

**CASSIUS
& TANG**

LITRPG



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A LITRPG ADVENTURE SERIES

MIMIC & ME

BOOK 1

Contents

[CHAPTER 1: ENTRANCE](#)

[CHAPTER 2: TRAPPED](#)

[CHAPTER 3: MIMICRY](#)

[CHAPTER 4: SYMBIOSIS](#)

[CHAPTER 5: TACTICAL RETREAT](#)

[CHAPTER 6: PLANNING AHEAD](#)

[CHAPTER 7: ONE CAKE! NO, TWO CAKES!](#)

[CHAPTER 8: MELINA](#)

[CHAPTER 9: RETURN TO ESLANT](#)

[CHAPTER 10: CAKE DIVERSION](#)

[CHAPTER 11: CAUGHT](#)

[CHAPTER 12: UNEXPECTED FAVOR](#)

[CHAPTER 13: NEW PREPARATIONS](#)

[CHAPTER 14: THE ADVENTURER'S GUILD](#)

[CHAPTER 15: GEARING UP](#)

[CHAPTER 16: UNEXPECTED HELP](#)

[CHAPTER 17: BATTLE IN THE FOREST](#)

[CHAPTER 18: THEY BUILD HUTS?](#)

[CHAPTER 19: UNDER THE STARS](#)

[CHAPTER 20: SALES CONTRACT](#)

[CHAPTER 21: SECOND STAGE REBIRTH](#)

[CHAPTER 22: BREWING STORM](#)

[CHAPTER 23: THE DEVIL YOU KNOW](#)

[CHAPTER 24: PAGODA DUNGEON](#)

[CHAPTER 25: ESLANT INVASION, PART 1](#)

[CHAPTER 26: ESLANT INVASION, PART 2](#)

[CHAPTER 27: ESLANT INVASION, PART 3](#)

[CHAPTER 28: AFTERMATH](#)

[CHAPTER 29: I'LL TAKE THE ROCKING CHAIR](#)

[CHAPTER 30: HE CRIED LIKE A LITTLE BITCH](#)

[CHAPTER 31: SO, WHERE IS HE?](#)

[CHAPTER 32: FISH, ANYONE?](#)

[THE LITRPG COMMUNITY](#)

[MORE LITRPG COMMUNITIES](#)



MIMIC & ME

CASSIUS LANGE
RYAN TANG

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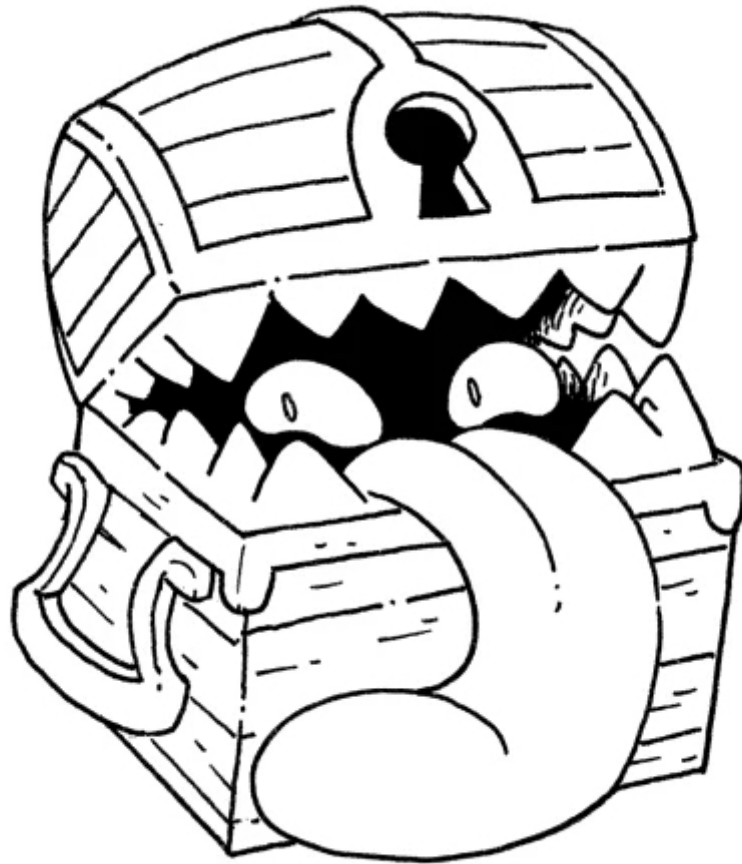
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CHAPTER 1: ENTRANCE

“Scout...” Aldon called, gesturing irritably at the dungeon entrance in front of us.

“It’s Damon,” I replied, keeping my voice polite.

Thus far, Aldon had only ever called me by my class, but that was typical. Most of my noble clients viewed me just as a tool, and Aldon Sherazad was no different. Aldon took care to protect his reputation inside the city, but most of the scouts he’d hired told me he was a boor and a brute, just like his father.

“Right, right. Damon then,” the man said, bobbing his head dismissively. “Are you sure this is the right place? I was hoping for something that looks a bit more formidable.”

The dungeon entrance was just a simple cave, surrounded by dull boulders, grass, and had even some trees growing against it.

Since there was no big sign hanging outside with the word ‘dungeon’ written in bold letters, it was the scout’s task to find the path and secure it. This particular dungeon could be mistaken for an ordinary animal lair if one wasn’t experienced enough with reading the flows of essence.

To an experienced scout like me, the portal magic screaming through the entrance was obvious.

To someone like Aldon, not so much.

The man stared pointedly at me, a passive-aggressive gleam in his eye, but I evenly met his gaze.

“Yes, this is the dungeon,” I replied. “And trust me, it took a lot of work to make sure that the trip wasn’t formidable.”

My short black hair was slick with sweat, and my studded leather armor was drenched. I was so tired that even the scar across my forehead was pulsating.

I’d spent the last day making sure the entire area was safe, so I wasn’t going to let some jumped-up noble talk down on me or my work.

Aldon grumbled. “Well. There wasn’t much adventure. I was hoping to impress my party.”

I laughed to myself.

Not much adventure, huh? That was what I got for working too damn hard.

My scout class allowed me to find ruins, dungeons, and other magical aberrations that popped up in the wild much quicker than normal people could.

Not only that, I knew the land south of Eslant, my hometown, like the back of my hand. The north was a different matter, but that didn’t matter at the moment.

By the blighted hell, I probably knew the southern lands better than the back of my hand, since I was always wearing gloves. I could find my way through the forests and hills blindfolded.

On top of all that, I had the uncanny ability to sniff out traps and danger from a mile away. I wasn't some sort of tracking hound, with a heightened sense of smell, mind you. It was more that after years of experience, I just knew what to look for.

"I'm sorry you don't like the look of the place, but this is the Skeleton Dungeon you paid me to find," I said. "It only appeared a few days ago, so you'll be one of the first people to go inside. And it may not look like it, but finding your way through the forest without me leading you would have been difficult, if not impossible."

"It's just... Well, I mean this place is just..." Aldon stammered, again fighting to put his thoughts into words.

I was surprised he hadn't gone cross-eyed yet trying to get his thoughts out of his head. From our few conversations, I could tell that Aldon fancied himself as cold and calculating—as most noble heirs did—but brains definitely weren't his strong suit.

I just stayed silent, letting him bleat his thoughts out.

"This is just some cave! How can a dungeon just be some freaky cave? I thought it might be a bone tower...or a..." he paused for a long moment. "Or something else! Up north, the dungeons are real dungeons and not...this," he finished lamely.

Since he was a noble, I expected a more refined attitude from him. Maybe even more formal speech.

I must have pissed off some deity to get stuck with Aldon Lead Tongue.

"Well...I guess we might as well get going," Aldon muttered. "Give me a second to put on my armor and call the rest of my party."

White light flashed across his entire body as he started pulling gear out of his spatial storage bracelet. The bracelet was a powerful magical item that absorbed and compressed items into an infinitesimal space, allowing for easy transfer of goods and weapons. Nobody, not even the best scientists on the continent, knew how they worked, but most suspected it was similar to the dungeons' portal magic.

The orbs of gleaming magical light expanded, transforming into Aldon's armored pieces. They stuck onto his body with echoing clanks, covering up his sweaty traveler's tunic.

The princeling's armor was too fine and heavy for him to travel through the forest in it, but now it was time for battle.

Light shimmered off Aldon's breastplate.

I looked away, annoyed by his entire get-up.

Aldon was the epitome of tankiness, or rather, tackiness. The man wore high-quality silver plate armor polished to a near-mirror finish. A green kite shield hung from his left forearm, and a long black sword was sheathed on his right hip.

"You go in ahead of us," Aldon grunted, slowly staggering forward.

His armor would protect him from most kinds of low-to-mid-tier physical damage but at the heavy expense of mobility. I'd guided a golem summoner a few months back, and Sir Tanksalot was barely any faster than the golem.

I disliked how slow and impractical the gear was, but if I was being totally honest, part of it was just simple human jealousy. I never would be able to afford top-tier gear like that, slow or not.

Aldon's high-end armor, his beautiful black sword, and his storage ring...

That was the kind of thing only real money could buy, and I didn't have real money. That was why I took any job I could find, even with unsavory noble clients like this. My scout class wasn't any good for combat, and even worse, the

nobles in town made sure to keep us from leveling or hiring a scout would be costlier. We were expendable as the most common class, which didn't help the situation in the least.

But once I had actual gear, I could truly make my way into the world.

Aldon stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly.

We waited a moment, and then four more figures pushed their way through the forest.

Aldon pointed at each of them in turn. "Alright, scout. Listen carefully. This is Falin, Maz, Jesabel, and Melina. Remember carefully. You'll need to warn us properly in the dungeon."

Great.

So my name didn't matter, but theirs did.

Awesome, asshole.

The first adventurer, Falin, wore leather armor from head to toe. He had a crooked nose and flinty black eyes that darted suspiciously from under his straggly black hair.

His clothes were as fine as Aldon's, but his sure steps told me he actually knew what the hell he was doing.

Falin must have led the rest of the party through the forest. Things would have been much easier for him since I'd removed the traps ahead of time, but that still showed he was a skilled woodsman.

A large bow was slung over Falin's shoulder, along with a nicely made quiver. His arrows were fletched with large high-quality goose feathers.

The second party member, Maz, was tall and burly.

He had coarse sideburns and a thick mustache but was as bald as a baby. The sheen of his bald head could have reflected the sun right back at me.

He carried a heavy double-bladed axe as tall as he was and wore lightweight leather armor that protected him without

hindering his movements.

Aldon's gear was that of a classical tank—heavy armor, a big sword, and a tough shield. Maz's gear was similarly standard for a damage dealer. He was meant to jump in the fray and start tearing things up right away. The lack of mish-mashed pieces, which was typical among commoner adventurers like me, again reminded me that I was dealing with a well-equipped noble party. Next to the leather-clad ranger boy and the tough axe murderer stood a tall and slender woman in pristine robes.

Aldon had called her Jesabel. She clutched a large magical staff in her hand, holding it so tightly that her knuckles were stark white.

Jesabel's long platinum-white hair was tied in a long braid that trailed past her waist.

She was tittering nervously, and her blue eyes darted anxiously from side to side, looking first at the cavern entrance, then back at her staff.

I couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever seen combat before.

The last party member, Melina, wore an emerald green tunic that drooped below her waist and black form-fitting leggings.

Although she was as tall as Jesabel, she slouched sadly, with her eyes pointed straight at her brown leather boots.

A dark brown hooded cape hung over her shoulders, covering her head and only revealing part of her pale face.

Melina glanced upwards for a moment and our eyes met.

A surprised shudder passed through my body, and I took a step back. Her eyes were shimmering green, shifting like forest leaves in the wind.

Human eyes didn't look like that.

Melina jolted, then promptly looked away, staring at her boots again.

I frowned, eyeing her closely. She was slightly hunched over, her expression was fearful, and she refused to make eye contact again.

Check-Check-Check.

I didn't know why, but she was in a precarious situation.

The tunic's long sleeves hung over her hands. And while I couldn't see it clearly, something bulged at her wrists.

I frowned.

What was she wearing around her hands? Armored gloves? Maybe even cuffs?

"What?" Maz asked as my eyes lingered on her for a moment too long. "You like her or something?"

I jolted towards him, briefly surprised, but then I smiled.

"...or something," I instinctively quipped, throwing him a wink.

Maz growled and a blush covered his cheeks. He cursed, slamming his ax into the ground.

"Who are you to talk back to me?" Maz grunted.

He seemed like the classic wealthy psychotic asshole who always got things his way. I'd have to keep an eye on him, just in case.

"Sorry about that," I said, hoping I sounded genuinely apologetic. "It's a bad habit."

Ever since I was a kid, I'd always run my mouth too much, but if I could, I'd try to avoid making him angry for no reason. Wealthy clients talked, and pissing them off never paid off. I needed every spare coin I could get. Maz looked like he wanted to say something, but Aldon hurriedly brushed him off, and we all walked up to the entrance of the cave.

"One last check before we enter," I said.

Then I inhaled sharply and looked up at the blue sky.

A sudden wave of essence washed over me as the sunlight bathed my face. I closed my eyes, letting the power soak into my body.

“What’s he doing?” Maz grunted.

I didn’t even need to look back to recognize his brutish voice. And even though I’d just met him, I could tell he was the kind of person who grunted all the time.

“He’s absorbing,” a weak female voice replied. From the downtrodden tone, I assumed it was Melina, the woman in the hood and handcuffs. “I can feel essence settling into him.”

Of course Maz didn’t know about essence absorption. What a typical blockhead warrior. It was said that System rebirths, which granted new classes and abilities, only transformed one’s body and not your mind. But I’d seen enough warriors like Maz to suspect otherwise. The System had given him a damage-dealing warrior class, so his main form of essence gathering was simply killing monsters.

Scouts like me had to make do with every bit of spare essence we could get our hands on, including harvesting the latent essence that poured out of dungeons. Our world, Basania, was a strange place. It—and the equally strange being, known as the “System,” that managed our rebirths and levels—was unfair and unjust, but we played the cards we were dealt.

“Don’t bother setting up camp or anything,” Aldon joked after several more awkward moments passed. “I don’t think he’ll need long anyway, considering his level.”

It was a needless jab at my low level since weaker adventurers could absorb less essence, but I didn’t take the bait and shrugged it off. The party needed me for my unique scouting abilities, not my strength or battle prowess.

I activated [Detect Trap], one of my most often used skills. It was part of what I’d received with my first rebirth, which had given me the scout class.

On its own, it was painfully simple and did exactly what the name said. But as I had learned, sometimes simple

and straightforward were better.

The skill sent out a wave of essence that bounced in a 20-yard radius, detecting any traps. It usually showed the type of trap, provided me with an outline of how the trap was activated, and lastly, it identified the trigger mechanism or range of activation, if there was any.

“I’m done,” I said after the skill concluded.

Just like during my previous check, there was only a single trap right above the cavern entrance. I already knew it was there, but I always checked each time I re-entered a dungeon.

It might have seemed obsessive, but that was how I’d kept myself alive dungeon delving for so long.

[DETECT TRAP]

[TRAP: Rafflesia Flower]

[TYPE: Living, Plant]

[TRAP RANK: 3]

[DISARM CHANCE: 92%]

The red glow of my magic revealed a rafflesia plant hanging off the ceiling.

It was far from adult-sized, but it could still kill any adventurer foolish enough to underestimate its liquid acid and poison fog. The hidden creature was exactly why most lower-stage adventurers hired a scout, especially if they couldn’t find a detailed map of traps.

I pointed at the entrance ceiling. “There’s a plant there,” I explained. “I was thinking of burning it with my torch. That way, I could save my skills for deeper in the dungeon.”

Aldon’s eyes narrowed. “A plant, huh? That’s a creature-type trap. We don’t need you for stuff like that.” The tank pulled out his black sword, smirking. “Things will be different once it tastes my runeblade.”

I stared at the beautiful broadsword with envy. Glowing runes were carved into the blade, and essence flowed from within, binding it to Aldon. It was the kind of magical item that synergized with its user, bringing out their innate strength.

But I quickly caught myself and remembered my duties. “Well, I can also just disable the trap. There’s no need —”

Aldon brushed me aside. “Get out of the wa—agh!”

He suddenly broke off, leaping back.

A bulbous, red flower lowered itself from the cavern ceiling, releasing a thick and poisonous acidic fog. Numerous yellow and green leaves opened up, revealing a pouch where the acid was stored. Once it had delivered its noxious payload, the flower immediately retracted, leaving a stunned Aldon lying on the ground.

Aldon had mostly gotten out of the way in time, and his armor protected him from the few spurts of acid. He wasn’t damaged, just embarrassed.

“What...what...what *was* that?” Aldon protested. “It came out of nowhere!”

I kept my face blank as I stared at him.

Yes. It came out of nowhere.

Almost like it was designed to *trap* people. Deciding to play it safe, I pointed at the entrance ceiling.

“Can you guys hit the ceiling with a fire arrow? Or maybe some kind of spell? It should be enough to—”

“What do you think we hired you for?” Maz asked mockingly. He poked my shoulder with a long index finger, probably expecting me to step back.

Aldon nodded hurriedly.

“If you can’t take care of a trap on the outside, how can we trust you to do the same on the inside? Our lives will be on the line and in your hands. Constantly.”

He would have had a good point if he hadn't made a total ass of himself just moments ago.

Well, at least clearing the trap would give me some valuable leveling essence.

Suddenly, a steel gauntlet tapped me on the shoulder, pulling me back.

“Wait,” Aldon said as he tapped the brushed steel, matte-black bracelet around his left wrist. “Take this.”

He pulled a torch from his spatial storage and handed it to me. As soon as my hand wrapped around the wood, the wrapped end ignited.

I already had a torch strapped to my backpack, but this one was fresh and bright, and the base was carved with magical runes.

Besides, I wasn't in a position to pass up on free stuff.

Whistling merrily, I turned away and hid my excited expression.

I'd seen that very torch offered on occasion in the market but was never in a position to splurge on luxury items since I had to save to buy combat gear one day. After all, it was just a torch, albeit a super nice one.

[ITEM RECEIVED: Magic Torch]

[DESCRIPTION: The magic torch gives off three times as much light as an ordinary torch. It will burn in any environmental condition and can be used to light a campfire or as an improvised weapon.]

[NOTE: The torch is weather and element-proof.]

“Thanks. I'll take good care of it until we're done with the dungeon.”

Instead of replying, four of the party members—Aldon, Falin, Jesabel, and Maz—fell back and started whispering and chortling together.

The only one who stayed silent was Melina, the mysterious hooded woman.

My keen ears caught only a few snatches, and I didn't like what I'd heard.

"He'd better keep that torch safe," Falin, the bow-wielder snickered. "It cost twelve gold pieces!"

"Do you think that's worth more than his life?" Jesabel asked. "Just look at his clothes!"

"It probably is," Maz grunted. "I bet a single coin would feed him for a week!"

"Enough," Aldon snapped. His voice had a hard edge to it, and I could tell he was still pissed off about how he'd embarrassed himself.

"But—" Jesabel argued, "Just look at him. He should be grateful, at least."

"Yes, and you should keep your opinions to yourself," Aldon growled. "He's here to do a job, and the torch is a tool. You provoking him about money isn't going to help us achieve our goal."

It was kind of funny—he'd just been taunting me about levels moments earlier, but now he was the great protector. His inconsistency didn't exactly fill me with the warm and fuzzies.

Not only that, the cold look in his eyes told a different story, of the "once we're done with the dungeon, we can do what we want with the guy," variety.

Conflicting feelings roiled up inside me, but it was not like I had a choice if I wanted the money. Shady or not, these guys paid well.

I walked up to the edge of the cavern mouth, then stopped as a red line appeared on the ground.

It shifted and pulsed with a bright, amber glow, one only trappers could see. It outlined the plant's range.

I looked around before finding a fist-sized rock that I threw over the border. It passed the red line and hit the ground,

then rolled for several feet.

Just like before, the rafflesia flower lowered itself from the ceiling. But this time, the trap focused entirely on the rock, melting it with the same acidic fog Aldon had barely dodged.

The rock and the ground around it were melted, a foul stench passing over me. Behind me, I could hear Aldon coughing nervously.

“Disgusting little—” I muttered, stepped over the line, then lifted the magic torch to burn the rafflesia.

It was a risky thing to do, but also the best way to go about killing the damn thing as soon as possible.

The rafflesia was incredibly dangerous. It could kill someone like me in moments, and even Aldon would have been in trouble if he didn’t scramble out of the way in time. However, it was also exceedingly weak to fire. Moments like these were why trappers and scouts, in general, preferred to keep their knowledge to themselves. It was sort of an unofficial code among our kind—the nobles might try hard to keep our levels low, but we’d make sure they couldn’t do dungeons without us.

The petals caught flame, which quickly spread across the whole flower, rushed up the stem, and then the rest of the plant.

I stepped back as it released more of the thick green fog, making sure to jump out of range.

[You have disarmed a rank 3 Rafflesia
Flower]

[You have received 15 skill essence]

[You have 3,190 skill essence points to
assign]

[Note: You have no available skills to
receive the extra overflow skill essence]

My skill window popped up beneath the familiar messages.

SKILL WINDOW

SKILL: Detect Trap (R), LEVEL: 5

DESCRIPTION: Detect traps in a 20-yard radius and provide an illusion of how the trap will activate. Has a high chance of illuminating the triggering mechanism. The success rate is increased by 5% for every skill level.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 7 Agility

SKILL: Disarm Trap (C), LEVEL: 5

DESCRIPTION: Attempt to disarm the trap mechanism using essence and tools. The success rate depends on the trap and Disarm Trap's skill level.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 7 Agility

SKILL: Hide Trap (C), LEVEL: 5

DESCRIPTION: Attempts to hide a trap using essence, essentially cloaking it. The success rate depends on Hide Trap's skill level.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 10 Agility

SKILL: Suspend Trap (UC), LEVEL: 5

DESCRIPTION: Suspends the trap and adds a remote trigger. A suspended trap can't be activated using its original trigger mechanism and effectively becomes a dud until the trapper can activate it manually.

COOLDOWN: 5 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 13 Agility

SKILL: Detonate Trap (UC), LEVEL: 5

DESCRIPTION: Detonate a trap using a planted remote trigger. Can only be used on mechanical traps.

COOLDOWN: 5 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 13 Agility

The experience was appreciated, but I still didn't have any skills I could level up. Right now, I had a large pool of level essence, but I couldn't use it yet. I needed to gain new skills or hit a new rebirth stage.

My current skills were all at the maximum level for my rebirth stage already, and I wouldn't be able to develop them further until I hit level 30. Then, the System would reforge my body, expanding my existing capacities and giving me new ones.

It was always a disappointment.

Still, it didn't matter that much, at least not now.

Skills couldn't be upgraded on the fly, anyway. Adventurers could gain new abilities and level up in combat, but they couldn't empower existing abilities on their own.

That could only be done back at the Adventurers Guild headquarters.

"It seems he's worth his gold, after all," Aldon said, walking up behind me. "You go ahead of us. I want to make sure there's no danger."

"There won't be," I replied. "I didn't go far, but I poked around before taking you here. There's nothing special in this dungeon—just skeletons, the undead, and your usual dungeon denizen."

In short, it was the perfect place for a bunch of mid-level nobles like Aldon and his team.

Aldon stubbornly shook his head. "Well, that's all well and good...but what if something bad happens? You know..."

like a big skeleton...or a big zombie...you should put your money where your mouth is and go in front.”

I sighed.

Wasn't this asshole complaining that the way to the dungeon was too safe just moments ago? I guess the trap must have humbled him.

Guys like Aldon always wanted things to *feel* dangerous, so they could act like they earned their levels. Once things got actually scary, they were more than happy to throw guys like me in front.

Most tanks I'd met were good, hardworking guys. They loved taking one for the team and sticking their head in the middle of danger.

Other people became tanks because they didn't want to get hurt.

Aldon was clearly the second type.

“Alright, I'll go in the front,” I said. “But maybe a party invi—”

“No.”

Aldon and Maz spoke at once, cutting me off before I could finish my sentence.

Aldon seemed annoyed I'd even asked, but Maz had a huge grin on his face. The axe-wielder, who I could already tell was an enormous jackass, was downright happy to deny me.

This was the main problem with my class and why I was only level seventeen and stuck on my first rebirth stage, despite having a lot more field experience than men like Aldon or Maz. From his looks, Maz might have even been late into his second rebirth or even at the start of his third, but that was easy as a damage dealer.

My sub-class specialized in disabling traps and detecting danger. I had no offensive skills, meaning it was hard to kill monsters myself.

I could nail traps like the rafflesia, but anything that could chase and kill me was mostly beyond my abilities in a fair one-on-one fight.

To make matters worse, thanks to the longstanding policies in Eslant, very few of my clients allowed me to enter their party, meaning that I never got to leech off some spare essence from slain monsters. As a utility class, it was much easier if we were born a noble. Otherwise, nobody would spare you even a second glance.

“Keep at it, scout,” Aldon said, cutting me out of my disappointed thoughts at the lost experience. His plate armor rattled as he moved, negating any element of stealth. “Let’s go.” I gave him a quick nod, then started walking.

“The entrance is now clear. I’ll go ahead and—”

“Not so fast,” Maz grunted, tapping me on the shoulder with his weapon. “You lead, but not from *too far* ahead. We’ll be right here behind you. Keep that in mind in case you see something valuable and try to slip it into your pocket.”

I eyed him for a moment and then nodded.

They were afraid I was going to take the loot. Alright, I could sort of respect that, as treasure was hard-earned.

Still, the way he’d said it bothered me.

Actually, he just bothered me in general.

“Maz, you walk right behind him, then,” Aldon said, nodding to the axe-wielder.

The rest of the group went back to chattering amongst themselves, muttering the same tired jokes as before, mocking my level of poverty.

Either they didn’t know I could hear them, or they didn’t care—almost the first.

When I glanced back, the only person who looked at me was the woman in green, Melina.

I was careful not to let my eyes linger for too long, but she threw me a weak smile and a nod, before whispering

something I couldn't fully make out.

