on that side alone. If something comes from the other end of the tunnel, I can’t help, and you can’t jump the gap by yourself.”

Slash yipped, stopped worrying about his tail, and went to the side wall.

“I can’t see the lever,” I said. There was a shape on the side that might have been what he was going after. I couldn’t see enough of it to make out whether it was the lever, a sconce, or something else entirely.

“I’ve... Got... It,” he said in between huffs as he jumped in the air. Each time he launched himself, his body straightened, all four legs pointing down as he made himself aerodynamic. “Just... Can’t... Reach... It...”

After too many failed attempts, he sat, slumping and breathing heavily. “It’s too high.”

I rubbed my face. “I can’t get over there.”

We sat like that in the damp tunnel, growing colder and more frustrated by the second.

Finally, I said, more to the empty tunnel and fate herself, “What do we do now?”

Slash didn’t answer. In our mutual quiet, he’d started pacing. When he hopped up, looking more alert than ever, I felt a flash of excitement. “Throw me your smelly sneakers.”

“What?”

“Just do it. Throw me a sneaker.”

“Okay. Okay.” I pulled the laces, but they knotted. When I tried to untie the others, they knotted as well. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

I told him.

“Just give me your ratty shirt then.”

I pulled the tunic over my head, suddenly aware of how vulnerable he was to anything that might come from the other end of the tunnel. I bundled the tunic, tying it around itself until it formed the tightest ball I could fashion, and tossed it. It landed near Slash with a dampened thumping sound.

Slash pounced at it with both front paws like he does when we play together with the tug-of-war rope. He grabbed it with his mouth and whipped his head around until it loosened.

“Not play time,” I said in gentle reminder.

I swear he gave me a nasty look just before trotting back toward the wall. The only thing saving him from losing out on future belly rubbings was the fact that with his black eyes and fur, coupled with the darkness in the tunnel, it was too dim to make out infinitesimal details like a Chihuahua’s expression.

He spent the next excruciating twenty minutes tossing the tunic into the air, aiming at the lever. Both of us grew more desperate with each failed attempt. Neither of us recognized how ridiculous it was to think he could trigger the lever with the item. But when the tunic finally wrapped around the lever and Slash gripped it and pulled back in jerking movements, I heard a deep *clunk* underneath the stone floor, followed by a rough grinding noise that could have woken any vampire in the vicinity.

Slash whooped, whipping in another circle.

The stone jerked and vibrated, kicking up thin tendrils of dust. Then popped like it’d just become dislodged, dropped about four inches, and slowly slid backward within itself, exposing a hole. I was already on my feet and looking down once I figured out where the floor ended and the trap started.

“Be careful,” Slash said from across the trap.

I lowered the torch. “Oh, trust me. I am.”

When the torchlight illuminated the hole, I was never more grateful for Slash. Sure, the little guy pissed on my floor, pooped on my rugs even though I took him outside four times a day, chewed expensive shoes, and claimed the couch as his, but he brought joy into my life. The stresses that came along

with seven pounds of Chihuahua hardly stripped away the happiness that came in that small package of energy. But now, he'd just saved my life.

The floor fell away into a square chute, dropping into blackness. It could have been ten feet, or it could have been a hundred. There was no way to tell beyond the torchlight. Not for me. But Slash could.

“Ohhhh,” he said hauntingly. “That’s scary.”

“What’s down there?” I asked, feeling the hairs on my arms raise. I didn’t like not being able to see threats, especially if the threats could see me.

“It looks like an elevator shaft. Like the ones I see in movies. Just without the elevator,” he said, standing at the edge of the hole. “There’s a ladder on this side.”

“I see. But you can’t climb down ladders, and I’m assuming there’s no other way down?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Just the ladder. And it’s too far to jump. Probably thirty feet. Even if you were a cat, you wouldn’t be able to stick the landing.” His head bobbed as he laughed. “More like the landing will stick you.”

“What do you mean?”

“The floor is covered in spikes as tall as you. At least, that’s what my superior eyes see.”

“Shit.” We were split up. Slash couldn’t get to me and I couldn’t get to him. I couldn’t jump into the pit and have him jump to me when I was safely at the bottom. There was no way I was going to ask him to head down the tunnel and find a back door so I could get around the trap.

“We have to climb down, don’t we?” he asked. Even in the lousy orange light, I could see him shaking.

The pit was seven feet across, but I didn’t have to jump seven feet. Gravity would pull me down as soon as I was airborne. With enough speed and a decent launch, I’d make the ladder. I hoped. What other choice was there? We couldn’t stay here. We couldn’t stay separated. Any second, another

horde of hemogoblins could form at the end of the tunnel and I wouldn't be able to save my dog.

I backed up a short distance.

“What are you doing?”

I kept backing, my breath coming rapidly as adrenaline fed my muscles.

“Brad?” Slash asked more forcefully when I didn't immediately answer.

I squatted into a sprinter pose.

“Don't do it.”

I shot forward. Right before I reached the chute, I launched myself into the air.

Slash's mouth fell open.

Airborne, I only had eyes for the rusted ladder rungs. I didn't notice the stale smell on the air. I couldn't think about my dog and what would happen if I missed the ladder or lost my grip even if I stuck the landing. The Brad-sized spikes at the bottom of the pit slid from my mind when I was over the open space. All I had to do was make the ladder and hold on. If I did, nothing else mattered.

The floor rose above me as I fell. I swear, my heart stopped as I dropped into the darkness. My arms swung out as if they had minds of their own. Just when I thought I'd self-selected to be eliminated, one hand smacked a rung. Stinging pain was my reward, making me lose my grip. But the other whirling arm was already coming around, and one foot kicked forward. My hand and foot found the rung nearly simultaneously, jolting me. My knee was going to make me pay for this stunt one day. Later on, next week, a month from now, or ten years down the road. I wasn't getting away with what I'd just asked of it.

“Brad?” Slash yelped, peering over the edge of the trap. His tiny ears flopped forward.

**BOOM!**

**HOLY CRAP, THAT WAS IMPRESSIVE! INGENUITY. BRAVERY OVERLORD, AND INCALCULABLE LEVELS OF SURGING TESTOSTERONE LED YOU TO MAKE THE DUMBEST DECISION YOU COULD HAVE IN THE SITUATION. THERE WAS A TRIGGER ON THE WALL BACK TOWARD THE ENTRANCE. GUESS YOU GENIUSES DIDN'T TAKE THE TIME TO LOOK FOR IT. YES, WE HID IT, BUT A LITTLE EFFORT WOULD HAVE GONE A LONG WAY.**

**OH WELL, YOU DIDN'T DIE, SO HERE'S SOME GOODIES.**

**+300 XP**

**+50 GOLD**

**+2 AGILITY**

**+1 SPEED**

**YOU WOULD HAVE RECEIVED MORE THAN A +1 TO YOUR SPEED, BUT WATCHING YOU SPRINT, IN GOOD CONSCIENCE, WE COULDN'T AWARD YOU THAT MUCH. THE +1 IS MORE OF A SYMPATHY POINT THAN ANYTHING.**

**MASCOT AWESOMENESS!**

**+2 INSIGHT**

**+3 EXPLORER**

I took a second before moving. Placing my forehead against a rung, I released a slow breath. Suddenly, I was aware of everything again. The stupid stunt I just pulled. The fact that one slight miscalculation would have led to my death. Everything after my demise that would have happened to Slash. My parents, Tess, and friends who'd never know what happened to me after I mysteriously disappeared from their lives. I pulled off the risk, so I deserved a second to embrace 'me time.'

"I'm here, wee man," I said after catching my breath and convinced myself my heart wasn't going to explode. I climbed the ladder.



When I reached the floor, Slash yipped and howled. I reached out with a hand that was now only slightly steady. I scratched his side. “Shhh, buddy. We’re still in enemy territory.”

He came closer, licking my cheek. “Fuck them. I’m just glad you’re okay. I cannot believe you did that. Epic, Brad. Absolutely epic!”

“Thanks,” I said with a shaky chuckle. “Now, get my shirt and climb on. We’re going for a ride.”

“Oh,” he said, looking back toward the crumbled pile of cloth. “You’re fucked. I tore the shirt when I pulled the lever. It’s no good anymore.”

“Great. So I’m shirtless again.”

“Yep,” he said cheerily as he climbed on, “so let’s hope the Vampire King isn’t a homophobe, or you’re going to really piss him off showing off your man-chest like that.”

WE DON'T NEED ANOTHER  
HERO... OR TWO

Slash had been wrong about the spikes at the bottom of the pit. They weren't nearly as tall as me. They were taller.

"Don't touch that," I said as he lifted a paw to the one closest to the ladder.

"Imagine what would have happened if you'd missed." He covered his snout with a paw, giggling. "What if you fell butt-first?"

"Grow up," I said, smiling. I pointed at the new, illuminated tunnel leading away from the small square bottom of the chute.

This tunnel was taller, wider, and more comfortable than the one above. It glowed orange from firelight coming from somewhere in the distance, around the bend two hundred yards away.

"It stinks worse down here than it did up there," Slash said.

I imagine his dog sense of smell made all this that much less enjoyable. The pungent air here was far worse than the dusty staleness we'd been breathing since entering the manor. Here, all I could smell was blood and decay. What would it be like to a dog? Poor bastard.

Framed pictures hung from the tunnel walls. Oil paintings that were as old as they were disconcerting. I glanced at the first few we passed, but had to stop at one after recognizing a pattern.

“There’s so many, and they’re all ugly as fuck,” Slash said, sitting by my side as we examined the painting.

Every single painting featured a vampire. Men on one side of the tunnel, women on the other. Unlike the hemogoblins, these vampires looked very much like humans. Fine attire. Sculpted hairstyles. Rich jewelry. But like the hemogoblins, their eyes were oblong slits of black. I couldn’t distinguish between iris and pupil, which only made it feel like the paintings were watching us as we moved along.

The guy we’d stopped to examine wasn’t different from the others. A gold placard at the bottom of the painting named him Count Kahleen. His long hair fell behind his back. He had a thick handlebar mustache and wore a gold monocle. The painting depicted him sitting beside a tiny table that held a garish oil lamp and book. The book was open, its yellowed pages split by a quill placed in the bind.

Slash had moved to the next painting while I checked out the count. “Brad, you have to see this. Wow. This guy was fucked up. I hope this isn’t the Vampire King.”

“Why?”

“Come look for yourself.”

When I did, I wished I hadn’t.

This vampire, the placard labeled him as Fangburt, wore a matching tabard and pant outfit featuring huge squares of yellows, oranges, and reds. His shoes were pointed and curled to sharp points, making them look an awful lot like scorpion tails. As horrendous as his outfit was, it paled compared to what the painting depicted him engaging in. Unlike the other, more refined, vampire paintings, it captured this guy juggling.

“Did they really do that back then?” Slash asked. He sounded as repulsed as I felt.

I stared at the human heads arcing through the air above the smiling Fangburt. Heads severed just below the jaw. Bits of esophagus and tendons dangled like tassels. “This is a game. These things didn’t really happen. At least I hope actual events didn’t inspire the game designers to include this bit of detail.”

“It’s fucked up.”

“Yes,” I said, swallowing and looking away from Fangburt’s gleeful face. “Yes, it is. People can be like that.”

We didn’t give the portraits another look. I feared what we’d see if we did.

When we neared the bend, I held my hand out. “We don’t know where the light is coming from. Let’s be careful.”

Slash closed his eyes, sniffing.

“What are you doing?”

One eye cracked open. “Seeing what I can sense.”

“Can you... Is your Insight really that strong? I know you got the upgrade with that trap floor, but you’re only a level five.”

His shoulders dropped. The closed eye opened. “Don’t worry about it. I picked up something.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“Something weird. Crackling and gurgling.”

That couldn’t be good. I pulled up my Inventory and equipped a stake in each hand. I also took a second to organize the rest of my Inventory. Everything we’d looted in the city was perishable. Unhelpful in a fight. Like the game didn’t want to give us anything that could be used against its monsters. Taking the time now to make sure the healing wraps and my single healing potion were in the top row was imperative. I even made sure the bread was in the box after the potion. If nothing else, I could eat a couple loaves to keep my Health stable. I’d played enough games to know what the journey toward a boss was like. No rest for the wicked.

As we neared a bend in the corridor, I whispered to Slash, "Let me know if anything at all feels off."

"Of course."

He stayed close to my side. Almost too close. If something jumped out at us, I had little space to react. But we'd deal with that if the time came. The moment felt too significant. I actually wanted him this close. His presence was comforting.

I signaled for him to press to the wall. I did the same, careful not to touch anything. For all we knew, this entire manor could be one giant trap, ready to go off at any of a series of wrong moves.

The hall turned sharply. The stone at the corner was rounded, hinting that this wasn't a right angle. I motioned for him to stay and stepped away from the wall. I swung around the corner with the stakes ready to stab any hairless or hairy bloodsucker. Heat struck my face.

This new hall was empty, stark, and dark. No pictures hung on the wall. No obvious traps or obstacles. Instead, it stretched hundreds of feet in a straight line toward the source of orange light we'd seen since climbing down the hidden ladder.

To this point, the journey had been one puzzle after another. Puzzles we'd navigated easily thanks to Slash's superior Sleuthing. Other players wouldn't have it this easy. Kira definitely wouldn't, and I wondered how she was doing. In an unsettling second, I thought about her and the trap floor and hoped she'd been smarter about it than we had.

"Slash?"

He stepped around the bend, staring at the blazing fire at the far end of the hall. "Whoa."

"Think that's the Living Inferno?"

"Bet you it is."

The far opening was square, probably fifteen feet tall and just as wide. Built for more than a single guy and his dog.

"Feels warm," Slash said, light orange flickering off his fur, making it shine dully.

“Hardly inviting, though. Let’s be careful. Keep your eyes, ears, and nose out for any more traps.”

We took it slowly. Slash constantly sniffed at the air. Every few steps, he’d inspect the floor, but never said anything.

The heat intensified with each step. Rare was it for me to be grateful that the designers of the game had shoved me into Darkworld wearing an outfit that essentially resembled some ancient old man’s kink underwear. But I was now. Rivers of sweat rolled down my chest, back, and legs. Slash panted and gulped.

We made it to the end of the tunnel without incident.

**BOOM!**

**LIVING INFERNO FOUND!**

**IT’S HOT, HOT, HOTTER THAN HELL UP IN THIS BITCH, ISN’T IT? TOO BAD FOR YOU, THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF EXQUISITE DISCOMFORT.**

**ONTO THE BLOOD RIVER, IT IS!**

**+500 XP**

**+150 GOLD**

**+1 SURVIVAL**

**+1 PATHFINDING**

Slash’s mouth formed in a tiny circle, and I assumed he was howling in celebration, but I couldn’t hear him over the roaring fire.

The hall opened into a massive chamber of dark stone. Black soot covered every inch of the stone floor and walls. Scorch marks of jagged diagonal lines two-feet wide scarred the walls in countless places. Stepping into it felt like finding yourself standing at the fifty yard line in the Dallas Cowboys stadium.

In the middle of the open space stood a fireplace. Was it even fair to call it that? This thing, constructed of black brick molded to look like a single piece, spanned well over a football field’s length. The mouth of the fireplace had to be

three hundred feet tall. The rectangular firebox raged, internal wall to internal wall, with the infamous inferno. The fire was so luminous that it lit the entire expanse of the vast chamber, leaving the backside in pitch-black.

The base of the raging fire glowed blue, radiating heat that could melt skin at a hundred paces. Slash wasn't the only one panting from the fire's output. Above the blue base, reds, oranges, and yellows danced in columns of flame taller than telephone poles and wider than school buses. The depth of the firebox made it impossible to see how deep the layers of flames raged.

Row after row of the swaying, twitching, and jumping flames reminded me of what a rock concert audience looks like from the stage. Or a rave nightclub. Not that I had much experience with those except for the time the Air Force stationed me at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, and I let myself get talked into going to one. I didn't know the military had declared it an off-limits site. The other guys did, but they weren't concerned with their careers. I think they had some PTSD stuff going on. Either way, that's where I got my first Letter of Counseling, setting off an unremarkable three-year period of my career during which my path became poignantly clear. Finding this fire probably set me up for more success than those assholes did.

I looked down at Slash. He was barking at the fire, snarling like he meant to launch himself at it. He said something, but I couldn't hear him over the inferno. I nodded back toward the tunnel.

Once around the bend, we pulled out a water skin from my Inventory and drank. I poured handfuls into a cupped hand. Slash drank greedily. I watched precious rivulets drip from his mouth, tiny beads clinging to his whiskers. He made me refill my hand three times.

“Careful, buddy. We don't know where this leads, but we know we have to go back in there.”

“I don't want toooooooo.”

I stroked his back. “I know, wee man. But we don’t get a choice. We’ve got to cross the Blood River. Have you picked up any clues about it? Smelled lots of iron?”

“Brad, this entire fucking place smells like blood. How anyone can live like this is beyond me.”

“Sorry.” I’d noted the smell upon entering the manor, and maybe I’d been too distracted with not getting myself killed to note any changes in its pungency. I wiped away a healthy coat of sweat from my forehead. “I think it’s different for vampires. Probably smells like potpourri to them.”

Slash huffed. “Yeah, well, I don’t get people who like potpourri, either. Do you know what that crap does to a dog’s nose? Anyway, I’m not going to be able to use any of my Sleuth traits or my Perception or Insight. I know they’re far superior to yours, as are most of my skills and traits, but I think it’ll still be difficult to find the Blood River. The fire blocks my perspective of the chamber. It’s like finding a needle in a pile of poop.”

“In a haystack.”

“What?”

“The saying is ‘finding a needle in a haystack.’”

“Mmm,” he said, narrowing his eyes in thought, “I’m pretty sure it’s ‘finding a needle in a pile of poop.’”

We had other things to worry about. “Since we’ve got to go back into that chamber, we might as well do it quickly. That shit isn’t healthy. We linger, and we’ll die.”

“Did you see how big it is?”

“The chamber? No. Could you?”

“No. The firelight hurt my eyes.”

“We’re just going to have to make a run for it. We stay against the wall, without touching it,” I said, forcefully enough to plant a definitive reminder. “The chamber was rounded. I noticed the bend in the wall when we were trying to get out of there before the fire turned us to jerky.”



“Mmm. Beefy treats.”

“Focus.” I recalled the chamber, trying to remember if I’d seen anything of note. The walls were bare stone, blackened by being exposed to that unforgiving fire, I assumed. I couldn’t remember anything remarkable except for the scorch marks on the wall, the layer of soot covering every inch of the chamber that’d seriously fuck up my red high-tops, and the blast furnace that dominated the center of the space. “We’re going to have to run for it. But there’s worse news.”

Slash cocked his head.

“You’re going to have to lead.”

He shivered. “Me? Why? I mean,” he said quickly, clarifying, “I will because you’ll need someone to protect you. Since I’m the valuable one in the party, I’ll need someone to protect my six.”

“You will,” I said, finding no harm in giving my pooch an innocent ego stroke. “But you’re the only one who can sense traps, and the fire is too loud for us to warn each other. When we hit that chamber, we need to do it with speed while keeping ourselves alive. There’s got to be a way out. Probably behind the fireplace. I’ll bet more than anything once we get around it, we’ll find a way to the Blood River.”

“Then all we have to do is find the Crooked Cross and fight the Vampire King,” he said, suddenly chipper.

“Yep, that’s all.” Internally, I groaned. “Ready?”

He yipped like a true warrior.

At the lip of the tunnel, we stopped and gave each other a nod of affirmation. Slash barked once and bounded into the chamber, sticking to the plan.

I ran behind him, doing my best to ignore how miserably hot the chamber was. If he was barking any warnings, I couldn’t hear. The plan was for him to avoid traps he sensed by darting or stopping, or whatever he felt the best aversion was to give us a chance. I’d mimic his reactions the best I could at that point.

The roaring from the fire grew as we moved away and around it. I didn't think to check behind us. After all, we'd been the only ones in the surface tunnel; all alone climbing down the ladder; the lucky bastards to see the vampire's wall of fame. No one had followed. Instead of routinely checking behind us, I'd focused on staying conscious long enough to circumvent the inferno.

Had I checked, I would have noticed the change in the Living Inferno.

The shaking underneath me was the first sign we were in trouble. The sudden change in the sound of the crackling fire, taking on hundreds of *whooshing* sounds in a matter of seconds, was the second. A bestial roar that made the chamber echo with anger was the last, and clearest, sign that this wasn't the uncomfortably hot but empty chamber we'd assumed it was.

Slash spun. The dribble of pee he released turned into a stream.

*No*, I groaned internally, holding my breath. A second later, I saw the notification I feared.

**BOOM!**

**AWWW, SOMEONE HAD A BAD DREAM!**

**-2% TO MASCOT AGILITY**

Shit. Slash's Night Terrors debuff kicked in when he pissed himself. I couldn't be mad. One, who the fuck gets mad at someone else's fears? Only an asshole, that's who. Second, all it took was one look behind me to see the source of Slash's reaction. I swear, if I wasn't so dehydrated, I probably would have filled my loincloth until I soaked the fox fur.

Now I understood why the game used the term Living Inferno. It wasn't because the largest fireplace imaginable contained the grandest, angriest fire in the history of the solar system outside our own sun. It was because the fire contained inside the firebox was, quite literally, alive.

It was still crawling out of the firebox when we turned. Even so, we were fucked. The creature was enormous.

The fiery beast leaned forward, its head the size of an airliner. Two hands, rippling with towers of flames, gripped the jamb on each side of the fireplace as the beast pulled itself out.

“Fuck!” Even though it did me and Slash no good, releasing the tension through vulgarity was necessary.

I turned, lifted both hands, pushing them against the air like I was trying to fan someone.

Thankfully, Slash understood what I meant, and sprang away. I worried about his Agility debuff. If there were traps between us, the fiery monstrosity climbing out of the fireplace, and the Blood River, that two percent decrease might be the difference between a lucky break and the end of my wee man’s story. Still, I couldn’t—Wait! I could.

Pushed on by absolute terror, especially now that the Living Inferno’s chest was pushing out beyond the fireplace, flames licking the air in a thousand directions, I caught my dog. Scooping him up, I ran forward, bringing his ears close to my mouth. Dogs’ hearing was far superior. I didn’t like the idea of shouting into his ear, but we were in serious trouble. I’d apologize profusely if we got away.

“Tell me if you sense anything. Do the best you can. If we step on anything we shouldn’t... Well, I fucking love you, wee man!”

I ran into the darkness. Behind me, the Living Inferno roared. Chunks of stone fell from above.

Slash bounced in my arms as the darkness peeled around us. Even though I constantly scanned our surroundings, I didn’t see anything that seemed like a trap, hazard, or obstacle. Block after block of stone cubes. That’s all I saw in the blossoming gloom as more of the creature came free, casting its blaze across the chamber. The floor ahead for yards was visible thanks to the fiery monstrosity.

I looked over my shoulder, feeling my throat constrict. The Living Inferno was pulling its trailing leg out of the fireplace. Worse, it looked in our direction. Most of its body consisted of

angry red flames, jagged and crackling, but its eyes were yellow. They betrayed an intelligence that scared the living shit out of me. Nothing that big should also have a semblance of sentience. Completely unfair.

A fiery mane of yellow and orange-colored flames danced in the air a hundred feet above the floor. An arm, impossibly long, reached out and swiped the wall with its fingers, leaving behind three fresh scorch marks.

That's where those things had come from. I'd spotted them during our first trip into the room. Remnants of previous encounters with other entrants? A warning to new, ignorant ones?

It roared, and I felt like I'd voluntarily stepped out of my vehicle in an automatic car wash as the heater kicked on. Its breath smelled like new charcoals soaking in a bathtub of lighter fluid.

The air *whooshed* long before the creature's arms swung for my head. I ducked, falling to the ground and cradling my pup to protect him from the impact. With the early warning, I had time to roll over and watch the massive arm move over the sky like one of those amusement park rides at the end of a spin as it tried to slow to let riders off.

We were up, scrambling away as the swing continued past. My Agility skill score was five, but against something this size, it might as well have been a hundred and five. We gained another forty feet on the beast before it even started retracting its arm.

Slash pointed with a black and tan paw, indicating something ahead. I pulled him close. "What is it, wee man?"

He turned his snout to my ear. "River!"

I checked on the Living Inferno. It'd fully recovered from its swipe and was now back in pursuit. Even though we were a football field ahead, the goddamn thing halved the distance in a single, thudding step. Another, and we'd be nothing but singed leftovers.

Ahead, a broad swath of red flowed from left to right, crescents of ripples wiggling across the surface. The smell of iron became heavier the closer we came. Metallic, it reminded me of my days in high school shop. The grotesque aroma irritated my nose. I fought off the urge to vomit, which was especially challenging when we reached the banks of the Blood River.

Forty feet across, I couldn't tell if the river was once full of water, but it definitely wasn't now. Deep red, like paint drowned in thinner, gurgled and gulped as it pushed to our right. The stench was foul.

But not as foul as the bones floating on the surface, reminding me of the fucked up paintings in the vampire hall of fame. Stripped clean of flesh as if they were being prepared for an elementary human physiology class, they bobbed in the river of blood.

If we weren't being chased by a living tower of fire, I would have turned away and retched.

I didn't have time to think. To my left and right, stone bent and stretched, always returning us to the fireplace. We were out of options. The game was forcing us to a single decision point. This wasn't a time to be creative. If we wanted to survive, we had to suck it up and do the last thing I wanted.

Pushing forward, I screamed to Slash to hold his breath, and then I leaped.

I think he howled, but the Living Inferno was impossible to hear over.

I didn't even bother with the fiery beast. I'd decided. Committed. No turning back.

The river of red raced up to greet me. I gulped the last grasp of air I'd get and hit the river. As soon as I was submerged, I recognized how thick the viscous liquid was. It pressed down on me, conjuring an image of a million tiny, heavy, unrelenting hands that refused to allow me to surface.

I kicked and pushed with my free arm, refusing to give in to the molasses-like liquid. My legs and arms felt heavy as

more of the blood clung to me. Finally, I broke the surface and gasped. Slash did too. He was coated in red, like a drunk handyman had confused the Chihuahua for the siding of my apartment during a paint job gone awry. Trails of red ran down his jacket's formerly shiny metal spikes.

"This is sticky," Slash said as his tongue dashed out of his mouth and lapped at his snout. He winced. "Oh my god, that's worse than your cooking!"

"Don't lick it then."

I swam to the far edge as fast as I could, which wasn't easy. I wanted to vomit from the feel and taste of the river of blood. It coated my skin, filled my nostrils, plugged my ears, and dripped into my eyes. That crazy woman from the movie *Carrie* had nothing on the two of us.

I reached the far edge, gripped it with my free hand, and lifted Slash. He'd gained a third of his weight from his coat absorbing blood. I placed him on the stone and pulled myself up, crawling away.

The Living Inferno froze in mid-strike.

**BOOM!**

**THIS AIN'T PHANTOSMIA, BABY! YOU'VE GOT A  
NOSEFUL, EARFUL, AND MAYBE EVEN A  
MOUTHFUL OF BLOOD. CLIVE BARKER WOULD  
BE PROUD.**

**CONGRATULATIONS. RUNNING FROM THE LIVING  
INFERNO MIGHT MAKE YOU A PUSSY, BUT IN  
DOING SO, YOU CROSSED THE BLOOD RIVER.**

**WAY TO GO, WIMP.**

**+500 XP**

**+100 GOLD**

**+1 AGILITY**

**-1 COURAGE**

**MASCOT LEVEL UP!**

**LEVEL SIX!**

**+2 INITIATIVE**

**+2 INTELLIGENCE**

**+1 INTIMIDATION**

**+1 ABILITY POINT**

**+30 BEEFY TREATS**

What the hell? We'd just *lost* a Courage skill point? I didn't realize we could actually lose points. Was that a one-off or a permanent game feature? If it was the latter, that changed everything. Mine was now a five. I didn't need to wonder what Slash's was, not unless the game allowed for negative numbers. Did it? We'd check into that after we were safe.

At least Slash leveled.

I blew out a breath.

Behind me, Slash shook, spraying blood everywhere. "I leveled up, bitches! Hey, Fireboy, who's your daddy, you stupid fucker?"

"Calm down," I said, getting to my feet. "We don't know if it can cross or if there's another one on this side. This is a big chamber."

"Brad, you aren't the boss of me. I'm a level six," he said, his voice deeper. He shook again. His legs shimmied sideways, but he remained standing.

I snickered. "You can't move, can you?"

"I can." His head dropped. "Slowly."

I knew why. "You're going to have to drop any beefy treats you can't eat, wee man."

"I don't want to."

"Slash."

Across the Blood River, the Living Inferno started back toward the fireplace, giving up on the pursuit. We were safe. Well, safe from that nightmare. I was sure the game had plenty more in store for us as we searched for the Crooked Cross.

Slash chomped on beefy treats until he couldn't eat any more. His Health refilled completely. I sat and ate a quarter of a loaf of bread. My Health bar inched to the right as we rested. The pile of beefy treats he left behind was cruel. Games always seemed to give players more of something tantalizing but ultimately useless than they needed, as if taunting players. Darkworld was no different.

I gave him a quick butt rub. He looked over his shoulder at me, his mouth curling upward as he twisted his ass in my direction. He likes the harder rubs sometimes. Fleeing from something like the Living Inferno was a legitimate excuse to ask for one. Too bad there wasn't a human equivalent. The way I felt, I could have used a reward like that.

“Come on. We'll pick them up on our way home.”

Slash whined about lost loves and beefy treats all the way out of the Living Inferno's chamber.



## DARK MASQUERADE



Bawdy laughter drifted down the hall about the same time shadows cast by flickering candlelight danced on the corner wall. Soft music, muted by rich red carpet and closed doors somewhere beyond what I could see, filled the hall with incongruent sweetness.

“What do you think it is?” Slash asked, hunkered against my leg.

“Don’t know. But if I had to guess, it sounds like a... a ball.”

Slash shimmied with excitement. “We haven’t played ball since we fell into this stupid game. Can we now? Maybe it’s one of those ‘games within a game’ that you always geeked out about when you had your dorky friends over. Well, at least the few times they bothered to come down to Olympia.”

“Seattle is a long drive.”

“No, it’s not. When we drove up there, I only peed in your backseat once or twice before we made it to their condos.”

“You peed in my car?”

He scowled. “Why would I pee in the pet crate you shoved me in? Isn’t being caged like a wild animal cruel enough? What is it with you humans? How would you like to ride around the city stuffed inside one of those carriers?”

“You can’t drive.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Focus.” I crouched, watching the far end of the hall.

Even though I couldn’t see anyone, their laughter was clear enough that whatever muted the music wasn’t affecting them. Likely, they were standing outside the various rooms. Were they regular party-goers, just the vampiric variety, or were we eavesdropping on security vampires? The voices were mixed genders, but that meant nothing. I’m not an ogre; I know plenty of badass women, and I’ve had to educate a few guys on their narrow mindedness about how tough women can be. Especially in the military. A lot of those morons deserved to go to the gym with me and get their ignorance handed to them on a platter by ladies who could bench press twice what they could.

“Are you sure this is the right way?”

“My map says so,” Slash said after a moment reconfirming that nothing had changed.

Though I trusted Slash and his map, neither had let us down, I pulled up my menu and searched for the Objective tab. The Search function was handy, becoming my Go-To, even though I knew it’d be smarter to memorize the tab locations. Throughout our experience in Darkworld to this point, I’d reacted to situations. Riding luck. A time would come, no doubt, when I’d need to access my menus in the heat of the moment. Then, I wouldn’t have time to mentally type out my search words in the menu. Not if I wanted to stay alive.

*After this, I told myself. After the Vampire King.*

“There’s not much in the way of details about the Crooked Cross.”

“We should have asked Fortune before we started this.”

“We didn’t know what we were getting into, wee man. There’s six objectives in this damn quest. She would have inundated us with information, and we’d probably forget most of it.”

“She might have told us just the important details.”

“Like the Living Inferno actually being a walking, roaring living thing?” I said with a chuckle I didn’t feel.

“Yep. And that I’d get so many beefy treats.” He lowered his head and growled. “I could have left my stock back home and not wasted all the ones the game gave me.”

“We’ll go back for them if we can. I promise.”

“Oh, I know. Did you see the size of that pile? I’m not leaving that for someone who didn’t earn it to find.”

“I haven’t seen other dogs in the game. Plus, if there are, they probably have their own stash. I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“Hey, do you think Kira will pick them up for me?”

“I’m not sure it works like that. Those were your reward. We’re not able to see other players except for in the Free Zone. The douches who designed this must intend to keep us separated during these boss quests, so my guess is no one will find your beefy treat pile. Otherwise, we’d have already seen dropped loot from anyone who got here before us.”

“I hope you’re right. Those beefy treats are mine. All. Mine.”

“Save some of that fierceness. We still have a few obstacles to beat.” I pointed in the direction of the laughter and blaring horns. “Starting with whatever that is. I have a feeling we’re about to get into something interesting.”

We crept forward, Slash slightly in the lead to stop me from stepping into a mess.

“Cheerio.”

Slash yipped. My heart stopped beating for a second. I spun, stakes coming up.

The vampire smiled. I tried to drive the stake in my right hand through his chest, but something stopped my arm just short. Not me. Not a sense of morality. I didn’t not want to kill him. The dude was a fucking vampire. Every one of these

bastards in this city meant us harm. Kill or be killed. Yet, I couldn't drive the stake into his chest.

At his greeting, I noted a change in the laughter levels from around the corner of the hall.

I tried to force my arm down to shove the stake into him. My hand shook with effort.

"How are you finding the ball?" the vampire asked, his words heavy with an aged Eastern European accent. "Marvelous, isn't it?"

He didn't even look at my hand or the stake. The vampire wore a velvet suit. Black, of course. His flounced shirt was white silk, wrapping all the way to where his throat met his chin. The black jacket's tail hung to the back of his knees. He was lean, somewhere near middle-aged, and stood rigid. A masquerade mask covered the upper half of his face. Porcelain white, it was ornate. Lines painted as thorny vines swirled in trance-like patterns around green gems.

"Have you met the Lady Anebelle yet?" he asked, carrying on as if this was a normal conversation. Not that any chat with one of the undead inside a video game could be considered anything close to normal, but this was especially surreal. I had tried to kill him. He'd seen the stake. His smile, not a creepy one, didn't even slip as he waited for me to answer.

"Slash?" I said without taking my eyes off the vampire, still struggling with the reality that I was talking to a real-life, flesh and bone bloodsucker.

"Yeah," he said in a tone swamped in wonderment.

"I think this is part of the game."

"What do you mean?"

"I tried to drive the stake in him."

Slash sniffed. "Trust me. I know. Awkward."

"Stop talking like a teen."

"I'm almost one."

“I thought you were almost two and could have a litter if you wanted? Remember?” Throughout our exchange, the vampire hadn’t changed a single mannerism. “Listen. Haven’t you noticed we haven’t had to fight yet? Not inside the manor.”

“Oh. You’re right.”

The corners of the vampire’s mouth crept up a notch. Still, he said nothing. Behind the porcelain mask, his eyes were warm. Innocent. Fawn-like.

“I don’t think we’re going to fight him either. I can’t. The game won’t let me. So this has to be another type of challenge.”

Slash did something I didn’t expect. He walked up to the vampire, taking tentative steps, and sniffed at the fine tipped shoes. “I think you’re right.” He took another smell before he backed up a step, craning his neck to look up at his target. Then he barked. Loud.

The vampire’s slits spread, showing off his fangs. A creepy sight, even if not one filled with malice. “Someone is excited. Trust me, you must try the hors d’oeuvres. Simply delectable.”

I didn’t want to know what a vampire masquerade offered for finger foods. Literally fingers, for all I knew. “I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your name.”

The vampire put a hand flat against his chest. “Forgive me. How terribly rude. I am Dimitrius of the Notte family. And, obviously, I have forgotten my manners. And you are?”

“Brad.” I didn’t see any sense in lying to the NPC. “This is Slash.”

“Well, most pleasant to meet you two gentlemen.”

“I’m not a man,” Slash said, one side of his muzzle crinkling. “Don’t insult me.”

“Easy. If we can get through this without a fight, I’ll take it.” To the vampire, I said, “Dimitrius, I was hoping you could help me.”

He looked me up and down. “Of course. Though none of my masquerade attire will fit you, I know a few of my friends will have something in your size. No problem.”

I waved my hands now that they were empty of stakes. “No. Sorry. Not that.”

He looked confused. “You cannot attend the masquerade dressed as you are.”

“We’re not here for that,” Slash said. “We’re looking for the Crooked Cross.”

I’d planned to be a little subtler, but my pup’s bulldog approach worked.

Dimitrius’s lips thinned as they spread like someone was pulling his mouth wider. There was no joy in the expression. “The Crooked Cross? What would...” He stopped, cleared his throat, and removed some harshness from his question. “Why are you two gentlemen interested in the Crooked Cross? An exquisite piece, I agree. But one Lady Anebelle is cautious about showing to those she doesn’t know. Are you friends of hers? I’ve never seen you attend her masquerades.”

Ah, so this production was the creation of the woman who possibly owned the item we were looking for? We’d have to go along with this game. That wasn’t a bad thing, necessarily. Puzzles were tedious as hell, and normally, I’d avoid them in a game if I could. When I was forced, I usually looked up the solution on the internet. To me, it’s kind of like a movie where the director liked to get artistic, or when a book threw in a four-page flashback or dream sequence. Anything that took me out of the story or the game, away from the main purpose, bored me to tears. Still, if we could get our hands on the Crooked Cross without having to fight, I’d put my biases aside.

Even though Dimitrius didn’t react when we disengaged from the conversation, I still felt compelled to whisper to my dog. “What’s your Charisma?”

“Um,” Slash said, dragging out the ‘m’ sound as he pulled up his menu. “Twelve. Why? What’s yours?”

“Four.” I tapped a finger against the back of my other hand.

“What are you thinking?”

“We need to get into this masquerade and find Lady Anebelle. It’s the only way we’re going to find out where the Crooked Cross is.” I turned fully to him now. “You’re going to need to convince him to get us in.”

“I’m on it,” Slash said, strutting forward. “Dimitrius, take us to this masquerade thing. Lady Anebelle loves cuddling with me and giving me belly rubs, and if she finds out I was here and you didn’t help me, she’s going to be pissed. Do you want that?”

The vampire’s face scrunched in confusion.

“Pissed means she’ll be extremely upset with you,” I said, to clarify the modernity of Slash’s manipulation.

Dimitrius’s mouth dropped open, inadvertently showing off his fangs. “Never. The lady, upset with me? I shan’t know what to make of my life and fortunes,” he said in the most pompous way before snapping his fingers and giving us another unsettling grin. “Thankfully, her invitation allows each attendee to bring a guest.”

“Great!” Slash said. “That’ll be me. Brad is my emotional support human, so he gets to go wherever I go. I’m even allowed to take him into the dog park when I try to pick up bitches. But he always cock blocks me right when I’m about to smell ass. He’s my ride, so I tolerate it. You understand, he’ll have to come with me, right, Dimitrius?”

“Absolutely,” the vampire looked me up and down hungrily.

Suddenly, I felt very naked.

“Everyone will absolutely love to see this specimen,” Dimitrius said hungrily. “He’ll be the center of attention before the night is out.” Then his eyes returned with clarity like he’d just come out of a daydream. “So, shall we?”