Turning away, I made a mental note to get her on her own, if possible. There was something going on there, and it made me uneasy enough to risk angering these asshole clients.

Then I stepped into the swirling darkness, the dungeon's portal magic making the hair on my head stand on end.

“Here we go.”



CHAPTER 2: TRAPPED

The feeling of passing through portals into different magical zones could best be described as a flood of goosebumps-inducing cold running down my body.

It wasn't entirely unpleasant, but it still wasn't something I liked experiencing.

Damp, stale air hit me head-on, flooding my nostrils.

Combined with the full-body tingling sensation of portal travel, I almost retched. Truthfully, most dungeons didn't smell that fresh, but most at least had air always circulating inside.

This one, however, stank. The magic torch and its billowing black smoke just added to the stench.

As always, I opened my information screen, just to make sure everything was in place as dungeons had a funny way of affecting essence and stats, sometimes adding or removing them. It rarely ever happened, but I still wanted to play on the safe side.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	Human
STAGE	Rebirth 1	LEVEL	17
LEVEL ESSENCE	48%	SKILL ESSENCE	3,190
CLASS	Scout	SUB-CLASS	Trapper
STRENGTH	8	ESSENCE	7
STAMINA	7	AGILITY	15
CHARISMA	9	FREE STAT POINTS	0

My level essence was at forty-eight percent.

I'd still need to get a bunch more to hit level eighteen. Maybe, if things went well, I could kill a few monsters in this dungeon and close the gap.

Since they didn't invite me to their party, I wouldn't get to share any leveling essence with them.

However, they'd already proven themselves to be fairly lazy and cowardly. Maybe they'd let me clear other monsters, or they might leave a few creatures weakened but alive. Any positive or small edge was good in my book.

“What is this? How did we get here?” a surprised voice called.

I glanced behind me.

Aldon frowned deeply, running his hands up and down his torso and legs. He looked utterly shocked by our new surroundings, and his cold aura was gone, replaced with confusion.

We were still inside a cave, but a massive one.

This dungeon—like most dungeons—was many times bigger on the inside than it’d looked on the outside.

He seemed fairly high level, but he’d probably gained those levels in a much safer and controlled situation, maybe farming off beasts his family’s servants brought home, or fighting through one of the special training dungeons I heard nobles had access to.

Aldon hadn’t recognized the dungeon entrance and I figured he must have thought we were just going through some cave.

Jesabel, the white-cloaked woman, was freaking out even more than Aldon. She squeezed her staff even tighter than before, and it trembled in her hands.

Normally, I’d feel bad for her, but after her earlier comment about my clothes, I wasn’t in a very sympathetic mood.

Falin and Maz seemed calm—they were the experienced muscle of the party.

I glanced at Melina, who was somber and quiet. After trying to talk to me earlier, she wasn’t looking at me anymore.

I brushed my thoughts aside and steeled myself for a difficult delve.

Despite their levels and gear—and Aldon’s earlier bluster about this just being an easy dungeon—these guys didn’t seem to know what they were doing. It’d be up to me and my knowledge to get us out of here alive.

From what I could tell at a glance, we were underground. And under tons and tons of stone...

Rock walls slick with condensation and growing fungi surrounded us. A crack filled with glowing lichen moss ran along the ceiling. The stone floor was covered with a thick layer of dust.

In a few sparse places, the dust was disturbed by haphazard footprints.

I listened carefully, but I didn't hear anything out of the ordinary.

Statistically speaking, since this dungeon had just appeared, the footprints were probably just decoration. I'd heard about that before from other scouts—new dungeons that appeared that had a bunch of signs of human activity, even human remains, inside of them.

But then again...they might have been something else entirely...

After dungeon delving for so long, I was used to rolling with danger and death, but Jesabel—and maybe even Aldon—might freak out if they found a human corpse. I didn't need any spooked beginners losing their heads and getting us killed.

Something bumped into me from behind, and I almost tripped over my own feet.

I turned and found Maz sneering at me, his axe raised pointedly.

He was probably hoping—or even expecting—me to snap at him, but I wasn't rising to the bait. I'd never liked the bully types, but being realistic, I wasn't in a position to stand up to him. I'd just take my money and go home, licking my wounds but not making any unnecessary enemies.

I just smiled, turned, and continued down the dungeon path, my hand up, palm forward as I moved it from side to side.

It was mostly theatrics—I couldn't scan my surroundings automatically like that, I had to use actual skills—but he didn't need to know that.

As soon as [Detect Trap] went off cooldown, I started actually working again.

I released a pulse of essence, the energy spreading outward into the dark corridor. I was almost immediately rewarded with a red, glowing light.

[DETECT TRAP]

[TRAP: Impaler]

[TYPE: Mechanical, Spikes]

[TRAP RANK: 4]

[DISARM CHANCE: 78%]

“Can I?” I asked, turning back to Aldon and the others.

“Can you... what?” Aldon asked, propping up his shield, and tightening his hand around the black sword's grip.

“There's a small trap just over there,” I said. “Ten or so steps away.” I pointed ahead into the passage.

I didn't know how far the trap was buried in the stone of the ceiling but considering it was a spiked construct, and a level 4 at that, it was semi-dangerous.

“Go,” he said, simply, and flicked his hand forward. The gesture was meant to be dismissive, but I could see the nobleman's fingers trembling a little bit.

I moved slowly and carefully forward, one foot in front of the other, all the while making sure I didn't trip the trigger mechanism.

Or so I wanted them to believe.

Thanks to [Detect Trap], I could clearly see the pressure plate on the ground and the trigger mechanism hiding inside the wall.

Again, theatrics.

I even threw in a few heavy breaths to make the situation seem super tense.

It was always smart to make scouting look harder than it was. That way I could charge more.

The more mystique, the heavier my coin purse.

When I was only a step away, I crouched and moved in to study the pressure plate. It was cleverly concealed, and thus the glow was barely perceptible, even to my eyes.

That didn't happen often, making me pause.

"Someone or something took their time on you, didn't they?" I whispered, squinting up at the ceiling. "What kind of beauty are you, huh?"

A faint red outline revealed the spikes hiding in the ceiling.

The trap wasn't elaborate, but then again, it didn't need to be.

The deadliest traps had perfect form and function, and as I'd learned through first-hand experience, complicated stuff had more reasons to fail.

The platform hidden in the ceiling spanned the width of the corridor. Thirty sharp, steel spikes hung from the bottom, each as long as my forearm.

Yep. That was definitely a deadly trap!

As soon as it was triggered, it'd probably go barreling from the ceiling, killing everybody underneath.

I looked back down at the pressure plate.

Other than how carefully it'd been hidden, there was nothing special about it that I could see.

I pointed, activating another skill.

[DISARM TRAP]

[Would you like to attempt and disarm
the rank 4 Spike Trap?]

[YES/NO]

I mentally acknowledged the prompt, and a schematic appeared before me.

A countdown timer appeared above the schematic, showing thirty seconds. It flashed once and started counting down, one second at a time.

My magic twisted below ground, and I could feel the trap's inner workings.

As I liked to think of it, every trap was a puzzle. To disarm them, I just had to make a few small changes.

Like many traps, the pressure plate operated magically instead of through an inner mechanism, but to my skill they were basically the same thing. Whether magical or mechanical, I could disarm a trap so long as I had sufficient skill.

As my magic continued snaking through the dungeon, a schematic appeared in my mind. It wasn't a clear picture, but rather like what I imagined a bat's echolocation to be like. It was more of a mental sketch than anything else.

The pressure plate was a rectangle with several near-invisible holes on the surface.

Those holes were able to magically detect weight.

Once they did, they sent a signal to a central node deep underground. That node would then send its own signal to collapse the ceiling.

I maneuvered my magic toward the communication line, then concentrated. Unlike a damage dealer, scout magic specialized in fine movements and accuracy, perfect for this kind of mental lockpicking. All I had to do was cut off that thread, severing them with my skill, and the timer halted with seventeen seconds to spare.

[You have disarmed a rank 4 Spike Trap]

[You have received 20 skill essence]

[You have 3,210 skill essence points to assign]

[Note: No available skills to assign
essence skill points]

The notifications always bothered me, but they were a good reminder of why I needed to become stronger. Once I hit my second rebirth stage, I'd be able to develop new skills. In fact, the storage pool meant I'd probably be able to level up a bunch of skills all at once.

All those stored points weren't wasted...I was just saving them up.

Three thousand points could level up any mid-tier skill to the maximum. I couldn't help but imagine getting an offensive skill of my own. Along with some good gear, that would solve a lot of my problems.

"Is it done?" Aldon asked.

I shot him a thumbs-up and stepped back.

With a dull clang, the spiked trap released from the ceiling. Instead of collapsing down on us, the suspended trap bobbed impotently in the air.

My two trap manipulation skills, [Disarm Trap] and [Suspend Trap], had different effects. [Disarm Trap] would render a trap totally unusable, whereas [Suspend Trap] allowed me to take control of it and trigger it at a later time. [Suspend Trap] was the more powerful and versatile one, but it placed a continuous tax on my mind. Since this was just the start of the dungeon, I decided to just get rid of this trap right away.

"Yes, we're good," I said, shooting him a jaunty smile. "Let's go, I've got somewhere to be."

"He has a bark. I think I like him," Jesabel said, giggling sarcastically. After seeing two disarmed traps, it seemed like she was gaining some confidence. "But *can* he bite?"

"Watch it or Aldon will get jealous," Falin chuckled. "Besides, he is a scout. You already know he has no bite."

“Of course, of course,” she tittered. “A little guy like this is nothing compared to Aldon.”

“Which way forward?” Aldon asked. He was still looking nervously around him, but he wasn’t shaking so much anymore.

It seemed like his training was setting back in.

I activated my map—an innate scout ability—but all I saw was darkness. The map would automatically memorize everywhere we’d been, but in a dungeon, it could only project just a little bit ahead.

For now, we were at the very bottom of the map, right in the center, meaning that we’d just started our delve. Just ahead of us, at the end of the corridor, was a small room.

“There’s a room ahead. Let me scan it for traps before we move further in,” I said, stepping forward without waiting for a reply.

“Go. We’ll be right behind you,” Aldon said, putting his blade and shield up defensively. He was calm again, and it sounded like he was used to the new surroundings.

I walked to the end of the corridor, pushing through the near-imperceptible door. It was black wood against a black wall—no wonder we couldn’t see it looking straight ahead.

These dungeons—especially the spooky ones with skeletons and undead—weren’t meant for people with crappy eyesight.

The walls, ceiling, and floors of this new room were all made from solid stone. No surprises there, as we were still in a cave.

Faintly glowing moss grew along the grooves, cracks, and fissures, bathing the space in a surreal green light that was much brighter than the corridor outside.

It was far from enough to travel comfortably, but it was better than nothing.

Besides, that was why I had my magical torch.

Well, the torch wasn't exactly mine, but it would do...

I pushed ahead, scanning for traps every twenty steps or so.

The room led into a short corridor and then into a second room, this one with an arched entrance.

I activated [Detect Trap.]

The room was clear of traps or surprises. What it did have was several skeletons strewn about the floor.

I stopped before crossing the archway.

"I doubt those are decorations. They are likely undead," I said, turning back to Aldon and his party.

He nodded. "I'm not worried. These are just some skeletons. Not a problem."

I stepped aside, letting them get to the battle.

Aldon marched into the room and slammed the tip of his shield down against the floor.

A red glow erupted from the point of impact and the scattered bones started to rattle.

Maz pushed past me, and then the archer.

I followed through at the end.

The room looked like an old crypt, with two broken and empty stone caskets sitting off to the side.

I saw—and smelled—rotting flesh, but the corpses were mostly covered by large blooming mushrooms.

Just as I suspected, the skeletons started getting off the ground. They were just playing dead, waiting to ambush unsuspecting adventurers.

The usual monster analysis message popped up.

MONSTER WINDOW

NAME: Reanimated Skeleton

TYPE: Minion, Undead, Reanimated

STAGE: Rebirth - 0, Level - 9

Monsters were also assigned levels and stages, just like us, making the Monster Window one of the best things that could happen to an adventurer like me. Anyone without the attack skills to fight monsters on equal footing, could always assess the situation and run.

Information truly was power.

Based on their gear, Aldon and his party should have been able to deal with the basic minions quite easily.

It'd be a bit of a challenge, but I bet they could even handle champion minions, mini-bosses, and probably even the floor boss.

Guardians were a whole different story, but there shouldn't be any of those in such a low-level dungeon.

First, one skeleton started to take shape, the bones merging and giving it a vaguely humanoid shape. Then the others came alive one by one.

Defying logic, they all made a beeline for the tank.

When Aldon hit the ground with his shield, he must have activated some kind of taunt ability.

Maz charged past Aldon and hit the closest target with an overhead swing. He didn't use any skill, obviously trying to save his essence for stronger targets.

The axe cut through the skeleton like a knife through butter, passing effortlessly through the skeleton's collarbone and chest, coming out between its legs. The heavy weapon struck the ground and sparks glinted in the gloom.

And yet, the skeleton didn't immediately collapse into a heap of bones and disintegrate.

It just rattled to the floor in a pile, before slowly coming together again. However, Maz didn't seem to notice. He just continued twisting around, viciously slashing his axe. The twin blades glowed brightly, and I could tell he was using some kind of cutting skill.

His blows cut the skeletons to pieces, and he charged recklessly through the room, stomping his enemies to dust.

It didn't matter though.

The skeletons just slowly came back together again.

For a while, I just watched Aldon and Maz stomping through the skeletons. It was totally amusing. They were so into the battle that they didn't even realize their enemies were reforming right in front of their faces.

Falin, the experienced archer, tried calling out a warning, but they didn't listen. Parties also had access to a mental chat, but it seemed like the two goons weren't reading the messages either.

Eventually, Maz let out a frustrated cry. "Scout! What's going on? Why are their infinite skeletons!"

"You can't just use brute force!" I called out. "The skeletons won't die to simple attacks! You need a holy or any elemental buff."

Reviving enemies were a known magical trick the dungeons sometimes threw at adventurers.

It was a tactic to see if they could use their brains instead of just brute force. Maz had clearly failed the test, which begged the question: had they ever faced undead monsters before? Or had his party just been fed leveling essence to get to this point?

A bright ray of holy light struck the remains, and only then did the bones burn to a pile of ash.

I turned, staring at the woman in white and her spell. That was the key to victory.

"Jesabel, holy buff, now!" Aldon cried.

I'd thought the woman was some kind of cleric or healer, but now it seemed like she was a priestess. Her eyes narrowed and a frown set in, but she raised her staff and whispered a chant without saying anything.

White light erupted from her staff, enveloping all five party members, and pointedly leaving me out.

Nobody respected the scouts...

After the holy buff, the battle ended in moments.

An arrow struck the next skeleton, and Aldon's sword caught a third. The holy buff Jesabel had given them erupted from their weapons and bathed the skeletons in light, disintegrating them.

In seconds, the reanimated undead were, well, dead yet again.

Of course, I didn't receive any essence, since I wasn't in their party and hadn't contributed to the battle.

However, I couldn't help but wonder how the System had distributed experience among their groups. The System calculated and distributed leveling essence according to each member's contribution, which made getting levels easier for classes like tanks and supports when they were included in the actual party.

Jesabel and the archer joined the other two inside the room, and cheers erupted.

The bratty nobles sounded as if they'd just beaten a lich or some fabled monster of lore, not a bunch of reanimated skeletons. They were recounting their exploits as if their lives depended on it, not paying any attention to me...

Or to the last woman in the group.

"Help me," a voice whispered from behind.

It was so weak that I almost mistook it for the wind.

But there was no wind, so it could have only been one other thing. The hooded young woman.

I wanted to go and talk to her, but I stopped myself.

Based on what had happened earlier, if they knew I was talking or listening to her, they could easily get violent.

It was clear that she wasn't here of her own free will. Her sadness and what I thought were cuffs on her hands were proof of that.

She might have even been a slave.

But I just didn't have enough information to do anything yet...

Maybe deeper in the dungeon, I could give her some chance to escape.

Of course, that also depended on the kind of servant she was.

Did she have a combat role, or was she just a mule who carried their items with her storage bracelet? Or maybe she was just a treasure to be used by the others...

How much I could help her depended on the answer.

"Hey, you coming?" the archer said, elbowing me in the side. "You all right in the head? Why are you spacing out like that?"

"Probably because he can't get any of this sweet essence," Maz laughed. "That's what he gets for being a stupid scout. The System might as well have rebirthed him as a servant."

Aldon didn't silence them this time, but I did see a strange glint in his eye. He was probably thinking the same thing but wanted to keep up appearances until I had led them to the main chamber.

Typical nobles.

"Sorry. I was just admiring your party," I politely replied. "You all are pretty good at this fighting and adventuring stuff."

"Of course we are," Jesabel boasted, taking my words at face value. "Do you think I'd be part of an idiotic group that couldn't even handle a bunch of skeletons?"

"Wait. You think us idiots?" Maz protested. He scowled at me. "Who are you calling an idiot?" He clenched

his ax so hard that his knuckles turned white.

“I didn’t say anything like that,” I replied.

Of course, I’d bet all fifty gold coins they’d paid me for the job that Maz wasn’t all that smart.

No. Scratch that. I could tell just by the dull look in his eyes.

Still, I really didn’t like how heated the nobles were getting with me.

It was like they were trying to pick a fight for no reason, and I had enough information to know that picking a fight with them would lead to a shitload of problems.

Assholes? Check.

Slavers? Check.

Nefarious nobles looking for a reason to sacrifice me to some trap or monster? Fortunately, we weren’t that far yet.

“Let’s keep going,” I said.

I pushed past the three, going into the corridor to the next room.

Unlike the previous corridors, this one twisted and turned, and my map told me the corridor was far to the left. A buff suddenly hit me. I stopped and turned back, only to see Jesabel pointing and laughing.

“You better use it! Get running, asshole!” she jeered.

[BUFF: Light Step]

[DESCRIPTION: Muffle all footsteps and increase walking speed by 200%]

[DURATION: 10 minutes]

This lady was a real piece of work.

I thought she might be alright earlier, but now that she was feeling more confident, she was showing herself to be just as much of an ass as the rest of them, if not worse.

Still, the Light Steps buff was every scout's dream as so many traps were sound-sensitive. As were monsters, for that matter, so muffling footsteps was the smartest thing she could have done in this situation.

If every one of these noble's stupid taunts came with buffs and power-ups, I'd happily take it.

I hurried through the corridor, scanning for traps, but fairly confident that there were no monsters.

Usually, monsters only spawned in rooms, rarely in corridors. Everybody—even children—knew this, but nobody could quite explain why.

“Over here,” I said, pointing forward.

Like the other one, this chamber had an arched entrance carved into the stone. However, this arch was much fancier, with a loosely fitted golden stone engraved with odd runes.

There was a single large casket sitting at the very center, resting upon a large slab of stone.

The walls were covered with black soot dripping to the floor and gathering in small pools. Stone debris was strewn around along with what looked like broken chunks of steel.

A single monster stood at the very center.

It was looking away from us for now, but I knew it'd attack as soon as we crossed the archway and entered its room—that was another one of the innate dungeon rules you learned as a kid.

This creature was a much larger skeleton. Aside from it being undead, the reanimated monster also wore a tower shield and a mace.

MONSTER WINDOW

NAME: Skeleton Knight

TYPE: Minion, Undead, Reanimated

STAGE: Rebirth - 1, Level - 4

Rebirth 1...

The stage meant that this creature was much stronger than the typical skeleton.

Once anyone—human or monster—hit level 10, the System would give you your first rebirth, resetting your level down to 1 as it specialized your class and characteristics. The same process was repeated again at levels thirty, sixty, and ninety. A level 1 with three rebirths was much more powerful than someone who was level twenty with only one rebirth. Even after being reforged with a new body, adventurers and monsters kept the same strength and stats from before.

“Careful,” I called, but the party ignored me.

By now, after getting just one victory, it seemed like all their fears had melted away.

Aldon rushed past me, slamming into the skeleton knight before it could turn around and sending it staggering.

Maz darted past him and swung his axe in a wide arc, hitting the skeleton’s right arm.

This time, instead of cutting through, the weapon bounced right off. The skeleton knight’s defenses were much tougher than the basic skeleton.

Maz let out a surprised cry, and the skeleton knight turned to attack him.

At the last second, an arrow struck the skeleton’s helmet. It deflected off into the ceiling, but the blow gave Maz enough time to drop and dodge a mace blow.

A ray of holy light enveloped the knight and it froze in place as its bones started to hiss.

Holy techniques were always extra-effective against the undead.

Aldon charged in again, dropping his shield and swinging his blade, then followed up with a tackle using his whole bulk. The skeleton knight fell over and melted into a pile of ash.

What surprised me most about this whole ordeal, though, was that none of them even looked back to see if the young cloaked woman was still there.

By now, we'd gone through a bunch of different corridors and fought through two fights.

If she'd wanted to, she probably could have bolted for the entrance.

But she followed obediently, which only bothered me even more. She wanted me to help her, but she couldn't seem to help herself at all. Why couldn't she just get lost inside the dungeon?

However, I didn't want the nobles breathing down my neck again, so I bit back any questions and moral accusations for now.

"Let's keep going," I said.

I walked past this room, then activated [Detect Trap] again.

"Hold on. There's a trap down that corridor," I said, pointing to the other side of the room, directly across from where we'd entered.

This path was three times as wide, but I didn't like the look of it. The wide path made trap detection harder, as there was more room to scan.

"What is it?" Aldon asked.

I squinted, but it wasn't any use.

The outline of several rows of tiles lit up, but that was all I got.

There was no deactivating mechanism, nor were there any hints about the trigger.

I knew there was a trap...but that was it.

I'd heard plenty of horror stories about veteran scouts who'd died poking their noses into places without perfect information.

Secondary pressure plates, hidden panels, invisible spells... you name it.

With no information, I couldn't approach it safely.

[DETECT TRAP]

[TRAP: Exploding Tiles]

[TYPE: Mechanical, Fire]

[TRAP RANK: 4]

[DISARM CHANCE: ???%]

An unknown chance to disarm it...

Usually, that meant that the disarming mechanism was too far for me to reach.

It could probably only be accessed from the other side of the dungeon, corridor, room, or wherever it was hidden.

I pointed ahead of us, waving my arms to make sure the group backed off.

“Exploding tiles. Several rows of them,” I said, shaking my head. “We can't go that way. There's no way to deactivate it from this side.”

“Can we trip the trap using stones or something?” Maz asked, nudging me aggressively. The brute was eager to keep going and kept breathing down my neck.

Fortunately, I kept my footing.

This guy had no idea what he was doing—nudging someone near some exploding tiles was a great way to burn the entire party to death.

“No, we can't,” I explained. “There's too many of them and no safe way to put out the fire once we start the trap. Maybe if we had a boulder, but...”

Aldon nodded and snapped his fingers.

The party turned to follow him back the way we came. I hurried after them, glad he was smart enough to take my advice instead of pressing on.

After backtracking past the room with the sarcophagus and the skeleton knight, we moved into another corridor that went on for several long minutes.

The walls had deep cracks and gouges in them as if someone had been swinging a massive sword around. More lichen moss filled all the gaps, lighting the way ahead.

The cracks looked as if they'd been made a long time ago—otherwise, the moss wouldn't have had time to grow.

However, the dungeon had just spawned recently. That meant it was probably just some decoration, not an adventurer who came in before us.

I had a distinct feeling that we weren't alone, though.

There was something very suspicious about this long corridor. Even though we'd been walking for a long time, and I'd activated my [Detect Traps] twice, the entire place was empty.

Either someone had already sprung most of them, which meant that we weren't the first ones in, or there just weren't that many, which felt highly unlikely.

Ordinary dungeons were usually filled with traps.

My suspicion only grew further once we made it to the end of the corridor.

Just like the others, there was an ornate archway leading into the next room.

However, I couldn't hear anything inside.

“No traps on the way here, and no monsters in the room,” I muttered to myself. “What is going on? Is this some kind of ambush?”

The group was whispering and making much more noise than I was, so I stopped them at the tunnel's exit.

I raised my hand and huddled against the wall, gesturing for silence. They listened to my surprise.

“Do you see anything?” Aldon asked as he hunched next to me.

“Nothing. That’s what worries me. A place this big should be teeming with monsters. And there weren’t any traps on the way here, either.”

Jesabel rolled her eyes. “I mean, it is an easy dungeon, after all. We’ve trained so much for this. It should just be a breeze.”

“That’s not quite how it works,” I explained. “This might be an Easy-level dungeon, but that doesn’t mean fewer traps or monsters. That just means the traps and monsters are easier.”

Aldon brushed me off.

The pompous tank clearly wasn’t scared anymore. His party had won two easy battles, and now they were getting cocky. Not only that, he probably wanted to impress his lady friend.

“Let’s just keep going. We can handle anything this dungeon throws at us!”

“Give me a second, then. I’ll scan for any traps.” I said, creeping forward into a massive hall.

There was no dissuading them, but I’d at least keep us from dying to something obvious.

This new chamber was at least a hundred steps long and thirty wide. Two rows of smooth, gray stone pillars ran from one side to the other, supporting the ceiling.

The large room meant we were probably on the right track. In general, the dungeon’s rooms got bigger and grander the further you went in.

However, this room had three exits in total.

I scanned for traps and was rewarded with two red outlines. One was on the eastern exit, and the other on the western.

The eastern trap was obvious to me—it was an arrow trap.

The one over on the western exit was more difficult... all I saw was a faint outline. It was either too high level for me, or it was enchanted.

However, the passage straight ahead of us didn't have any traps.

I frowned.

That was probably the clear route, but was that really where we wanted to go?

What if that path was cleared of monsters and traps too?

Then my suspicions that someone or something was inside with us, would only rise further.

“Well, what is it?” Maz asked, shoving me again.

“There, and there,” I said, pointing at the traps. “One is an arrow trap and the other one is...I'm not sure. It's either over level six, or it's something really special.”

Aldon nodded and waltzed into the room, his chest held out like a peacock, shield up high, and his sword raised.