## **ATTEND THE DARK MASQUERADE AS A GUEST OF DIMITRIUS NOTTE?**

### **YES / NO**

I clicked **YES**.

Slash whistled, and he spun in a circle, checking himself out. An evening jacket covered his studded leather. The spikes of his original jacket poked through his attire. Four tiny, pointed shoes covered his paws. Each time he stepped, he'd lift one leg to the side and try to shake the shoe off.

I chuckled.

He turned to growl at me. Wrapping around his face just below his ears and over his snout was a masquerade mask. A cat's face, complete with perky inverted triangles for ears. Unlike Slash's real ears, these remained standing. The mask even had whiskers. "What?"

"Your get-up."

"You wish you looked this good."

Indeed, I was fully dressed for the first time since entering Darkworld. My outfit mimicked Dimitrius to the detail. From the vampire's non-reaction, I don't think he noticed. Our reactions to the outfits weren't part of his script, to which he seemed incredibly restricted.

"We look good," I said, giving the jacket a tug. Funny, after being essentially naked for weeks, clothes now felt restrictive instead of comforting, even in the presence of a strange vampire. Maybe especially so now that I knew we were about to walk into a party of untold scores of them.

"Well, I do," Slash said, trying to shake off another shoe. "You're just my eye candy." To Dimitrius, he said, "Okay, we're ready. Take us to see Lady Anebelle."

We entered the Dark Masquerade. When the doors opened, I realized how correct I'd been. The ball was as nightmarish as I'd feared.



## THE TOXIC WALTZ



Double doors swung open by themselves when we rounded the corner. Whoever had been laughing when we were farther up the hall had dispersed before we arrived, either back to the event or to somewhere private to enjoy their debauchery. The self-propelled doors opened slowly, forcing us to wait.

“The Dark Masquerade is the event of the year,” Dimitrius said cheerily as the string and horn music now sounded clearly. “You’ll absolutely die once I introduce you to the lady. Be sure to thank her for the invitation. Don’t worry. She won’t know if you were invited or not. She has others who handle those details.”

“Sure,” Slash said. I think he was enjoying being the focus of the conversation.

The ballroom was dark, lit only by candelabras on tables and floating candles hovering over the dance floor. Hundreds of vampires filled the room, dressed in their evening best.

“That’s a lot of vampires to kill,” Slash said, barely audible over the music.

“We’re not going to if my gut is right. We’re just here to get the Crooked Cross, remember? If we can do that without a fight, we’re going to.”

“Boring,” he said, sounding like a jaded teen.

Though hundreds of finely dressed vampires milled about, chatting, laughing, flirting, eating, and dancing, one stood out from all of them.

She stood off to the side of the dance area. She might as well have been front and center, such was the attention being paid to her by those not engaged elsewhere. A disproportionate percentage of the event’s attendees competed for seconds of her time.

Her skin was pale, but whose wasn’t in this crowd? Even the darker skinned vampires’ features were ashen. Her midnight black hair fell in waves behind her back. As we approached, she turned to say something to a vampire behind her and I noticed she wore an open-back ball gown. Her hair fell nearly to her hips. She had a stunning figure, highlighted by the red sequined dress that clung in all the right places. It was easy to get lost in her beauty when she turned to greet us. As the crowd around her parted to allow Dimitrius to make introductions, she ignored the vampire who’d been doing her best to hold the lady’s attention, to welcome us. Her eyes were blood moon red, and her full lips formed an oval of the same hue.

“Try not to stare at her boobies,” Slash said.

I hadn’t until my damn dog mentioned them. Even as a vampire, an NPC, she was mesmerizing. Though awkward, at first, I understood why he made the comment. He wasn’t trying to be a little pervert. He was drawing my attention not to Lady Anebelle’s breasts, but to what hung between them.

Made of blood-red gems that each seemed to hold the light of the candles, the Crooked Cross hung low, drawing the eye to her cleavage. Each gem was shaped identically. Teardrops that could have been mistaken for frozen drops of blood. Matching her mask, the gems were set in metal that could have been forged by the Living Inferno itself. Three thin arms of black metal held each gem in place.

The centerpiece of the necklace was the Crooked Cross. A single blood-red gem, bent and twisted. Though it was one

piece, the cross's red color seemed to undulate between lighter and darker colors. It didn't look like any cross I'd ever seen, but I guess any two intersecting lines could be considered a cross. If I had the chance to peer closely without being thought of as some socially inept dude bro, I swore the dark red swirls inside the gem actually moved.

Slash not only created my blushes by drawing my attention to the lady's femininity, but he also spared them. "Lady Anebelle, I wanted to thank you for the invitation," he said after Dimitrius made introductions. "This is such a lovely party."

Even though his phrasing was inaccurate and awkward, and would have probably been insulting if this were a real masquerade with a real host, his comment seemed to land.

Behind her masquerade mask, her eyes sparkled with lust. A filigree of red beads swirled across the black mask, accentuating her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was deeper than I expected. "You are most welcome. I am honored you were able to attend." Those red eyes, the pupils as black as the freaking center of the universe, slid to me. "It will be lovely to enjoy you during the festivities later this evening."

"Indubitably," Slash said, slaughtering British English not for the first time in Darkworld. "We don't want to bother you, but we're fascinated with this event and would love to know more about what inspired you to host it."

"Really?" she said, a greedy smile spreading slowly. "No one ever asks me that. We shall chat. Come."

The crowd of hangers-on drifted away when it became evident she wasn't interested in entertaining them any longer now that Slash had her focus.

She drifted toward the front of the room. Vampires parted to allow her by. Regardless of whether they were chatting or dancing, they moved as if they knew she was coming. The music was too loud for her to have given a command, yet the sea of bodies pushed away to give her space. I felt their hungry eyes on us as we followed.

Looking behind once we reached the long table at the front of the hall, hundreds of dark eyes watched us. As dead as a still night, none of them made a move. Dimitrius was nowhere to be seen.

Slash spent the next hour entertaining Lady Anebelle. Even when he hopped up on the table to recreate our fight with Fuji's blobs, she didn't seem put-off. Every once in a while, I'd catch her gaze slipping to me. Each time those disturbing eyes fell on me, I felt more naked than the early minutes of running around Darkworld in nothing but a loincloth. Slash consistently pulled her attention back to one of his stories, which gave me a chance to keep my situational awareness on the hundreds of vampires surrounding us and, more importantly, examine the lady's necklace.

Somehow, I had to get my hands on it without her noticing. While Slash was keeping her engaged with his tales of epic heroism, all loosely based on reality, he wasn't providing me with real opportunities to grab the jewel.

I pulled at the collar of my shirt, feeling suffocated. The jacket was constricting. My dress shoes kept my toes pinched. I was growing irritated because I didn't like this. I wasn't sure how other people played this challenge. I had no idea how Kira was tackling it. But I didn't see another option besides a dead-end smash-and-grab. Even if he had her fully distracted and I grabbed the necklace, we'd never make it through a room filled with the undead.

When the servants set the flagons out, an elderly man stepped to the table from behind us to pour our drinks. As I expected, he filled the lady's glass first. What came out of the flagon was viscous and red.

"Don't drink," I said to Slash, who was already moving to his now-filled bowl.

"Why not?" He bent his head and sniffed, pulling back immediately. "Ewwwww."

"Yeah. Did you expect them to drink anything else?"

He stepped closer, walking across the table as if he was a king and this was his castle. “Brad, that’s blood.”

“I know. They’re vampires. It’s what they do.”

“Not very creative. You’d think with an entire team of people to build Darkworld, they could come up with something fresh for vampires.”

“When did Hollywood, or the entire entertainment industry, ever do something new with vampires?”

“What about those sparkling ones Tess used to watch when she spent the night?”

“The less said about them, the better. I think I’ll take the same jaded stereotypes before sparkling ones.” I looked down at the table, smiling at my neighbor. She was elderly, which for vampires meant she had to be hundreds, maybe thousands, of years old. Her white hair was done up in big rolls. How gravity didn’t pull that down was beyond me, unless it was the magic of a video game at work. She smiled and lifted her glass to me. I lifted mine in return but didn’t drink when she did. Plates were already set, and now the serving staff were coming out with trays covered in meats, potatoes, leafy greens, and piles of something that might have been an odd species of pale Brussels sprouts. “And whatever you do, don’t eat.”

Slash was sniffing the air. “Why not? It smells delicious.”

“This is a challenge, wee man. We’re not in friendly territory.” I took in the crowd of vampires who were moving back to their tables and taking seats if they hadn’t already. They laughed and shouted, slightly more gregariously than when we’d first entered. Drunk on blood. Good. We needed to buy ourselves time. *Imbibe all night, motherfuckers.* “And this is their world. Trust me on this, okay?”

“Fine,” he said with a sigh, hopping down into the chair as the servant piled his plate with thin slices of something that could have been rump roast for as pink as it was. They added healthy piles of the pale Brussels sprouts and potatoes that would have been enough for me. He stared at it hungrily.

“No,” I said, just like I used to a thousand times during our training in the months after his adoption.

“Talk to me like I’m a puppy again and I’m going to pee in your mouth the next time you’re asleep.”

“Sorry. Old habits. Seriously. Be strong. This is a setup. Plus, you just ate.”

“I have high metaaaaaboooooolism,” he howled, right there in his chair.

Lady Anebelle threw her head back and laughed in deep, robust rounds. It took everything I had in me, and a healthy dose of good sense, to not rip the necklace off and sprint for the nearest exit.

“You are such a joy to have around,” she said in that deep, sultry voice. “I must enjoy you for a long time.” She pointed at his plate with her knife she’d been using to cut tiny chunks off meat. A knife she could easily put through my pooch. “Are you not going to enjoy the feast?”

“I will. But you know how these things are. I need to keep up appearances.”

Lady Anebelle put a cold, pale hand to her mouth, smiling devilishly. “Is that not the truth? Myself, I will enjoy a few bites and you had better believe each will be counted by all the ladies. By tomorrow evening, those unlucky enough to not attend will have heard I have eaten ten times what I actually did.” She sighed, her ample chest heaving. My vision, once again drawn to the gem, glazed over. I shook my head free of the fog when she said, “Such is the way of a court. Is it the same in yours?”

Wait. Had Slash said he had a court? What stories had he been telling when I was watching the room and calculating a plan? I really needed to keep better tabs on him.

They kept on the conversation about courts and their drama until the lady signaled for a servant to take her plate and ours. She’d only eaten two bites. No wonder she kept that figure. I was glad to have the plate taken away. In my heightened awareness, constantly on-edge for the next threat, I

felt the cost. Being constantly on guard was mentally draining. The buzz of conversation mixed with the accompanying music droned on, making my head feel thick. We needed to make a move soon, or I might slip. But what? I still didn't see a way out. Not a subtle one that would satisfy the objective.

Just then, Lady Anebelle smacked her hands together once, and the musicians at the side of the room started another haunting ballad. She stood. A servant was there, in sync with her movements, to pull her chair away. She held her hand out to me, bent down at a ninety-degree angle. "You will dance with me."

Slash yipped. Her hand hung there as thoughts zipped through my head. I'm sure no one had ever made Lady Anebelle wait on anything in her life. Turning her down was an option only if I wanted to force us to fight our way out of the ballroom. Up and down the table, dark eyes turned to watch. I saw a narrow range of expressions. Most seemed intrigued. More than a few held heated glares they tried to cover with smiles, but even hidden in their masquerade masks, their envy was clear.

My delay led to Slash standing on his hind legs, waving his front paws in the air. "Let me dance?" he asked the lady, pulling attention away from my social fumble.

The presence of her hanging hand seemed to swell. This wasn't a request. She wasn't offering. I didn't want to be separated from Slash. But I didn't see a way out. If I declined, she could probably turn the entire room on us with a word.

We'd already taken down a squad of vampire bats and a horde of hemogoblins, but we'd had advantages. Slash's Potty Mouth had stunned the squad of bats. Could it do the same to hundreds of vampires over the top of the tones of the band? The water tower filled with holy water ended the threat of the nightmarish horde. We had nothing of the sort available to us here. Nothing about this part of the quest felt like it required fighting. Darkworld was the most complex game I'd ever seen, so it followed that it would also have a complex range of quests.

I gave her a smile and pushed my chair back slowly, ensuring my pinky finger was hooked on the silk napkin. I promptly pulled it to the floor as I stood. "Excuse me," I said. Her expression never shifted as I bent. Without turning my head toward Slash, I whispered, hoping his dog hearing allowed him to pick up my words above the music. "If you see anything wrong at all, use your Potty Mouth and run for the front door. I'll be right behind you."

"Brad?" he said, suddenly shivering on his haunches. "Are you sure? What if it doesn't work?"

"Just run. You're faster than everyone. Get your ass through the crowd to that door and down the hall. We'll meet by the Blood River."

"I don't want to leave you."

"We don't have time to argue." The napkin was in my hand. I'd delayed long enough, leaving the lady with her hand extended toward me while everyone of note watched. Further delay might raise her ire to a level I wouldn't be able to rectify. "Just do it. Please."

Pasting on a smile I didn't feel, my heart racing, I stood, set the napkin on the table, and took her waiting hand. Chills went through me. Her hand was ice cold.

As we made our way along the back of the table, I felt the eyes of all those who envied her, aspired to be like her, and those who wanted her, fall on us. "I've got to warn you."

"Oh?" she said seductively.

"I'm a terrible dancer. I've never actually been to one of these."

Her laugh was rich. "Though I do not find this surprising, it only makes you that much more interesting. I promise, the waltz is simple, and I need something to stimulate me." She waved her hand in the air at the room of vampires. "I find these events to be... trite. I believe this is my three-hundred-and-seventeenth ball, and I'm so tired of them."

"Why?" I asked as we faced each other, and she pressed closer.



“These vampires think I do not see it, but I know they use my galas to curry favor. From one another. From me, mostly. I find it exhausting. They take. Take. Take. Here,” she said, wrapping a long arm behind her, guiding my hand to her back. “Now move it up slightly.”

I stiffened. She’d mentioned the word “vampires” so casually, and now here I was dancing with the queen of them all. Maybe she wasn’t in title, but the way everyone acted around her and the opulence of the event definitely made her into one in my eyes. Plus, my hand was now on her bare back. Her skin was smooth. Soft. Though her long hair fell down her back, I could still smell it. A fresh, almost fruity fragrance. This close, it muted the smell of iron in the air that reminded me I was standing in the middle of a room full of bloodsuckers.

She pressed closer. The swell of her breasts pushed against me. Her hips met mine. I wasn’t lying when I told her I wasn’t a dancer. Dancing is stressful. Especially choreographed dancing. *Especially* as a man, the one expected to lead. All those arranged steps. Prescribed. Memorized by seemingly everyone but me. Moving to the rhythm of the music. Navigating your partner around the floor, keeping time and step, all while not running her into another couple. That’s some serious responsibility. Hardly the stuff of relaxing downtime. Even with my limited enjoyment and knowledge of dancing, and having never danced a waltz, I didn’t think we were supposed to be pressed together like slices of bread without a peanut butter barrier.

“Now,” she said, gripping my other hand gently, “you hold me firmly. Take a step back with your right.” Her red eyes seemed to bore into my soul behind that midnight mask. She smiled. “Good. Move to your left.”

I did.

“Yes. Yes,” she said in a way that made this all even more awkward. “Now, close your foot to your left.”

She nearly purred when I followed her directions.

At the side of the room, a loud cheer went up. I glanced that way, but my chin chilled with the touch of her insistent finger, one that pulled my attention away from the gathering crowd of vampires. “Pay them no mind. They are setting up the dessert. Focus on me. Unless, of course, I am not enough for you?”

Oh, she was. If this wasn't all weird, I tried to enjoy the moment. Lady Anebelle was built like a super model. The type of perfection you only see in airbrushed pictorials of people who eat nothing more than three lettuce leaves at every meal and claim they're fat after drinking two glasses of water at dinner. But that was part of the game, I bet. Dorky programmers coding an incredibly enticing vision like Lady Anebelle to throw gamers off.

Was Kira forced to dance with the lady as well? I wondered where she was and how this was going for her as we moved through the steps of the waltz. Each time we circled back to the top of the progression, the steps became easier.

“You pick things up quickly,” she said. “Hold me tighter.”

I slid my hand farther up her back, nearly between her shoulder blades now. We weren't in perfect symmetry, but my confidence was growing. Each time I rotated her so I faced the head table, I checked for Slash. He stood on the table, two men stood slightly behind him, at his sides. Too close for my comfort. My pup swiveled his gaze between watching me and my dance partner.

“You are a lovely dancer,” she said, drawing my attention back to her. “I will regret when the evening ends, for it will mean the end of my chance to dance with you again.”

I was about to say she could invite us to a future ball, but stopped myself from putting that out into the universe. Fortune had told me from the beginning that the AI would drive players who didn't actively participate in the game. But could the AI also adjust to unanticipated inputs? If I extended a fake interest, would that change how the game progressed? A chance I didn't want to take. This one time was enough. Especially with the growing sense of unease coming over me.

I didn't like how close those two vampires were to my dog, almost like they were watching him while positioning themselves to take advantage of a superior position. Sort of like claiming the high ground in a fight. I also didn't like being surrounded by hundreds of vampires on the dance floor now that we were in the center. My unease grew along with the numbers in the crowd off to the side of the room. The fact that Lady Anebelle constantly drew my attention away from that activity only made my suspicions grow.

I led her so I could get a glimpse of the distracting festivities. Each time I did, though, her cold finger would grasp my chin and turn my face toward hers.

"Look at me," she said, her deep voice filled with a huskiness that betrayed her lust.

Her red eyes seemed to suck me in and the world wavered. The sound of the eerie music muted. The vampires dancing the waltz all around us blurred into an amalgam of the undead. My focus centered on Lady Anebelle.

A trance.

I tried to shake off the effects, tried to pull my eyes away from hers, but I couldn't.

At the side of the room, I heard a piercing scream. A human scream. The crowd of vampires roared with laughter and glee.

I knew I was deep in the shit when Slash started barking.

## RUN TO THE HILLS



“Deeper,” the lady said.

My bones chilled. It was like she was inside my head, sinking those cold fingers into the folds of my mushy brain. She pressed against me. Five-feet-nine-inches of woman. Gorgeous. Powerful. Sexy. Undead, bloodsucking woman.

Yet, I couldn't deny her. I heard Slash's barks, and though my chest thudded with panic, I couldn't pull myself away from her gaze to search for him. The crowd at the corner of the room, the one that had my situational awareness on high alert, began to drift from my concerns.

Lady Anebelle took control and was leading me through the waltz now. We swayed. The rhythm, hypnotic. I couldn't pull my gaze away from her red orbs behind the masquerade mask. Inches below her succulent mouth and small chin, just above her breasts that could entertain someone for hours, the Crooked Cross swayed with our movements, and I didn't care. My only concern was in making her happy.

The tempo of the music slowed, and I felt, more than noticed, the crowd move away. We were now the center of attention on the floor as vampires circled.

“Deeper,” she said, her chest heaving now. Shadows danced in her eyes.

I sank. Slash's barking disappeared. Even when the small portion of my mind still in control of its faculties pleaded with me to break free and pay attention to my seven-pound terror, I couldn't. I wanted to. God, how I wanted to. But my arms were leaden. My brain, fuzzy. All my vital organs, detached.

Lady Anebelle's mouth opened. Her fangs glinted in the candlelight. "Lean your head back, pet."

I didn't even fight. If she wanted me, she could have me.

Her soft smell absorbed the world as she leaned toward my neck, opening her mouth wider.

I willed the pain to come. Desired for it. Yearned for her to taste me. Begged for her pointed, sharpened enamel to plunge deep. To penetrate.

Lady Anebelle howled. The world exploded into life once again. At the first hint of her pitched pain, I became aware of my surroundings. Every single bit of the horror we were in the middle of registered, shoving the fog away.