To my surprise, he walked all the way toward the mysterious western trap, obviously intrigued but confident.

“What is it?” Jesabel asked Falin, the ranger. “Can you see anything?”

He shook his head and they walked past me, all staring out the western exit. Usually, bonus loot was hidden behind high-level traps. Now that they were emboldened, the party wanted to explore as much as possible instead of going past the clear paths for a second time.

I stared at the group for a moment, then hurried along, not wanting to give them any reason to try and weasel out of the remaining money they owed me.

It was strange how only two out of the three exits were trapped. That usually meant that the dungeon wanted us to go in a particular direction. Or that there were valuable artifacts hidden within.

It was usually best to avoid the routes without traps, as they were more often than not dead-ends.

“There’s a treasure chest here,” Maz said excitedly, raising his voice. His eyes glinted with greed. “And it’s a good one!”

I peeked past him and saw the shimmering chest sitting at the far end of the next room. Earlier, I could convince them to go the safe way, but now that there was a treasure involved, I knew we were barging down that path no matter what, so I steeled myself.

The chamber was almost as large as the one we’d just exited, while the chest itself looked to be roughly four feet wide and two high.

It was probably filled with treasure, just like they said...

But all of it sat tantalizingly past an ingenious trap and gods knew how many triggers.

The four turned to me, their eyes narrowing.

I had a bad feeling about it and felt like a grave digger caught humping corpses by a holy man.

“We didn’t pay you to only spot traps,” Aldon said, poking a finger into my chest. “You need to disarm them for us, too. Go do what you’re paid for, scout. It can’t be that hard since you already spotted part of it, right?”

He snorted. “If you need to, just run in and trigger it. I’m sure the amount we paid you can cover for your healing.”

I bit my lower lip and nodded.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped up to the room’s entrance and stopped.

The outline only showed me a single large tile that ran across the whole width of the ceiling. The trap wasn’t just limited to the archway. It was inside the room itself.

If I was fast and darted right through, maybe I could somehow grab the chest in time...

No, that rarely worked with wide area-of-effect traps. I just wouldn't be able to get out of the effective radius in time.

I surely wasn't in the mood to get my limbs blown off or get cut in half by some kind of blade.

I pulled a pebble from my pack and threw it at the ceiling.

It bounced off and landed on the ground. Nothing else happened.

Now, that wasn't a good sign.

Sound or movement didn't trigger it, which meant that it was probably pressure-sensitive.

But where? I couldn't see any pressure plates or other triggers, even with my naked eye.

I fell to my knees and pressed my cheek against the floor, activated [Detect Trap], and waited.

Hopefully, using it closer to the trap would make things easier...

Nothing but my heart thumping louder in my throat and ears.

The only other thing I could think of was that the chest would trigger the trap. But that meant someone needed to go inside...

"What are you doing?" Aldon whispered. His voice was laced with impatience and anger.

"The lid is probably the trigger," I muttered, pointing at the treasure chest. "I can't think of anything else."

"The lid? What now?" Jesabel asked, her voice dropping in pitch. The thought of a deadly trap covering her loot seemed to have dampened her enthusiasm. She was nervous, I could tell that much.

"Melina, come here," Aldon ordered.

The cloaked woman hurried forth to stand next to him.

“We still have close to a thousand commands worth in your contract. Cast something that might trigger the trap. If nothing works, flood the room with fireballs.”

Melina pulled her hoodie back and raised her arms. Our eyes met, but she quickly looked away.

“Can I start?” she asked weakly.

The pompous bastard lifted his shield, and the others readied their weapons just in case.

But it wasn't because of a possible monster attack.

No, they were ready to kill her if she misbehaved.

The cloaked woman, Melina, watched them raise their weapons without saying anything. Though her hands trembled, she didn't even raise them in fear.

Hell, she didn't even start casting her magic yet.

Whatever this “contract” was, it made her obey their every word. It probably had some kind of magical enforcement. I'd seen stuff like that from nobles before.

Finally, he nodded.

“Go.”

Melina's hands glowed for a moment, and then a fireball erupted from her palms. It hit the ceiling and bounced, flying off into the room.

The spell hit the top of the chest, and the gems adorning the lid exploded across the room. The lid was promptly burnt to cinders, and the trap in the ceiling vanished alongside it, utterly nullified.

Maz, Aldon, and Jesabel started cheering, but there was only one problem.

Melina was powerful—much more powerful than anybody else here. Her fireball had obliterated the trap, but it wasn't done burning yet.

The reverberating flame from Melina's attack bounced wildly across the room, before coming back at us.

“Duck!” Aldon cried, dodging to the side.

I slid away with the rest of them.

The fire missed most of us...well, save Maz, who took the brunt of it to his face. He'd been staring at the treasure so greedily that he had no idea what was going on.

For a while, he just stood there, coughing awkwardly with a blackened face.

Then rage flared in his eyes as he smelled his burnt skin.

“You fucking bitch!” the axe-wielding attitude problem hissed. He stepped in and slapped Melina across the face.

The young woman cried out and fell, hitting her head against the hard stone. Her wrists slipped back, revealing a pair of eerily glowing cuffs.

They weren't made of metal.

Instead, they looked like brightly colored stones, with holes all over them. They were entwined with magical runes, and even from where I stood, I could sense the evil sorceries coursing through them.

The cuffs glowed for a moment and Melina cried out again.

Aldon sighed through his nose, looking at Maz, whose face now resembled a ripe tomato.

Aldon didn't seem all too happy with what just occurred and bore his teeth. The hand gripping his sword tightened until his knuckles had gone white.

I tried my best to hide my reaction as I recognized the hellish contraptions for what they were.

Coral cuffs were specially made to control spell casters. Melina was likely bound directly to her master, probably Aldon.

The cuffs allowed him to perfectly control her, including the use of mental commands.

Slavery wasn't exactly outlawed as many noble families didn't pay their servants and forced them to stay on their properties at all times. Coral cuffs, however, were considered the worst of the worst. They were legal, but barely. Their use and control over them were restricted. Not to keep the masses safe, but rather to keep the nobility from getting trapped.

Aldon glanced at me, his eyes glistening.

Baron Sherazad himself was an honest brute. He wouldn't care if someone found out about the cuffs. However, I knew Aldon by reputation. He was the sort of man who enjoyed feigning nobility and kindness.

There was absolutely nothing I could do other than try to run, as we were already far beyond threats.

They knew they couldn't let me live. I did too.

Casually, Falin nocked an arrow and stepped away from everyone, conveniently placing his body between myself and the exit. Maz did the same but moved toward the northern corridor that didn't have any traps.

Aldon and Jesabel eyed me curiously.

"I suppose that wasn't supposed to happen, right? Me seeing the coral cuffs and all?" I asked, nodding at Melina.

Aldon sighed again and shrugged.

If I knew about the coral cuffs, and he wasn't worried about it, that meant I wasn't supposed to leave the dungeon alive.

"I tried, scout, I really did. But my friend here is an idiot who can't control himself. All he cares about is loot, women, and torturing people weaker than himself."

"Hey! You make me sound like a villain!" Maz retorted.

"You're worse than a villain. They usually have a reason to be bad, you don't," Jesabel muttered. "You're just evil because you can be."

All of them were villains, I could have told them that much.

I eyed Melina and realized that I couldn't leave her behind, not if I could help it.

There was something in the way she smiled at me, though. It was sad, but also hopeful.

As if she was saying, "Go. Leave me and run."

Maybe if I fainted leaving, then I could double back...

An arrow leaped off the archer's bow and thumped me in the thigh. I staggered back against the wall, gasped for breath, and fumbled, dumbfounded at the shaft now protruding from my body.

How in the blighted did that get there so fast?

Falin was way stronger than I thought he was. Not only that, the backlash from his attack knocked me into the room.

In the back of my mind, I thought that I should be worried about the mysterious trap, but there was nothing I could do about that.

I slumped to the ground, twitching and barely able to move. My leg felt like it was going to slough off my body at any moment, and there was no way I'd leave the room. All I could do was stammer in shock. Somehow, I'd thought I'd weasel my way out of this mess too, but it was over.

I forced myself to turn my head. Aldon and the rest of them weren't even paying attention to me. They were staring greedily at the chest, frowning.

"Damn," Falin cursed. "I thought knocking him inside might trigger the rest of the trap."

Aldon shrugged. "You had the right idea there."

"You asshole! I wanted to gut him!" Maz yelled.

"Whatever. He's dead anyway. I want him to thrash around. That will trigger the trap eventually. And if he's right about how dangerous the trap is, it'll be a death sentence at his rebirth stage."

Aldon snorted. “He’ll bleed out, then we can loot his corpse. We can come back after we’ve done our rounds.”

“Do you guys even realize what you’ve done? Our trapper will be dead within minutes, and we have no idea where to go. You’ll have to go in every time, Aldon. Or we could use the spell caster, but she’d be dead if a single trap hit her.”

That voice belonged to Jesabel, the “voice of reason.” Of course, being reasonable didn’t make her any better than the others.

If anything, she was even worse. The thought of throwing a slave straight into a trap didn’t sit right with me at all. Even though I was bleeding out, the thought still bothered me.

“As long as you heal me, I’ll tank all the traps in the world,” Aldon laughed.

“Yeah, yeah. So, where do we go?” Jesabel asked. She shot me an apologetic look, then waved goodbye, as if to say sorry for leaving me to deal with the trap and die.

“Let’s keep going west. Jesabel, keep the buffs up and heals ready. It’s not that hard of a dungeon. I’m sure we can handle this, even without our scout.”

The voices faded away, leaving me to my death. I was just like the torch they’d given me—a tool to be used and then discarded.

I wasn’t going to let things lie this way, though.

No fucking way.

Falin knew what he was doing. Normally, shooting me in the leg and letting me flail around and activate the trap was a good idea.

But I had a regeneration potion in my bag.

It’d cost me an arm and a leg, but I always brought it on my trips. My adoptive father Rolo had a saying—it was better to give up a metaphorical arm and a leg than your actual arm and leg.

I didn't know just how powerful it was, but the potion might stop the bleeding and let me get out of this mess. Then I could sneak out, and bring the entire town of Eslant coming down on these bastards for using the cuffs.

I heard a sudden crack and jerked up.

I couldn't tell if it was just the blood draining out of my body, but I could swear the chest was breaking and shrinking somehow...

It was the only way I could describe it as one moment it was there, and the other it was as small as a dried raisin.

The hair on my arms and neck stood upright as the temperature inside the room seemed to drop. A new and somewhat fouler smell wafted over me—one of rotten meat.

I tried to get back to my feet and start running, but a wave of nausea laid me low as blood poured from my leg wound.

I would have to get the potion first before leaving, but I didn't have any time as the chest suddenly changed.

Its lid opened, revealing two rows of long, jagged teeth. A ten-foot-long fleshy tongue rolled out and slapped against the ground, leaving a slimy trail in its wake.

With a pop, two three-foot-long eye stalks protruded from the top of the lid.

The bulbous eyeballs swiveled, before locking on to me.

I wish I could have said I was just imagining things, but then a message flashed before my eyes.

Surely I wouldn't imagine the Monster Window, too.

MONSTER WINDOW

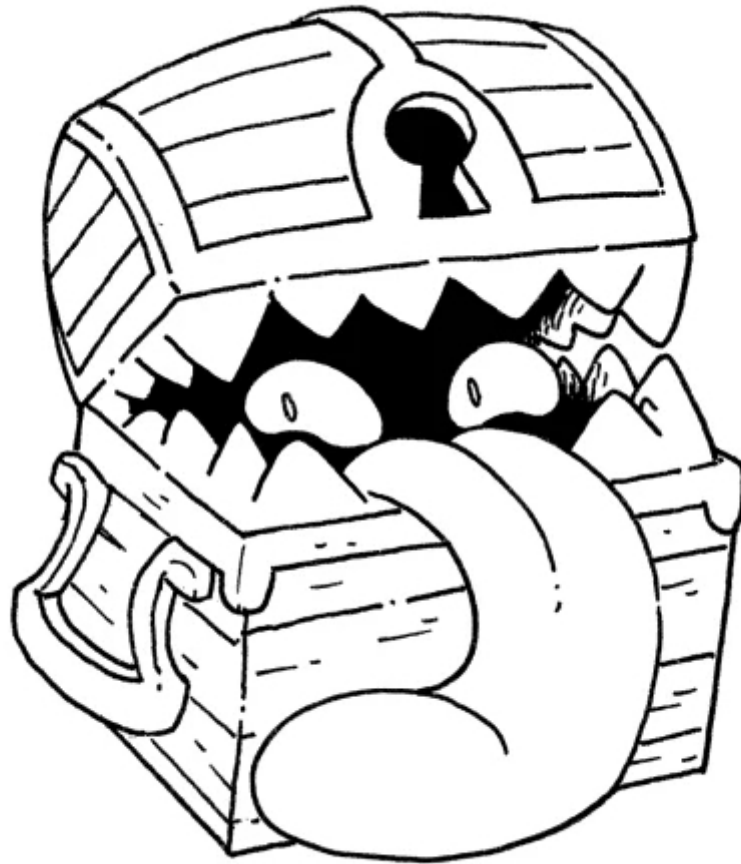
NAME: Mimic

TYPE: Unique

STAGE: Rebirth - 2, Level - 60

“Fuck.”

Just when I thought I was getting out of this mess, and now I was going to be eaten alive.



CHAPTER 3: MIMICRY

The creature's tongue shot out just like an arrow and struck me in the face, toppling me sideways. The attack was absurdly quick and powerful, much faster than Falin's, since the creature was on its second Rebirth, and had plenty of levels on top of that.

I rolled and landed on the actual arrow inside my body.

It snapped off but jammed the rest of the splintered shaft deeper into my leg.

The corresponding wave of pain almost unseated my reason. It was pure agony as the arrow scraped against my bones.

My mind raced, spinning around a single desire. I had to run. I didn't want to die.

There was still so much I hadn't achieved in life, and the people who would miss me...would they ever know the ending of my story?

That I'd been betrayed, crippled, and left to be eaten by a freaking mimic?

I watched as the creature's tongue snapped out again.

I flinched, but it didn't come at me.

Instead, it wrapped around my bag. Still hooked to me, the rucksack jerked across the ground, pulling me along with it.

My arms bent awkwardly, my back wrenched, and my legs contorted, but then the bag's strap broke and I toppled free again.

The mimic made a strange chortling, snorting noise.

It was hard to believe that such a tiny creature was so powerful. The shrunken chest could have fit on my shoulder!

"What... are you doing? If you're going to kill me... just get on...with it," I wheezed.

I wasn't going to keep my mouth shut and die quietly. That just wasn't my style.

The mimic's two large eyes swayed to the sides. They were as big as my fists, and both remained glued to my bag as it made some freakish guttural noises that made my skin crawl.

My rucksack dissolved as it hung on the mimic's tongue, and all its contents fell to the floor.

My torch, a spare set of clothing, a healing pack, two flasks filled with cold, crystal clear water, and some food.

Well, a lot of food.

There was a large piece of wrapped ham, which lay in arm's reach, a loaf of bread, some cheese, and cookies. Several containers of them.

I'd been planning on eating after the trip before I picked up my next clients.

I glanced at the food for a moment. After the mimic finished eating, it was probably going for me.

I had to get the potion by then.

There was only one problem.

The potion was still in my bag. I could glimpse the tiny vial, and it'd stuck to the bottom.

This had to be some disgusting joke.

Salvation was right in front of me, and I couldn't reach it.

I stretched out, but I couldn't reach the damned bag. After getting my leg pierced by the arrow, I couldn't move. Even worse, my leg was still bleeding out, and I was getting more and more light-headed as time went on.

I turned to the mimic, not knowing if I was delirious or if I'd always been this delusional.

“Hey. Any chance you can pass me the bag?”

The mimic didn't eat me, which was a damned good start, but it seemed utterly uninterested in anything I'd said.

Its tongue pulled back into the chest, before slapping out to slide messily along the teeth. It almost looked like a hungry dog licking its chops.

Then the box started to jump up and down excitedly as if performing for a treat.

It had shrunk when it first started to move, then grew as its teeth, eyes, and tongue appeared, but now it was shrinking again.

Now it was barely bigger than an ordinary jewelry box, though the tongue was as long as my arm. The creature was able to freely shift its appearance, and the constant distortion of its shape was almost comical.

I'd known that mimics would disguise themselves as passing objects like chests to lure prey, but I didn't know they could transform the size of their bodies to such a crazy extent.

Still, I had no idea what it was doing, but I knew it wasn't going to help me. On top of that, it was too fast for me to escape it with my bum leg.

I slid along the ground, reaching for a lone cookie that rolled out of the small container.

It wasn't the potion, but at this point, it was better than nothing.

If I was about to die, I'd at least do it with a mouthful of a freaking chocolate cookie. Maybe then if anyone found my corpse, they would say, "now there is a man with his priorities straight. He died eating cookies."

Hell yes. If I couldn't be remembered as an amazing adventurer, I'd be remembered as an amazing glutton.

The mimic's eyes shifted from the food to me, back to the cookie, and then to me again.

The creature tipped onto its side, the lid opening fully and showing me its fleshy, monstrous insides. The lid, or its mouth, I supposed, snapped open and shut.

I blinked.

Wait a second...

The creature wasn't looking at me because it was focused entirely on the food that'd fallen out.

As if to confirm my theory, the mimic froze, its tongue pulling back into its chest-shaped body.

"Foo—key."

Now it was my turn to freeze. The wooden bastard spoke!

And it wanted to... fuck me?

Fuck, no!

I wasn't letting a mimic do me even if that meant death!

How would I look anyone in the eyes with dignity if we met in the afterlife?

“Get that nasty tongue away from me!”

“Fhookie! Choofie!” It coughed and a blob of acid struck the wall next to me. “Shookie! Shookie! Shookie!”

I blinked, and even though my vision was fading and I could barely breathe, I wanted to laugh.

It wasn't saying “fuck me,” it just wanted to eat. My initial impression was right.

“You want my... cookie?” I asked, slumping against the ground.

Well, I supposed it was better than eating me.

Hell, at least I'd get to see something exciting. A human splitting a cookie with a mimic. You didn't hear about that every day.

“Fuck...why not?” I groaned, stretched, and fumbled the cookie off the ground. Then I tossed it at the box.

The tongue shot out of its mouth and snatched the chocolate cookie out of the air.

“Shookie! Yeeash!” it cried, as some truly horrendous, fleshy noises gurgled out of its insides.

I didn't know what scared me more, my own impending death or a ravenous mimic chomping on a cookie and jumping in place. It was such a freaky sight that part of me wondered if I'd died already.

The mimic continued jumping with joy, and this time, luck finally went my way.

The creature's excited motions jerked my bag free, and it landed in front of me. The mimic was so strong that it caused the ground to tremble a little, even while it jumped up and down like a kid.

“Yeeash! Yeeash! Yeeash!” It cried.

Maybe that was how mimics celebrated.

The creatures were very rare, and I'd never actually encountered one before.

Then the mimic finally seemed to tire itself out.

“Yeeash,” it whispered for one last time.

It swayed its stalker eyes, rolled its tongue into the box, and started snoring.

A green blobby bubble appeared from a small hole where its nostrils might have been—if it was humanoid—and popped every time it exhaled.

Disgusting!

I eyed the rucksack in front of me, the mimic, and then the hole in my thigh.

If I was going to make a move, it was now.

I had to grab the potion while the mimic was asleep then dash to safety. And if I screwed around too long, I'd bleed to death. A wound in the leg was relatively tame, as far as everything was concerned, but you couldn't just leave it.

And since I knew that the trap was the now-sleeping mimic, I felt fine moving around.

My fingers wrapped around the rucksack's strap.

I pulled it toward me, wincing through the flaring pain in my leg, and opened it.

A small vial fell to the stone floor and cracked. My heart skipped a beat as I watched it roll, the liquid sloshing inside.

“No! Don't you dare!” I hissed under my breath. It stopped rolling right in front of me, its contents intact.

I let out a long breath.

I would have liked to say I didn't know I was holding it in, but I did. It was easy to count all your breaths when sharp pain flared through your body with every breath.

But that was going to be better soon, hopefully.

I gently picked up the vial, rolled over on my back, and tried to catch my breath.

Salvation was at hand.

I had two ways of playing this.

The first was to pour the liquid over my wound and let my body absorb it to accelerate healing, but by the time I regained my strength, the arrow could have grown into my flesh.

The other was to drink the potion and pull the arrow out, then bandage my wound.

The second choice felt far less enjoyable, but I didn't savor the idea of having an arrow stuck inside me forever.

Screw it.

I had to do something, so I decided to split the difference and hope it would work at least half as good as intended.

First, I drank half of the potion, then poured the rest over my wound. The pain dulled almost immediately as a familiar message flashed before my eyes.

[BUFF: Regeneration I]

[DESCRIPTION: The potion is a substitute for a first-level healing spell. It will heal smaller wounds and help with recovery]

[DURATION: 60 seconds]

Thank the gods.

The potion was working. Potions were one of the few things I never skimmed on, always getting the expensive option instead of random budget items, but still, I never knew to trust the potioneer until the item actually worked.

Since I had a trustworthy product, I grabbed what remained of the arrow and yanked it out. The arrow had splintered, so pulling it out wrecked my tendons from the insides.

It was basically the worst form of torture ever.

Hell, this might not even have passed in an actual torture operation, since doing this would have killed me if it

weren't for the healing magic from the potion.

A gasp of air fled my lungs as I doubled over.

The pain flared through my entire body and I could feel myself drift into unconsciousness for a moment.

I took in several deep breaths and tried to focus as I bit through the anguish. There was a snoring, nose-bubble-popping mimic sleeping across from me, and I was drifting off to sleep.

Not good.

A trickle of strength returned to my body as I felt the skin tighten around the wound.

That on its own was already great progress.

I wasn't going to be running marathons anytime soon, and I still needed a bit more to recover my strength, but I wasn't worried about bleeding anymore.

I grabbed the bandage and ripped off a strip, then held it against the hole in my leg.

The bandage stopped what little blood was still trickling out. It was just enough for me to get a breather and to give the little bit of remaining potion time to work.

Making sure the mimic was still asleep, I reached for the ham, cheese, and bread.

The food would help me recover even sooner. It always worked well with potions. Then I could get out of there and tell the Adventurer's Guild what I'd seen. Nobles always had special privileges, but at the very least, I could ruin Aldon's carefully maintained reputation.

The meat was still warm, and the bread was fresh. Essence was everywhere, and it played a big role in our lives from the most basic of things like lighting a fire to keeping food fresh and cleaning our clothes.

I pulled a knife free from the scabbard on my left arm and cut off a piece of bread, then some meat, and finally, cheese, layering it in thin slices.

The food smelled heavenly...

This was exactly why making a sandwich proved to be the one thing I shouldn't have done, as the moment I brought the makeshift sandwich to my mouth, the mimic stirred.

My cookie container was too far away so I couldn't reach it and feed the fleshy living box. First, the right eye opened, and then the left as its tongue slithered out and onto the ground.

The mimic considered me, then the sandwich I was holding in front of my mouth.

“Are you—?”

“Shhammwish?”

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw.

Why was this happening?

Just when I thought I might escape, this mimic woke up, and to add insult to injury, it wanted my sandwich too.

“You want my sandwich?” I asked resignedly.

“Shhammwish!” it hissed, finally flopping back onto its bottom. It started to jump up and down, the tongue lolling.

I wrapped the sandwich in a piece of the bandage so the layers wouldn't separate, and then tossed it to the mimic.

Its tongue shot out like a dart and wrapped around my last supper, pulled it into its mouth, and rumbled happily.

Alright then.

My new plan was to stuff this thing's face, then run.

It had gone to sleep after eating a single cookie, so what kind of food coma would it fall into after eating a sandwich and more sweets?

Then it dawned on me.

Why was this creature even able to speak? And ask for food?

And most of all, how did it know what these things were called?

I'd never heard of a mimic in human civilization.

"Can you understand me?" I asked, knowing just how stupid it sounded.

"Undersshtannd? Foohd! Shammishh! Make!"

Well, it could understand me. It just wasn't all that interested in talking.

It just wanted me to make more sandwiches.

"Well, alright then," I said, making another one and then feeding it to the mimic.

It disappeared in mere seconds.

Then the mimic's tongue suddenly flicked out, and I winced, afraid it'd suddenly decided to attack me. I could almost imagine the monster's logic—if this guy's sandwiches are this good, then how does *he* taste?

But instead, it licked the spot where the arrow had pierced my body. I felt more slime-like substance enter my wound.

It was so cold I wasn't ashamed to say that I shuddered.

But the slime helped close the wound.

The bleeding stopped, and even my breathing got better.

Winning the loyalty of a second Rebirth monster with sandwiches...

By the blighted hell, what had happened to my life today?

But the madness wasn't close to over.

"Heeeelp you," it said, then jumped on top of me.

"No! Ahh! Get off!" I yelled as the mimic's weight landed on me, the pressure almost breaking my ribs.

“Still!”

Still?

Did it want me to stay still?

Sure, I guess. It wasn't like I could move anyways with a giant chest on my...chest.

The mimic stopped moving and turned into a writhing mass of silver, black, and brown goo.

What the hell?

Wait.

This was help?!

I didn't even have time to protest before the creature enveloped me.

I could feel the weight spreading out across my back, legs, and arms. The mass slowly inched down and around my body, sticking to me like a second skin.

I tried to push myself up, to speak, or roll away...to do anything, but any movement was beyond me.

Time passed as I lay there for what seemed like an eternity, the mimic's heavy weight pressing down all around me.

I had trouble just breathing.

Considering how I'd almost died moments ago, it really wasn't the most pleasant feeling.

Tentacled growths abruptly sprouted from the now blob-like creature's sides and pushed me up into a seated position. It released a mass of needles that dug deep into my flesh.

I felt every single one of them pierce my body, burrowing into my flesh, and then into my spine.

“What the—shit! That... hurts, you little bastard!”

“Phaaain. Yes. Good. Feel! You become strong!”

“Pain doesn't...make you strong!”

“Yes! Good! Lisshhen! I make strong!”