Lady Anebelle had spun, aiming a kick at Slash. Her pale ankle, perfect only seconds ago, now had two new puncture wounds. Both bled. The crowd that'd moved away to give us space while she feasted on me now slunk forward, fangs bared. Across the room, the reason for the ruckus that continually drew my attention and raised my nerves became clear. As that crowd of vampires moved toward the dance floor to join their brethren in surrounding me and my pooch, they left the dessert table. I nearly threw up.

The table was easily thirty feet long. Draped in what had once been a fine white tablecloth but which was now smeared red with the bodies of at least four people. Each of their throats looked like a dog's chew toy after an especially stressful doggie day. Their chests were ripped open, and the entrails were pulled free and discarded in piles or left hanging over the sides of the bodies and table. Trails of blood dripped to the floor, forming small mounds.

Ho-ly. Fuck.

Slash dashed away from Lady Anebelle's kick.

“Slash!” I called out in sudden clarity. “Follow me!”

Before Lady Anebelle could turn, I reached for the back of her neck. My fingers gripped thick strands of her hair, but they also wrapped around the Crooked Cross. I yanked.

The vampiress stumbled backward as the necklace broke and came free. I gripped it in a fist.

“What are we going to do?” Slash said, staring at the wall of vampires blocking our escape.

“Get ready to run.”

There were too many vampires to fight. Too many for me to make out what level they were. When I tried to glance at their names to get an idea of what we were facing, the text overlapped, making it a jumbled mess.

“Here goes nothing,” I said, growling and sprinting forward.

Five feet short of the wall of undead, I dove forward and tucked into a ball. I hadn’t used my Rock n’ Roll attack yet, and in that last second, I cursed myself for not practicing it before now.

Behind me, Slash barked. From the sound, I could tell he was close.

My body curled in on itself in a surreal moment of adhesion. I tucked my head to my stomach, grabbed the front of my ankles, and felt myself gel. There was no other way to describe it. Instead of a body with extremities that could easily get broken if I hit the ground at the wrong angle, I suddenly felt whole.

I hit the floor, not even feeling the impact. My momentum picked up as I rolled and blasted into the wall of vampires. Striking so many bodies at once should have been painful. I plowed right through them, feeling nearly nothing. It was like dangling a loose piece of paper and punching it with your other hand. Even with my eyes closed, I knew I hit something, but nothing that’d change the outlook of my day or required a diet of Motrin.

Tucked in the ball, I rotated quickly, yet barely lost sight of the vampires I was plowing through. I'd carved a path through three rows in a flash and was bowling for the ballroom doors. Two guards stood in front of them. One was Dimitrius. He crouched and snarled, his eyes blazing with hatred. I blasted into them and pummeled the doors. They flew open, smacking the walls so hard one came off its hinges.

Outside the room, I let go of my ankles and sprang out of the Rock n' Roll attack. Slash was right behind me, but so were hundreds of irritated, hungry vampires. Lady Anebelle led them.

"Let's go!" I shouted, and we sprinted down the hall where we'd met Dimitrius.

"That was fucking awesooooooooooooome," Slash howled, running ahead.

"Yeah. It was. But we're still fucked."

"What's the plan?"

"Run like hell."

Over his shoulder, his limp ears flopping, he said, "Run? That's your plan?"

"Do you have a better one?"

"I can't always be the brains *and* the brawn of the operation, Brad. You need to pull your weight, too."

"Head to the Blood River!"

"But the—"

"Just do it!" It takes a lot of energy to sprint for someone with my physique. Any oxygen I spent debating with my pup was energy I couldn't afford to waste. He could fight me on the validity of my spontaneous plan once we were away from the pursuing pack.

A rising collective hiss filled the hall as more masquerade attendees gave chase. We cut around the corner. Slash took it easily. My fancy ball shoes might have looked great, but they were terrible when taking hard turns. I slipped when my right

foot kicked out, and I almost went down. Before I stretched too far, I saved myself from doing a very awkward split, giving the hungry mob a chance to set their fangs in me.

Now would have been an excellent time to use the garlic bomb I'd given to Kira. I hoped it was coming in useful for her.

We cut another corner. Ahead, a vampire stumbled down the hall, moving in our direction.

“Keep going.”

Slash dashed around the man. He mumbled somewhat drunkenly. As I passed, I noticed the thousand-yard distant look people have in their eyes after a drink, or ten, too many. He tried to hiss at me when the delayed message reached his brain that I was a mortal worth sinking fangs into.

As he lunged, I punched, catching him square in the nose. Something cracked. He howled, his hands going to his bloody nose. I didn't bother worrying about his counter because he was stumbling sideways, trying to catch himself against the wall. Plus, I was too busy trying to figure out what would happen once we got back to the vast chamber of the Living Inferno.

Slash stopped and spun. He spread his legs and barked frantically. “Run faster, Brad! They're coming!”

Just then, I heard a swarm of clicking sounds. At first, my brain didn't register the threat. Then vampire bats filled the air. Faster than in their human form, the vampires transformed into bats and not only closed the distance, but had overtaken me.

I ducked, still moving forward as quickly as I could in the stance. An ineffective tactic. Claws swatted at my outfit, tearing the restricting jacket. They swooped and slashed. A couple caught face and hands. Searing pain burned with the cuts. One landed on my shoulder. Without thinking, I reached up, snagged it, and slammed it against the wall. It squeaked in pain and fell limp to the floor.

I didn't have time to celebrate. Even as I was pulling my arm back from slamming the bat against the wall, another



landed on it. I kept running, but pulled it free, careful to not drop the precious necklace we'd come for. Just as I did, a third landed on my shoulder. I pulled the one off my arm and threw it to the side. The one on my shoulder squirmed to avoid my hand. I snatched twice, missing both times. When it unfolded its wings, I grabbed one. Lucky chance. Nothing more. The result was the same.

The bat wiggled in my grip, flapping its other wing and reaching with its claws for my hand. I spun and chucked it at the pursuing crowd. I didn't wait to see the outcome. Only half of the crowd was still in their human form.

*Blocking me off*, I realized. From above and behind. Attacking on multiple fronts. We were royally fucked. I was too busy running for my life to wonder how I could have tackled the objective of snagging the Crooked Cross any other way that wouldn't have resulted in this mad pursuit.

"Go! Go!" I made a shooing motion at my pup, who stood at the end of the hall, barking at the bats.

"Fuck you, you ugly fucking flying rats," he bellowed instead. His voice carried well beyond me, and I realized he was trying to use his Potty Mouth attack. Genius move by the little guy. Brave, too. But it only had a five percent chance of working. By remaining in the hall and using the spell, he was taking an enormous risk. A ninety-five percent failure-rate kind of risk.

"Go, Slash. Please!" Another bat fell on me, landing on my head. Its claws dug with multiple points of stabbing pain.

Too many bats to count flapped in between me and my dog in their chaotic air dance. Too many. A swarm. Hopeless.

Slash yelped.

I'd lost him in the cloud of bats and noticed they crowded out the end of the hall.

"For fuck's sake, Slash! Run!"

"Help! Braaaaaaaaad!" he howled over the top of my plea.

Through the mass of tiny, black bats, I saw my seven-pound Chihuahua being lifted into the air.

And something dark fell over my mind. I'd felt it before. Years ago. Falling back. Regressing. Back to a time I'd forgotten about. Forced myself to forget about.

Growing up, I was a stick of a boy. When puberty hit for the other guys, mine took its time. When they filled out, I was still as thin as a corn stalk before I sprouted my first ball hair. People talk about being bullied and the impact it had on them. I understood. Far more than any kid should have to. I weighed one hundred and fifteen pounds going into my junior year.

Imagine the shit I got for being so undersized. Guys are fragile creatures. Especially teenage guys. Every one of us is as strong as a vase made of ice. How we disguise that vulnerability is the only thing that distinguishes us.

My teen years were hell. I hated waking up every day except the weekends. Why? Because on Saturdays and Sundays, I didn't have to go to school. Weekends were my reprieve. My sanctuary. The only place I found peace.

It stayed that way until my junior year in high school. As the calendar ticked into October, I was the center of scorn for peers who couldn't deal with their own shit, so they took it out on me. Because of the summer job, I didn't get a break from their tormenting. Their aim? To make me regret waking up every single day. They pushed me to the point where I almost did something I could have never undone. That October ended up being the turning point.

I was being shoved around in a secluded hallway at school. I'd been running late and used it as a shortcut. They cornered me, spat insults, pushed me around, and then spent what felt like five minutes punching and kicking me in every place that wouldn't show teachers I'd been roughed up. Bullies are cowards like that. I learned that lesson that day.

What I also learned was that people cared. They just needed to know what was going on in someone's life.

Mr. Snodgrass found me in the hall, crying. Once he checked me for severe injuries and had a student run for the nurse, he stayed with me. When they took me to the nurse's office, he stayed with me while someone else covered his class.

Somehow, he got the entire story out of me. I'd told no one, not even my parents, about the years of bullying. I'd tried to tell a supposed friend once, when we were freshman, and he'd laughed and called me a pussy. That was the last time I opened up about what had been going on until Mr. Snodgrass saved me on that fateful day.

By showing me he cared, he opened something in my head that made me realize I didn't deserve to be bullied for something I couldn't control. He showed me the value of claiming my life. But he also taught me another lesson. The power of confidence.

He taught me about fitness, weightlifting, and eating right. That went on through the winter. Mr. Snodgrass became more than a teacher. He became a mentor. A role model. My father isn't someone I didn't look up to, but this special teacher was different. He unlocked something in me no one else had.

When my bullies made disgusting claims about him, I told him about their detestable accusations, I saw the panic in his eyes. He was a good man, a kind soul, and someone who helped a kid in need. He didn't need false and reprehensible allegations made against him and his reputation. As an adult, I understood his plight better, but even then, I knew he didn't need that.

I spent more time than ever in the gym. I ate right. While other kids worked summer jobs or went on family vacations, I was in the gym. When I wasn't sleeping, eating, or helping around the house, I was in the gym. It was my home away from home.

I'll never forget that first day of senior year. When I walked into the school, the lingering looks and whispers validated all my hard work over the past year. Some kids I'd

spent my entire life around didn't even recognize me. I'd never felt better.

I got suspended that first day. For fighting.

Joe Butch was the most tenured dick in the bully group, and my first target. I knocked three of his teeth out. Hank Follows was next. I got him during suspension and off school property. I broke his arm. It wasn't wrong. This was justice served. Retribution. Evening the score. Making sure those demented fuckers learned to leave others they saw as weaker alone.

In school, I started getting words of thanks from the other kids who'd been targets. Even Mr. Snodgrass once gave me a knowing wink when we passed in the hall. It was the day after I'd returned from the first suspension for kicking Joe Butch's ass. Girls were suddenly talking to me. Life was good. Until the homecoming weekend.

Three of the guys decided they were going to corner me at the football game that Friday night. I'd gone because a girl said she hoped to see me there. Hailey Ritchers. I'll never forget that name. Her interest validated me like nothing had until that point. With a stuttering promise that I'd go to the game, she'd made me feel something deep inside for the first time in my life. The three assholes robbed me of it that night at the game, just like they'd robbed me of joy throughout my high school years.

I'd bought two corn dogs, hoping to run into Hailey and gift her one. They'd caught me away from the food stand and thrown me under the bleachers. The element of surprise was theirs, but it didn't last. Once I was on my feet, I beat them senseless.

Ricky Jensen. A ghost of a name that'd forever haunt me. He was the last bully standing. I'd pummeled his face against the bleacher stand repeatedly. Broke his eye socket.

When my parents asked what happened in the company of our town's police chief, I told them everything I remembered. Most of the details came from people who'd witnessed the fight but didn't intervene. People can be like that. Their

statements included details I didn't remember because I'd blacked out in my rage.

Being pushed that far was a once in a lifetime experience. I never wanted to lose control like that again. As a scrawny wimp, I wouldn't have wanted to. Having packed on sixty pounds of muscle in a year, I realized how seriously I needed to take control of myself after putting a kid into surgery to reconstruct his face. I didn't need the two hundred hours of community service that followed to teach me anything. The faces on the bystanders scared me as much as I scared them. The way Hailey Ritchers couldn't look at me reinforced the guilt swallowing me once the testosterone flushed away.

In his own way, Ricky Jensen had taught me a lesson as valuable as Mr. Snodgrass's nearly a year earlier.

A lesson I was forgetting as I watched the bats lift Slash into the air.

The fog descended as my blood boiled. I grabbed bats. Smashed them against the wall, the floor, and each other. I heard a detached roar and realized it was mine. Even though the bats dove at me, landed, scratched, and bit, I felt impervious as I snatched my pup. Their claws did nothing. I broke the skulls of those biting me. The three bats lifting him fell to the floor when I yanked him free. I flattened their bodies under my dress shoes.

"Thank you," Slash whimpered when he was in my arms and we were away.

I hugged him close. "You saved me. Thank you."

We sprinted out of the hall, into the Living Inferno's chamber that held the Blood River. The monstrosity roared from inside the insanely large fireplace. Orange fingers, thick as trees, wrapped around the bricks as it pulled itself free.

Vampires poured from the hall behind us in pursuit. The air filled with their hissing and the chirps of sixty or seventy newly transformed bats.

I ran for the Blood River. "Be ready to hold your breath."

"Okay."

It was nice to not get an argument from my pup. Behind us, the vampires refused to give up the chase. Above us, the bats swooped and darted. In front of us, the Living Inferno was free and lethargically stomping in our direction.

“Here we go!” I leaped, sailing over empty air and colliding with an unfortunate bat that had swung in front of me at the worst time.

Slash howled as we plunged toward the river of blood.

Hitting it, I felt the same disgusting sensations as earlier. My nose filled with the scent of iron as we surfaced. Slash coughed and spit out a glob of blood.

“You okay?”

He nodded. “Some got in my mouth. I’m not used to swimming yet. Dogs keep their heads above water for a reason.”

I squeezed him tighter as the thick river carried us away from the vampires. “We’ll work on that.”

The undead crowded the banks of the river. The bats, constantly tormenting, hovered, but didn’t swoop at us. All along the bank, the vampires spread out. They hung as close to the edge as they dared, hissing. The Living Inferno hung back from the river just as it had the first time. Whether it feared the blood or the hundreds of vampires on the other bank, I couldn’t have cared less. It wasn’t reaching to scoop us out of the Blood River, and that’s all that mattered.

“What do you think is in there?” Slash asked, pointing at the approaching tunnel.

I looked up at the frustrated bloodsuckers. The crowd split for Lady Anebelle just as they had in the ballroom. She’d taken her masquerade mask off during the pursuit. Now I understood the reason for the types of balls she threw. Her gray skin was shriveled and ashen. Now, her lips were thin and pale. Her neck, wrinkled. Her breasts drooped in defeat to gravity. A living, breathing skull. As horrendous now as she was beautiful with the mask on. Though life had been sucked

out of her, those fierce, red eyes watched me floating away with a hunger that made my throat constrict.

Just before we disappeared, Slash lifted a paw and somehow folded three of his toes, leaving one up in a universal sign I'm sure even the vampires understood.

## HAIL TO THE KING



**W**e didn't get time to celebrate. Just inside the tunnel, we received the new game notifications.

**BOOM!**

**HOLY BAT-BE-GONE! THAT WAS EPIC FUN, WASN'T IT? DO YOU REALIZE YOU WERE SECONDS AWAY FROM BECOMING THE MAIN DESSERT? TYPICAL MAN, ALWAYS FALLING FOR BIG BOOBS.**

**HOPEFULLY, YOU LEARNED YOUR LESSON. IF YOU EVER SEE LADY ANEBELLE AGAIN, WE DON'T THINK SHE'LL BE SO... ACCOMMODATING.**

**~~OBTAIN THE CROOKED CROSS~~**

**+2,000 XP**

**+1,000 GOLD**

**+10 STEEL ORE**

**+2 TOUGHNESS**

**-1 REACTIONS**

**+5 SPEED**

**WHAT A MASCOT YOU'RE BECOMING. ALL PLAYERS SHOULD BE SO LUCKY. WE HOPE BRAD**



**APPRECIATES YOU WHILE HE'S GOT YOU.**

**NEW MASCOT ITEM!**

**BLOOD BATH**

**+3 COURAGE**

**+2 INITIATIVE**

**+2 REACTIONS**

**+1 PERCEPTION**

“Holy shit, Brad! Two thousand XP,” Slash said, wearing a huge smile.

“It’s awesome. I didn’t expect that much.”

“But you don’t sound happy.”

I’d pulled up my menu as soon as we got the notifications and saw my XP level. “I’m still fifteen hundred XP shy of leveling.”

“So?”

“I wanted to level up before we face the Vampire King.”

“Did you not just see what we pulled off?” Slash said, pointing back toward the chamber that was far enough away we couldn’t hear the vampire’s hissing. I could still make out the forms, if not faces, of those brave enough to lean over the river to peer down the tunnel. They still gesticulated angrily.

“This blood bath is pretty gross.”

“What’s it do?” I asked, curious about the item. I didn’t trust the designers to not dump something detrimental in his Inventory.

“Hmmm, that’s interesting.”

“What? Details, Slash.”

He looked at me, unhumored. “You know you could just pull up my Inventory yourself.” He sighed and almost put a paw to his face, stopping short and looking at the blood-covered appendage. “Yick. Since I’m your, air quote, mascot, my Inventory is accessible to you just as yours is to me.”

I flipped through the tabs at the top of my screen, navigating to my Inventory screen. I was just about to tell him I didn't have access to his when I noticed an obscure box at the side of the screen that simply said **MASCOT**. I clicked it.

“Oh, this works.”

“Of course it does. See? Now you don't always have to ask me what I'm carrying.”

The blood bath was an awesome drop. It took up one of his slots, but added no weight. With his limited carrying capacity, that was crucial. The boon the item held made it invaluable.

“You can take a bath in this thing and immediately restore your full Health.”

“It's blood. I'm not taking a bath in blood.”

“If your Health is too low, you will.”

“You're not the boss of me.”

“I'll dunk you if I have to.” I kept reading the description. “Well, shit. It's only for dogs.”

“I can give it to you, and you can take all the baths you want.” He stuck his tongue out. “The only good thing about it is that cats aren't allowed to use it.”

At the bottom of the description, I saw what he was talking about. The blood bath would be destroyed if a cat used it.

“That would be a fun way to get rid of it. Imagine throwing a cat in there. Something like a Birman. Hey, or an American shorthair. Oh. Oh. What about a Persian?” He chuckled devilishly. “I know a few I'd like to do that to.”

“Focus. Fully restore your Health. Don't make me give you a bath.”

“It was always awkward when you did that in your kitchen sink,” Slash said. “You spent too much time cleaning my dick.”

“That has to get washed, too. Especially the way you dribble piss.”

“But not for as long as you did.”

I didn't respond as we floated around a slight bend. A red hue illuminated the far wall of the tunnel.

“Shhh,” I said, holding him tight. “Not sure what we're about to head into, but we know where this ends.”

Slash didn't say a thing, probably picking up on my nervousness. The only noise came from the gurgling blood.

Voices murmured around the corner, an echoed element that gave me an idea of the size of the room we were about to enter.

We were running out of time to examine the properties of the Crooked Cross. Any smart player wouldn't go into the battle against a level boss without being as prepared as possible. The main objective of this level was to kill the Vampire King, but there'd been a set of mini-tasks to complete. Mini-tasks that weren't so mini when they set you up to fight off a hundred hemogoblins, including a giant, avoid aerating yourself, extinguish a walking mountainous candle, and dance with the queen of death after putting on a humiliating exhibition for a few hundred of her buffet attendees. The Crooked Cross had to have some worth.

And around that bend in the tunnel, we were going to get a big clue what purpose it might serve. I still had seconds to pull it up in my menu. I switched to my MISCELLANEOUS tab. The Crooked Cross wasn't there.