Something stirred on my back, writhed and expanded, growing rapidly.

The pain was almost unbearable. It felt as if I was being flayed alive.

My skin tore and my muscles shook.

“What are you doing?” I cried as my blood ran cold.

It just got worse from there.

A skeleton rose from my back, moving and extending past me.

Horror.

This is pure horror, I thought as a hundred questions flooded my mind.

Was that *my* skeleton? How? Why? Was I going to turn into a blob too?

I wasn't a doctor, but I knew my skeleton was supposed to stay inside me!

The mimic started to cackle and screech, and I had no idea what was going on.

The creature was so incredibly heavy, pushing down on me as if I was stuck beneath a mountain.

I could barely even move my eyes to see what was happening. Its manic laughter stopped and a mangled skeleton clattered to the ground, several of the bones shattering on impact.

A tidal wave of essence washed through me. It was strong, so much stronger than any I'd ever felt before.

And yet the influx of magical power was different... strange, and foreign, but continuously expanding deep inside me.

Taking root in my very soul and merging with my own essence.

I blinked.

“Are you...are you giving me your essence?”

Then I remembered I had more pressing concerns, like the skeleton that'd just flown out and crashed to the ground.

“Was...was that my...”

“No. I say. Other human skeleton. Old friend. You have your own skeleton.”

The mimic's voice rang in my mind, and the noise was perfectly clear this time. There was no accent or slobber. Hell, the voice was clearer than my own thoughts.

This was just way too weird. I had no idea what was going on, and I still wasn't sure if I was supposed to believe the mimic as it could have very well just ripped out all of my bones and replaced them with something else like it's hideous goo.

I was terrified.

Despite what many people said, monsters didn't make good pets, and this bastard just made me his!

A shrill scream rang in my ears until something wet and slimy slapped me across the face. It was then that I realize it had been me screaming and the mimic was slapping me silly with a tentacle.

“Stop scream. You are fine. Strong now. Stop scream, weak human!”

I gasped, then shut up.

Sure, I might have screamed, I might have been in pain, anguish even, but to have a mimic call you a weak human...now that was a whole other level of pain and shame.

“Weak human? Why would a monster call me—”

“Monster? Hurtful!”

I closed my mouth, unable to understand why I was arguing with a mimic that was speaking inside my mind.

I'd heard stories about them, of course, creatures known to be highly intelligent and crafty. But also deceptive

and savage.

But in all of those stories, I'd never heard of something like this.

However, the mimic said he had an "old friend." Was that how the creature knew about human food and culture? The remaining growth on my back, which had shrunken substantially after pouring into my body, popped like a pimple and dissipated into smoke. What felt like a second layer of skin enveloped my entire body but for my head. Before I could give it a good look, the armored layer of new skin disappeared, soaking into my skin.

The tingling sensation was shocking, but not entirely unwelcome. It jerked me right out of my thoughts.

My hand rose and I touched my arm, leg, and then my chest.

The armor I'd been wearing before was soft but durable. It could even absorb a blow from a dull weapon if it wasn't infused with a higher-tier skill.

But the mimic's armored skin felt so much sturdier to the touch, yet I could move my limbs freely as if it wasn't even there.

A small box grew on my right shoulder then. Two stalky eyes slid out from under the lid and looked right at me.

"Hey! What are you—?"

"Hungry. Feed me."

It was stuck inside me now!

I mean, I'd felt the magic flowing into my body, but seeing those eyestalks pop out of my shoulder...

That was something else entirely!

"Why so surprised? Make sandwich. Hungry." The mimic repeated itself, sounding a little peeved. This time, I was reminded of a cat instead of a dog, a cat whose owner was a few minutes late to feed it.

The mimic was annoyed and petty, but not entirely unfriendly.

“Yes. We are friends. Friends make food.”

I blinked, then gasped.

“Wait, you can read my mind?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. That’s... unexpected.”

“I am you now. You make food. We are friends. Friends find food. Go find food!”

There were so many changes I could barely process them.

First things first: my wound had healed, I had received an invisible layer of armor, and I was now apparently in charge of feeding a hungry mimic, which was also part of me.

And the strangest thing was how most of my fear just...evaporated.

It was as if this kind of union was...normal.

“Why...am I not afraid of you? And—?”

“We are one. We feel as one.”

What did that even mean? We felt as one.

“I not afraid, you not afraid.”

“Wait, so you can affect my feelings? For you and other people?”

“Yes. You affect mine too. So stop being scared. I don’t like scared.”

A chill ran down my spine as I tried to wrap my mind around what it just said. This time—after such a freaky statement—I recognized what was going on.

I was still afraid, but it felt suppressed somehow like I’d gotten some kind of courage buff. The feeling was dulled, and it didn’t affect my thinking. Apparently, the mimic had

forced me to not be afraid. That made me feel very upset, but not...afraid.

And then everything changed as a wave of warmth flooded my body, and I felt...good. Most of my strength returned and I felt as if I could take the dungeon on by myself.

It wasn't just the mimic adjusting my thoughts either, it was the new magic and power I felt. We were one now, and that meant I had part of the mimic's power, too.

Like I'd noticed earlier, the creature was insanely powerful, much more powerful than Aldon and his band of noble thugs.

The mimic's voice sounded in my head.

"People kill you? Attack friend?"

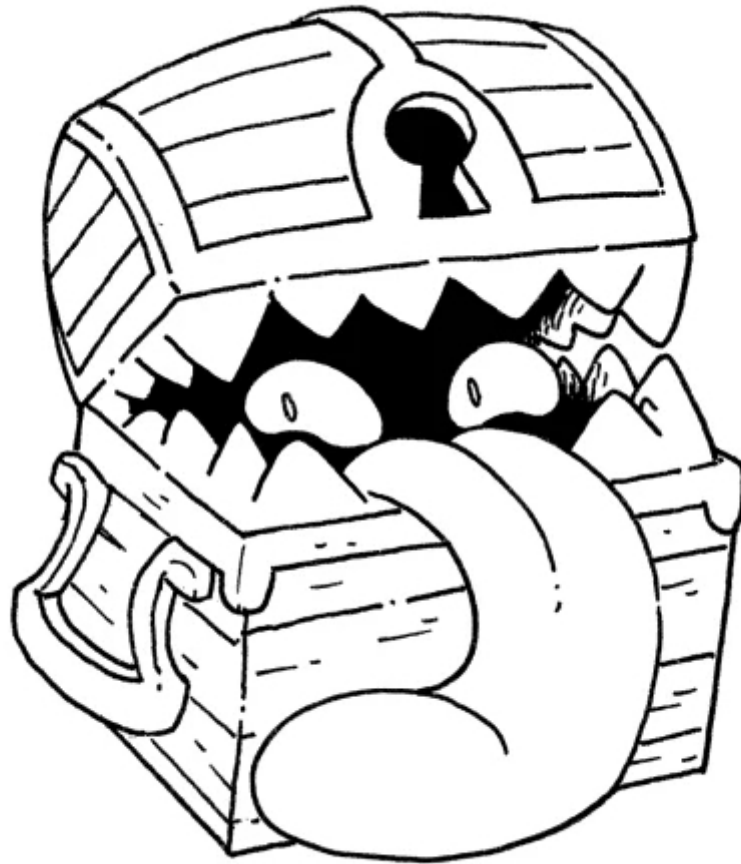
"Yes," I replied, hardly believing what was happening.

Was *this* how I could get my revenge and free Melina?

"Okay. We eat them. Samwich dinner. Friends dessert."

Wait.

What?



CHAPTER 4: SYMBIOSIS

“Eat..people?”

“Yes,” the mimic replied like it was the most normal thing in the world.

I knew it wasn't going to hurt me because it would have done so already if it wanted to.

But when it came to eating others...

Its eye stalks extended until it looked me directly in the eyes. I flinched since the eyes were way too big and veiny to be those of a human.

“Hey! That's nasty! Don't do that!”

“Ok.”

The stalks retracted and I shivered again, trying to gather my thoughts on what to do next.

“Alright. So let me get this straight. You eat people?”

“Yes. I eat many things. I eat food. And people. And monsters.”

“But you won’t eat me—right?”

I needed to hear it one more time. Just to be sure.

“Eat you? No. I eat food. Eat other people. Eat monsters. You are friend. You are part of me. I don’t eat friends. I lonely.”

“Friends?” I whispered. “I guess that makes sense. I wouldn’t eat any of *my* friends. Or myself, either. But most of my friends aren’t actually a part of me, which is probably a good thing...”

The mimic ignored my musings and just stared at me. *“Let’s go. Eat people who hurt you.”*

“Okay, but don’t you feel bad?” I asked. “I mean, I want to kill them and free their slave...but *eating* them?”

The mimic responded to me like I was some kind of small—and idiotic—child.

“Feel bad? No. Humans kill monsters all the time. Why can’t I eat if hungry?”

He had me there.

There wasn’t really anything I could say to that.

“So you’re just trying to stay alive,” I said. “You kill humans just like we kill monsters.”

“Yes. Stay alive good. Also, people taste good. Fatty and get stuck in my teeth. No use wasting good meat.”

Okay.

So it wasn’t entirely sympathetic or anything like that.

Still, it wasn’t eating me, so I could be happy about that. I had to take care of number one after all.

All told, this was kind of funny.

If a gluttonous mimic could ever become someone's friend, I guess it would only make sense that it would happen to a schmuck like me.

With my wound healed, I got back to my feet and started walking. I had a weird feeling I was making a deal with a demon—not that the mimic was a demon—but this seemed like my best choice for now.

“Not demon,” the mimic replied, reminding me it could read my mind. *“Not monster. Friend.”*

“Do you have a name?” I asked the mimic. With my luck, it would go by something absurd like Cookie. “And how is it exactly that you can talk?”

Or, since it liked cookies so much, maybe the Cookie Monster. Now that would be a weird name. I couldn't imagine calling myself that with a straight face.

Now that we'd merged, hopefully, I wouldn't have to share its name. Like some kind of weird marriage or something.

“Stop. I am not the “Cookie Monster.” Nobody would call a strong monster the Cookie Monster. I have no name, just mimic. And we are not married. Just combined.”

“Well, that's a relief. It would be a hard sell getting the ladies to join in a throuple with a mimic,” I joked. “But how is it that we can communicate? How do you understand human culture?”

“I told you. I eat people,” the mimic replied. *“I have many memories that I absorbed to understand you and speak.”*

So the mimic didn't just get *stronger* by eating people. It got *smarter* too, kind of like how we humans gained more skills by absorbing essence.

I guessed that made sense.

As the mimic said, we killed monsters to grow stronger, and they killed us too. That was just the way of life, I guessed, with essence circulating through it all.

The good news was, the way of the world was finally on my side now.

“Yes, we’ll get you your food, alright. But I got to ask. How did you get stuck here? Why couldn’t you leave the dungeon by yourself?”

The mimic sounded very peeved. *“I got lost. Wandered into a new dungeon looking for food. All I find are traps and bones. Bones. Gross and dry. Disgusting. And I’m slow. Am blob. Hard to walk.”*

I grinned. “Well, you’re in luck here, mimic. I’m a scout. So I can get us out of here in no time!”

Maybe we’d be a pretty good team after all. Not just because of my class, but because I had a functional pair of legs. Still, that made me wonder how he’d gotten into the dungeon in the first place. Maybe it had something to do with his “old friend” and the skeleton I saw earlier.

“Great! Scout is my best friend! Now get out of the room, and find people who try kill you. People who try kill best friend will make good food.”

Now that was what I liked to hear.

It was good to have my class finally appreciated.

I started studying the room around us.

Since the mimic had already triggered some of the traps blundering its way in, this wouldn’t be too complicated.

Not only that, I could vaguely hear the other party thudding their way around.

They were pretty far from me, but Aldon was wearing so much armor I could hear it clanging and banging from anywhere. Not only that, they were using a brutish strategy, having him run into everything before being healed.

I could get myself out of here and then go after them with no problem.

“You found them! Good. You smart one. I relax. I need food before thinking. I hungry. Usually hungry.”

“But wait. How do we fight the others?” I asked. “They’re pretty strong, and I have no attack skills.”

“*No problem,*” the mimic replied, though he didn’t elaborate any further. “*You are strong now. And I’m strong too.*”

I snorted.

That wasn’t the response I’d hoped for. Now that we were joined together, I thought the mimic would try and give me information, but his lackadaisical attitude hadn’t changed at all.

“You know if I die you can’t get food right? You should help me more.”

“*Way of life,*” the mimic lazily replied. “*If can’t get revenge, we deserve to die.*”

That simple huh?

I shot the creature a dirty look, but the eye stalks pointedly swiveled away, ignoring me. But alright, I could figure something out.

I had two daggers, a hungry mimic serving as my armor, and a strong desire to get even.

But then, I thought deeper about what the mimic had said—I was strong now. And the new essence flowing through my body...

“Wait a second...” I muttered.

I pulled up my status screen next, just to see what had changed after it... back-humped me.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	Human
STAGE	Rebirth 1	LEVEL	17

LEVEL ESSENCE	48%	SKILL ESSENCE	3,210
CLASS	Scout	SUB-CLASS	Mimic
STRENGTH	14	ESSENCE	10
STAMINA	15	AGILITY	18
CHARISMA	9	FREE STAT POINTS	0
SYMBIOSIS	7%	STATE	Discontent

Okay, this was crazy.

As the mimic said, we really were one...

My status information had definitely changed for the better now that we'd been fused together.

My strength and stamina doubled, which was awesome. That was just crazy.

Unfortunately, essence and agility had only gone up by three points, which was a bummer. I needed agility as a scout, not strength. I guessed that made sense. Mimics weren't known for being very mobile.

However, considering what I'd started with, I would take anything I could out of this unholy union.

Charisma was the only stat that hadn't gone up, which made sense too. The mimic probably presented the opposite end of the spectrum from charisma.

Then there were two new stats called symbiosis, which was at seven percent. That one seemed pretty obvious. It probably reflected how close we'd joined together.

I eyed the mimic on my shoulder.

I wondered what would happen as “Symbiosis” increased.

The last was a state—Discontent. I hadn’t seen that before. I guess it would make sense that I was “Discontent” though, as I’d almost been killed by my clients, and I now had to fuse with a mimic just to survive.

Anyone would be discontent.

The mimic’s voice echoed in my mind. *“Ass! That’s my state!”*

Oh. Well, I guess it made sense the mimic’s state was discontent. Probably because he was hungry.

“Yes. Hungry.”

I looked down and traced my fingers across the small hole in my armor, right where the arrow had gone into my thigh. The skin beneath had already healed and it was smooth. If the slime could close holes and help heal at such a rapid pace, then it was any adventurer’s perfect companion.

A new revelation pulled me right out of my thoughts.

A trickle of the strange, new essence pulled at my mind. And then my ability window opened all by itself.

ABILITY WINDOW [2/5].

ABILITY: Mimicry (R), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Attempt to mimic an animate or inanimate object. The success rate depends on the available mass and complexity of the object.

COOLDOWN: 5 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 45 Stamina

ABILITY: Absorb (U), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Attempts to absorb the target’s stat essence and random skills. The absorption rate is from 1 - 10%, and

the quality of the obtained skills varies
from Common to Unique.

COOLDOWN: 10 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 14 Strength

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “Can you explain this?”

I knew we merged, but seeing the stats—and the new skills—was just another thing entirely. “How did you improve my stats? And what about my new skills? Is that why my sub-class is mimic now? It used to be trapper. ”

“I merged through spine. Now we are one. You have my sub-class. Can never leave or it will kill you.”

Okay.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples.

This was just crazy. The mimic could never separate from me or I’d die?

Maybe this guy wasn’t the perfect adventurer companion after all. Being stuck to anyone or anything in the long run...I couldn’t imagine how it would work out.

Still, it hadn’t quite answered my question.

“Alright. I’ll have to deal with that later. For now, I need to know some things, Mimic. How did my stats rise? Was it the symbiosis thing? And what’s with the two abilities, [Mimicry] and [Absorb]?”

It let out a string of incoherent noises, which I interpreted as sighs and grunts. If anything, it seemed exasperated, but that was a bit unfair. It wasn’t like I was born knowing how humans worked with mimics.

“You get part of my stats. More symbiosis, more stats. I get strong, you get strong. Mimicry makes you look like item. Or monster. Absorb eat meaty desserts, gain stats and skills. Nom-Nom, chomp-chomp. Eating is good.”

Talk about butchering an entire language. This guy really didn’t like complete sentences.

Maybe it was just laziness?

At least I could mostly understand what it was saying. I was far from finished asking questions, but now I had some information.

My stats would increase with symbiosis, I could mimic items, and eat other people. Yeah, it appeared that I was stuck with a mimic for life and if I tried to get it removed, we would both likely die.

Alright then.

Time to get going!

I started moving, following the path where I'd seen Aldon and the others leave.

I took a hurried step forward, stopped, and then backed up to the left behind an alcove, getting out of sight.

If I ran into them, I'd be screwed and dead before I could even blink.

I needed to ambush them and make sure I had the initiative.

Yes, my strength had improved a lot, but they were still higher level and with better gear. Even though Mimic was a second rebirth monster, I clearly hadn't gained *all* of its stats, just a portion.

Mimic and I needed to approach this problem step-by-step.

"Go. No people. They go up room. Far ahead."

"Wait, I need to check some things first," I replied.

I lifted my left foot, then the right, then my hands and arms, making sure everything was just as it had been.

I felt stronger, more durable, and generally in better shape despite the sluggishness.

Every stat had its use, even if I didn't need them in a specific build.

More strength would allow me to hit harder with a weapon, exert more force on an item, or break someone's neck...while stamina would harden my body and make it harder for anyone or anything to deal damage to me.

Essence affected a spellcaster's elemental damage or the healing output of a priest, even the effect of a debuff. Agility allowed for faster movement, nimbleness, accuracy, and greater ranged damage with a bow, a crossbow, or even with throwing daggers. Charisma was trickier and only worked on other people, making me more likable to them, but it barely had any effect until it was much higher.

Depending on the situation, some stats were more useful than others, though, but they all mattered, which was why I appreciated any kind of boost.

Maybe if I bonded with this mimic long enough, I wouldn't need the magical item and gear after all. Of course, it'd still be nice, but it would also be exciting to rely on my base stats and strength. That was just a road I'd never even considered before.

I took a step out from behind the wall and made my way toward the center of the small room, then darted off toward the exit, checking how fast I could go while still staying silent.

I was a little bit faster, but I felt a very slight discomfort that had settled deep inside me.

That was the mimic boring holes into my skeleton I guessed but didn't dare ask for specifics.

I turned back into the room and studied what had remained of the items in my backpack. The cookies were gone, as well as most of the food.

My spare set of clothes was ruined by the mimic's tongue, and all I was able to retrieve was the magic torch. I envied adventurers with storage jewelry right about then...

I quickly double-checked my two daggers, then nodded.

One in the left scabbard, another one hidden in my right boot.

There was nothing special about my weapons or their scabbards, but at this point, they were better than nothing.

The magic torch...well, it wasn't as bright as I remembered. It could have been a cheaper knockoff or something. That'd be typical of Aldon and his group.

"Your weapon weak. We find better."

I suddenly felt a tug at my insides, then my foot rose and I stepped forward. Then the other.

"What—wait! What are you doing?" I protested, trying to wrestle control back from the mimic. The creature had somehow managed to move my body!

"I walk. Go. Need food. Hungry for long time. Need food."

"No! We're *not* doing this!"

Shouting at a hungry monster wasn't smart, but be it for better or worse, he'd dulled my fear just enough that bad ideas suddenly looked like good ones. Beyond that, our fates were intertwined now, so theoretically I could call the creature out on stuff.

At least I hoped.

"If you want food and dessert, you will *not* try and take control of my body! You can watch and do stuff only if I ask. Or maybe if we need to slip out of danger. But I call the shots, you watch."

To my surprise, the mimic quickly agreed, relenting right away and withdrawing its control so that I no longer felt like a puppetmaster's marionette.

"Okay. I am friend. Only watch. Ok. Now go."

Going back to my former careful pace, I made my way outside and into the great hall. It was empty, just as the mimic had said.

I hurried and ran over to one of the massive pillars, then dropped low and listened for a moment.

I could still hear them thudding and clanking ahead of us.

We needed to chase them, but the paranoia that followed was worse.

Shit.

It was one thing saying I'd attack them but another to actually do it. I'd never fought before aside from shooting weak monsters with a crossbow, and I was still a scout at heart.

Sweat was beading up on my forehead, and the air suddenly felt too thick and humid. My heart thundered in my chest, and a high-pitched ringing filled my ears.

"Calm. You tremble. No need to be afraid of dessert. Breathe."

I was still pretty scared, but then a thought struck me.

Maybe they were using the young woman as bait, forcing her to enter every room first and absorb any traps they might find. After all, Jesabel had suggested that before leaving.

That would definitely get her killed unless she was incredibly strong or had some powerful deity's favor. This place wasn't full of traps, but the ones it did have were potentially very deadly.

Thinking of her gave me courage.

Usually, I wasn't the kind of person to stick my neck on the line for someone else, but man.

Mind-controlling coral cuffs. That was an all-new low. Especially because Aldon had tried killing me to keep it secret, which showed he knew exactly how shameful it was.

I nodded to Mimic, then got moving, leaving the trapped western room.

I rushed up the stairs, making sure to create as little noise as I could.

I'd maximized speed and caution before, so I was fairly confident they couldn't hear me. Maz and Aldon didn't have very subtle fighting styles.

To me, it was just a dull clanging, but I was far behind them in the dungeon. For someone standing next to those two awkward brutes, a scout following from far away would have been imperceptible.

My hands brushed along the cold, rough stone walls, grounding me in reality. Even with my life on the line, I was starting to think that this had to be some kind of dream. Being stuck inside this body together with a monster was doing strange things to me.

Both physically and mentally.

At the top of the stairs, I was met with three corridors.

The left one led to a dead end, the one ahead of me went into what looked like a small room, remarkably similar to the one where the mimic found me, and the one to the right disappeared into a corridor further down.

I did what every self-respecting scout would do.

[DETECT TRAP]

I might have been fused with the mimic now, but I still had that good old skill.

The trap was still there, untriggered.

For a moment, I thought I was heading in the wrong way, but I could clearly hear the clanging noise coming from ahead of us.

I guessed the other group must have found their way around it somehow, maybe due to Falin's ranger skills.

A red blob lit up in the ceiling above the entrance to the small room. The left and right corridors were clean from what the skill showed me. I turned back to the trap and read the notification.

[TRAP: Dissolving Acid]

[TYPE: Liquid, Mechanical]

[TRAP RANK: 5]

[DISARM CHANCE: 69%]

I watched intently, moving around the entrance, and made sure to inspect every inch of the doorway.

There was nothing.

Shit.

I'd wasted a precious minute, and I still needed to try and find the mechanism if I was to disarm the trap and make my way inside.

Time to ask for help.

"Mimic, what can we do about this trap? I can't see any disarming mechanism."

"Watch me."

I was suddenly pushed to my knees, rather forcefully, as something heavy grew on my back.

It felt like the hideous growth from before... growing, expanding, and then it popped.

A slime-like something that I couldn't recognize shot out from inside the growth and flew several steps through the air. Even though he'd left my body, we were still connected via a thin strand of flesh. I could feel that strand pulling at my body and spine, almost like the Mimic was some kind of puppet I controlled...or maybe I was the puppet.

It landed in the doorway, wiggled like pudding, and rolled for another five feet, then stopped. The mass remained in place for several seconds, then it seemingly deflated and several mostly-damaged pieces of steel armor clattered to the ground.

Either the weight, the movement, or the sound from the steel hitting the stone floor triggered the trap, and the blob of

acid dripped down from overhead, melting through the steel and creating a hole in the floor.

The stone bubbled and popped before the corrosive liquid disappeared into cracks and flowed into the ground.

“It is safe. Now go.”

“What the hell?” I asked. “How did you know how to disarm that trap? Where did that suit of armor come from?”

“I stuck here long time. And armor...past meal.”

I had a feeling I didn't want to know more.

I got to my feet, still not necessarily feeling safe even though the trap had been triggered. If that acid hit me, not even my bones would have remained.

Stop thinking about that stuff, I thought, chastising myself.

I inched forward and peeked into the room beyond, pinching my nose against the harsh, acrid fumes, only to find another chest sitting out in the open.

It was oddly suspicious. And even more suspiciously familiar.

“Say, is that another mimic? How did it get here?”

“Yes. Go take. It's a friend.”

“Wait, what? Do you want us to take in another mimic? Will it join with me too?”

It stayed quiet for a moment, then hissing laughter resounded in my mind.

“No. That a joke. Real treasure. I don't know what is.”

I shook my head in disbelief. I was stuck with a mimic that had a sense of humor. Or at least it tried to have one.

I hopped over the hole and landed inside the room, almost slipping on the mossy floor. The new space was about as large as the mimic's chamber. Making sure there were no other traps, I stopped and scanned again.

Disarming the trap hadn't given me an essence-gain message. Had the rules for disarming traps changed now that I'd fused with this mimic?

If so, I needed to make sure and understand how it worked. Not just that but losing leveling and skill essence was a huge, well, waste.

But then again, the mimic had done the disarming. Maybe we weren't quite as one as he thought.

"Don't know," the mimic said.

Alright then.

I forced the thoughts aside as I watched the treasure chest in front of me.

It was calling, beckoning with an invisible finger. I approached it carefully, holding my daggers out in front of me defensively.

There were no monsters, no mimics, no traps, but still...I had a lot of spare paranoia.

And after what'd happened today, it was for a good reason.

When nothing happened even when I was close enough to touch the chest, I tapped the lid with my blade, then stabbed it and pulled back quickly, letting out a slightly too dramatic battle cry the mimic probably wouldn't be proud of.

The tip of my blade clanged against a chunk of steel, cutting through the silence. Other than that, nothing happened.

Good. Now we were getting somewhere.

"Here we go," I whispered, pushing the lid open with the tip of my dagger.

A blinding light struck me, and a notification popped up.