“Whatever you're doing, hurry,” Slash said nervously.

“I can't find it.”

He sighed. “I told you to get better at your menus. You should have spent more time—”

His comment was cut off with a yelp, and the world fell away. I tried to shout, but got a mouthful of blood for my troubles. Breaking the surface, I gasped and spat out what I could. Grasping for a handhold, my hand swatted at nothing, smacking the river's surface.

The blood churned. We dropped again. Before we went under a second time, I saw enough of the river's course in the pale light to make out a series of rapids. Details were difficult to make out because everything was so dark, and I was kicking and pulling with my one free arm to find anything to grab onto.

The blood churned, swelled, and fell. We were pulled around a slight bend, closer to the red light. A second after I broke the surface and spotted a boulder. Twice as wide as me, it blocked our path. I kicked to turn, taking the brunt of the impact on my shoulder. I think Slash yelped, but I couldn't hear much over the roar.

The river fell away again. I caught enough breath to avoid another mouthful of blood. Slash hacked when we surfaced. The river was calmer here. We'd found an eddy. The current pulled us around in a tight circle. Maybe fifteen feet in diameter.

"You okay?" I asked as I tried to gain perspective on our situation.

"I stiiiiiiiiink," he howled.

"Slash, are you okay?" I despised speaking with an authoritative tone even before this new, twisted reality that allowed him the power of speech. Now that we could clearly communicate, talking to him like that made me feel even more nauseous.

With each rotation around the small pool of relatively calm blood, we were being pulled farther toward its edge. Another handful of laps, and it'd jettison us back into the rapids. I scrambled to get a sense of what lay ahead. Though the tunnel was dark, swirling in the eddy gave me time to see how much stronger the light was up ahead. The river dropped at least twice more that I could see. We'd have to be ready. As it did, the tunnel's ceiling sloped down, cutting off my view of anything ahead.

As Slash coughed and hacked in my arm, I wondered how much longer I could keep us afloat. I was already struggling and failing whenever the rapids pulled us under. Though I

couldn't tell how long we'd been pulled along its course, I knew I had maybe a few hundred yards of fighting left in me. If we didn't find something to climb onto, some way out of the river, we might not make it.

For the life of me, though, I couldn't see a reprieve from the constant churn. We were now a rotation or two away from being thrown back into the tumult.

I'd given up on trying to read the description for the Crooked Cross. Taking a glance at my blood-soaked pup, the way his big, black eyes seemed to shake in distress helped me tap into my energy to get us out of this.

I grabbed for a boulder as we were whipped around. My fingers grasped the sharp, wet edges, but only for the briefest of seconds. Torturously, the river's pull ripped my hand away. We were sent careening over the edge.

I kicked to the surface, my legs burning.

The rapids were a tangle of dizzying swirls and raucous roaring. I'd never felt this disoriented in my entire life. Not the time I was five or six and lost in a retail store. Not the time I was stationed overseas and had something slipped into my drink at the Kaiser Skybar. Not the time I thought my size would make a mosh pit at a Five Finger Death Punch concert an enjoyable activity.

As the river spun and tossed us around, a tidal wave of blood that had lashed back after colliding with a rock sprayed my face. I would have sicked up if I had the chance. My stomach was twisted but also felt bloated by the constant upheaval. Each time I saw the swells and bubbles, I knew we were about to be turned inside out. Each time a jagged rock poked out of the river, I exerted ten times my reserves of energy just to avoid the collision.

My head throbbed. My lungs burned. My muscles ached.

An approaching roar put all the previous ones to shame. It sounded like the entire manor was crumbling down on itself. A million blocks of brick falling inward. Slash yelped. I squeezed him when I saw the churning lip of the falls.

“Hold on!”

His claws dug into my arm, biting sharply. I had bigger problems than that.

The falls approached. Red light was cast on the ceiling of the tunnel, highlighting its uneven surface. I wrapped my other arm around Slash just before the river pushed us over the edge.

The world fell out beneath us. I kicked my legs, but somehow, in the moment of madness, I didn't lose my grip on my main man. He twitched in my arms.

There's something that happens in the seconds where someone confronts the reaper. Our body shuts down our capacity to think, to rationalize, to observe our world beyond the most immediate threat. Somehow, I knew I still held Slash. Before we fell, I knew my priority was protecting him. As we fell, I committed to that job. But beyond that, I couldn't tell you the first thing beyond the sensation of having the world pulled out from under my feet and the utter incapacitating realization that I couldn't do anything to stop it.

I tried to keep my eyes open, but that's not as easy as it sounds. I looked down at a wide pool of calm blood zipping up toward me.

I pulled my legs toward my stomach just before we hit.

Contrary to popular opinion, jumping from heights into a body of liquid is not a task for the weak of heart. It might be liquid, but it hurts when you puncture it from any height above twenty or so feet. If my teenage years taught me anything about peer pressure and how much jumping into water off cliffs hurt, it was that.

We smacked the calm pool. Blood exploded into the air. Every inch of my skin felt raw and violated. My tailbone pulsed. Stretching my legs to kick was difficult for the first few seconds, but I pushed us to the surface.

“Hoooooooooooly fuuuuuuuck,” Slash howled, looking at me with his soft, puppy dog eyes and grinned. “That was fucking epic! Can we do it again?”

I grunted a laugh. “Maybe another time.”

I looked up at the bloodfall we'd just survived. The drop was probably forty feet. Just enough to hurt, but not enough to kill.

As I kicked to turn us away and find the shore in this brighter submersed cavern, a deep laugh that had an air of wispieness to it reverberated across the stone ceiling and walls.

Slash looked over my shoulder and yelped, before lowering his head and growling. I kicked, turning.

On the shore, the Vampire King stood, arms crossed. He loomed over the floor of the cavern, the rust-colored stalagmites, and even the stairs leading to his throne, larger than some of the office buildings I'd worked in.

As I treaded in the pool of blood, I glanced up to the corner of my mindscreen and saw my Health level.

I wrapped my other arm around Slash. "Buddy, we're fucked."

## CALL TO ARMS



The Vampire King's presence was commanding. Repulsive. Antagonistic. Threatening. Imposing. All those and more. Yet, no matter how my mind struggled to comprehend his size, I was drawn back to him in something that rivaled reverence without consent.

Over twenty feet tall and broad-shouldered, his skin was as pale as Lady Anebelle's. A trait I was sure all these inbred fuckers shared. His eyes glowed like the sun, white-hot. I couldn't make out irises or pupils. I couldn't look into them for more than a few seconds.

His hair was dark and long, looking very much like every hard rock singer from the Seventies.

"That's him, isn't it?" Slash asked, shaking in my arms.

I didn't need to focus on the name floating over the Vampire King's head; the yellow letters bordered in gold, flaming ropes. "Yeah."

The Vampire King hadn't moved. He crossed his arms and spread his legs, forming a twenty-five-foot-tall pyramid like he was striking a decent replication of old pro wrestling postures he'd seen over the ages.

"His armor is cool," my pup said, like that made any of this easier.



“Yeah,” I said again, my mind swirling as I tried to figure out just how in the hell we were supposed to defeat something that size. The game let us get away with the Living Inferno, but our goal here was to kill the Vampire King. That was the level’s overall objective. The boss fight. We’d used up our run-to-stay-alive chances. Now, we stared down the put-up-or-shut-up moment of our time in Darkworld.

I should have seen it coming. Even before this craziness kicked off when I opened the chest, I’d noticed an abnormal number of bats in the Olympia sky. I’d fought that baby vamp in a park in my city. A bat surveyed the hillside at the start of the game. A squad of the fuckers had attacked us in our camp. From the beginning, the underlying theme of Darkworld had been about the undead. Of course, fighting their king was how they intended to end this level.

Now, we just had to find out if that meant the end for the Vampire King or for us.

The Vampire King’s armor that Slash admired, and which was admittedly kick ass, gleamed black in the brazier light that cast the cavern in red light. Conan the Barbarian would have been proud to wear it. So dark, I couldn’t see the welds from this distance, the metal shimmered when the firelight hit it at just the right angle. His black helmet was fashioned like a bat’s head, complete with long fangs and pointy ears. The deep-set eye slits didn’t prevent me from constantly being drawn to his white-hot eyes burning behind the shield. Above his etched breastplate, two-foot spikes covered his black pauldrons.

“His gauntlets look like the ones Rob Halford used to wear back in the day,” Slash said.

“Your knowledge of Judas Priest is as interesting as it is a testament to how much TV I let you watch.”

“What else do you want me to do when you’re gone all day? There’s only so much I can play with Pussy.” He sniffed. “I miss her.”

“I know, buddy. We’ll find her.”

“Will we? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“We have to kill that thing first. Don’t you remember that part?”

How could I forget?

The air grew thick with tension as I paddled to the far shore, away from him. The Vampire King’s hot glare followed us, his head rotating slowly as if on a rusted crank, tracking us all the way out of the pool.

Behind us, the roar of the bloodfall faded away into my subconscious. It was a design element, either for aesthetics or for distraction, and I wasn’t betting on the former. As hundreds of gallons of blood poured into the pool every minute, the cacophony it created covered the sounds of anything the Vampire King had readied. Footsteps of his minions. The clinking of a metal trap. Anything. I ignored the noise and focused on the abhorrent ruler of the undead.

His gaze was piercing, I’ll admit. A congruity of monochrome. At once, he gave nothing away while displaying his power to attract. A vampire trait, I realized. Lady Anebelle had done the same thing. She almost had me willingly give myself over as a post-dinner treat.

I thought about those poor people the vampires had laid out for dessert, devouring them while they were still alive. I hoped they were NPCs and not sentient bastards who’d fully realized the terror of their last moments.

“You invade my home?” the Vampire King spoke, his voice deep, resonant. A question, yet not one. A command to be followed. Even enthusiastically.

This time, though, I felt the tug of charisma.

“Slash. Heal yourself. Eat every beefy treat you have if you need to, but do it now,” I whispered. Thankfully, my pooch didn’t argue. To the Vampire King, I said, “We’re not invading your home. We’re here to kill you.”

I hoped the bravado would trigger his. He might be undead, might be a video game character, but he was male. If the bastards who programmed this game were true to reality, they'd have shoved an overload of testosterone code into his brain and trigger his need to chest puff like most guys.

I needed time to pull up my Inventory and equip myself, but also use the healing wraps and maybe even potion.

“Kill? Me?” he said, as his arms slowly moved to his side.

I scrambled to open my Inventory, mentally clicking through the tabs. The last time I'd played with the menu, I'd forgotten to return it to the main character tab. That had always been my starting point, yet that's not the tab I was on.

Because I was concentrating on my menu, I almost missed the Vampire King raising his arms.

Slash drew my attention. “Brad, something is happening.”

Fuck. I flicked through the tabs.

Slash yelped. “Brad?”

I clicked on the WEAPONS tab, armed myself with two stakes, and closed the menu. Now that I'd found my WEAPONS tab, I could easily get to the POTIONS tab for the wraps and single potion. His plea forced me to get a check on the situation before I snagged those.

Good thing, too. To both sides of the Vampire King, hundreds of gray oval sparks snapped in the air and formed into central points. Six in all, three on each side of the boss.

“What the hell?” I asked, about to return to my menu, when all six ovals expanded in a sudden burst.

Slash yelped and raced to the side of the cavern. I dove for cover. Nothing happened. No shrapnel. No explosions. No howls of pain from my pup or triumph from the oversized undead. What I saw when I peeled my head from the cover of my arm was far worse.

Six vampires stood at the Vampire King's side, three on each side. Instantly, I remembered why they looked so familiar. I'd seen the outfits and sculpted hair. The dark eyes

that seemed to watch us constantly. The way the firelight danced off the necklaces, the monocle, bracelets, and gaudy rings brought my mind back to the first time I saw these particular vampires.

In the hall, after avoiding falling onto the spike trap. These were the vampires from the paintings, just in somewhat-living flesh.

“Brad?” Slash asked meekly from around the corner.

“I’m here, buddy,” I said, reaching my arm out, hoping it’d encourage him to join me. A breath later, I heard his nails clicking on the stone.

The six rocked on the balls of their feet, ready for permission to attack. Their undead eyes, very much alive with their shared hunger, were locked on us. Two of the six were women, and their vicious sneers promised as much pain as their male counterparts.

I watched Count Kahleen and his long hair. It still fell over his back like he’d brushed it before coming to the fight. If I got the chance, I’d grab him by his horrendous handlebar mustache and take him for a painful ride. Just after I ripped that obnoxious gold monocle out of his eye and shoved it down his throat. Unlike in his painting, his finery wasn’t as fine as it once was. Tattered, faded, and worn, his garments had seen better days.

I could say the same about each of them. Six vampires who’d probably survived hundreds of years, likely serving the Vampire King their entire lives.

I caught myself.

This was a video game. These vampires were NPCs. Creations of the demented assholes behind the game. The incels with pocket protectors, who had more notepads filled with code to design animated women than phone numbers of real ones. The ones responsible for what we were facing. They and their fucking angel investors who funded this bullshit excursion, this investment they surely meant to get a return on one day. Both those groups and the politicians who turned a

blind eye to the unscrupulous violations of autonomy and personal freedoms could kiss my ass.

As I looked at the ancient undead dressed in rags, garments with more holes than a donut shop, more stains than a Catholic church's windows, I realized I could get retribution. On them. On the Vampire King. On everyone responsible for injecting me and Slash into the game.

None of the six held weapons, yet they held aggressive stances. Ready to pounce. Hands twitched. Weight shifted.

The worst of the six, the one I wanted to stay very far away from, wasn't as tense as the others. He could have been a statue for as much life as he showed.

I swallowed when my eyes met the Insane Clown Posse poser who stood at the Vampire King's right hand.

Fangburt. The court jester-looking psychopath dressed in the outlandish tabard and pants outfit of yellows, oranges, and reds. Red shoes curled to a point resembling scorpion tails. The human head juggler. He held two heads now. One male. One female. Both their mouths were open in a death scream. They dangled from his hands by their blood-soaked hair.

"Stand up and fight, mortal," the Vampire King said in a mocking voice. "At least make a sport of this."

I did. I wanted him to see that I wasn't afraid, but I did it slowly. My Inventory was up and I navigated to my healing wraps like a starving mouse searching cheese. I had nineteen, but had to use nine of them to get my Health back to full from our previous adventure with Lady Anebelle.

Without taking my eyes off the Vampire King, I asked Slash, "You good?"

"I am," he said, his voice shaking. "How are we going to do this against six of them and..." He gulped audibly. "And against something like that?"

He was talking about the Vampire King. I was just about to tell him my plan when all six vampire Hall of Famers blinked out of existence. I wish I could say that was the end of their

involvement in the fight. That would have been great news.  
The truth was much darker.

## DANCING QUEEN



“Where’d they go?” Slash yelped.

I spun, stakes raised and ready to strike. We were against the pool of crimson blood with only a few feet to spare. That space was empty.

“I don’t know.” I checked on the Vampire King. He hadn’t taken a single step closer.

“Maybe it was a trick to throw us off?” He sounded hopeful.

“Stay on your guard.”

There was a faint hiss. A sound I’d heard hundreds of times today. Like turning on a gas stove that failed to light right away.

I jumped to the side, away from the hiss, a moment before a female vampire popped into that space. She swung at me. Her nails clipped my forearm, drawing three lines of red.

“Shit.” I yanked my arm back, seeing the slight downward tick of my Health. Raising a stake, I stabbed.

The weapon sank into her neck. With a *poof*, she vanished.

Behind me, the air hissed.

“Watch out, Brad!” Slash yelled, bouncing on his front paws.

The next vampire, a male with skin so pale it might as well have been white, lunged for me, swinging two arms wildly. It reminded me of those times in the Air Force when I was stationed overseas and the guys couldn't handle their German beer. They'd get drunk as piss in the bars and want to hug everyone, even strangers, telling them how much they loved them. Their bumbling, stumbling awkwardness was a lot like what this guy looked liked now. I wasn't sure how he made the Vampire King's Hall of Fame wall. A sad testament to what made the best of the best, even for a level one boss, unless his skills had diminished over the decades.

I ducked under his swing, jabbing up with my left. It's my weaker hand, but armed with the stake designed for killing vampires, it was an easy kill.

“Yes! Kill them, Brad. Kill them all,” Slash yipped in his tweener voice. It cracked halfway through his shout of encouragement.

Two down, four plus the big boss man to go.

Another hiss to my right made me jump to my left to avoid Count Kahleen's attack. He led with his teeth. I didn't think a Speed score of sixteen was all that, but it was obviously superior to the count's. He stumbled forward, and I was about to drive a stake in his back when I heard a twisted giggle behind me.

Fuck.

Fangburt clobbered me in the back of the head. It was my turn to stumble. Right into the arms of the count.

Face to face, he wrapped his arms around me. I had about four inches on him, but my arms were pinned to my side. The maniacal jester vamp moved into my periphery, holding the two heads like they were medieval flails.

Slash darted forward, barking and almost going hoarse.

“Come here, ye little bastard, ye,” Fangburt said, and reached for Slash. My dog yelped and scampered away.



It was the break I needed. With my arms still snared, I snagged fistfuls of the count's rotted tunic and lifted. Not only did I have four inches on him, but I was in far better shape. In the seconds his partner's act distracted him, I squatted and thrust. The combined momentum of my legs acting like pistons and my arms pushing up and back sent the count flying in a modified German suplex. I re-equipped the stakes and drove one into his chest, then slammed the other into Fangburt's back.

Both imploded in a cloud of gray sparkles.

"Four down!" I taunted the Vampire King.

"Suck my dewclaw," Slash yelled, spinning in a circle.

The last two Hall of Famers popped in view on either side of me. One was a woman with limbs so gangly, she moved like a drunk spider. The other was a guy. Warts covered every inch of his skin, making him look like one of those therapeutic foot massage balls.

They attacked together.

I dodged forward, thinking to outsmart them. The wart vampire nearly caught me, but I lost track of the woman when she zapped out of the fight, reappearing three feet in front of me. I almost ran into her. Only a diversionary spin spared me her clutches. The move also forced me to take my eyes off of them.

As I turned, I caught sight of the Vampire King. I was grateful to whatever was preventing him from joining the fight. Though his inactivity didn't make sense. I'd never seen a boss battle where the boss wasn't involved in battling. But I'd take whatever allowances this level one fight handed out.

She screeched as she lashed out. I ducked under her swing, easy to counter because, at that length, it took a long time for her to get momentum. But as I brought the stake up to stab her in the ribcage, a pale, wart-covered hand snagged my arm.

Me and the wart boy made eye contact for a brief, awkward second, as if neither of us could believe he pulled it

off. I ducked and spun under his grip, coming up on his opposite side. I drove the stake into his shoulder blade.

In a cloud of gray sparks that drifted into the air like the burned remnants of paper thrown onto a campfire, he vanished.

In the space where he'd stood, the woman popped into my view. Crazy lust filled her face. Wide eyes that would put Shelley Duvall to shame. Her mouth fell open like the dude in "The Scream" painting. Ridiculously, I noticed she was missing a front tooth. But her fangs were still nasty points that could puncture my skull.

She jumped on me like a spider monkey. I caught her, more out of instinct than strategy. At that moment, I didn't think about the stakes in my hands. She'd caught me off-guard. I'd expected a multitude of moves, but hadn't seen that one coming, and that was my mistake. Thankfully, she was the last of the Vampire King's minions, and he didn't look interested in jumping into the fray. His mysterious reluctance gave me time to square my head and realize the gangly vampire had fallen into a trap I hadn't meant to set.

She snapped her fangs, looking like a park pigeon at feeding time. She came close. The only thing that stopped her from sinking her fangs into me was my jerking reaction. I thrust my arms out, lifting her away. I'd love to say I have superhero level strength, but the only one on our team who was a superhero was the seven pounds of black and tan attitude barking himself hoarse a few feet away. Avoiding the bite was priority number one, and I succeeded at that. Pulling her in, I shoved her away with all my body weight behind the push.

She fell to the ground and her knees buckled. I charged, shoulder blocking her. I had a moment to override my sense of humanity at charging a woman and sending her flying five feet backward on her ass. A moment in which I reminded myself that she'd eat my still-warm guts from my open stomach wound if she had the chance.

Before she stood, I was on her, driving the stake down on her skull.

Big mistake.

The stake snapped in half. It wasn't the only thing to snap.

Her gaze was as white-hot as the Vampire King's eyes when she looked up at me. It was one of those "oh, no you di'n't" type of looks.

In a flash, she went from being seated on her ass to springing in the air.

"Shit!" I backed away as she leaped over me, landing behind me.

Even as I turned to confront her, she was airborne. Like a freaking grasshopper. Not a spider. This bitch was the vampire version of a praying mantis. But this wasn't a mating dance, and she wasn't going to eat me after we were done.

"Come on! Kill her," my bloodthirsty Chihuahua shouted from the side.

"I'm trying!"

We mirrored each other, sidestepping, trying to suss out an advantage. Every movement I made, she countered, and vice versa.

The mantis vampire hissed and snapped.

"What? Too dead to use your words?" I said, hearing how lame the taunt sounded.

She snapped again, thrusting her head forward, her teeth smacking together with a *clack*.

There was a rhythm to her. As we shifted back and forth, I noticed her tendencies. Each time we moved away or toward each other, she was a threat. But when I moved to my right or left, she seemed to struggle to keep her feet working with her brain.

"Slash, get behind her."

"What?"

“You heard me. Do it.”

Our conversation didn't seem to register with the mantis vamp. Just like every single one of these undead bastards, she seemed clueless about my strategy exchange with Slash.

“Be careful, but don't let her move forward or backward. Keep her moving side to side.”

“Why?”

“Focus. Just do it.”

My pup moved pensively in a lateral line to the vampire. His ears were pinned down and his tail was tucked, but he came through for me.

The vampire didn't seem to notice him until I stepped toward her and she tried to step back. Slash barked and growled. She flung her arms out and hissed at him. He whimpered, but stayed where he was, where I needed him.

I dove, raising the stake. She sensed me coming, spinning and swatting away my strike. I jumped back before her trailing arm came down to rip my chest open. Her pale skin creased with madness.

“Don't pee. Whatever you do, you cannot pee.” I dreaded Slash activating his Night Terrors debuff.

“But I drank a lot of water,” he said, quaking where he stood.

“Slash,” I said warningly.

“Fine, I won't pee myself.”

I pointed the stake at the vampire. “You and me. Let's dance.”

I stepped forward. She stepped back. Slash barked.

We were reducing her options, restricting her movements to lateral ones. Her clumsiness moving side to side, now obvious.

I fainted to the left, and she did exactly what I wanted her to do. She jumped to her left, my right. I'd wanted that. With

my feint, I was already shifting to spring.

She tried to scramble back when she saw me driving the stake at her, but my teeny-weenie tag team partner snapped at her heels. In a moment of overwhelming dilemmas, she did what most people do. She froze from indecision. I used that to my advantage, jamming the stake into her chest.

Before she could wrap her long arms around me, she puffed into death.

Panting, I pulled up my menu and equipped another stake, facing the Vampire King. He hadn't moved during the fight. It was as if he was watching a sport being played for his entertainment.

Without a game notification that we'd finished the quest, which I already guessed we hadn't, the game went on.

"Nice of you to protect your slaves," I said. "Not very impressive for Hall of Fame vamps."

The reference might have been lost on him for his lack of reaction. I stared into those white-hot eyes behind the helmet.

"Silly mortal," he said, his deep voice booming around the cavern.

Not one for conversation, he finally unlocked his arms.

Slash had moved to my side.

"Be ready," I said.

"Oh, I am. I'm going to go undead all over his face."

"That's my boy," I said, risking a glance away from the Vampire King to smile reassuringly at my dog.

He smiled back. His big, black eyes were soft. Innocent. "That's my human pet. Let's just hope you're better at this than all those video games I watched you play. But if you die, remember the Death Lottery. If you enter and survive that, you can rejoin the game and come back here to get your ass kicked again."

I gave him a wink. Goddamn, I loved that little dude.

“I’ll try.”

A moan drew my attention back to our target. The Vampire King lifted his hands. The mournful sound seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

His booming laughter rattled the walls as, unbelievably, six clouds of gray sparkles formed at his side. The bastard was respawning his minions. I hadn’t killed them after all. Instead, that overgrown bag of skin suckered me into revealing my fighting strategy.

“Fuck,” Slash and I said simultaneously.

The Vampire King pointed, a silent command that restarted the fight. Only this time, he joined in on the fun.

## THE FINAL COUNTDOWN



I ran for my life.

Slash did that from the outset. To avoid the discouraging reappearance of the Vampire King's minions, he raced around the pool of blood.

"Don't corner yourself," I shouted in the madness.

The Vampire King's Hall of Famers were popping in and out of thin air with aplomb. Laughs, cackles, and hisses filled the air. Especially disconcerting when the body creating the sound disappeared a fraction of a second later.

Unlike the first time I'd fought them, they spent little time visible now. They popped in and out of the air with dizzying regularity. Forming to swipe or attempt to sink their fangs into me, only to zap away before I could counter. They weren't my only problem.

The uneven rock under me shifted as the Vampire King lumbered closer. I'd kept an eye on him as I dodged his minion's attacks, but he'd been slow in engaging. Right until he refused to wait any longer.

He dropped his arms to his side, curling his fingers into fists and pulled his arms back like he was in the middle of an oblique workout. He charged.

I don't mean he ran at me. No. His charge was so lightning fast it reminded me of those old-school toy cars where you wound the back tires until they couldn't turn backward any longer. When you set them down, those recoiled wheels sent the car zipping off in, usually, a straight line.

The Vampire King had started his charge fifty feet away, and in a streak of black, he flew past me. The only thing preventing him from making my body fly apart in a spray of viscera was my last-second dive.

He nearly slammed into the chamber wall on the far side. The big boy apparently had a problem hitting the brakes.

“Slash, follow my lead. Ready your Potty Mouth attack.”

Slash sat in the cavern's corner, shaking uncontrollably. His head swiveled as he stayed on watch for the next vampire appearance.

“Slash, focus!”

He found me and his little eyes narrowed, which meant he'd heard me and was simply being a brat at the most inopportune time.

“Fiiiiine,” he howled.

Three vampires circled me, but before I could swing with the stake, they vanished. I had to swivel to keep my pattern unpredictable. The Vampire King had watched me for this specific reason. Modern games were notorious for having an AI that could adjust to an individual player's style. Why wouldn't Darkworld? If I wanted to keep us alive, I needed to change my tendencies. Easier said than done. Natural reactions to threats weren't easily reprogrammed. In sports, a shoot-out with insurgents, or fighting in a video game world against vampires, the things I'd relied on all my life to survive were the same things keeping me breathing now. The concerted effort to change every approach slowed my reactions, and that nearly cost me.

Mantis vamp and her wart-covered sidekick appeared on both sides of me. I rolled forward, barely avoiding their slashing attacks.



“Cheerleader!”

“Nooooo,” Slash howled.

“Do it!”

“I hate that spell.”

The count was suddenly in front of me, snarling. I tried to stab him, but he was gone before I could get my hand up.

Behind me, the insane clown giggled, and I didn't even bother to attack. I spun away.

The fight was a storm of movement. I couldn't stand still for a second without fearing an attack from any of the seven vampires. The only one constantly present was the biggest sonofabitch in the bunch, and he was preparing another charge.

The pale vampire snapped into my periphery. I jumped back and swung. He was gone before I connected.

The first minion I'd face, the aged woman, lunged at me out of thin air. I swatted her away. Before I could turn and strike, she was gone.

“Ra! Ra! Sis boom bah!” a chorus of angelic voices sang.

Slash had activated his Cheerleader spell. I glimpsed him decked out in the blue and white skirted costume. The blonde wig had fallen sideways on his head. One of his floppy ears split his bangs while he tried to puff away the pigtail hanging over his snout.

My Health bar slid back to the right, refilling the fifteen percent bonus and wiping out the effort I'd expended when avoiding being sliced and diced by the Vampire King's closest buddies. The boost in Fortitude was small but had an added benefit I hadn't noticed before.

Maybe it was because I was in the heat of running for my life while trying to land a lucky strike. Who knows? But with the boost, I felt a sudden steeliness I didn't have seconds ago. It had nothing to do with courage. The Fortitude boost brought a steeliness, along with clarity.

I'd been in plenty of fights in my life. My deployment bases had been the targets of mortars on an almost daily basis. When we were coming in for a landing in Iraq, we'd been shot at with their bargain basement anti-aircraft guns. I'd been in the thick of shit before and I know what it feels like to have adrenaline push your brain to focus on threats and survival. This was different. This was like sipping coffee on a bench while overlooking a quiet park pond. Just right in the middle of a fight for my life.

"Thanks, buddy!"

"If you tell anyone about this, I swear I'll—"

"You'll pee on my car seat. Got it." I dodged the count's next appearance, swinging my leg out and catching him. He went down.

I arced the stake through the air, aiming for his back.

Even prone, he zapped away before I could strike.

"Watch out!" Slash yipped.

I lunged to the side without turning. The Vampire King's blur pushed past me an instant later. The force behind his charge was so strong, the gust trailing in his wake made me stumble.

I had a second to assess my surroundings before he turned. The Vampire King was too far away to get to before he turned. I needed to set up somewhere in the cavern where I could trick him into a charge where I could take advantage of his turn time. One that wouldn't put me in a corner, fighting off his minions. The cavern had a few spots, but one stood out above all the other options.

Sandwiched between the pool of blood, a twenty-foot expanse of the cavern wall bowed out before sinking deeper into the shadows. The pool would prevent the vampires and their king from charging me from that spot. The curved portion of the wall would do the same from the opposite side. Best yet, it provided enough flat floor for me to dance around the sneak attacks until I figured out a way to put an end to the Vampire King.

I sprinted the thirty yards to the defensible location.

The ghostly red-haired woman hissed as her cloud of gray exploded near me. To her misfortune, I'd just set myself. I stabbed blindly, as was going to be my strategy until Slash could use his Potty Mouth spell. The stake caught her in the arm. For the second time, I'd vanquished her.

"I don't like this spot," Slash said once he joined me.

"It's the only place we can fight and have a chance."

He scoffed. "You think too little of yourself. The cavern has plenty of them."

I rocked on the balls of my feet, slightly facing the Vampire King, who was only now turning. "You're welcome to search for them. I'm going to stay right here."

"Go—go out there? No thanks."

"That's what I thought you'd say." I reminded him of our original plan and told him my thoughts about how to beat the Vampire King. "Get ready."

"I was born ready." He lifted his head. "I'm going to take these bitches down."

"Save it for your spell," I said, seeing him pinch his eyes in frustration. "By the way, you're adorable in pigtails."

He didn't bother to hide his growl.

"Ready. Here he comes." I stabbed the stake at the Vampire King. Though he was well over a hundred feet away, once he charged, he'd be on us in seconds.

A demented giggle gave Fangburt away again. Slash tucked his tail and scrambled out of reach. I jumped back, already swinging the stake before his ugly face appeared. My hand came down through the cloud as it expanded. I'd given up hope that I'd pulled off a pretty ingenious maneuver until my arm was halfway through its swing. At that moment, Fangburt materialized, physically born around my arm and hand. The one holding the stake.

He bellowed as my weapon, already inside his body, tore his insides out. The spraying cloud of vampire dust hit me. I swallowed enough of it to make me hack and cough, hoping it wasn't actually part of Fangburt I'd just ingested.

Slash bounced on his front legs. "Two down, fuckers! Why don't the rest of you come out and play?"

"What are you doing?"

"Taunting," he said as if it was obvious, turning to face me and away from the open cavern floor. "I've seen you play that shoot 'em up game with your buddies. The one where you can play against the game or each other. Don't blame me for my shit-talking when it's you I learned it from."

"Move!" I smacked my hands together to scare him out of the Vampire King's path.

The large vampire started his charge. In school, I was a much better baseball pitcher than I was with a bat in my hands, but understanding that dynamic between the two gave me unique advantages. I knew how to anticipate a pitch by learning and watching other pitchers, seeing the finer points of their mechanics. "Getting the lead on them," my coach used to call it.

I'd done the same for the Vampire King, and that's why I knew when he was making his break for us.

By the time he was a second step into his charge, I was already moving. Moving not just to avoid disaster, but to put an end to him and this quest.

He skidded to a stop right about where we'd been standing, looming over me. Unable to turn quickly, I launched into my attack. I stabbed the stake into his calf and jumped back, ready to be showered by a massive gray spray of his death.

Except, he didn't die.

No matter how often or how fast or how deep I stabbed and slashed with the stakes while he turned his tall frame, the Vampire King's Health bar barely budged.

I was already sweating from dodging his minions for the past ten minutes. Now, I was at an absolute loss, and drenched. I'd hit him twenty times, and barely saw a sliver of black in his Health bar.

“What the fuck?”

“What about the Crooked Cross?” Slash asked.

“No time to pull up my Inventory.” I couldn't stand here and ponder what went wrong. The big man was half-turned. Three hisses enclosed me. “Now, Slash!”

“But they haven't formed yet.”

“Now!”

Three gray clouds popped around me as seven pounds of Chihuahua tore into them. “Listen here, you saggy bags of skin. I don't know what mudhole you crawled out of, but I promise you I pissed in it.” By now, the three vamps had formed, but that didn't stop my pooch. He pointed a paw at the pale vampire. “You need a few days on the beach. I've never seen paler skin in all my life, and I have an albino friend.”

His paw shifted to the count. “And you. What's up with the name? Are you proud that you know your numbers? Or are you making up for another inadequacy by making the few friends you have give you a made up title?” His voice rose, shrouding us in its voluminous glory.

The count's face twitched like Slash had hit a sore spot.

Last, my little buddy turned on the wart-covered vampire. “And you. For the love of jackfruit, go see a dermatologist. I typically don't pick on people for their physical appearance. Only assholes do that. But for you, I'll make an exception. Listen to my advice, unless you actually want to be single for the rest of your life.”

The three seemed mesmerized by my dog's Potty Mouth attack. At first, their heads only twitched in his direction, but now it was as if he had them enraptured. It didn't matter which of the three he targeted with a particular taunt. Each seemed as invested as if his words were aimed at something very

personal, something deep that brought them to the brink of a mental breakdown.

That's when I stabbed. I had seconds before the Vampire King would turn. I couldn't waste a single one.

Slash's taunting continued as I dispensed the three with quick jabs, making easy work of them.

I still had the Vampire King to take care of, and he'd turned by the time I'd vanquished five of his six minions.

"Little mortal. I will crush you to pulp and drink your blood," he said as he pulled his arms back and readied to charge.

"Where's the Crooked Cross? Maybe it does something."

"Go, Slash!" I sprinted away. I counted to three as I ran, my legs pumping as fast as they could. With a glance over my shoulder, the oversized vampire was in full pull-back. I waited another second until I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest.

"Brad!" Slash was by the pool, quaking.

I tumbled to the side, not even trying to sidestep the king's charge. Just as I hit the ground, he zipped past me.

I scrambled to my feet, hearing the hiss of air behind me. Blindly, I stabbed, and the gangly limbed vampire shrieked in pain and rage.

"Fuck youuuuuuuu!" Slash howled into the cavern.

For the second time, we'd taken out the Vampire King's crew. And now the white-hot fires burning behind his helm took on an entirely newly stoked fire. They blazed so bright they washed away the details of his ghastly bat helm.

"I will crush you," he said.

"Come and try, bitch."

I needed him in the corner. It was the only place in the cavern where I had a chance to land blows. It wasn't like I could run right up to him and duke it out. I couldn't chase him

down. I needed him restricted to a small area where I could slice and dice his Health to zero.

The Vampire King laughed. A cocky, almost narcissistic sound. Then he spread his hands out to his side and respawned his slave crew.

I'd hoped the game put a limit of a onetime good deal on his ability to do that. I'd been wrong. I dropped my head. "Sonofabitch."

My Health was still in good shape. Way over the three-quarters mark. But I was tiring. With it seemingly likely the Vampire King didn't have a limit on his respawns, I'd be here all day. Slash had already used Potty Mouth, and we'd successfully pulled off the mass slaughter of vampires. But how many more times would they fall for that tactic? How much longer could I do this before fatigue set in and I misstepped?

The six reappeared, wearing various grins of sadistic joy.

"Go," the Vampire King said simply enough, and his troops snapped away.

Slash looked around nervously, his ears folding in half each time he lifted them when he thought he heard something.

A cloud of gray exploded next to him and the count snatched at my dog. He missed when Slash tucked his tail and scrambled away. Five feet in front of him, another cloud burst into the air and the redhead hissed, lunging. He darted sideways.

The Vampire King had changed tactics, sending his troops after my little man.

"Here, Slash!"

My pooch flicked his head my way. The cheerleader wig's pigtail flopped in his face, and he moved to swat it away.

"Don't!" If he removed the costume, we might lose the buffs that came along with wearing it. We'd never tested that. Never needed to. Now was not the time to, either.

But Slash's vision was blocked, and he'd just been attacked by two vampires. It was nerve-wracking enough to be in a fight while your ally was being targeted. Slash was now finding out that the experience got much worse when he was the center of the vampire's attention.

In that moment, as the mantis vampire popped up behind him, Slash knocked the pigtail blocking his vision out of the way. The threads of the wig got caught in his nails and he pulled the wig off.

My fear was confirmed when the rest of his cheerleader outfit disappeared, revealing his studded leather jacket. The Fortitude buff melted away as the fifteen percent Health bonus got sucked from my bar. Worse still? In his panic, he didn't see the mantis vamp's appearance until it was too late. She snatched him in her long arm even as I shouted a warning.

Too far away to rescue him, the distance didn't stop me from trying.

I charged, raising my stake at the last second. The mantis vampire, looking like she'd drop my pup if I turned myself over to her cold hands, smiled. To my horror, her smile lingered until she blinked into nothingness with him in her grasp.

My breath caught. I spun. Where was he? I heard him howling, but I couldn't see him.

Darkness descended as I listened. The panic in his whimpering howls was too much.

"What did you do to him?" I said, snarling at the Vampire King as I tried to block out my wee man's yelps and howls.

I reached out and embraced the darkness, feeling like I did all those years ago in high school. The Vampire King was a bully, just like that squad of insecure twats who'd made my formative years an absolute hell. How many times they'd pushed me to breaking. How often I thought I wasn't worth anything because they'd convinced me I wasn't. How they'd pushed me deeper into the dark recesses of my mind. How I'd



stood on the railing of an Olympia bridge and almost jumped because I simply couldn't take the torture anymore.

I don't know why I stepped off the railing that day and back onto the cold, uncaring concrete sidewalk. I had every reason to jump. I hadn't talked to my parents about how much trouble I was in. There wasn't anyone from school there to talk me out of it. Even the commuters making their way to and from work, the grocery store, or picking Little Jimmy up from soccer practice hadn't bothered to stop and check on the scrawny kid, literally and figuratively, balancing on the edge. But I had stepped down that day. Rescued by Mr. Snodgrass later that fateful week, my life changed for the better.

But I never forgot what it felt like to be absolutely dead inside. I also never forgot that I'd tapped into those feelings when I set things right.

I screamed and charged the Vampire King.

He pulled his hands back, preparing for a charge of his own.

I didn't pull out. The second I saw him launch himself forward, I tucked my head into my chest, reached down for my ankles, and engaged my Rock n' Roll attack.

The vampire slaves wouldn't be able to touch me in this form, even the Hall of Famers. Now, we'd see if the king of the undead could.