[ITEM RECEIVED: One-horned Trout]

[DESCRIPTION: A one-horned trout is a fish that has two special properties. One,

it can alleviate hunger for a week,
casting a buff that can't be dispelled.
Two, it stimulates essence absorption for
the same duration]

Suffice it to say, I was underwhelmed with my first-
ever treasure prize.

And how...just how did a treasure chest inside a bone
dungeon spawn a fish?

Still, I'd never actually gotten to loot a chest before so
I wasn't sure what to expect, but this... wasn't what I wanted
or needed at all.

*"Prize good. I will store it. Go find dessert. Nom-
noms."*

The mimic's tongue lashed out, and it ate up the fish.

Huh.

I guess I didn't need a dimensional storage device after
all, especially after seeing it spit out a suit of armor.

That was something to be thankful for, but still, to me,
the mimic sounded a bit sarcastic... I didn't want it making
fun of my first loot, even if it was just some weird fish.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't shit on my parade, alright?
Anyway, do you want to eat the fish raw or something? I can
cook it for you."

*"No. You eat later when are stronger. I don't eat fish. It
has spell good for friend. But not now. Only in the future, when
you are much stronger."*

Huh.

Maybe it wasn't being sarcastic.

I had to give the mimic credit.

The monster was clear about what it wanted, and in
that future, it saw me getting stronger than I was now.

The one future I saw, however, was saving Melina and
punishing those four bastards for killing me.

Well, attempting to kill me.

And for torturing her.

Hell, if me and Melina got out of this alive, maybe we could relax over a nice rainbow trout dinner.

“No,” Mimic suddenly said. *“Fish valuable. Save for yourself.”*

“Alright then,” I replied. “No sharing the fish.”

“Good. Now get moving.”

I eagerly went into the left corridor, but it was a dead end.

“I thought you scout?” the mimic said. *“Room has no door.”*

“That’s what a scout does,” I replied, feeling a little annoyed. “I scout the rooms, making sure where we go.”

“Scouting take lot of energy. We should eat soon.”

“That’s what I’m thinking too, buddy,” I muttered.

At this point, I wasn’t just hungry for revenge.

I was just hungry in general. This overeager mimic had eaten all my packed food.

I turned toward the only path that I had yet to explore, the rightmost one.

This one was a long corridor that went on far into the distance. As I headed forward, I found a new path that joined into this corridor.

When I looked closely, I found several pairs of matching footsteps, right where that path crossed into this one.

“Bingo,” I muttered.

Every twenty steps, I stopped and scanned for traps.

There wasn’t a single one in the long narrow corridor, which confirmed that my back-stabbing counterparts had already sprung them.

Soon, I came into a large cavern with a high ceiling. Skeletal remains were strewn about.

I stiffened, but I could tell these weren't undead.

These were actual human corpses from adventurers, not reanimated skeletons. There was still some flesh on those limbs.

Hell, if my count was accurate, there were easily a few dozen scattered bodies. They looked old—this wasn't my group of nobles—but it seemed like this trap was one that worked well.

It was probably some poor group of sad sacks that'd come in before us, eager to check out the new dungeon.

But then I noticed something interesting lying on the ground. It was fresh blood.

Someone had gotten hurt recently... but who?

I looked about and found I was in the same predicament as earlier.

There was another split in the path.

The large hall led down several flights of stairs that disappeared into a passageway some hundred steps from where I was standing. Directly across from me was a narrow corridor, and to the left were more stairs, but I could see the far wall from where I stood.

The left was another dead end.

This time, I was close enough that I didn't need to check all the paths.

"They are below," I muttered.

"*Down we go,*" the mimic said. It could hear them too. "*Nom-noms.*"

It was hard, though. My heart raced and my palms were getting sweaty as I thought about our meeting again.

This time, it wasn't because I was afraid, but rather nervous.

What would happen when I...err, when *we* caught up to the others?

Would I enjoy it when the mimic side of me ate people?

Shit, man.

I thought I was going to enjoy this, but now that I had a chance to have revenge, I wasn't so sure.

But then I thought of the slave in the cuffs again.

Even if I didn't eat them, I would have to make them pay, somehow.

With the magic torch in one hand and a short blade in the other, I slowly descended the stairs.

Dark, smoldering torches lined the walls, smoke wafting off several of them, while only a few still burned.

I smelled oil and wood, but also something else I couldn't pick out.

"Do you think you can help when we find them?" I asked.

The question was awfully unspecific, but the mimic seemed to understand it.

"Yes. I help you. Don't ask questions."

Alright then.

No questions. In his own way, this guy could be a real pain in the ass, just like Aldon.

"Any chance you're a noble mimic?" I asked, half-fearing the answer.

"No. Mimics not stupid enough to support such a thing." Well. Maybe the two of us had more in common than we thought.

A fairly bright light loomed far ahead, illuminating the passage from some distant chamber. It could have been anything—candles, torches, braziers, or perhaps, an opening to

the world above. But I had a suspicion it was a party of explorers holding torches.

I moved quietly back up the stairs and extinguished the magical torch. I couldn't risk someone seeing me coming, so I'd have to do the last part in the dark.

I pulled out my second dagger and steadied myself. Killing someone with my own hands was something I'd never done before. With that said, I had been around plenty of death, just never close enough to do it with a knife...

Stepping off the last stair, I stopped just short of the side passage, then peeked around the corner one last time. The lights were moving now.

I scanned for traps and noticed one.

What in the blighted hell?

How had they missed it...

[DETECT TRAP]

[TRAP: Arrow Rain]

[TYPE: Mechanical, Projectile]

[TRAP RANK: 4]

[DISARM CHANCE: 86%]

My eyes widened.

Strangely, the trap pointed toward the room and not the entrance or outside.

That meant only one thing: whoever walked in was supposed to stay there.

The trap would be triggered on their way out instead of shooting people on the way in.

Maybe I could use that to my advantage. I knew for a fact that they couldn't detect traps without me, otherwise, there was no way those cheapskates would have hired me in the first place.

I pointed at it, then activated one of my trapper skills, [Suspend Trap]. There was a big difference between

suspending a trap and disarming it completely.

A suspended trap could be used later.

[SUSPEND TRAP]

[Would you like to attempt and suspend
the rank 4 Arrow Rain trap?]

[YES/NO]

I mentally selected yes and tapped the trap mechanism.
A familiar schematic pulled up.

It was another puzzle, one where I needed to connect all five shapes on the left with the correct shapes on the right using a thread, but the thread couldn't pass through any occupied spaces.

Trapper magic did this sometimes—when it was a complicated trap, it mentally transformed the inner workings into a puzzle, making it easier for my brain to comprehend the trap and remove it.

A timer appeared overhead, counting down from sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight...

Fortunately, I'd solved a trap just like this one a few weeks ago. I knew what I was doing.

The trap clicked and the usual notice popped up. Unlike before, the trap didn't disarm. Instead, I had now gained control over the inner mechanisms.

[You have suspended a rank 4 Arrow Rain
trap]

[You have received 20 skill essence]

[You have 3,230 skill essence points to
assign]

Perfect.

I'd just have to remember to use it on my way out.

With my additional trap set, I made my way slowly toward the chamber, my heart beating comfortably in my throat.

Keeping to the shadows and alcoves, I inched to where the party was busy fighting from the sounds of it, and where it branched off into two more passages.

Just ahead of me was a narrow passage that disappeared around the corner, so I made my way there, slipping past the room and hiding behind a piece of the broken wall. I took a breath, then peeked around the edge.

I could see the room from where I stood.

Not all of it, but a good part. The whole party was busy killing skeletons, even Melina and Jesabel.

Dozens of the reanimated knights, mostly small, but with a few larger ones taller than a human, surrounded the party, attacking from all sides and keeping them busy.

It appeared that their priestess in white was the main reason they were still alive. She was weaving a masterful tapestry of healing spells, buffs, and holy light.

Despite her earlier timidity, she was skilled.

It almost pained me to have to kill her.

Almost.

She'd left me for dead just like the rest of them.

"Keep at it!" Aldo's voice rang out above the crash of steel and rattle of bones. "Maz, Keep the slave alive!"

"Almost all of my heals are on cooldown!" Jesabel yelled as she cast a protection spell over the whole party.

Damn.

Whole-party buffs were rare and extremely expensive. Just how rich were their families to afford such powers?

"*Go. Claim nom-noms, friend! Feed me,*" the mimic said, its voice ringing uncomfortably in my mind.

"Easier said than done..." I started to say, then realized how wrong I truly was. They were set up perfectly.

The skeletons had done most of the work for me.

All five members of their party were overwhelmed and pulling into a tighter group.

Aldon and Maz were busily fighting at the front, with the archer and Melina standing behind them and close to the entrance.

Jesabel was the furthest back, as she stood in the doorway.

“Alright, I can do that I think,” I whispered, holding both of my blades near my chest.

“Yes. I will keep friend safe.”

“Okay, friend. Let’s see how this goes.” I chuckled and lowered myself so the others wouldn’t notice me. “If I die, promise you will eat them. Give them my final regards.”

I tugged at my armor, my sleeves, pants, and boots, making sure everything was in place and wouldn’t come undone in a scuffle.

Then I saw the perfect opportunity.

Two of the large skeleton knights smashed into Aldon, sending him flying.

Jesabel sent a healing spell his way as I inched closer, step by step.

My mind was clear.

This had to happen. They attacked me and then left me for dead, believed owning slaves was okay, and were some pompous scumbags if the first two reasons weren’t enough.

I scanned one last time when I was about ten steps out.

There was still only one trap I could see, but its design was clearer now.

Two hidden panels were dug into the entrance walls and covered with half an inch of what looked like plaster. One of the two activation mechanisms—the one on the right—sat outside the room. But I couldn’t tell what kind of trigger it was. Still, I had to take some risks.

I sheathed my blades and crawled, only stopping when I was several steps behind Jesabel. Her attention was only on the battle before her, lucky for me.

Out of the corner of her eye, Melina turned and looked at the trap, spotted me, and instead of warning the others, she smiled. Her emerald green eyes glistened, and she looked genuinely hopeful.

That just motivated me even more.

The young woman took a step back and out of sight, then flung a fireball at one of the skeleton knights.

With a grim determination and need for revenge, I reared back and drove my blades into Jezebel's back.

Blood splattered my face as the woman in white gasped and tried to twist away. I pulled the blades out with a sickening squelch and drove them back in again, this time into her neck.

“W—what—?” she gasped, all words dying in her throat.

Despite being a healer, and a protector—someone who could pull others back from the brink of death with magic, she was powerless to help herself.

I leaned in and pulled her around to look at me as the mimic stirred on my shoulder. Her eyes went wide and she coughed, blood covering her lips.

“Y—you!”

“Yes, me,” I whispered.

“And me,” the mimic hissed in her ear and licked the side of her face with its tongue. “She is nom-nom, friend.”

“Jesabel! Heal!” Maz yelled. I glanced at him to check, but he was turned away from us and oblivious to what was happening. Just like with the skeletons earlier, he'd totally lost himself to the battle with no understanding of his surroundings.

He was asking for a heal for himself, not for her.

Typical.

The armor-like substance around my body shifted, turning black as night.

Massive, sharp teeth grew from my torso, a tongue appearing next as my chest became a horrendous mouth.

“H-H-Help!” Jesabel cried.

Only Falin heard her.

The archer’s head snapped, then with eyes wide, slowly lifted the bow toward us, an arrow already nocked.

Too late.

The mimic’s tongue snaked around Jesabel’s body and then swallowed her whole.



CHAPTER 5: TACTICAL RETREAT

Jesabel's body just vanished.

It was almost impossible to believe.

There was no way the mimic could swallow her whole, could it?

I could hear it crunching and snarfling, but I didn't feel the weight at all.

"No! No! No! Give me back my sister, you fucking—"
Faln cried, the words dying in his throat.

Sister, huh?

I didn't realize that. They'd looked nothing alike, though I guess they had the same shitty slave-keeping scout-

killing attitude.

He was totally stunned, his bow almost falling to the ground.

Notifications flashed before my eyes.

I closed them as quickly as I could and stepped back out into the passage. I could go back left where I came from, off to the right into a dark corridor, or spin around to go in that direction.

I could feel the mimic stir all around me.

It was happy, far more so than it had any right to be, and I could feel its primal emotions take hold deep within.

The mimic thought Jesabel was delicious.

It was satisfaction in its most basic form.

For a while, Falin just stood there shouting.

“The bastard scout is still alive! He just-he just ate my sister!” Falin cried, his voice cracking.

I felt the man’s pain, his agony. Then again, I’d just eaten his sister.

As unbelievable as it sounded, Aldon and Maz were still fighting the skeletons.

The dolts *still* had no idea what was going on.

The pair whooped and cheered as they attacked—they really were dumb as a pile of bricks. An arrow struck my shoulder, but it barely penetrated the mimic’s armor. The shot still hurt, but it was far from the pain I felt when he first hit me. “Good thing you didn’t drop your bow like you did your sister, piece of shit!” I shot back and turned to run.

He snarled and started chasing after me.

That was perfect.

Falin was the most dangerous one in the group, the only one who knew what he was doing.

Now that he was angry and emotional, I could kill him...

Or better yet, trick him into killing himself.

“*Fight!*” the mimic growled through chomping and crunching noises. “*Why run?*”

I disappeared to the right of the entrance, readying my blades.

The archer came running after me, which was just what I wanted. He was too angry to think, or he thought that I’d keep running, turning my back on him.

Unfortunately for him, I wasn’t that stupid.

The best way to die against a ranged adventurer was to turn your back to him and start running. The last time he hit me, I didn’t have a choice, but now, I had the perfect ace in the hole.

I activated the new skill I received from the mimic— [Mimicry]. Essence flowed through my body, and I could feel my muscles slackening, turning thin and elastic, almost like noodles.

I concentrated, thinking of nothing but the stone wall of the dungeon.

“*Wall, wall, wall, wall.*”

That was the only thought on my mind.

And then my body transformed. My skin took on a grainy, rocky color, identical to the wall behind me, and my whole body suddenly flattened.

“Huh?” Falin muttered under his breath. “Where is he?”

He stared back and forth, looking right at me. He had no idea I was here.

I thought about turning back into a human and just stabbing him. But I had a better idea. I mentally concentrated at the ceiling and activated one of my trapper skills—one I didn’t get to use often, since it was more for killing parties than guiding them.

[Detonate Trap]

The arrow rain trap came to life, releasing several dozen arrows in a heartbeat. The long, steel shafts were tipped with incredibly sharp arrowheads that could penetrate well-made armor and shields. Some of the arrows bounced off harmlessly, but others found gaps in his defenses.

Unfortunately, the System was stingy with leveling essence for killing things with traps, but I didn't care right then.

I just wanted to get these bastards dead as soon as possible.

The arrows passed through his soft, leather armor, piercing his skin. As a ranged damage dealer, his defense was very low, and he hit the ground hard, the bow falling beside him.

The deafening clamor of the arrows got Aldon's attention too.

The idiot decided to investigate the noise.

Sir Tanksalot lumbered towards us, looking as confused and stupid as always.

"What is going on?" Aldon growled. "Maz! Hold the skeletons back!"

The arrows nailed him moments later, and the mimic chortled. "*Hah! What a big moron!*"

Aldon cried as blood spurted from several wounds. He was a bit tougher than Falin, so he was able to survive, even dragging the ranger back with him to safety.

By now, the archer was burbling deliriously, but it seemed like Aldon got the gist of it. Anger flashed across his face as he realized what happened to Jesabel.

"Melina! Do it! Now!" he shouted.

A fireball struck the wall only several steps behind me.

The coral cuffs must have forced her to obey, and while the wall disguise was pretty good, I would still get obliterated if the blast hit me. Sitting around was a bad idea.

“Mimic! Can we escape in wall form?”

“Idiot! Can walls move?”

Point taken.

I canceled [Mimicry], feeling my body expand again, and then I ducked and skidded across the stone floor, scraping my face and hands. I avoided the worst of the blast, but not all of it.

Fortunately, the mimic’s armor was truly marvelous as it absorbed part of the fire blast. Her attack would have probably done me in if I hadn’t merged with the mimic.

Heavy footsteps resounded from inside the room as someone rushed out after me.

Whether it was Aldon, Maz, or Falin after drinking a potion, I didn’t care.

I had to beat a temporary retreat.

I shot to my feet and ran down the long, and mostly dark corridor. There was barely any light ahead of me, but I kept pumping my feet.

I was stronger, but I was far from able to take all three of them at once.

The arrow trap had shown me the way to win—I had to combine the strengths of both scout and mimic.

The heavy clanking sounds soon grew silent as I fled down a long flight of stairs, then rounded a corner.

This time, I didn’t take the same route back. After all, Aldon and the rest had triggered most of the traps on the way there.

I turned left, then right, heading down another long corridor.

As I ran, I checked every room, hoping to find the place I was looking for.

Before long, I was back in the room with the first skeleton knight, the one with the sarcophagus in the middle.

There we go.

[DETECT TRAP]

[TRAP: Exploding Tiles]

[TYPE: Mechanical, Fire]

[TRAP RANK: 4]

[DISARM CHANCE: 79%]

There we go.

It was the exploding tiles from before.

Considering it was a rank 4 trap, it might just hurt any one of the three so I could finish off at least one of my targets. The trap ranks weren't correlated with player levels. A sufficiently ranked trap could wreak havoc even on someone who'd unlocked multiple rebirth stages.

Even better, my initial instinct from before was correct.

I couldn't disable the trap on the other side, but from this side, I could.

It simply had to do with where the mechanism was. In this case, the trigger was throughout the ground, but the ignition which allowed the exploding tiles to activate was on my side.

I activated [Suspend Trap].

I set to work on the mental puzzle, twisting my essence around the various grates and fuel canisters that comprised the trap and received twenty skill essence after suspending it.

There was a resonant click, accompanied by a subtle pressure in my mind. It was now ready to be reused.

"Good. Friend smart. Wait for people," the mimic mumbled. It almost sounded as if he was drifting off to sleep.

Not just that, but it seemed to be complimenting me for the scuffle I'd just survived. I guess the battle must have impressed him.

The mimic was probably the first "person" to have complimented me in a very long time.

Still, it was a mimic. Now, if that wasn't a new low, I didn't know what was.

The mimic seemed alright, but not enough time had passed for me to process the horrible noise of it chowing down on Jesabel...

That chewing sound was disgusting, and I still felt queasy at the thought of eating someone. Yes, they'd tried killing me, but *eating* them?

My hand shot up to my mouth, and I covered it as an unwilling scream passed my lips.

Despite my negative and rather frantic thoughts, the mimic didn't seem to care or even notice. "Are you full or something? You sound drowsy," I said, sliding behind the sarcophagus to hide.

It was far enough so they wouldn't spot me in the dark, but close enough that I could detonate the trap.

"Not full. I am about a quarter full. People are tasty. Want more meat snacks."

"A quarter full? What does that mean?"

"Until I stop being hungry!"

I noticed its use of language was getting better, or at least when it came to conveying its thoughts. Before, it butchered every word, now it just butchered some of them.

"All right, all right. We'll get you more food," I whispered.

If he was just a quarter full...

Well, that worked out pretty well for us, didn't it?

Considering these exploding tiles, the mimic might even get some barbeque.

The thoughts were gross, but I might as well take advantage of the situation and fight for my life since there was no going back now.

I listened for Aldon's party, and from the faint noise, it sounded like they were far in the distance.

Sure, I wanted them to come to this hall and find me, but not until I had calmed down enough so I could fight with a cool head. Plus, I needed time to figure out what had happened with Jesabel.

After eating her, a bunch of notifications flooded in front of me.

I'd dismissed them since the middle of a battle was no time for reading. However, the System was always very insistent when it came to reminding people of information they'd ignored.

Since I might need it in the coming skirmish, I pulled it up now.

[You have used ABSORB on: Jesabel]

[Leveling Essence Received: 258%]

[Stats Received: 1 Stamina, 5 Essence,
1 Charisma]

[Symbiosis has risen by 2%]

[Spells Received: Heal, Cure, Barrier,
Dome, Light Step]

[Item Received: Storage Ring]

"And all that from just a single adventurer," I whispered, trying to come to terms with what had happened.

It was just crazy.

I thought back to what the mimic said, that they killed humans just to grow stronger and learn more abilities.

Still, I understood the mimic's eagerness and his constant hunger. This rate of gaining stats and leveling essence was far past what I would ever have done by myself.

It was gross, but man, eating people paid off.

First things first. I had absorbed the priestess, or rather, the mimic had eaten and then absorbed her.

Because of that, I received two-and-a-half levels—which was indicated in the essence received being 258%—along with several stats, and my symbiosis had also risen by two percent.

I figured the gained stats were based on Jesabel's own abilities. As a caster, her most important stat was essence, the pool of magic she drew from to cast spells. As a result, that was the largest stat increase after absorbing her, which I supposed made sense, in so far as eating someone to grow stronger could make any sense.

It wasn't really something I'd thought about until today.

Next up were the spells.

I hadn't received just one, two, or three.

No, I'd received five spells that should prove to be of great help. All those buffs, skills, and heals that I'd admired... they were mine now.

I let my excitement simmer down and managed to slow my breathing, then listened for any indication that the four were coming.

They were still far off.

Once I was confident that I was still alone, I pulled up the spell window, to learn what all of them did. Even after gaining a lot of power and experience, I still had my old caution and paranoia. I wasn't going to run in using skills I wasn't familiar with.

SPELL WINDOW [5/10].

SPELL: Heal (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Heal a light amount of damage on a single target and close very small wounds.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 9 Essence

SPELL: Cure (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Cure all low-level debuffs, toxins, and burns with a 50% chance from a single target.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 13 Essence

SPELL: Barrier (UC), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Decrease received physical damage by 10%.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

DURATION: 30 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 20 Essence

SPELL: Dome (UC), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Decrease received essence damage by 10%.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

DURATION: 30 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 24 Essence

SPELL: Light Step (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Muffle all footsteps and increase walking speed by 100%.

COOLDOWN: 15 seconds

DURATION: 10 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 24 Essence

Interesting.

My spells had a nice duration, so with up to thirty minutes per buff, I wouldn't need to recast them as often.

None of my clients had ever bothered casting either [Dome] or [Barrier] on me, so now I felt kind of cheated since the buffs were so cheap essence-wise.

I didn't have enough essence status points to learn the two protective buffs. It seemed like even though the mimic had given me the potential to use the skills, I still had to follow the requirements, but I was happy to see that I had enough for the movement spell.

I knew how casting worked, thanks to watching other people I'd partied and fought with in my past.

So I imagined myself as the target and then just thought of activating [Light Step].

It worked just as advertised.

After I cast the buff, my walking speed doubled and I wasn't going to make any sounds unless I ran.

Perfect. What wasn't there to love about that?

But after using the skill, I felt another strange tug on the back of my mind. I checked my body and saw everything was alright.

Everything was normal, but there was one weird thing...

There was one line I failed to see at the very start: the five out of ten spells.

Did this mean I had only five slots left or five uses?

"Say, mimic?"

It didn't reply right away and instead responded with moaning pleasurable noises. It was horrific considering I knew what it was doing.

"Yes."

"How's...the food doing? You almost done eating?"

"No. I savor. She is tender."

Tender.

Fucking hell, that was gross.

I shuddered and had to take a deep breath. Before I could finish my question about the five slots, I heard the telltale sound of steel boots hitting the stone floor.

The group was almost here.

“I know he’s in there! Look! There’s blood!” Maz said, his voice resounding from outside in the corridor.

I could never mistake it for the other two as it was a pitch higher and full of malice. Aldon was cold and calculating when he wasn’t bumbling around, and the archer sounded indifferent when speaking, though I was sure that he was freaking out right now.

I’d have to keep my trap back until the tank entered. It’d be easiest to blast him with the explosive trap.

“Isn’t this the hall with the trap?” Falin asked. “Look at the sarcophagus. The scout said there were those tiles.”

He was in pain, that much was clear from the strain in his voice. Too bad I didn’t manage to finish him off right away, but that was all right.

I’d take them down one by one.

Still, I was annoyed that Falin made them back off.

Would they turn away?

Then I’d have to come up with a new plan.

Fortunately, the other group was still a bunch of idiots.

“We’ll make her go in first then,” Maz said, shoving Melina forward.

Perfect.

They didn’t realize I could control the traps. Melina would pass by freely, and that would only build their false confidence.

Melina, the female mage in the hood, suddenly stumbled into the room.

I watched Maz push her through the entrance from where I was hunched behind the sarcophagus. The axe wielder looked ready to split me in half. His teeth were grit, and his eyes were almost crossed with rage.

Ironically, the push helped me.

Now, Melina wouldn't get caught in the trap. Maz had pushed her right over the tiles.

"Looks like it's safe," Maz grunted. He entered next, but I didn't activate the trap. The mimic and I could deal with him in other ways. Even though he was powerful, he specialized in damage, not tankiness.

I focused on the exploding tiles and waited as Aldon stepped into view next, but the way he moved was off.

His usually cocky air was lacking and his shield hung limply next to him, leaning against his leg. He was the only one I couldn't really damage with my short daggers due to his superior armor.

Aldon leaned against the doorway, seeming visibly distraught.

Either he was sad about Jesabel dying, or maybe the previous trap did more damage than I hoped it would.

Regardless, it was time for round two.

I activated my magic.

[Detonate Trap]

The tiles flared, and then fire exploded from the ground. Flames surrounded Aldon's armor, and he screamed.

Some of the fire pierced straight through even his pricey armor, some clanked off against the magical protection, and others seared him through the gaps.

"Aldon!" Falin cried from behind.

Maz shot around and stared at his leader.

I couldn't see his face from where I stood, but it must have been pure terror and shock.

I decided to go for him next.

Falin was already injured, and it wouldn't take much to finish him off.

I could try and cripple Maz now too, leaving Aldon for later, especially since the exploding tiles had separated the

group.

I moved out from behind the sarcophagus and beelined for the axe-wielder.

Luckily, he still had his back turned to me.

Unfortunately, Aldon saw me.

He tried to speak and point with his sword, but the constant damage from the tiles was too much.

He fell to his knees, some smoke even coming out of his mouth.