We slammed into each other. The world exploded. Pain coursed through every inch of my body.

His strike pulled me out of the Rock n' Roll posture. All twenty-plus feet of the Vampire King had me wrapped in his arms. We zipped across the cavern; me riding his charge like a suckerfish taking a clinging to a whale.

We collided with the cavern wall. Chips of rock broke loose above, falling on us and clattering to the floor. The Vampire King took most of the rocks on the head, but his helmet protected him.

In my rage, I didn't think to check my Health bar. I didn't care. Even behind the king's victorious laughter, Slash's yelps

cut the air. Each was a spike in my brain. My boiling temper fired new energy into my muscles.

I slammed the stakes into the Vampire King's shoulders, neck, and chest. Over and over. His Health ticked down.

"Fuck you," I said, slamming harder with each strike.

The Vampire King started to turn, still holding me. I looked over my shoulder and realized he was preparing another charge. I glanced at my Health. The attack had taken off at least thirty percent. I couldn't take many more of these if I wanted to save my wee man.

I slammed the stakes into him, over and over, as fast as I could. One broke, and instead of pulling up my Inventory, I used the only one I had left.

This was getting me nowhere, I realized as he propelled us across the chamber. The only blessing of the charge attack was the fact that the sound of the rushing air and the king's victory roar drowned out Slash's cries and whimpers for a few seconds.

My back raked with pain when we hit the far wall. My Health dropped below fifty percent. The filling color changed from red to yellow.

The Vampire King turned again, readying another charge as he held me in a relentless grip. "You will die, mortal. We will feast on your flesh and pick our fangs with your bones."

"The fuck you will, you rotting carcass." I head-butted him.

The Vampire King's head rocked back. If indecipherable eyes of blazing white fire could show disbelief, his did when he looked at me again. So, I head-butted him again. If I was going down, I was going down in action hero style.

He opened his mouth wide, showing off fangs that had to be a foot long. When he brought his head down as if to sink them into me, I stabbed him in the eye with the stake.

The Vampire King howled. In rage or pain, I couldn't tell. He let go, both of his hands going to his eye, and I dropped to

the ground.

My Health bar was dangerously low. Slash was still whimpering and whining. When I heard him yelp my name, my heart broke. If I had superhuman strength, I'd Ultimate Warrior-press this undead bastard and break his back over my knee.

Instead, I pulled up my menu and scrambled to find the Crooked Cross.

Hissing air warned me that the slaves were about to reappear.

"Come on. Come on!" I flipped through the tabs and nearly wailed in heartbreak as the memories of Slash's criticisms about how poor I was at using my menus flashed through my mind.

I couldn't concentrate on the Vampire King or his reappearing minions with the menu on my mindscreen. The king was still raging in pain. The red-haired vampire tended to him. She wasn't a threat. Neither was the mantis vampire. She stood forty feet away, hiding behind a stalagmite, watching the battle unfold. More importantly, she had Slash in her arms. He squirmed and snapped at her. She had her hands full with him.

I sent a whispered message to my little guy. "Fight dirty, wee man."

The sight of my pup still alive and apparently healthy enough to be a pain in the ass to his captor lifted the pain of thinking he was gone. Though the pain evaporated, it was replaced by the darkness at what they'd done to put him in peril.

A nearby giggle warned me that Fangburt, equipped with his human head flails, was close. I flipped tabs as I dashed and darted into spaces that were open enough for me to see even with most of my vision blocked.

The ground shook. I was nearly thrown off-balance.

The Vampire King made a fist. "Kill him!"

Beyond the opaque menu boxes, the Vampire King had dropped his hands from his eyes. Whatever I'd done with the stake strike turned off the blazing light in that orb. He was down to one eye now.

I used that to my advantage, constantly moving to his blind side.

“Gladly.” Fangburt giggled and charged.

With the menu still blocking a clear view of all the threats in the dingy cavern, I'm sure I was missing a lot. My distraction with the overwhelming concerns of this fight prevented me from anticipating the problem of moving myself toward the edge of the blood pool. I'd accidentally cornered myself, and the insane clown was taking advantage of my mistake.

As he neared, I didn't have time to close my menu, so I reacted out of sheer instinct. As he swung one of the human heads at mine, I ducked. The head flew over me, Fangburt's arm lateral to the ground.

I snagged the hair of the decapitated head and yanked. Fangburt's crazed eyes went wide as I threw him off-balance. Whirling in a circle, I picked up momentum. I had to outweigh him by a few dozen pounds. He was having trouble keeping his feet on the ground as I whipped him around. When he swiped at nothing but air with his trailing foot, I knew I had him. Whipping faster, I released the hair when I saw his second foot come off the ground.

Fangburt flew out over the blood pool, still clutching to the hair of the two heads. He yelled until he hit the surface.

The splash was glorious. Blood sprayed upward. The demented fucker screamed. The sound was short. Cut off as soon as most of his body plunged below the pool's surface. A sizzling sound like raw bacon being dropped into a pan of hot grease came from the bubbling circle of blood. White tendrils of smoke drifted into the air.

Holy hell. I figured the vampires from the masquerade ball had stayed away from the Blood River because, well, it was

blood. They probably didn't jump in the river for the same reasons humans didn't drink water from the same sources they swam, pissed, and shit in. But now I remembered that when Slash and I survived the rapids and the tumble over the falls, the Vampire King let us have an entire conversation while we were in the pool. Maybe the vampires avoided the river and pool for another reason.

At seeing Fangburt's fall into the bloody water, the red-haired vampire snapped away into bat form, reappearing on my arm. She chirped and snapped at me in the crazed way of lovers pained with loss.

I dropped the stake on the ground and grabbed her behind her bat head. With my free hand, I broke her wing with a quick twist. Disabled, I tossed her bat form in the pool. Just as with Fangburt, the blood sizzled when she hit, and more white smoke drifted toward the cavern's ceiling.

Maybe I was onto something, but there were four vampires and the Vampire King himself left to deal with. Now, though, the slaves were hesitant to approach. When they popped out of the air, they no longer did so close.

I used that hesitancy to equip the Crooked Cross. I kept my palm closed around it.

"Kill the mascot!" the Vampire King said to the long-limbed vampire.

Slash bit her arm. She yelled out, pulling away. He snapped, snarled, and wiggled. But he wouldn't last long.

My Health might not tolerate another charge, but I was out of options. She was too far away. I couldn't get to her on my best day. Too much distance to snag and toss her into the blood pool. In fact, the remaining vamps were staying back. They'd wait me out, kill Slash, and then gang up on me in my despair unless I changed the dynamic.

I sprinted at the Vampire King, hitting the Rock n' Roll again.

He charged, colliding with me. This time, I'd made it farther. His strike was excruciating, but weaker than the first.

Because I'd blinded him in one eye, his strike wasn't true either. He'd hit me off-center.

As he propelled us toward the cavern wall, I braced myself. We hit and my Health dropped to less than a quarter remaining. The bar's color filling pulsed in warning. A white rectangle surrounded a black emptiness that represented the little I had left that blinked in and out of existence. I was dangerously close to dying.

But the Vampire King didn't have a good grip on me. As he scrambled for purchase, I pushed myself out of his arms, climbed over his shoulder, and wrapped my arm around his thick neck. I clawed for his throat. Did he have an Adam's apple? Did it matter if I could cut off his oxygen supply?

He bellowed and swatted at me, spinning both of us wildly.

I held my grip on his neck. Not only did I want to choke him out, but also because if I fell, I doubted I'd get another chance before the mantis vampire got the better of Slash. We spun and spun. He nearly tripped over an orange stalagmite, bouncing off it which threatened to jettison me.

The wild swings and jerks made it impossible to do anything but hold on. The cavern spun in his panicked attempts to knock me off. Each swirl became more unpredictable. At one point, my legs swung horizontally.

I cinched on his throat, using my other hand, the one holding the Crooked Cross, to pull my arm tighter. Even a Vampire King needed to breathe.

He stumbled. His Health slid farther to the left in bigger wedges than any of my stake attacks had accomplished. He swung at me with both arms. Below us, Count Kahleen and the pale male jumped at my legs. One of them was successful.

I slipped down the king's back. Tightening my grip was difficult with the added body weight dragging me down. I tried to kick off my rider, but they clung. The count glared up at me, baring his fangs. I sent a kick into his face. The satisfying crunch was temporary. The blow hadn't knocked him off.

With his weight, I couldn't get a good chokehold on the king. I stopped trying. Before I admitted defeat and let go, I was going to make his life uncomfortable.

The Vampire King was still swinging his arms. One caught me on the side of the head, making me see stars. My bar dropped again. A searing pain tore through my calf. The count had bitten me and was now sucking away like a baby on a nipple. My Health jumped to the left.

Fuck. I was out of time.

My hand holding the Crooked Cross shook as I reached around the Vampire King, stretching. My mouth was dry. Dizziness swarmed my brain. I was losing focus as the count drained me.

With a quivering hand, I raised the Crimson Cross in front of the Vampire King's face. On his blind side, he might not have seen it. Whatever the reason, his wild swings didn't knock it away. I shoved the blood gem into his empty eye socket.

The world exploded.

I was flung off the king's back, and free of my personal bloodsucker. I hit the rocky floor, crying out as the rough surface tenderized my back.

When I slid to a halt, I craned my neck. Even something that simple siphoned too much of my energy.

Where the Vampire King had stood was now only a pile of viscera.

"Brad! Braaaaaaad!" Slash howled.

I tried to roll over but winced when my breath caught. A broken rib, probably.

From the dim red light, my pup bounded across the cavern. He stopped by the pile of viscera, all that remained of the Vampire King, raised his leg, and pissed. This time, it wasn't one of his trademark dribbles. An almighty stream wetted the remains of the first-level boss. When he finished, he raced toward me and jumped on my chest, licking my face.

“I’m so happy to see you. I don’t even care how bad your doggy breath is,” I said, focusing on his face for a second as I scratched behind his ears. “You okay?”

“I’ve been better, but I kicked her ass,” he said, wearing a huge smile. “You should have seen it. She was like, ‘I’m gonna get you,’ and I was like ‘no you ain’t, bitch.’ When I was done finishing her off, I asked who her daddy was.”

“You really need a new action hero line,” I said, hugging him. When my pain cleared, slightly, I looked around, seeing nothing. “Get up. I’ve got to kill the others.”

He stayed atop me, pinning me. “Nope. They’re all gone.”

“What?”

“When you blew up the Vampire King, they did, too.” His face scrunched like he’d eaten something sour. “The floor is covered with their guts. It smells worse than what you do in the bathroom after all-you-can-eat-taco night at the bar.”

“They’re gone? All of them?”

“Yep.”

I let my head fall back to the filthy stone. Drawing a deep breath, I laughed. Slash laid on my chest, pressing himself flat and sniffing at my chin. I don’t know how long we, man and best friend, laid like that. Two seconds or two hours, it didn’t matter. I soaked in every bit of it, our own, personal glory of victory.



## HOME SWEET HOME



**BOOM!**

**YOU MARVELOUS FANGBANGER! WHAT A FIGHT.  
TOO BAD WE HAVEN'T CODED THE LIVE FEED  
YET, BECAUSE THAT WAS EPIC.**

**MANY ENTRANTS ARE SMART ENOUGH TO USE  
THE CROOKED CROSS THE FIRST CHANCE THEY  
GET. WELL, AT LEAST THE ONES THE VAMPIRE  
KING DOESN'T KILL IMMEDIATELY. BUT, NO, NOT  
YOU! YOU INSISTED ON THROWING DOWN WITH  
THE BIG UNDEAD BOSS LIKE A DRUNKEN SAILOR  
ON SHORE LEAVE. WE DON'T KNOW WHETHER  
WE SHOULD CELEBRATE YOUR STRATEGY OR  
NOT. ON ONE HAND, IT WAS BY FAR THE MOST  
ENTERTAINING BOSS FIGHT WE'VE SEEN SINCE  
OUR OFFICIAL RELEASE. ON THE OTHER, SOME  
OF US LOST SERIOUS MONEY BETTING THAT  
YOU'D FALL.**

**WELL PLAYED. WELL PLAYED.**

**~~KILL THE VAMPIRE KING~~**

**+5,000 XP**

**+3,000 GOLD**

**LEVEL UP!**

**LEVEL 6**

**+4 AGILITY**

**+6 CONSTITUTION**

**+4 DEFENSE**

**+3 REACTIONS**

**+2 SPEED**

**+1 STRENGTH**

**+8 SURVIVAL**

**+2 TOUGHNESS**

**-1 WISDOM**

**YOU DIDN'T THINK WE'D REWARD YOU FOR  
WHAT WAS ONE OF THE DUMBEST WAYS TO TAKE  
ON THE VAMPIRE KING, DID YOU?**

**NEW ITEM**

**LEATHER TUNIC**

**H**oly shit. Eight points to my Survival skill?  
Fortune smiled and nodded, reading my mind.

“My turn! My tuuuuuuuuuurn!” Slash howled.

The game notifications didn't stop for me. I expected it to be extensive when we beat a level boss. A finer point of gaming Slash didn't quite understand yet.

**NEW SPELL!**

**NIGHT FURY**

**HOLY ROLLER!**

**FOR HAVING THE BALLS TO USE THE ATTACK  
AGAINST THE VAMPIRE KING, ONE THAT SHOULD  
HAVE SURELY KILLED YOU, AND SURVIVING IT,  
YOU'VE EARNED AN EPIC LOOT DROP.**

A single Inventory box popped up on my mindscreen. I couldn't tell what it was.

## **CLICK TO OPEN.**

I focused on **Click** and the Inventory box peeled back like a sticker.

**+10,000 GOLD**

## **RING OF THE IRON STOMACH**

“Holy shit, we’re rich!” Slash whipped around in a circle. “Hey, put the ring on. What’s it do?”

“Hang on, wee man,” I said, smiling and looking around the hillside. I breathed in the air, filling my lungs until I coughed.

“Hurrerrrrrry up! I want my prizes.” He swatted at me with a small paw.

I breathed again, taking the air in deeply, letting its freshness fill me.

“Serves you right for being stubborn,” he said. “Just like in the fight. Just like with your menus.”

I pointed a finger with a snap. “True. I’ll give you the menus. I need to get better at that. But what about the fight? When was I stubborn?”

His mouth fell open. “Seriously?”

I shrugged.

“I think Little Sir is talking about your repetitive attacks with the stakes,” Fortune said, covering her smile with a dainty hand.

“Yeah, that didn’t work like I thought it would.” I checked out my new, vastly improved tunic, which provided a +2 to Defense, equipping it. “That’s better.”

“Bout time you put some fucking clothes on,” Slash said.

I inspected my new attack and epic loot. “Hmmm.”

“What is it? Are you dissatisfied?” Fortune asked, sounding worried.

I didn’t want to go into why I didn’t like the spell called Night Fury and would probably never use it. If I used the spell,

I'd get ridiculous boosts to my Fortitude, Constitution, Toughness, Speed, and Strength. On the surface, that was great. The problem? The Cooldown was long. An entire day. During that time, my Health's recharge slowed by forty percent. *Forty*. Who'd fall for that?

Instead, I focused my comments on the epic item. "I'm digging this ring."

"What's it do?" Slash asked.

"Makes me immune to poison."

Slash sat and blinked. "Put it on me." He held up a paw.

Fortune giggled. "The ring won't fit you."

"Why not?"

Her joy slipped. "Because it is for entrants only."

"That's bullshit." He tipped his head back, howling at the open, clear sky that was free of vampire bats and the smell of iron. "I want my prizes." He stopped, looked side to side, and threw his head back again. "Nooooooooow."

**LEVEL UP!**

**LEVEL 7**

**+6 AGILITY**

**+4 INITIATIVE**

**+3 REACTIONS**

**+5 SPEED**

**+5 SURVIVAL**

**+2 TAUNT**

**+3 WISDOM**

"What's your Wisdom, Brad?" he said when the notifications stopped.

"I don't know. I'd have to switch menus."

"Never mind." He paused, and I realized too late that he was looking at my stats. He laid down and rolled on his side.

“I’m smarter than you. Yours is only a two.”

“Wisdom isn’t about how smart you are. What you need—”

“Oh,” he said, dragging the word out. “I got a new skill. I’m going to talk shit as good as those guys in the rap battles you let me watch when you were trying to make puppies with Tess.”

“I didn’t—God, what didn’t you watch?”

“Don’t blame me because you’re the type of furless parent who uses the electronic nanny technique.”

“The what?”

“You let the TV babysit instead of spending time with me.”

I groaned. “I’m canceling all my streaming subscriptions when we get home.”

“Touch it and I’ll pee on your pillow every day you go to work.” The way he squinted and how his lip got caught on his tooth, giving him a snaggletooth appearance, I think he was serious.

“What else did I geeeeeeeeeeet?” he asked the sky with exaggerated drama.

**BOOM!**

**GARLIC BREATH BADASS.**

**THE PROBLEM WITH PEOPLE IS THAT THEY  
DON’T UNDERSTAND THAT DOGS’ MOUTHS  
AREN’T CLEANER THAN THEIR OWN AND  
POOCHES NEED DENTAL CARE AS WELL. NOR DO  
PEOPLE APPRECIATE DOG BREATH.**

**THAT’S BECAUSE MOST HUMANS THINK THEY  
KNOW BETTER THAN DOGS. BUT THEY REALLY  
DON’T, DO THEY? YOUR LIVES BURN OUT  
QUICKLY, BUT BRIGHTLY.**

**YOU PROVED HOW BRIGHT YOU WERE IN TRYING  
TO GUIDE YOUR HUMAN PET. CONGRATS.**

## **EPIC DOGGIE LOOT!**

### **HAIR OF THE DOG**

“Ohhhhh,” Slash said and then howled into the air.

Damn, it felt good seeing the clear sky, not having to worry about bats swooping down to attack or even report our activities to anyone who could threaten us. I was going to let the wee man celebrate how he wanted.

Slash came down with a case of the zoomies, racing through the grass until he stopped, pounced at a dandelion, spreading himself out and lowering his head to the ground. He snapped at it, constantly missing.

Fortune looked at me. “That is an important item.”

“What’s it do?”

Her nose crinkled. “A disgusting nectar. But something you’ll want him to protect and keep safe. He can use it on himself or another. The potion will fully revitalize whoever drinks it, even if their Health has been exhausted.”

“Even if they’re killed?”

“Only the one who possesses it.”

I held up my hand, excited. “Wait. So if Slash has this in his Inventory and he’s killed in a fight, he can still access it and drink it and come back?”

“Yes.”

Sometimes I truly appreciated Fortune’s succinctness.

“Fucking ‘A’,” I yelled, scaring my guide as I jerked my arm up, palm open, to high-five with her. When she flinched, I apologized profusely and explained what a high-five was.

She beamed when we did it, taking three attempts to hear the smack of our hands, mine real and her digital, somehow meeting in the air without touching. I figured three attempts wasn’t bad, all things considered.

As Slash terrorized other innocent dandelions, I looked back at the barren landscape that used to be scarred by the

presence of the Crimson City. “So, it’s just gone?”

“Yes. Once you completed the objective the game had no more use for it in your perception.”

I thought about Kira and panicked. “But what about the other players? Does that affect them?”

She shook her head. “Each entrant’s experience is unique during these quests. Though you can interact with another entrant out of mutual interest and benefit, there will be times when the game is able to...” Her mouth stretched like she was unsure. “‘Splice,’ is what I guess you would call it. The game splices and runs concurrently. That is how you were able to meet all those entrants in the Free Zone, yet you never left the quest.”

“They’ll all be like that?”

“As far as I know, yes. But keep in mind that my knowledge of Darkworld is restricted to the levels that were active during the testing phases.” She scowled. “And what my training provided.”

I thought there was more to her comment than what lay on the surface. I was in too much of a good mood to explore it now. I’d given the game far more than it deserved. I’d almost lost my dog to it. I needed a minute to recharge and decompress before I allowed it inside my head again. That wouldn’t happen until we were home.