Melina cried out and pointed to the far corner, directly opposite from us.

“There!” she cried. “He’s hiding there!”

The idiot believed her, and he turned away.

Maz grabbed his axe and searched the darkness, crouched low, and moved stealthily. I followed him.

Meanwhile, now that the exploding tiles had finally run out, Falin was trying to get their leader to stand but had little success lifting the man and his bulky armor. Even more so since his arm was a mess, thanks to the arrow trap from earlier.

He was huffing and straining, but the archer still spotted me just as I made it to his friend. Falin’s eyes widened in shock, and his mouth opened to cry out a warning.

Maz suddenly stiffened. He must have read the other man’s face, but I was already too close.

Unable to do much damage through his armored back, I stabbed upwards at his armpits.

The tips slid in between sheets of steel and studded leather, going in up to the hilt. He was a tall man, almost two heads taller than me, so I couldn’t go for my preferred target: his neck. The armpits were the next best thing.

“Mimic! What are you waiting for? Help me!”

The gluttonous creature didn’t bother responding, for whatever reason, and left me to deal with the three by myself.

Maz kicked out and caught me in the chest, the power behind his blow sending me flying.

I accidentally released the grip on my long daggers.

I grabbed for my chest, feeling gut-wrenching pain shoot through my chest. The blow had probably damaged my ribs, and if it hadn't it was probably very close as I could barely breathe.

Once again, the mimic armor congealed around my body had saved me. Maz's strength stat was no joke, he was much stronger than an ordinary person.

He must have had over a hundred points in strength to do such damage with an ordinary kick. Fortunately, that strength was now a little bit restricted—the daggers were still stuck in his armpits.

I could see he was trying to lift his arms, but his face was set into a silent scream. Swinging his ax was probably beyond him at this point.

But I wasn't much better off.

I pressed my hand against my chest and focused on using the [Heal] spell. White light flared to life and entered my body. I could feel some of the pain fade right away, but most of it still lingered.

“You—how do you—shit! Heal me and I might let you live, you bastard!” Maz snapped as he strode toward me, still stumbling awkwardly due to his injured arms.

A fireball suddenly erupted at the far wall, striking the doorway. Large chunks of stone dropped from overhead, slamming into Aldon and burying part of him.

The battered tank groaned and fell to the ground, temporarily stunned beneath a pile of stone.

My eyes widened, and I grinned despite the dangerous circumstances.

Melina had saved me, but now she was in danger herself.

I didn't exactly know how the coral cuffs worked, but one of the things I did remember was that you couldn't attack anyone whose essence was imbued into the cuffs.

At least not directly.

The way she abused the cuff's built-in System oath was genius. Falin climbed over him and fell over a piece of rock, then shot to his feet again and climbed past the debris.

It was more bad luck than clumsiness, but whatever the cause, there were two of them here now.

"Maz, damn it! Kill that scout! I'll take care of this little bitch before she does more harm! Now!"

Falin raised his bow with his one good hand and plucked an arrow from the quiver with his mangled hand, nocked it... and then Melina was running.

"Go there!" I yelled, pointing at the passageway we'd originally entered the first time. "It's the exit! Now it's your turn to run! Just go!"

A moment of reluctance showed on her face, but it disappeared quickly. Melina nodded and ran past me, her palm pointing up into the air.

An orb of fire appeared at her hand and then flew at the pillar where the archer was standing.

Falin just stepped to follow after her when a chunk of stone exploded toward him from the fire orb's impact.

Shards peppered his side, and a piece of stone slid just in front of his foot. He lost his footing and fell over the piece of rock, falling face-first to the floor.

For a moment, I hoped he was knocked out, but he got back up again. He was injured, but sadly I couldn't get rid of him—I had no ranged moves, and the mimic was silently in snoozeland.

Falin pushed through the pain, snarling.

"Get back here, slave!" He ran even past me—despite his desire for revenge, he knew he couldn't let the slave escape

and damage Aldon's reputation. The thing was, Aldon was beneath a pile of stone. I didn't know if he was alive or dead—hopefully the latter.

That just left Maz as Falin stumbled away.

It was one-on-one.

Maz roared and stepped toward me.

I looked back at him, half-expecting to see his arms raised, but he couldn't push past the pain. They still hung limply to his sides.

A painful snarl was still painted across his face. The blades had dug deep into his armpits, and they weren't coming out.

I stepped away, easily dodging since the [Light Step] movement buff was still active.

Maz's kick went wide, narrowly missing my face, and I saw an opportunity.

Despite the risk, I lunged and tackled his other leg.

Maz almost lost his balance.

Almost.

His right knee came up to meet my face but it missed me by inches, leaving him even wider open.

With a hard yank, I pulled at his leg but the man was as solid as a bear.

I didn't know if it was the adrenaline rushing through my body or just natural stupidity, but I bit down on the backside of his knee where there was no armor. My teeth weren't mimic-sharp, but they dug into his skin and I tasted salty blood.

“Motherfucker!” Maz cried and tried to step away.

Thanks to my bite, most of his weight was placed on his back leg.

With a yank, I pulled that leg toward me and he fell through his knee, falling over on his side.

The blade that was still stuck in his armpit caught between the floor and his weight, meeting resistance for just a heartbeat, and then punched through his neck.

I threw myself to the side as he fell, but the massive axe was still strapped to his back. As his body came down, the axe managed to cut into the back of my leg.

It was pure dumb bad luck, but it might have doomed me. The axe hadn't dug deep, but it was enough to cut my leg open.

I stared down at Maz.

He was still and unmoving. With my blade stuck through his neck, there wasn't even any burbling, just a satisfying pool of blood growing on the ground.

I'd won—no thanks to a certain someone.

“Mimic! Where the fuck are you?” I cursed, scrabbling to my feet and pulling away from the brute.

Nothing.

The mimic still wasn't responding.

It was either asleep, in a food coma, or enjoying the show, which meant I was on my own.

I placed my hand on my leg and cast [Heal], feeling a surge of healing power hit me.

It was likely far from enough to close the wound and fully heal it, but it had to be enough to get me back up and fighting.

A debuff notification flashed before me.

[DEBUFF: Bleed]

[DESCRIPTION: You are losing blood at a rapid pace. Close the wound before it gets infected or you bleed out]

[DURATION: 60 seconds]

A small counter appeared in the periphery of my vision along with a blood drop. I never received a debuff before aside

from a poison arrow I once caught in my hip.

Back then a similar small image was in the same place, but it had been a green skull instead.

I put my hand on my leg again and cast [Cure].

The debuff disappeared and I let out a sigh of relief. Jesabel's powers were coming in handy, that much was certain.

Now... how much stronger would I become if I could eat the other three? Would I—?

"I'm back!" the mimic said cheerfully. *"I have digested that woman. Time for more nom-noms. Wait. Why are you hurt?"*

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Sleep. Enjoy sleeping after eating."

"Even on a battlefield?! We could have died!"

"Like I said. Way of life. Mimic wants to eat and then food coma. Rather die than give that up."

For crying out loud!

I wanted to curse him, but at least he had my back again. Shit. I would have to account for that unreliability after eating someone.

Fortunately, [Heal] only had a twenty-second cooldown.

Just a few more seconds... and [Heal] came off cooldown, so I used it again.

The wound was finally closing, stemming the flow of blood. Most of the pain had faded, which was a good sign.

I thought about absorbing Aldon and Maz now, but that would take time, especially since the mimic might fall asleep again after.

I had to go for Melina and Falin.

Falin had probably caught up to her by now.

From what I'd noticed, it was mostly Aldon who could order her around directly with the coral cuffs, but she probably couldn't attack anybody in the party with her magic.

Without me, she was screwed.

I shot to my feet and fought the urge to run.

I had to balance speed and strength, and my claimed [Light Step] buff was still up. I walked instead, hurrying along.

My leg still hurt, but this way I wasn't straining it too much, and more importantly, the archer wouldn't hear me coming.

Melina seemed smart from what I'd seen so far, but I knew she'd get caught.

There was only one direction she could have gone, and that was toward the exit.

I made it into the room where we'd fought the first group of skeletons when a commotion ahead drew my attention.

Were they fighting?

A fireball struck the ceiling of the passage ahead of me, and more debris rained down.

"No, no, no!" I hissed, trying to make it before the ceiling collapsed.

I hustled, running as fast as I could. Then—perhaps because Melina heard my cry—I received further help. Part of the wall tilted, holding the ceiling up.

I slid through and used [Heal] one more time as the cooldown timer hit zero.

Even though some of the debris hit me, the pain barely even registered.

So that was the power of a healer, huh? No wonder they were worth their weight in gold.

“Get back here, you freak! Come...back!” Falin hissed, his voice filled with anger and malice.

“Let go of me! That hurts! Let go!” Melina cried.

I rushed into the small room where we’d entered the dungeon at the very start and stopped, only then remembering that I hadn’t taken either of my blades with me.

Fucking hell.

Of all the times to screw up.

Maz was dead, but in my rush to save Melina, I’d forgotten to pull the blades free.

Cold sweat formed on the back of my neck as I realized there wasn’t much I could do now. Sure, Falin was wounded, but with his level and all the extra stats, he was still stronger than me.

“No! Don’t!” Melina cried again.

I grit my teeth.

My fears didn’t matter.

I’d just have to make do somehow.

“I can help,” the mimic said. *“I’ll make up for sleeping when you fight.”*

“Alright then,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

I took in a deep breath and hurried out into the last passage. The two were moving toward the exit.

“Melina! Run!” I yelled, trying to draw Falin’s attention.

It worked marvelously as Falin turned my way, his face twisted in hatred and grief.

Just then, Melina stomped on his foot, then swung an elbow into his gut. He doubled over, finally letting go of her hair.

“You shit!” he cried, pulling out a longsword from thin air.

I didn't know what kind of storage item he had on him, but it must have been a ring most likely, as the weapon appeared right in front of him. "I'll get you for killing my sister! I'll let you bleed out and then stomp you into paste!"

Melina took advantage of his tantrum, splitting out the back. She went through the swirling portal, then warped away.

Good.

She was safe now.

I grinned and raised my arms, showing I had no items.

Then I started to run toward him.

Startled, he stepped back and frowned at me.

He must have been wondering what I was doing, but *I* wasn't going to be the problem. He'd seen the trick already, but fighting against a half-human half-mimic combination...

That went against his every instinct.

The mimic's tongue lashed out, and I heard a loud crack.

Falin's leg shattered.

Blood, bone, and tendons flew everywhere.

The archer was strong, but not as strong as a second rebirth monster. I'd never seen Mimic hit at full strength yet, but it was like his leg had been liquidated.

The archer cried, hitting the ground.

He stared up at me, his face twisted in hatred and his hands clenched into fists.

"I'll never—not like this! Fuck you!" he spat and then cried out. "You ruined... everything! Jesabel's... marriage and ___"

If I'd been feeling any remorse for hurting him, it was now gone.

The man was mad!

He was the one who had tried to kill *me*.

And was he really hoping that if Jesabel married Aldon, he'd somehow rise to fame?

“Falin, you were the one who shot me, you idiot,” I said, my eyes arched in disbelief. “You wanted to kill me!”

“And I'll kill you again!” Falin cursed. “In our next life. I'll—”

He broke off, gasping and wheezing in pain.

His great speech might have sounded a little more impressive otherwise.

He gave up and decided to try running instead, but it was almost impossible with his obliterated leg and injured arm. He just sort of dragged himself, like a human worm.

Hah.

I'd felt a little bad about Jesabel, but I had no sympathy for Falin. He was the one who'd actually shot me, after all.

I stepped forward.

“Goodbye, Falin. May you be reborn as a worm and ___”

“Ahh! It hurts!” he cried, cutting me off from finishing my villainous monologue. Or whatever I'd been planning on saying. Truth be told, I'd been making it up as I went along.

I watched the archer pushing himself away and toward the exit. In the several seconds it took for me to gather my thoughts, he'd already managed to widen the gap between us. Given a few minutes or so, Falin would get to swirling blackness and make it out. Unfortunately for him, it might as well have been a mile.

I grabbed his sword and stepped forward.

Then I plunged it into his chest, eliciting a dull scream.

He gasped for air and then grabbed the blade with both hands and laughed, all sanity falling out of his eyes.

Had he broken?

Of the four psychos, he'd seemed like the one with the most sense, albeit a little mad.

"What are you laughing about?" I asked.

He nodded toward my right shoulder, leering at the mimic.

"We'll keep a...place warm for you...in hell."

I just stared impassively down at him.

For Falin, I didn't even feel guilty.

First next lives, and then hell, huh?

He didn't seem to have a very clear theology, that was for sure. Guys like him only believed in themselves, not higher powers.

The mimic's stalker eyes swayed back and forth right next to my head

"He nom-noms. Can I eat him now?"

I nodded, chuckling at the monster's eagerness.

Maybe I was going to go to hell for this. Still, it was better than dying. If it weren't for the little guy on my shoulder, things would have gone according to Falin's plan, and I would have died an hour or so ago.

"It's an all-you-can-eat buffet, mimic, but we've still got two courses left, so don't overdo it."

"Ok."



CHAPTER 6: PLANNING AHEAD

Watching, feeling, and hearing the mimic eat for the second time was just as bad as the first time around. The crunching, gnashing of teeth, and smacking of lips were just utterly hideous, especially since it felt like it was echoing out from inside my body.

But then, several notifications appeared before me, making sure the discomfort was short-lived.

There was nothing like more power and abilities to clear away a moral quandary or personal queasiness!

[You have used ABSORB on: Falin]

[Leveling Essence Received: 197%]

[Stats Received: 2 Agility, 1 Charisma]

[Symbiosis has risen by 2%]

[Skills Received: Hide, Sharpen Edge,
Snipe]

[Item Received: Storage Ring]

Two of my stats had risen after using [Absorb].

For some reason, this haul wasn't as good.

It might have been because I hadn't gained as many levels this time.

In general, the greater the experience gap between me and the monster—or in this case, monster in human skin—I killed, the more experience I'd get.

Back when I killed Jesabel, I was lower-leveled than when I killed Falin, so this time, it was less of a relative victory so to speak.

Still, I thought of it as a success. Especially if we could continue absorbing stats from our unfortunate...nom-noms.

However, there was something else that I noticed.

“Mimic, please correct me if I'm wrong, but do my stats rise along with our symbiosis? If so, then your stats should be as important as the symbiosis stat.”

The mimic was at the second rebirth stage, and his stats were a lot higher than mine. If symbiosis meant how much percent of his stats transferred to me, then I wanted to know what was the maximum I could get.

Unfortunately, he didn't respond, which meant that Falin was probably just as delicious as Jesabel...

Considering they were siblings, maybe it was a prime line of flesh, in the mimic's mind.

Fuck.

That was gross.

I groaned and leaned against the wall, tired and hurting, but I still had some presents to unwrap after checking my current state.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	Human
STAGE	Rebirth 1	LEVEL	22
LEVEL ESSENCE	3%	SKILL ESSENCE	3,210
CLASS	Scout	SUB-CLASS	Mimic
STRENGTH	18	ESSENCE	16
STAMINA	20	AGILITY	20
CHARISMA	10	FREE STAT POINTS	5
SYMBIOSIS	11%	STATE	Happy
STORED MASS	21%	DIGESTING MASS	24%

Not much had changed, but still enough to notice a difference.

My muscles were also more pronounced and I felt lighter on my feet. The essence within me was more palpable, and I just felt...good.

Just like last time, the stat increases were calculated presumably based on the enemy that I'd consumed. Since Falin was an archer, his best stats came in Agility.

Aside from the status points, two new types of stat showed up in my status window.

The first was “stored mass.”

Based on what the mimic had told me, that was Jesabel with all her gear. He’d finished absorbing her...meaning he could probably use her mass for something?

I would have to ask later.

And then there was the digesting mass, which was at 24%. I figured it was Falin’s body with his gear, and probably why the mimic had fallen silent again.

I renewed my [Light Step] spell and felt it take hold.

It was an exhilarating feeling as the magic enhanced my body.

Was that what mages and priests felt like all the time?

Then it was no wonder how mages liked to fight and kill things with big spells. It almost felt like a drug.

I pushed the feeling away and checked the skills I got from Falin.

There were only three this time.

SKILL WINDOW [3/10].

SKILL: Hide (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Lower the chance of being spotted

while hiding by 100%.

COOLDOWN: 60 seconds

DURATION: 5 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 19 Agility

SKILL: Sharpen Edge (R), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Increase your party’s physical damage

output by 10%.

DURATION: 10 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 15 Agility

SKILL: Snipe (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Use a ranged weapon and hit the target with a 100% chance, dealing base damage.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

DURATION: 5 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 11 Agility

I might not have gotten five spells this time, but [Sharpen Edge] and [Snipe] made up for it. Hitting someone with a hundred percent chance was way overpowered. It meant that my opponents basically had to tank my attack instead of just dodging it.

I couldn't believe I had all these abilities.

There had to be some kind of a catch—maybe something to do with the number next to the skill window, which showed [3/10] this time. Back with Jesabel, there'd been an [5/10] on my spells window.

Was that the limit of borrowed spells and skills?

But that was just absurd. Ten skills and ten spells, for a total of twenty abilities.

It just felt too good to be true.

How was I able to use skills and spells that didn't belong to my class?

Sure, archer and scout belonged to the same class *tree*, but there was still an ocean of difference between a trap specialist like me and a bow user like Falin. And a priestess like Jesabel was just out of my class tree entirely.

Ordinarily, I wouldn't be able to buy them from the guilds. The very System that governed our world and provided these powers wouldn't allow it.

Still...

The System clearly *had* allowed it, because I now possessed these skills.

Was this some secret I'd stumbled upon?

Barely anyone knew anything about the System, and what little information the guilds possessed, was closely and jealously guarded, with guilds in each town refusing to work with each other and share notes.

I probably wasn't going to figure it out myself, so I decided to just focus on the results.

What mattered to me was that it'd given me a chance to become stronger, faster, deadlier, and self-sufficient.

Sure, I was merged to a bloodthirsty, gluttonous mimic, but unless he actively tried to wrestle control away from me, I was alright with having him around.

The eyes and the small box were growing on me... literally.

On top of that, I wasn't restricted to new skills.

I did have new items too...kind of.

I pulled out the two rings I'd taken from Falin and his sister. I was a little surprised they still existed, considering the ravenous mimic.

Maybe the mimic couldn't eat them as they provided spatial storage powers. And if a mimic had its own spatial storage where it kept its food and the gear...it made some sense. I didn't know what would happen if you put spatial storage in spatial storage. It might cause some kind of collapse, and since the mimic was mixed with my body, I wasn't interested in finding out through first principles.

I pulled them from my pocket and opened my hand, letting the torchlight illuminate them.

They were two identical, wide, steel bands.

If I didn't know what I was doing, I'd probably think twice about picking them up from the street. There was nothing remarkable about them at first glance.

However, I knew they were storage rings from experience. These things were expensive I knew as I'd always

wanted them, but I was stuck with my rucksack.

Now I had two.

The problem?

Once a storage item bonded with the user, no one outside of their bloodline could access it unless the storage space was reset. Doing that would destroy everything inside, though.

I'd hoped that maybe the mimic eating them would let me open the rings—since their bloodline was technically inside of me, as unsavory as that sounded—but no luck.

“Unless I have someone reset them, I guess, but that shit's expensive and counterproductive,” I muttered, staring at the two rings.

Considering Jesabel and Aldon were betrothed, based on Falin's pre-death ramblings, I would have expected her ring to be stacked with expensive gifts, money, and all kinds of powerful treasures. The higher-tier spells she had cost a lot, and she had truly been good at her job, so someone clearly was investing in her.

As for Falin, well, I wouldn't bet much on his ring, since it seemed like he was more of a minor noble hanger-on to Aldon's group, but one never really knew. He might have been a hoarder, and his clothes were still much better than mine.

Either way, I pocketed the rings for now.

I had to get going.

Any particular dungeon would let anyone in once per day.

Now, I'd eaten Jesabel and Falin, but if someone else came along and found Aldon and Maz, I would be screwed.

Sure, they'd been using coral cuffs, but there unfortunately wasn't much of a defense for eating your clients.

Every time a party hired a scout like me through the Adventurer's Guild, traces remained. We were linked to each

other on an official register. If only I'd charged less and didn't take the job through the Adventurer's Guild, no one would know about me, but it was too late to cry over spilled milk now.

I had to get rid of the evidence, by eating their corpses, too. Of course, losing out on some extra stat points and skills was another reason to hurry the hell up.

The one silver lining was Melina.

She made it out of the dungeon and was outside, hopefully safe.

Alone.

And still cuffed.

Sure, her hands weren't bound to one another directly, but coral cuffs were more damning than iron shackles... and they diminished her powers.

Maybe it wasn't that much of a positive.

Either way, I decided to return to Aldon and Maz, first, especially since it took a while for the mimic to finish absorbing bodies, so I had to get started right away.

My only barrier was the skill cooldown on [Absorb]. It was ten minutes, and considering the mimic ate Falin only several minutes before, I still had some time left before I could eat the other two.

I squeezed through the caved-in part of the passageway and used [Hide], familiarizing myself with the skill.

My movement speed dropped by a third and I almost tripped over my feet. The shift in movement speed was jarring.

I gasped. "What just—?"

Then I caught myself, calming down and reasoning through the new ability.

It did make sense if you thought about it.

When hidden, light would reflect off my body so if I moved too quickly, it wouldn't do its job properly.

I needed to keep that in mind. Using a new skill at the wrong time really could kill me.

[Hide] on its own lowered the user's movement speed while greatly enhancing their camouflage capabilities. It wasn't the kind of skill I could use while running from an enemy who could see me. I would have to duck back and slip away before using it.

I stopped and leaned against the wall, waiting as I held my hand out. My skin darkened, and then the light seemed to bend around and pass through it, becoming one with the backdrop.

"So, this is how it works," I whispered. "Light bends around me, but only if it's dark enough. I'll have to test this out when the sun is out later," I whispered, genuinely surprised by the skill.

Then I hurried along the passage as fast as [Hide] would allow.

Considering the deadliness of the trap, plus the fact that Melina had brought the ceiling crashing down on them with a fireball, I was fairly certain that both enemies were dead, but staying calm and quiet was still a best practice for scouts, and despite my new power, I wasn't going to dump the old habits that'd kept me alive so far.

Keeping my ears and eyes focused around and ahead of me, I made quick progress. In case one—or both—managed to heal themselves using a high-level healing potion or one of those healing artifacts, I might even stumble into them.

"Calm down," I whispered. "They'd be here already, but since they aren't..."

The idea of the burly tank or the murderous axe raider looking for me made goosebumps form on my arms and my neck.

I stopped upon entering the great hall.

Maz lay close by, dead as a doornail, and Aldon's body was still partially buried beneath the doorway.

Neither moved nor made a sound, but they could still be playing dead...

“Mazzy boy? You alive?” I asked, raising my voice.

One of them grunted in surprise, but it wasn't Maz.

Aldon, it appeared, was still alive.

He was stuck under rocks though, and stunned, so I thought I might as well arm myself properly.

I walked over to Maz's corpse and pulled my left dagger free with relative ease.

The one on the right was wedged firmly between his ribs, so it took me a moment to get it free. They were both coated with congealed blood.

“Sorry for leaving you, guys. I still love you two, all right?” I whispered, eyeing my weapons.

The left dagger had a big dent in its blade, while the right one broke off at the tip.

Talk about crappy quality...

Still, the daggers were mine. It was a good thing they couldn't read my thoughts like the mimic on my shoulder.

I looked over to Maz's axe.

Now that was an actual weapon.

It was appealing by appearance and looked deadly, but I had nowhere to store it. And dragging the heavy weapon along would be tedious work.

Still, I lifted it and put it over my shoulder to test the weight. The weapon slipped almost right away from my hand. It was too heavy for me, at least for now.

“Mimic?” I hopefully asked, wondering if I could get help.

No response.

Alright, the ten minutes of snoozing digestion were obviously not over yet, so I did the next best thing and made my way over to Aldon.

The tank couldn't move his head, but his eyes followed me as I closed in on him.

“Y—you—are alive?” Aldon wheezed. “I hoped... Falin...”

“Dead,” I replied, shaking my head.

The tank was in a piss-poor state.

His body lay at an odd angle, and a fractured bone stuck from his uncovered arm. It was mangled and half of his hand was missing.

His skin was scorched, and it looked like he'd been through hell. Burns marred his body, and he even smelled roasted.

Shit, the trap had really done a job on him.

So had the ceiling caving in, for that matter.

“Serves you right,” I said, feeling no sympathy. “We could have breezed through this dungeon, but instead, you chose to betray me. That makes *you* the scumbag in this story.”

“Heh, you—what...ever. Can you finish—it hurts. Everything...hurts. It just hurts...really hurts...”

He meandered on for a while. His eyes were filled with pain, and it looked like he didn't even care anymore.

Well, I wasn't going to let him off just yet.

I pointed at his wrist.

“Tell me, Aldon, how can I access your black bracelet? I'm sure you have some interesting things in there.”

“You can't—bound to blood and—”

The mimic's stalker eyes grew out from my shoulder, then the small boxy body appeared and it started jumping up and down excitedly.

“Looks tasty. Nom-noms! Big armor. Strong and expensive,” the mimic said. He seemed even more excited about Aldon than he did about Jesabel and Falin, and he'd burst out without even warning me.

Aldon turned, staring at him, his mouth agape in horror. “What the hell...what is that thing...”

I turned to the mimic, scowling. “Why are you talking out loud? Didn’t he just hear you? And what does armor have to do with him being tasty?”

“I cannot eat him as nom-noms unless you remove the rocks. Get to work. Talk less. I want to eat,” the mimic said, pouting a little.

“Wait, what? I can’t clear all that rubble with just my hands!” I protested.

“Ok.”

The mimic’s armor shifted and turned into a long, thick lever with a sharp tip.

It shot out toward the debris and slammed in between two large rocks. With a heft, the upper piece rolled off and tumbled to the ground, almost crushing Aldon’s head in the process.

I stared in awe at the mimic’s handiwork.