“What is that for?” Fortune asked.

“What?” I said, looking down at my hands to make sure I wasn’t clenching them.

She wiggled a finger at my face. At least, that’s what I think she was aiming for. “You seemed sad for a moment. I hope I did not do anything.”

“Not at all, Fortune. You’ve been absolutely marvelous throughout this. We couldn’t have done it without you.” I felt she might need to hear the affirmation. I wasn’t saying it to play up to her. I truly wanted her to know how I felt. Still, I added, “Seriously.”

She dropped her head, but I saw her blush before she did. “Thank you for saying that, Brad.”

“Thank you. For everything. For using my name.”

Something dark passed over her face.

“What’s that about? Please tell me you’re not still struggling to not call me ‘sir?’”

“No. Not at all,” she said, her gaze still aimed down. “I am... overjoyed for you and Little Sir.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

Her answer took longer than it should have. “I fear I am not supposed to be.”

“What?” Then it dawned on me. The game designers, her Electors, were still at play here. “They don’t want you to be happy, do they?”

“For entrants?” she asked, looking up at me with her head bent like shame weighed it down. “No. I’m supposed to guide you. Not feel anything. No joy at your victories. No pain at your losses.”

“These fuckers want you to be numb?”

“To do otherwise is to step out of my role.”

“To do less is to not be human.” Within a heartbeat of the comment, I knew I’d screwed up. Was the game trying to draw me back into turmoil moments after overcoming its first level? Fuck them. “You’re entitled to your feelings, Fortune.”

She bobbed her head but did not look up. “I wish I believed that.”

“It’s the truth,” I said softly, but with enough firmness that she knew I meant it.

“Thank you,” she said after a long moment. “The game took many already. This level was harder than it was throughout any of the tests.”

“Players? Are you saying entrants have died fighting the Vampire King?”



Her head bobbed, her loose ringlets bouncing. “Or because they refused to fight him.”

“They... They killed people for not fighting?”

Still looking sheepish, she said, “They will do the same to you and Little Sir if you don’t work toward completing each objective. They... They have before. I anticipate they will again.”

Oh, would they? Fortune had warned us that the game’s AI would adjust to nudge players toward engaging. We were going to be forced to play. Forced to play at knife point if need be, apparently. The designers wrote code that would put people in the ground because they weren’t ready to face the Vampire King?

“Do you know how many are gone?” I couldn’t bring myself to saying they were dead.

“Over five hundred, from what I can tell. But the log hides the actual numbers. The Electors are masking the data for some reason.”

I had a feeling I knew why they’d keep that kind of information limited to those with a need to know. After all, they had angel investors to protect or keep ignorant. Either way, it didn’t matter. Only the inner circles would have insight into how devastating Darkworld was.

Watching Slash run back and forth across the field, snapping at dandelions and jumping to snatch mosquitos was such a contradiction to the reality of this world. On the surface, it was a wonderful place to be. Not perfect, but comfortable. A home many would envy. Yet, the surface only needed a slight scratch, the foundation removed, to reveal the scars below.

Slash had seen the ugliness within, but watching him play now, he hadn’t lost the sense of who he was. I envied him and celebrated him at the same time.

“If you do not mind, I would like to leave,” Fortune said. “I am troubled.”

Fuck. My comment had landed a sucker punch I hadn't meant to throw. "Of course. We're going to head home soon."

I couldn't believe I was now calling our camp 'home.'

Her smile flickered. "Before I go, I need to make sure you understand the new position you find yourself in."

I didn't like the sound of this. "Okay."

"When you completed the quest to kill the Vampire King, your butcher received a notification."

That's right. She'd warned us of this before. "So BigDk already knows I made it out alive?"

If hearing me refer to his gamer name surprised her, Fortune didn't show it. "Yes, they have been given notice of your achievement. But that is not the worst of it."

"What is?" I asked with a sigh.

"As it turns out, the Electors do not stop with merely informing the butchers of your success, they also give a clue about the entrant. I fear this will happen each time you complete a major objective. By killing the Vampire King and completing the first level, your butcher received another clue about you."

"What kind?"

She spread her hands. "I do not know that, I fear."

"You'd said he'd be told I completed the objective... Why didn't you tell me all this other stuff before?" I asked softly, feeling deflated, but hiding it from my happy pup.

"I did not know until you completed the objective. I promise."

"I believe you."

Her shoulders fell. "I am so very tired of letting you down, Brad."

Dammit. I wanted to grip her by the shoulders and shake this programmed mindset out of her. Just in a loving way. "No,

Fortune, you didn't. Please don't think that. Any hard feelings I hold are reserved for the fuckers who made this game."

"They also made me," she said so softly I almost missed it. "I have to go. Congratulations on your well-deserve title... Brad." She smiled. It looked sad. "I am very happy for you."

And with that, my guide was gone.

Slash, on his back and rolling in something I didn't want to know about, popped up. His ears stood straight for two entire seconds before flopping in half. "Stop making her sad, Brad. We're supposed to be celebrating. Oh, yay!" His head snapped toward where Crimson City used to stand. Suddenly, he was on all fours. "Kira! Hi! We're over here!"

I couldn't hide the goofy grin spreading across my mouth when I saw our fierce neighbor.

She made her way to us under her own power until she was within arm's reach. Her legs gave out. I caught her and helped her to sit. I pulled a waterskin and healing wraps from my Inventory. She waved away the wraps.

"Thanks. I've got my own. Whew," she said with a breathy laugh. Her eyes flicked to the space in the sky just above my head and she chuckled. "That was a hell of a fight, wasn't it?"

"Not the half of it," I said, sitting across from her. "Kudos on getting through it."

"Kudos?" she said before laughing exhaustively. "God, you really suck with women."

"You don't know the half of it," Slash said, jumping into her lap.

Kira wrapped her arms around him. They both looked at me and the space just above my head, then looked at each other. Kira put a hand to her mouth. Slash covered his with a paw.

"Slash, give her a minute."

She took a long drink and then waved my comment away with it. "No. He's fine. It feels good to cuddle with something after..." She flicked her hands toward the empty plains where

Crimson City once stood. “After that shit. Fucked up, wasn’t it?”

Nothing hotter than a woman who fully embraced F-bombs, let me tell you.

“Tell us how you did it,” Slash asked, bouncing around in her lap.

Kira ran through her journey while she alternated between petting my wee man, drinking from the water skin, and looking skyward above and behind me. All in all, she’d done far more running, dodging, and hiding than us. She picked up on the Living Inferno immediately but struggled with the masquerade, claiming she snagged the Crooked Cross right after meeting Lady Anebelle. The fight out was hairy, and she barely got away. She must have been one of the players the game notifications were referring to when it mentioned players using the Crooked Cross at the first opportunity against the Vampire King.

“So the masquerade was the worst part, by far,” she said, finishing up.

“Not for us,” Slash jumped in. “The Vampire King fight took fooooooover. Brad was so stubborn. Can you believe he almost didn’t use the Crooked Cross? I told him to, but he never listens. His ex-girlfriend used to tell him to stop humping his hand so often so they could try to make puppies, but he didn’t listen then either. One time she—”

“Anyway,” I said. “Yes, the game is absolutely screwed up. But you made it. We made it. Let’s celebrate that.”

Kira groaned.

“What?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those ‘tomorrow is never guaranteed’ guys?”

“Maybe?” I said with a laugh.

She groaned again, but I didn’t miss the way her dark eyes sparkled as they flicked between the sky above me and my

face. Not with analysis this time, but with something bordering on, dare I say, interest?

As I looked above me to see what she was constantly looking at, Slash said, “He is. He used to say it to Tess all the time. Said he learned it in the military. Like he was ever in the real military. He was Air Force, for fuck’s sake. They don’t call it the ‘Chair Force’ for nothing. I mean, come on. They call their workouts ‘Physical Training.’ What military has to be *trained* on how to be physical? You don’t hear the Army or Marines saying shit like that.”

“How do you know all this?” Kira asked, barely able to get the question out because she was chuckling so much.

“YouTube,” Slash and I said simultaneously.

“If we’re going to be neighbors, you’re going to have to work on that,” she said, her gaze holding mine for longer than was normal. Not that I was complaining, trust me. Her dark eyes were absolutely gorgeous.

“I promise.” I looked at my pooch, who was shaking. This time, I think, with excitement.

“Good,” she said, a slow smile spreading, “because living with ‘Brad the Impaler’ will be bad enough. I don’t need him to be a philosophical ‘Brad the Impaler’ on top of that. No one does.”

“Right ooooooooooon,” Slash howled and licked her cheek.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

They looked at me flatly before returning to their humored state.

“Shit.” I had a dawning realization and snapped open my menu, going straight to the tab for my avatar. There, above the modestly accurate representation of me, was my gamer name. My new name.

Brad the Impaler.

The small pencil icon used to edit profile features was grayed out. “I can’t even change my name back.”

Kira snorted. “Sure.”

“Seriously.” I tried to click on the editing feature. Nothing happened.

“Bet he’s going to use that name when you move in with us, Kira,” Slash said, leaning against her, but staring at me. His chest puffed out slightly and when he spoke, his voice was deeper and oafish. “Look at me, little woman. Me Brad the Impaler. Want to see my stake? Might be little, but goes long time.”

He fell over in her lap, his thin legs jerking with laughter. Her light laugh accompanied his as she scratched his belly.

When he finished being ridiculous, he asked, “Does this mean you’ll move closer? Hey, we could move to your camp. You have that awesome river. Brad hasn’t even built me a house yet.”

“Slow down, buddy,” I warned.

“Yeah, let’s think about that. I’m not sure if my camp is ready to have a bunch of boy funk around it. No river can clean that away,” she said, smiling and bringing her face closer to his. Slash reached up and sniffed her nose before his tiny pink tongue darted out and licked it. Kira didn’t pull away.

A cool woman never pulls away from dog kisses.



“This is where we part then,” Kira said, still lingering by the road.

We were back at the spot where we’d rounded up before setting off for the boss fight. Far removed from the Crimson City, Vampire King, Blood Rivers, or any of that madness, I felt calm. Back in the quiet country of Darkworld. Back to where I could pretend I was living a quaint and reclusive life, and not something out of a nightmare. Back home, dare I say.

Home. What was home if not the place where you could be most vulnerable? Where you felt safe? Where you could be you, in whatever form that took?

As crazy as it was, we were close to ours now. Once we said our temporary farewells to Kira, we'd be back to the one place where I belonged. The one place that felt right.

“So, we'll check in on our camps,” Kira said, business-like once again, but still as stunning. Grit and grime from the boss fight and travel hadn't tainted her one bit. “Sleep. Eat. And then rendezvous here tomorrow at high sun?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

Slash leaned against her leg. “When we live together, will that make you Brad's girlfriend? Because, if it does, I'm going to talk to him so he doesn't fuck it up like he usually does.”

Kira and I looked at each other and burst out in laughter.

“We'll see,” was all she said.

I coughed in surprise. I pointed at my throat. “Swallowed wrong,” I said, hoping it sounded genuine.

Slash raised a paw. “But if you two try to make puppies, do it somewhere away from our camp. I don't want to listen. At least not until I find a bitch of my own.”

I slapped my forehead and groaned.

“Your training?” Kira asked, wiggling her finger above Slash's head.

“I had nothing to do with that.”

“Uh huh.” Kira kissed him on the head and set him down. Her shoulders rose and fell quickly, and she stepped to me, wrapping me in her arms.

We held each other for longer than people who were simple friends did. Facing death had a way of establishing bonds exponentially faster than normal.

When she backed away, her eyes locked on my chest. “Make sure you're here tomorrow.”

It was so hard to swallow. “We will be.”



“The stars are beautiful, aren’t they?” Slash asked, snapping off another chunk of his beefy treat.

“They are,” I agreed. I looked over at my fierce Chihuahua, who’d not only faced, but had also survived things that his entire breed hadn’t collectively dealt with. I reached over and rubbed his belly.

“Don’t make this awkward, Brad,” he said and rolled to his side to face me. “Hey, promise me you’ll seriously be less stubborn from now on? Okay?”

I petted him. His soft fur comforted me, somehow wiping away all the world’s worries for this moment in time. “You got it, wee man.”

He sounded drowsy when he said, “Promise me we’ll look for Pussy?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

His arms holding the beefy treat slumped to his side. “I’ll finish this off if you want to hump your hand,” he said, gnawing away.

“What makes you think I want to do that?”

“Because human men do it daily.”

“Uh, dogs hump everything. All. The. Time.”

He sneered at me. “You would too if you were as hung as me. Anyway, I guess I could sleep. I’m not hungry anyway, and I don’t want to listen to you grunt. It’s gross.” He dropped his beefy treat and licked my hand. “Good night.”



He turned away, then I focused on the black sky dotted with spots of twinkling white.

I stroked his thin, soft fur, watching the swell of his chest rise and fall. A pup at peace. Crickets chirped in the darkness. The wind blew through our crop. Not a single click of a vampire bat polluted the black veneer above.

The blanket of sleep lowered.

I smiled.

Darkworld wasn't so bad after all.

**BOOM!**

**WELCOME TO LEVEL 2!**

**GAME ON, BITCH!**

I ignored the notification, rolling over and cuddling up to my seven-pound terror, wrapping my arm around him. Though he couldn't be fully asleep yet, he didn't protest. The designers of Darkworld might want to torment me into never feeling free of the game, but they could wait.

Tomorrow, I'd fight again. Tonight was about me and my wee man, and fuck them all.



The story continues with [Book 2 – Into the Pit!](#)

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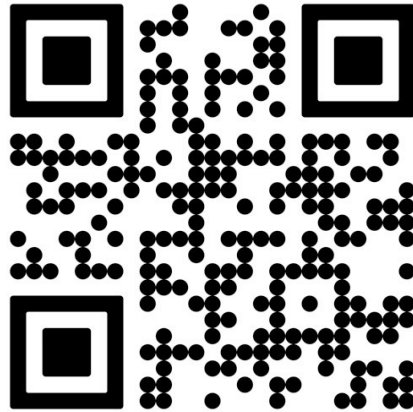
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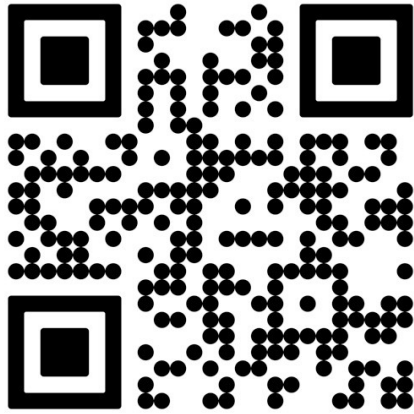
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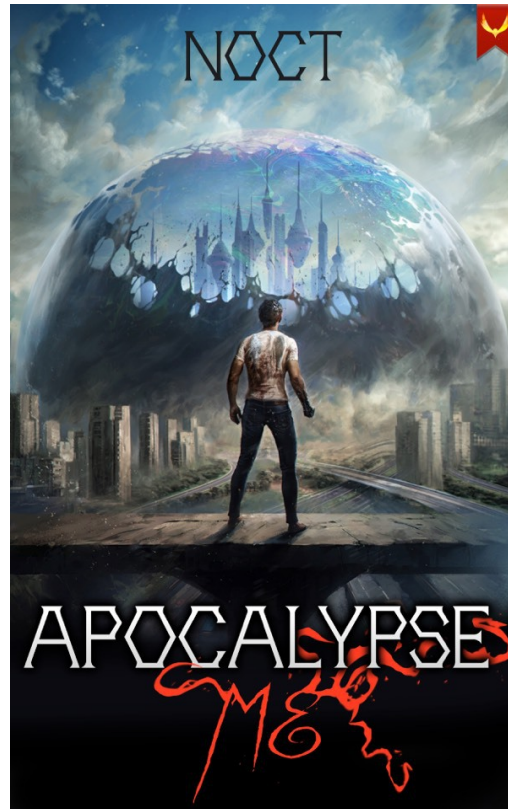
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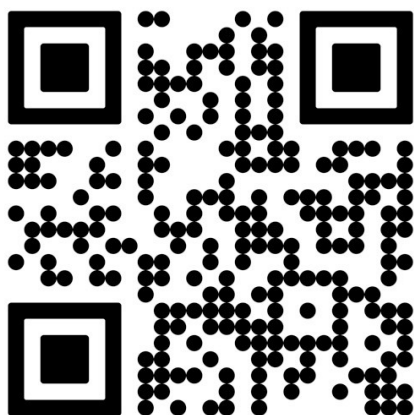
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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Oh, how to explain Brad and Slash.

In the fall of 2022, I sat down with Matt Dinniman of *Dungeon Crawler Carl* fame. I bought him a beer and picked his brain about the LitRPG genre. From the outside, I found it to be compelling. The thought of writing my own LitRPG series had been pinging around in my head, but I wasn't sure I wanted to jump in. After all, as my readers will know, I already had four open series.

So I did what all responsible adults do. I asked, *Why not add a fifth?*

Honestly, I was sold on jumping into the genre after that lunch with Matt. The title had popped into my head in the summer of 2022 when I was feeling particularly snarky and funny on a gorgeous summer day. We'd adopted the real-life Slash a few months earlier, and I was already head over heels about my wee man (yes, I actually refer to him by that), and the brainstorming session that made me question putting him in the book lasted for about five-tenths of a second. He's got quite a personality in real-life, and I figured once he obtained the power to speak, it'd only be more prominent. I hope you see that now, enjoyed it, and are looking forward to more of it from the wee man.

I can't thank Matt enough for his input and openly sharing his thoughts, and encouragement. Were it not for the time he gave me that fateful day (and since), I might never have tried writing what ended up being my favorite (and longest published) novel of my entire life. Who knows what will come of my adventures in Darkworld, but I'm in love with a new genre, and in many ways, I have Matt and his kindness to thank for it.



My poor, suffering wife. Every time I came up with another ridiculous interaction between Brad and Slash, she got to hear it. Every juvenile comment, or poor-taste observation/statement Slash decided to share, she was the test audience. Things you haven't seen yet in the series that I find ridiculously funny, she already knows. And when I giggle myself hoarse over a scene where Brad skips all his AI guide's advice and game history, she was there, laughing (sort of) along with me. Every author should be so lucky.

My daughters, Nikki and Alex. Both accomplished some amazing things in their lives during the writing of this book. I'm pretty sure my #parentflex at their accomplishments over the long, cold winter helped keep the writing light and always with a pinch of humor. Being a parent is the toughest job in the world, but damn, when you see the fruits of your labor and realize you didn't actually screw up other humans' lives, it's a pretty kickass feeling.

Gary Henderson was invaluable throughout the early stages of this book. His eyeballs were on the chapters long before anyone else, giving me his thoughts and encouragement as he walked the journey with Brad and Slash. Having that fresh perspective so early in the process was as invaluable as it was kind.

My Patrons, who support me on Patreon month-in and month-out, have helped me do things I never thought possible. You'll never find a better group of caring, giving people.

And finally, as always, I send my gratitude to every single person who picks up my books (bonus points to those who tell others about them). Because of you, I carry on.

Keep being epic!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Sating is an author, podcaster, and self-professed coolest dad on the planet, hailing from the Pacific Northwest of the United States. At the end of his military career, he decided to reconnect with his first love (that wouldn't get him in trouble with his wife) and once again picked up the pen. Years on, he has published tons o' novels and is living the dream... Though he still has occasional nightmares that he's back in the military and deploying to some obscure location around the world.

When he's not working on stories, you can find him talking to himself in his backyard working on failed landscaping projects or hiking around the gorgeous Olympic Peninsula. He is married to the patient and wonderful, Madeline, and has two daughters—thus the reason for his follicle challenges.

Find out more about his other books and free podcasts from his website: [paulsating.com](http://paulsating.com).