It was quick and efficient.

Only a minute later, I found myself pulling Aldon from beneath a pile of debris.

The shattered pieces of rock were mostly smaller and didn’t weigh much. Besides, I was now much stronger than I had been that morning so a few rocks weren’t much of an issue.

I found both of Aldon’s hands missing, half of his left leg, and his back crushed. I could see as much from the massive crack in his armor and all the blood that had congealed there, and again, he smelled actively roasted.

Yet he was still somehow alive.

That went only to say how much the System didn’t make sense in certain situations.

There had been this one story that circulated for a while in the Adventurer’s Guild, how a tank had been burned

so badly, that his flesh had started melting into his bone and that he'd been missing both arms.

Healers managed to patch him up and he'd made it out alive, only to regenerate over mere days and return to battle the same drake that had almost killed him.

And I believed it.

I'd seen many nasty wounds on surviving adventurers, only to see them back and up a few days later. If they had the money to pay for treatment...

In the end, Stamina, Health, and sometimes plain and simple determination let people like Aldon live, not that it'd do much for him in this state.

"I can use [Heal] to keep you alive for a while longer, maybe torture you, or you can die with relative ease, Aldon. Tell me where my money is. You owe me that much after trying to kill me." I narrowed my eyes, trying to look and sound way more brutal than I really was.

Yes, I had started eating people today and never thought that'd happen.

But still, torture wasn't a line I thought I'd cross just yet. Aldon never gave me that decision.

A weak smile crossed his lips.

"In my... bracelet," he chuckled, weakly. "You'll never—I'm taking...with me."

Those were his last words, and then he died, sealing my gold coins with him.

He'd smiled defiantly, so I leaned in, pulled the bracelet from his stump, and stashed it away with my rings.

Unfortunately, his siblings probably weren't going to help me open it. If anything, they'd guessed that I'd killed him and put a bounty on my head through the System.

As I'd noted earlier, there were official records held at the Adventurer Guild headquarters, and since the information was stored on the System, it wasn't like a document I could

sneak in and steal. The Sherazad family would know I'd gone out with the party.

“Ugh, this is a mess,” I muttered. “I’ll need to disappear as well, I guess. Maybe to one of the bigger cities where his family has no presence.”

I stopped and thought for a moment.

The thought sounded appealing, and not just for me, but if Melina wanted to join me... the problem would be her cuffs.

In Eslant, very few people knew how to get rid of them, which was another reason why they were considered so horrifying.

And at this point, there was a reasonable chance that no one would help us get rid of them, even if they could. I had enough common sense to tell that the authorities would consider eating nobles worse than having coral cuffs...the only reason the cuffs were socially stigmatized was to protect the nobility in the first place.

So that meant there was only one thing Melina could do: join *me*, an unknown person, to travel possibly for weeks, all while cuffed, to a place she didn't know or could trust.

Would she want to do that? I shook my head and shrugged, deciding that I'd cross that bridge when I got there.

For now, I needed to absorb the two so I could go.

Unfortunately, with a ten-minute timer between the two of them...

I glanced further into the dungeon.

I might as well get a post-meal delve in. If anything, that was better than sitting suspiciously next to a pair of corpses. It was brutal, but adventurers left the dead aside all the time.

Of my options, this was the best one and would present the least guilt if I was unlucky enough for someone to go in.

“Mimic, what if I took Aldon’s black blade? Do you think I could finish off those skeletons in that big room where you ate Jesabel?”

“Jesabel? Who?”

“Um...the first snack,” I said, hardly believing the words coming out of my mouth.

“Ah, yes. Her. We can probably beat the skeletons. Maybe. You want to try?” the mimic asked.

I frowned.

The mimic was sounding more and more human. That was another strange thing.

“Wait, why is your speech even more different now? It’s almost impeccable.”

“The woman and her brother were smart. I got part of her memories and power. We are stronger now. The more I eat, the smarter I get.”

Now that was just creepy.

It would talk like the people it ate?

I wasn’t sure I liked that.

It was like I was haunted or something...

“Ok,” the mimic said.

“Ok, what?” I asked, shooting the creature on my shoulder a sideways glance.

“I speak like me. That better?” it asked, resounding in my mind again. *“When talking loud, I copy the way you speak. When speak to your mind, I speak this way.”*

The voice resonating in my head now sounded just like an echo of my own.

“I guess,” I said, picking up the black blade. “No, wait. That’s just as bad. Can’t you like... I don’t know, sound less like us but more like you? Without all the butchered words?”

“I try,” the mimic said, its voice deepening and taking on a hint of its monstrous self.

“Better,” I said, inspecting the black sword. It was weird, but having my own voice in my head talking to me was just too weird to deal with right now, even after everything else that happened. The monster’s voice was better than anything.

“Now, can you answer my question?” I asked, bringing the discussion back to the important topic at hand. “How strong are we once we use this sword? We should do a dungeon run since it’ll take time for you to digest whatever body we choose to eat.”

It was incredibly well-crafted, that much was obvious even to someone like me who wasn’t well-versed in weapons.

It felt just the right weight, so I tried swinging it once.

It was so enjoyable I did it twice.

The blade sliced perfectly through the air, and it didn’t throw me off balance, which was another very important thing to consider.

I eyed Maz, then the blade, and then Maz again.

He was an actual damage dealer with a bunch of attack skills.

Aldon was a tank, so eating him first probably wouldn’t give me what I needed.

Maybe he’d give me one or two skills, but what kind?

Considering my health pool, I wasn’t going to walk in tanking people. Hell, a move like the taunt he’d used earlier on the skeletons was basically the exact opposite of what I wanted.

A scout who face-tanked a bunch of monsters was just asking to be killed. I would have to get way more gear and stats first.

Maz, on the other hand, could possibly give me several potent offensive skills, if I was lucky.

“Mimic, can you eat Maz first? I think he’ll make it much easier for me to fight the monsters. I’m not nearly strong

enough to wear any of their armor anyway. I don't think I'll meet the stat qualifications."

"I can store armor. You use it later when you are stronger. Do you want?"

"So...all the items you've eaten along with Jesabel and Falin? They're still intact?"

"Yes. Slimy, but intact. Don't know how long. Maybe some days? Then become bad from my stomach acid."

"Wait, wait, wait," I said, trying to understand what it was explaining. "Can you take the items out when you want to? So I can equip them?"

"Ok."

The small box on my shoulder suddenly grew several times larger, and I almost stumbled forward due to the increased weight. It was kind of a strange thing, as the mimic's transformations changed its body mass rather than just moving it around. I didn't know where it stored all that extra mass when it wasn't using it, but I definitely didn't want it to knock me to the ground.

"Hey, not on my shoulder! Can you split from my body or something? At least when you want to grow larger?"

The mimic's eyes drooped as it slid down my shoulder, arm, and then dropped to the ground.

"I am sad mimic. Friend not like me."

It almost looked like a beaten dog.

I felt bad...

But then I recoiled.

Oh, for fuck's sake, why was I a sucker for such a horrific man-eating monster anyway?

Just as I was about to tell it to come back, monstrous tentacles sprouted from the bottom of its chest, and it slithered off.

Before I could ask what it was doing, the chest jumped on top of Maz.

“Come here, snack!”

Oh.

So it wasn't sad after all.

It was just hungry...

Figures.

The mimic's whole body enveloped the corpse and then teeth grew from the very top and bottom, only to bite down on what used to be Maz. Crunching noises reverberated—the sound of breaking bones and ripping flesh.

That hideous noise for the third time...

It was somehow even worse than before.

I finally couldn't take it anymore and doubled over, throwing up what little food I had eaten that morning.

The third time was the charm, I guessed.

New messages popped up before my eyes as I wiped aside the tears from vomiting.

[You have used ABSORB on: Maz]

[Leveling Essence Received: 212%]

[Stats Received: 4 Strength, 3 Stamina]

[Symbiosis has risen by 1%]

[Skills Received: Critical Strike,
Slash, Thrust, Heavy Swing]

[Item Received: Storage Ring]

SKILL WINDOW [7/10].

SKILL: Critical Strike (R), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Increase your party's
critical hit.

chance by 10%

DURATION: 10 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 20 Stamina

SKILL: Slash (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Attack the target with 40% extra damage.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 10 Strength

SKILL: Thrust (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Attack the target with 60% extra damage, inflicting [Pierce] debuff with 10% chance.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

DURATION: 10 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 14 Strength

NOTE: [Pierce] causes the target's defense to drop by 15%

SKILL: Heavy Swing (C), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Attack the target with 80% extra damage, inflicting [Stagger] debuff with 30% chance.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

DURATION: 5 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 20 Strength

NOTE: [Stagger] causes the target to lose their balance

“Well, I guess that was worth it,” I muttered, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand as I read the messages.

I hadn't thrown up a lot, but enough for the bile to catch in my throat.

I just hoped it wouldn't need to eat anyone for a long time once we were done here.

It was sort of weird—I didn't actually throw anything up, since I wasn't exactly adding their flesh to my body. It was something else—maybe just their essence?

I read the skills and was impressed with the descriptions.

Then I stared at the third ring. It was another one I couldn't open or use, but that didn't stop me from taking it.

I'd find a way to use the storage items either back home or if I went to the big city. I'd just have someone look at them eventually. I noticed all three were identical, which probably meant that Aldon had bought them all the same rings. Not that it mattered anymore.

Considering all the weird stuff that'd happened today, maybe someone would be able to open them. It was worth a shot, especially since their weight meant taking them didn't cost me anything.

Stashing the ring away with the black bracelet and the other two rings, I picked up the black sword again.

That led to another message.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Obsidian Runeblade, RARITY:
Exotic

SPECIALTY: Negate part of the incoming
damage when equipped with any kind of
shield.

REQUIREMENT: 35 Strength, 30 Stamina,
30 Agility

BONUS STATS: +40 Strength, +15 Stamina,
+10 Essence, +5 Agility

WARNING: You have equipped a weapon you
are not qualified to use.

WARNING: You can't receive the weapon's
bonus stats until qualifications have been
met.

WARNING: You can't use the weapon's specialty until qualifications have been met.

"Holy crap..." I whispered.

Now this was something else entirely.

The weapon was impressive, even more so since it was of an exotic rarity. It also had a specialty and would give a huge boost to my stats, once I reached all the additional qualifications.

For now, I could still use the weapon, even though I didn't meet the requirements. There was a difference between abilities and actual physical items like this sword. It was just that for me, it was only an ordinary sword, without the benefits. For now, all the weapon would provide was its insane durability.

Still, that wasn't all bad just to have an excellent bludgeoning tool. I sincerely doubted the edge would dull or crack against anything short of another exotic weapon.

And if I managed to get into enough trouble that I faced someone with a higher-ranked weapon, I'd be dead anyway.

Technically, once I eventually got the stats to use the specialty skill as well, I should be set for...life?

Maybe?

Unless I found something superior, it should serve well.

Thinking back on the several encounters we had since arriving at the dungeon, it was no wonder that Aldon could fight the skeletons and knights with ease.

It made me wonder.

Could this party have beaten the mimic if things turned out differently?

I wasn't so sure, but considering how powerful this weapon was and the overall party skill, they might have at

least put up a good fight.

Maybe encountering each other was best for both me *and* the mimic.

I eyed Aldon's armor and his green shield.

There was no way I could use it effectively. It looked far too heavy, and I only confirmed it after trying to pick it up.

The System didn't even bother offering me an item prompt as there was no way I could use it. I needed both hands to just hold it up in the air, and that made it useless to me.

Looking around the room, I nodded satisfied.

Maz's remains were nowhere to be seen, and the only things that remained were Aldon and his gear.

Unfortunately, I couldn't lift him. Otherwise, I might hide the body in the sarcophagus. Still, once the mimic had digested the extra mass, I could just use [Absorb].

I'd take care of them later once I destroyed the skeletons.

"We'll come back and get his body and gear," I told the mimic, who just murmured something indistinct and sleepy.

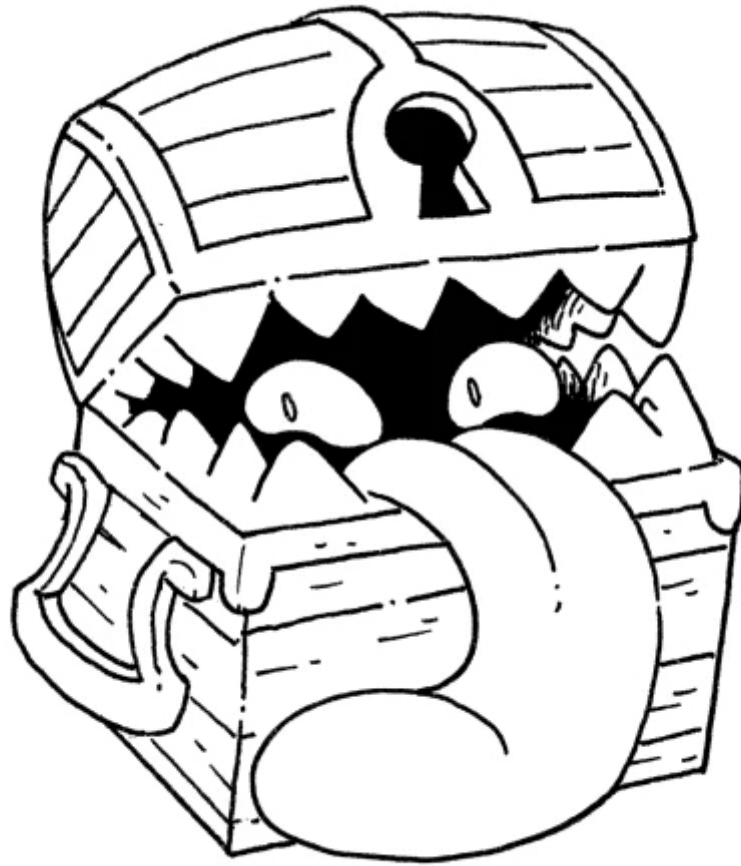
The happiness pulsating from his body told me he was in a food coma again. This guy was just sprinting through food comas at top speed, but I didn't mind.

In a way, it was funny.

Aldon had ordered his team to leave my corpse, saying he'd loot me later.

Now I was telling the mimic the same thing, only he actually *was* dead.

How the tables had turned.



CHAPTER 7: ONE CAKE! NO, TWO CAKES!

I picked up the sword, lugging it along with me as I retraced the adventurer's path, going back to the room where I'd found them.

As I walked, I realized I'd forgotten to ask the mimic about the bracketed numbers appearing each time I gained new skills.

I had a theory that I was pretty confident in, but just in case, I wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth, or rather, the mimic's mouth.

Shit. I was letting the excitement of it all get to me.

"Hey, mimic," I started, but all I got was some more snoozing. The mimic had fallen asleep again, but to my

disgust, it was still chewing while asleep.

The mix of snarling and snoring was truly disgusting...

Talk about roommate problems, or I guess bodymate problems.

I put the thought aside for now but reminded myself to proceed with caution the best I could.

After gaining this new mimic power, I'd become a lot more exuberant than normal. In a way, I couldn't blame myself, as I had been left for dead and instead gained incredible new powers.

Still...

Overeagerness killed the scout.

That was a made-up mantra that I'd repeated to myself my whole career.

Soon, I found myself back in the skeleton room, and yet I didn't dare enter just yet.

There were only seven bone fighters left, but one was a skeleton knight. Having seen them fight, I wasn't necessarily sure that I *wanted* to try and fight it. Even now that I'd gotten my hands on a decent weapon, some stats, and skills.

However, the main thing holding me back wasn't fear.

It was also a bit of technical difficulty with my new skills, as my essence reserves weren't high enough to cast [Barrier].

That buff spell would give me a much higher survival chance, but I didn't have any way to get my hands on the necessary essence stats quickly enough. Aldon was a tank, so he wouldn't be giving me any essence.

I was fairly sure of it.

Based on absorbing Falin, Maz, and Jesabel, each of them had upgraded me based on their class and abilities. Tanks just weren't known for having a lot of essence—they just cast a few skills, with most of their statistical growth and rebirth transformations prioritizing health.

“Ugh,” I groaned, “It’s not like another Jesabel is laying around for me to eat.”

Still, there was no point waiting forever.

I decided to make the best of what I had, casting the buffs I *could* access right away.

I started off by casting [Light Step] to increase my movement speed and muffle my steps.

Next, the skill [Sharpen Edge] gave me a 10% boost to my physical attack, and [Critical Strike] raised critical hit chance by 10%.

Neither of the two buffs was anything special at their current low level of development, but given enough time, they would become really powerful. Not just that, they were party-wide buffs that didn’t affect just me. And in my eyes, that was the real beauty, especially once I found an actual party.

I had a bunch of stored essence that I could use for leveling up my new skills and spells, but I couldn’t do that out here. I would need to visit the Adventurer’s Guild first.

Of course, the Adventurer’s Guild might wonder how I’d gotten all these skills in the first place.

“That’s for tomorrow,” I whispered to myself. “If I live to fight another day, that is. Anyway, let’s go, mimic. Don’t blame me if we die.”

I shook out my arms and legs, then swung the blade several more times as I worked out the nerves, then walked into the room. Making sure I didn’t trip, I stepped around the remains of the spent arrow trap that’d wounded Aldon and Falin gravely.

I looked around, taking in the space.

It was roughly oval and half as large as the great hall with a single pillar at the very center. The column was carved into the shape of a skeleton wearing a staff and crown.

Not at all ominous.

Six of the ordinary skeletons roamed around the room, but the lone skeleton knight was in the far corner and seemed to be lost as it bumped into the wall over and over again.

Unlike the other creatures, they didn't attack as soon as I entered the room.

I was surprised. Maybe since I'd fused with the mimic, they thought I was a monster too, or something like that.

Either way, I didn't want to push my good fortune by sitting around. It was best to attack my unsuspecting foes right away instead of waiting for them to notice me.

I raised my new sword and swung it again, just to make sure my body remembered how it would affect my balance and pose, then I stepped toward the nearest skeleton.

I remembered that Jesabel had cast a holy buff on the party, and that was probably how they'd dealt so easily with the skeletons.

I wanted to try and see if I could replicate their success, but I didn't have enough essence to cast the full-powered buff.

In that case...

I put my hand out and targeted the closest skeleton, as inspiration struck.

I cast [Heal].

Warm light erupted from my hand and hit the skeleton's chest. It staggered, throwing its arms back.

It worked, though far from well enough to kill it or anything.

I swung my sword just like I'd seen Aldon do. It struck the skeleton's shoulder and bounced off.

"Oh, hell—shit!" I cursed.

My strength sucked, and a regular attack wouldn't work.

I lifted my stolen sword again, then followed up with a [Slash].

This time, the skill helped me attack.

The movement was almost automatic as my hand retracted, a thick, red line appeared in front of me, and I cut diagonally from right to left. The skeleton dropped, crumpling into a heap of ash, and bones.

[You have killed a Reanimated
Skeleton!]

[Leveling Essence Received: 30]

[Leveling Essence: 1,815/11,900]

[Skill Essence Received: 7]

[Skill Essence: 3.217]

Hell yeah!

“All right, that wasn’t so hard,” I said excitedly, my arm still shaking from the blow. “Not just that, but look at this beautiful notification right here.”

I noticed that the kill had given me seven skill essence, which were points used to upgrade the skills I’d learned. Killing enemies would level me faster than disarming traps, as there were a lot more enemies in this dungeon than traps.

The only problem was the lack of additional information on damage calculation, but from what I’d seen and heard, that was to be expected.

Between [Heal] and [Slash], I didn’t know what was more effective. I couldn’t measure the tangible damage I’d inflicted on my opponent, I could only gauge based on appearances.

The way the System worked was beyond us, but as one adventurer said a long time ago, the lack of pampering and the stinginess with data led us to try out new tactics and gear.

While a few scientists tried to optimize everything with damage calculations, the average adventurer didn’t have that information.

Until I ate a professional mathematician, which I didn't really see myself doing, I would just use what seemed best.

I readied myself for the next skeleton, preparing my only available holy-type spell, and charged.

Once again, I caught the creature totally off guard.

The skeletons were weak, that much was clear, but the one thing that struck me odd was that they had zero cohesion when fighting an enemy. Or it really might be my mimic friend.

Against Aldon and Maz, they'd grouped up and run them over.

This time, every single one of the skeletons waited for me to attack them.

I wasn't sure, but now that I had a bit more time to think about it, I suspected it had to do with skills.

[Hide] was still active. That was probably the explanation for their confusion. They hadn't seemed to notice me walking into the room either.

I breezed through the remaining reanimated until there was only one skeleton and the knight.

By then, my [Hide] skill wore off, and I decided to test my hypothesis. The moment I got close to the weaker of my two targets, it turned toward me and charged.

I blocked its swing with my new runeblade and slashed across its bony chest.

The creature staggered and I followed up with a [Thrust]. It fell over onto its back, the entire skeletal body clattering.

It tried to push itself up again, but I wasn't dumb enough to sit around and watch.

I stepped in and brought the blade down on its neck, cleanly severing the skull.

As the bones tried reforming, I blasted them with [Heal], dissipating the bones and stopping the skeletons from

regrowing themselves.

Technically, I guess this all made sense, because [Heal] returned things to their natural state. Fortunately, the natural state of these skeletons was dead and not attacking me.

The skeletal knight—the main opponent—turned toward me, its shield held high and sword rising.

Then it charged.

Shit.

Its sword was longer than mine...not the kind of thing I'd admit to a girl, but it was just me, the skeleton knight, and a snoozing mimic on my shoulder, so I could be honest.

Now, there was no good way to fight an enemy that had both better range and high defense, but the best thing I could come up with after watching others from the sidelines for so long was to confuse it.

I dodged the first swing—a clumsy attempt that went wide.

I rolled under the blow and snapped to my feet behind it, then followed up with another [Thrust] as it seemed the better choice for a clumsy and slow target.

The knights wore heavy armor, so they staggered easily.

My blade caught its spine, but I didn't win.

Instead of falling over dead, the skeletal knight lumbered forward, then slammed its shield into the ground and steadied itself.

Crap.

I hadn't expected that.

The skeleton knight swung its sword around with greater speed than before, but with my newfound agility, I was much faster.

Having seen others do it before, I weaved past the knight and lunged for its leg. The skeleton struggled for a

moment and then fell on its side, both the sword and the shield clattering to the ground.

I brought the blade down in a violent chop, using both hands to add power to my strike.

I hit the neck once, twice, before its fist snapped up toward my face.

I jerked to the side and the fist glanced off my shoulder.

Thanks to my new stats and the mimic armor congealed around my body, the damage I sustained was minimal, but it hurt like a bitch.

I bared my teeth, growling with anger, and brought the tip of the sword down again, piercing its skull. The skeleton knight's body went limp.

[You have killed a Skeleton Knight!]

[Leveling Essence Received: 170]

[Leveling Essence: 2,135/11,900]

[Skill Essence Received: 26]

[Skill Essence: 3.243]

I let out a long sigh of relief, then grinned.

During the fight, I'd mostly copied moves I'd seen before, but it'd worked. I was worried about my first battle, especially after years of clients who claimed that the quests were impossibly hard work.

Turned out it was a bit easier than they'd told me. It was just like what the veteran scouts said—the noble clients deliberately kept experience from us to make sure our prices were low.

Well, the good news was, I wouldn't have to worry about bullshit like that anymore.

A golden ray of light descended on the center of the room, revealing a treasure chest.

Before, I'd found the fish from a treasure chest lying around on the ground.

This time it appeared out of nowhere, which seemed much more grand and impressive.

I just hoped it held something good.

A rush of excitement washed over me, and I felt the corners of my lips rise with greed.

It was the second treasure chest I'd ever earned, so I wasn't sure of what to expect, but it looked much more expensive than the first time.

The one-horned trout I got previously wasn't something I would brag about to anyone, but since the mimic liked it, I guessed there was some use to the fish.

I focused back on the chest, and just in case, I checked for traps.

There were none on the chest or in the room, so I grabbed the lid and pushed it open. More golden light erupted from within and almost floored me like an uppercut.

A ring appeared in my hand, shimmering into existence along with a description. For a moment, I thought it might have been a freaking mimic again...

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Ring of Courage, RARITY:
Legendary

SPECIALTY: Immune to fear and mind-based
debuffs

REQUIREMENT: 20 Stamina, 20 Essence

BONUS STATS: +10 Strength, +10 Stamina,
+15 Essence

WARNING: You have equipped a ring you
are not qualified to use.

WARNING: You can't receive the ring's
bonus stats until qualifications have been

met.

WARNING: You can't use the ring's specialty until qualifications have been met.

Thank the System, it was just a ring...well, not just a ring. It was so much more than just a ring. Qualifications be damned, this was a heck of a ring.

Mind-based debuffs were very common with spellcasters, I'd often seen as much in the combat pit near Eslant. Of course, I'd never participated, but every so often a client invited me to watch their bouts, particularly if there was an item we'd earned that they wanted to show off.

Bumming around on the sidelines and watching other people use items I'd helped them win wasn't exactly my idea of a good time, but I'd wanted to learn more about combat, and it was always a very educational experience.

Mental debuffs like terrify and hallucinate had always seemed the most bothersome, even from the sidelines.

"Just the mind ward alone is worth more than the stats," I whispered. "Too bad I can't have it yet."

Somehow, I'd been screwed by the requirements.

Again.

I was missing three points in the Essence Stat before I could fully use it.

Unlike the sword, though, I didn't get anything off the bat.

The bonus stats and the mental debuff were both locked until I had the requirements.

And unlike the sword. I couldn't swing this around or use it.

It was just a fancy piece of jewelry.

Still, considering I could wear several rings on my fingers, there was basically no downside to wearing it. Maybe

if I found a pretty lady, she'd think I was rich and successful or something.

Fingers crossed!

“*Good catch,*” the mimic said as it appeared on my shoulder. However, this time, the creature had changed. “You’re back? And what’s with the new outfit? Feeling something seasonal?”

“*Yes.*”

The mimic didn’t have any more of an explanation.

The mimic now had a pumpkin-like head with two large glowing orbs for eyes, two rows of long, sharp, and orange teeth, and pitch-black, scaly skin. The mimic didn’t have a neck, and instead, the head was glued directly to its torso, which was half as wide as the head. The body looked human-like but for the spikey growth coming out the bottom of the torso.

Two small, black arms protruded from the mimic’s sides, just below where the neck would have been, and they were covered with mottled, scaly skin, ending in five-fingered hands.

They looked comically small in comparison to the head.

Finally, the tail-like appendage growing from the bottom of the torso was thick at the base and sprouted from where the tailbone would ordinarily be.

It curled downward and was covered in sharp barbs.

The first thought I had after seeing its new body, was that it had become a genie. A rather vile-looking genie.

“Yes, it says,” I laughed, rolling my eyes. “Anyway, you need a name. I’ll give you one if you don’t want to make one of your own. I’m tired of calling you ‘the mimic.’”

The creature answered right away. He didn’t seem to care much about his name either way, so it had no problem with me naming it. “*Ok. You choose. Give me name then.*”

I thought for a moment. “How about ‘Teeth?’ You’re all tooth and tongue. They’re everywhere.”

It stared at me for a moment. “*Why not Tongue?*” it asked.

“I think it’ll give people the wrong idea,” I replied.

“*What idea?*” it asked. The voice was totally innocent, so I *thought* it was just wondering. Still, it had lived in human society before, so it might just be pulling my leg.

I took a look at the creature’s long tongue, then decided to stay quiet.

Yep!

I wasn’t going to give this guy any weird ideas.

No way!

“So, what’s up with this new form, Teeth?” I asked, trying out his new name. It felt a little weird coming out of my mouth, but I supposed that was because it was a new name.

“*Transforming is fun. Do you like?*” it asked.

“I will leave that to your imagination, Teeth,” I replied, trying to be diplomatic. “But tell me, how do you expect to walk around outside?”

“*Walk? I have no legs.*”

“Well, float then.”

“*I invisible to meaty snacks. I think.*”

I frowned, stuck my hand out, and poked it in the chest.

“Invisible? Are you a ghost?” I muttered. “No, of course you’re no ghost.”

“*Yes. Of course I no ghost.*”

All in all, it was about two feet tall and very much not a ghost.

“Then how—?”

“I use [Hide] skill better than you. By the way...I no like name ‘Teeth’. Old friend give me good name, now new friend does that.”

So now it was getting picky.

“What was your old name?” I asked, kind of just wanting to get it over with.

“Not telling. That was for old friend. New friend, new name.”

I was pretty interested in learning more about this old friend—particularly how he’d kept hidden, since nobody I’d met had ever heard of a human-mimic hybrid before, and that was the kind of thing that got around.

It sounded like a story for another time, though.

We had to keep going, and then reset the dungeon, but I might as well give the mimic briefly known as Teeth a better name before we got moving again.

I thought for a moment. It was a chest, and there was this guy I’d known...

“Hey, how about Chester? I had a friend called Chestari. He saved me from a monster once, and since you saved me from a group of monsters...I guess it’s fitting, since, you know...chest?”

Funny thing was, Chestari himself was named after a guy named Chester, only his parents had decided to make the name a little fancier. Now I was making it a little less fancy again. Funny how things worked out.

I felt a sudden flare of happiness from the mimic’s body, and then he spoke.

“I...like. Let’s go. Me now Chester, not Teeth. And definitely not Tongue.”

Suddenly, Chester detached from my shoulder and started floating forward.

“Wait!” I cried. “What the heck are you doing? If you detach from me, I die!”

Chester looked back at me.

His strange pumpkin-like head stared pointedly at a string of meat that was connecting us.

Considering how he was floating, he looked almost like a kite attached to my body—a horrifying meat kite.

“My body is attached to yours. Merged through spine. But, I can peek out and scout. And be invisible.”

“I see...” I replied, feeling even more disconcerted than before.

Indeed, most of the mimic was still inside me—attached to my spine just like promised. So the creature that popped up on my chest wasn’t the whole creature after all.

It was just poking its head out from its den in my body, so to speak...not sure how I felt about that one.

Chester started floating toward the exit and I followed, eager to get moving and to think about other stuff.

“What do you mean by finishing the dungeon?”

“We kill boss, then eat that crushed and fried meaty dessert.”

I froze, trying to process the mimic’s bold words.

“Crushed and fried...you mean Aldon?”

“Yes.”

Dang.

Crushed dessert for us humans normally meant some kind of icy treat. Not a smushed murderous tank.

I guessed it was different for monsters.

“Stop. Not a monster. Mimic.”

“And did you just say boss?” I asked, half surprised and half trying to change the subject.

“Yes. *We fight boss,*” Chester said, turning to look at me. “*Don’t worry. I help.*”

It didn't wait for me and floated out of the room, going left.

For some reason, the mimic seemed to know exactly where it was going.

I followed the meat thread connecting our bodies, making sure I didn't trip over the trap, and made my way up a flight of stairs.

At the top was a small room, but it was empty of both traps and monsters. I turned the corner and saw the mimic floating in front of the entrance to another room.

I checked for traps and then followed it.

For a brief moment, I saw a flicker of red outlining the wall.

But then it vanished before I could do anything.

"Hold on, what's that—?"

"I suspend trap," Chester said. *"We use trap to kill boss. Come here."*

Wait, what?

It suspended the trap?

How in the blighted hell could a mimic use [Suspend Trap]? I guessed it could use my skills, but even then, how did it even know there was a trap to begin with? It seemed awfully familiar with the dungeon...

Just in case, I used [Detect Trap] to make sure.

There was a trap at the entrance, but it was already suspended, just as Chester claimed.

"What is it? I can't make it out," I asked.

"Doesn't matter. Go inside, then run out," Chester replied. The mimic sounded utterly confident and chipper.

"Run—what is your plan? Do you even have one?"

"Yes. Go in, then run."

I glared at the mimic and then at the doorway.

It was pretty narrow, which was interesting as most of the other entrances had been much wider.

Could the mimic really know what it was doing? I peeked inside, my head rising just above the last staircase, and noticed a mass of skeletons roaming about.

There were easily thirty, or maybe forty.

Skeleton knights were present as well, and amidst the mass was a much larger skeleton, easily twice the size of the knights.

The monstrous skeleton resembled a skeletal mage or a necromancer.

A tattered cloak hung around its back, and a spiked collar protected its neck. Atop its head sat a dull, battered crown.

I recognized it, though the last time I saw it, it was only a picture.

“That thing...”

“Oh, yes. Powerful. Can kill you with one spell.”

“No, I meant it’s the carved skeleton from the previous treasure room. The pillar.”

“Yes. Boss of the whole dungeon. Run in and then out. It can’t see you here. It is too tall.”

I grunted, unable to hold back my frustration.

“How are you so sure? It can just kneel or something, or bend over, and then it can see me.”

Chester remained silent for a while and then started laughing.

“Oh...yes. It can. Good point. Careful friend or friend die.”

He sounded somewhat unhappy at his bad instructions...

But not unhappy enough for my liking.

“Freaking smart-ass,” I whispered back. “You got to be giving me better information here. So, what does the trap do? Tell me or I am not going in there.”

“Trap? It closes room and floods with water.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but then stopped and recalled its words several times.

Go in, run out.

It closes and floods the room.

“Wait, you have [Detonate Trap] as well?”

“Yes.”

“So you share all my skills and spells?”

“Yes.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“No.”

“Fine, whatever,” I said, waving my arms, angrily. “You could really start explaining things better, you know?”

“No.”

I bit back another outburst and took a deep breath.

Well.

Whether or not the mimic wanted to keep things hidden...

It was bound to me, and me growing stronger helped it grow stronger.

Chester was being a real brat, but I could always count on good old self-interest to keep it in line.

“I want the leveling essence, so I’ll detonate the trap.”

“Ok.”

I hurried and knelt next to the trap mechanism, then used [Suspend Trap] to gain control.

[TRAP: Floodgates]

[TYPE: Mechanical, Water]

[TRAP RANK: 6]

If it had been me doing the initial disarm or suspend, I honestly didn't think I'd be able to make it because of the trap's rank.

That begged the question: what kind of power was the mimic hiding from me?

I stopped at the edge of the room and watched the mass of skeletons.

If I used [Hide], they wouldn't...

Wait, why was I even doing this?

Water couldn't drown a freaking skeleton! They didn't even need to breathe!

Also, why would I even need to go inside if I could just trigger the room from the outside—and then I saw it.

There was another door, and that one was wide open.

"Yes. Now you see," Chester said, floating next to me.

"Once I walk in, the other door closes, right? And then I detonate this one and crush them with water pressure?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

I readied my sword, recast my buffs, and made the leap.

The moment I stepped foot into the room, a massive slab of stone dropped and closed off the second exit.

Every skeleton turned to stare at me, including the big skeleton magician, complete with all its powerful equipment.

MONSTER WINDOW

NAME: Skeleton Lord Stormcaller

TYPE: Floor Boss, Undead

STAGE: Rebirth - 1, Level - 30

I froze for a moment.

That thing had a lot of essence!

If only I could...

“Chester, can we absorb monsters for stats as well?”

“Skeletons don’t taste good. I refuse to eat.”

That wasn’t good.

This thing looked powerful—it had Stormcaller in its name.

“Hey, what if I promised to get you the best-tasting food in the whole world? Cake! A lot of frosting and chocolate and all that stuff.”

“Cake? What is cake?”

“It’s like cookies, but bigger, softer, and tastier!”

“Maybe...no! You can’t...but...yes. Two! I want two cakes! Big ones!”

“Deal! And hey, will the trap kill the magician right away?”

“No. He strong. Will need fight too. Water trap only kill the others.”

I started running back outside the room.

Fortunately, the slab that normally would have locked me in didn’t activate. We’d properly suspended it.

The skeletons clattered away behind me, but it was too late.

Then I braced myself and detonated the trap.

A solid chunk of stone dropped in place, just as it had with the first entrance, and closed the room off as the walls and ground began to shake and rumble.

If I didn’t know water was filling the trap room, I’d be running for cover, thinking it was an earthquake or something.

Since I’d sealed the room, I couldn’t see the skeletons dying.

But the System was more than happy to provide me with the information.

[You have killed a Reanimated Skeleton!]

[Leveling Essence Received: 30]

[Skill Essence Received: 7]

[You have killed a Reanimated Skeleton!]

[Leveling Essence Received: 30]

[Skill Essence Received: 7]

[Leveling Essence Received: 30]

[Skill Essence Received: 7]

The skeletons were dying one after the other, which made me wonder why the dungeon had even put them there.

Boss rooms didn't need minions to help protect them, the boss monsters were perfectly capable of doing so themselves.

Maybe it was to lure adventurers inside with a false promise of free leveling essence? I had no idea.

[You have killed a Skeleton Knight!]

[Leveling Essence Received: 170]

[Skill Essence Received: 14]

Not only were the reanimated skeletons dying, but the knights were doing so too.

Great. Soon only the boss would remain and then I could sic Chester on it. And maybe see what kind of skills and abilities the mimic possessed. I had a feeling it might have more skills than I realized—maybe even skills from this first “friend.”

Now, the one thing that I really, really wanted to know, was what kind of stats did it have beyond what I'd managed to figure out through our symbiosis percentage.

If it had a ton of equipment stored inside, did that all add up and increase the mimic's own stats?

And what if I fed him all the spare gear we found, would that help both of us rise in stats?

Since the mimic was part of me, it was important for me to learn its full capabilities and how to level it, whether it wanted to cooperate or not.

The small, two-foot-tall mimic suddenly grew several times its size and took up a roughly human shape.

More and more of the substance oozed out of my body and into the mimic, and even the thread connecting us grew thicker.

By the end, Chester looked like a pumpkin head on top of a whole pile of muscles. It was a hulking pumpkin monstrosity.

The mimic jumped up and down excitedly.

"Hurry! I want cake! No, two cakes! Hah! I the only mimic in history who eat cake!"

The short statements were accompanied by a cacophony of noises resembling laughter, crunching teeth, and grinding wheels.

And then...

We waited for the room to stop flooding.

Several seconds passed, then half a minute as it stood with its back to me.

Then the stone door slid back up, releasing a stream of water that almost knocked me over.

"Chester!" the mimic growled, raised its clawed hands, and charged.

My first thought was that he must love his new name if he was willing to use it as a battle cry.

My second thought was just a plain and simple "holy shit."

I thought this thing was crazy powerful when it blew up Falin's leg.

Now that it had some cake to motivate it, it was on a totally different level.

The tendon attaching us together jerked taut, and I felt like an owner being pulled forward by an overeager dog—the most overeager, most monstrous, most terrifying dog in the history of the world.

The skeleton lord froze at the ten-foot-tall muscular monstrosity's rabid charge.

You knew something was terrifying when even a skeleton magician flinched.

Then it swept its staff and hit the mimic with a lightning bolt.

Chester shook violently and then fell over, faceplanting.

He hit the ground with a thud and a groan, throwing dust into the air.

I watched in disbelief, unable to fathom how easily it'd been knocked over when a torrent of lightning flashed toward me.

I instinctively jumped back, retreating down the stairs.

The bolt hit the passage ceiling where I'd just been standing and sent shards of stone flying everywhere.

I stumbled and cursed, then hit the wall with my back and elbows. Pain flared up my arms.

I pressed my right hand to my left elbow and used [Heal]. That took care of any mild damage, but if the skeleton lord hit me directly, a small heal wasn't going to do shit for me.

A monstrous screech reverberated from up ahead in the boss room.

Shit.

What was going on?

I touched the tendon, which felt warm. Chester was still alive, but I guess I couldn't just let him die, so I rushed to see if he needed any backup.

I climbed the stairs again, holding my sword aloft to smite any skeleton that stood in my way.

Only, there were no monsters.

At least not any that were alive, or rather, undead.

The ungodly symphony of breaking bones filled my ears.

Then the whole room shook with a bellow, a burp, and a moment later a piece of bone bounced down the stairs.

Damn.

I guess I shouldn't have worried after all.

A notification popped up before me.

[You have used ABSORB on: Skeleton Lord
Stormcaller]

[Leveling Essence Received: 27%]

[Stats Received: 1 Stamina, 4 Essence]

[Symbiosis has risen by 1%]

[Spell Received: Lightning Bolt,
Lightning Resistance]

SPELL WINDOW [7/10].

SPELL: Lightning Bolt (R), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Cast a lightning bolt on a single target and deal 100% extra damage. Inflict [Stun] debuff with 40% chance.

COOLDOWN: 60 seconds

DURATION: 5 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 32 Essence

NOTE: [Stun] causes the target to lose all ability to move, attack, and use skills or spells.

SPELL: Lightning Resistance (C), LEVEL:
1

DESCRIPTION: Decrease received lightning damage by 30% and ignore a single instance of stun.

COOLDOWN: 60 seconds

DURATION: 5 minutes

REQUIREMENT: 17 Essence

“Cake! Where cake?” Chester roared, his voice echoing down the stairwell. *“Come, take treasure chest. We need to go.”*

It was an understatement that the duration of the fight had flipped what I previously thought I knew about the mimic on its head.

His faceplanting was...awkward, but the speed with which he destroyed the Stormcaller was impressive.

“Shit, you are much stronger than you let on, huh?” I asked, genuinely in awe.

Chester chortled.

“Hah! Me fall as joke. Scare you. Should have seen your face! You have no idea.”

I grinned.

“All right, maybe you’ll show me one day. And yes, let’s go, but you’ll have to wait for cake until we get back to town.”



CHAPTER 8: MELINA

I fumbled with the Ring of Courage and equipped it as I walked back up the stairs.

My stats immediately rose, and I could feel a mental barrier being set into place.

It felt like a mild, but not unpleasant vibration spreading throughout my body. The sensation lasted for several seconds, and then it stopped, but I could still feel its presence, although it was very subtle.

“Screw it. If a mimic can live attached to my spine, a ring might as well live in my head,” I grunted.

I knew that the new force in my head was the mind ward, but it still felt weird.

I guessed it sort of made sense, though—you'd feel it if you were wearing a helmet, so I guess you'd feel it if you were putting on a mind ward.

“Well, at least there's the leveling essence. Let's see...”

The floodgate trap killed exactly sixty-five reanimated skeletons, fourteen skeleton knights, and one Stormcaller, netting me a total of 7,550 leveling essence.

Adding that to the spare 1,965 points I had over after devouring Maz, I'd almost leveled up.

I checked the rest of my stats and grinned.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	Human
STAGE	Rebirth 1	LEVEL	24
LEVEL ESSENCE	80%	SKILL ESSENCE	3,470
CLASS	Scout	SUB-CLASS	Mimic
STRENGTH	36	ESSENCE	37
STAMINA	36	AGILITY	22
CHARISMA	11	FREE STAT POINTS	7
SYMBIOSIS	12%	STATE	Exalted
STORED MASS	72%	DIGESTING MASS	9%

Now, this was nice.

All of my stats had gradually increased, thanks to my increase in levels.

The increase had a few different sources—absorbing Jesabel, Falin, and Maz had all given me increased stats in line with their strengths, as had fusing with the mimic.

However, I was still gaining additional points based on my own leveling growth. Everyone's stat gain was different, and it depended on our class and rebirth type. From there, the System would reward us as it saw fit. As a scout, my points were mostly going into Agility and Stamina, with a little bit in Charisma.

On top of that, I had 7 free stat points I could assign as I wanted.

Before, I would have put them into Agility and Stamina, putting together my “get the hell out of trouble” build.

Now, though, things were a bit different, since I had a mimic.

However, I still wanted to focus on Agility, this time for a different reason...

Then I pulled up my sword requirements, noticing that I was still eight agility short.

Damn.

In a way, this was almost an insult.

How could a scout like me be gated by agility?!

A thought crossed my mind, pushing back the frustration. It was something Chester had mentioned earlier, but in the middle of the chaos, I didn't have time to sit down and ask him for all the details.

“Chester, did the three people you ate have any kind of lower-level items on them that would add agility stats?”

“Only some items survived my acid. Do you want to see?”

I let that response roll through my mind several times.

“Wait, didn’t you say they could be inside you for a while?” I asked, looking for clarity.

His toothy grin put me on the defensive.

Even though I knew he wouldn’t hurt me, I had a feeling I shouldn’t push too much.

“Depend on item grade. Rare item stay inside for month, exotic six or seven month, and legendary year or so. I have bad acid...”

“So...you’re like a *very* temporary storage for rare items?”

“Yes.”

“All right, next question. The items that survived are of rare quality?”

“Yes.”

Perfect.

I wasn’t looking for lower-grade items anyways.

Having to use crappy old hand-me-downs was bad enough.

Using crappy old hand-me-downs covered in mimic drool and stomach acid...

Well.

I *had* to be getting rare items for that at the very least!

Chester unrolled his tongue and dropped several weapons to the cavern floor. Maz’s axe was there, and so were Jesabel’s staff and Falin’s bow.

Their other gear must have been under rare quality because all I saw were a few leathery scraps.

That archer could have had agility bonus items on him, but they were gone now.

Shit! I would have to get creative.

“Hey, do you have anything else in there that you can share with me?” I hopefully asked.

“No. Long time since I ate good items. All gone or rusty.”

“Ugh. What’s the use of a bottomless pit if everything rusts away?”

“Yes, rusts. Now, go get your reward for beating the skeleton. Maybe that will help.”

“Award?” I asked. “You mean for clearing the dungeon?”

“Well...my reward. But, we are friend, so I share.”

So the System rewarded the mimic instead of me for killing the skeleton lord. That all made sense. It *had* done all the work after all, in pumpkin-hulking monstrosity form.

Even the stunt with the flooding trap had been its idea, though I didn’t know how it’d known about the trap in the first place.

“Then go to room with roasted tank,” the mimic continued. *“I want to eat meaty snack. Then I sleep and wait for cake.”*

“Alright, alright. A promise is a promise, but I don’t have any right now. You’ll get the cakes when we’re back.”

“Grr.”

I snorted at his growl, finding it mildly amusing.

For now, I turned to eye the three weapons and stared at them for a moment. I picked up the bow first.

NAME: Hawthorn Bow, RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: The user’s accuracy goes up by 10% when shooting targets at twenty yards+.

REQUIREMENT: 25 Strength, 20 Stamina, 40 Agility

BONUS STATS: +10 Strength, +10 Stamina,
+25 Agility

NAME: Javana Axe, RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: The user's defense
penetration goes up by 17% when attacking
an armored target.

REQUIREMENT: 45 Strength, 40 Stamina,
30 Agility

BONUS STATS: +30 Strength, +15 Stamina,
+5 Agility

NAME: Sharot Staff, RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: Increases the user's magical
potency by 15% when casting spells.

REQUIREMENT: 10 Strength, 10 Agility,
45 Essence

BONUS STATS: +5 Strength, +35 Essence

It was interesting to see how I couldn't use the specialty or gain the bonus stats for any of the weapons as I was missing the necessary stat points.

It was a shame.

But that was the way of Basania and our System.

People often made a joke about it—just like how someone had to have money to make money, they had to have stats to get stats.

Still, even if I could use them properly, all the items were weaker than the Runeblade.

Sure, the sword was just a grade higher going by ranking, but the difference was staggering.

My former employers had obviously played on gearing Aldon and then getting whatever best possible offensive weapons they could for the rest, all while neglecting their defenses.

It made sense considering Aldon was funding them.

His focus on himself first was a good thing, as I wouldn't have killed the rest of them so easily otherwise.

I hurried back into the room where a glowing chest waited for me.

It was small, barely a foot in length, and made out of dark wood and finely-crafted gold hardware. I picked up the box and opened the lid. More bright light spilled forth from inside, covering me.

[ITEM RECEIVED: Magic Chest of
Evolution]

[DESCRIPTION: The Magic Chest of
Evolution is one of two main evolution
ingredients for any unique-type monster]

[NOTE: The evolution item can only be
used once]

Hah.

The mimic had gotten a monster prize.

And there he was claiming he wasn't a monster...

Well, I had the System backing me up in any future arguments.

A notification popped up before me, counting down from fifteen minutes.

Now that we'd claimed the final prize, the dungeon wanted us out of there so it could reset.

It was more than enough time to exit, but first I wanted to make sure I didn't miss anything.

I'd honestly hoped I'd get an item I would be able to use, but something that could theoretically help the mimic evolve was also acceptable.

The mere thought sent my mind racing.

What kind of evolution would Chester get? And what about its appearance? Would it stay a boxy mimic, or turn into something else?

I slid along the wall, tapping it in several places and searching for any indentations, loose rocks, or a mechanism that might open a trapdoor to reveal more treasure.

I wasn't so lucky.

Chester floated nearby, watching me anxiously but it didn't say anything.

I didn't know if the mimic had seen the item I got from the treasure chest, or if it'd read my mind.

"Can you store this item thing without destroying it?" I asked, holding the magic chest out between us.

"Yes."

Its tongue rolled out and snapped the evolution box out of my hand, storing it inside.

I couldn't read his emotions, but he seemed pretty happy to have it.

It was a different sort of happiness than the food, though, since he wasn't freaking out about it. This was sort of a fast friendship, to say the least, one where we were getting unusually close, but I didn't know much about him yet.

I shook my head as we made our way through the narrow passages, the floating mimic eyeing me all the way to the hall with the pillars. It was only by the flicker of a flame that I noticed how Chester wasn't so much floating as being held aloft by the narrow thread of his own body mass.

"Don't you need to see where you're heading?" I asked, curious about his perfect navigation skills. "And how are you staying afloat on that thin strand of mass?"

"No, don't need to look. I feel dungeon because I live here long time. Also, I see from your eyes. I also speak in your mind. Also, Mimic can manipulate mass and weight. Do you like?"

"Yeah, about that...it's weird, but I'll deal with it. New question. How can you speak to me directly?"

“I think your mind just knows my thoughts. We are one. Also, I want three cakes. The skeleton tasted bad. All rotten bones, no meat.”

“Wasn’t that a bit obvious?” I snorted. “What did you expect? I mean, it was a walking skeleton.”

“No. Thought maybe tasty.”

Then I stopped for a moment, realizing something much stranger from the conversation.

“Wait. You said you lived here a long time? I thought you got lost in here?”

“Yes. Lost for long time. That’s how I know everything about the dungeon.”

That only caused more questions than it answered.

This skeleton dungeon had only just appeared.

How could the mimic have lived there for a long time?

And if it had an old friend who was a human, how had *they* been in the dungeon?

Anticipating my thoughts, the mimic answered right away. *“Don’t know how long. Lost track of time.”*

Great.

Lost track of time, huh?

At times it felt as if I was talking to a toddler, while at others like an aged dragon full of wisdom. Not only that, this guy gave me information when he felt like it, not when it was relevant.

Freaking mimics...

A short while later, we arrived at the great hall.

I shot a careful glance, checking the roasted man lying in his shattered armor.

Then I breathed a sigh of relief.

Aldon was very much dead, which was kind of obvious from any lack of breathing on his part.

But then again, you never knew with dungeons.

They just might decide to turn someone into an undead...or a half-mimic as it did with me.

“I eat him. You prepare many cake as I sleep.”

“How long will you be asleep?”

It was good that Chester announced its sleep for once.

“Don’t know. I eat lots of snacks. Always depends. Why? Must process.”

“Because I don’t know if I can survive without you.”

“Oh, ok. I will keep eye open. Now I hide. I help if you going to die.”

The mimic became a blurry shape with a single open eye.

Its teeth were now gone, but that didn’t make it any less dangerous.

After all, it defeated the boss monster in seconds when I hadn’t been watching. Which only begged the question of what kind of skill or spell had it used to defeat the boss monster.

Chester settled in front of Aldon and used what had quickly become my favorite ability.

[You have used ABSORB on: Aldon]

[Leveling Essence Received: 319%]

[Stats Received: 1 Strength, 3 Stamina,
1 Agility, 2 Charisma]

[Symbiosis has risen by 2%]

[Stored Mass 100/100% reached]

[Note: Stored mass will provide the Mimic with nourishment, and the host with protection. Any damage the Mimic’s armor sustains in battle will be replenished using stored mass]

[Skills Received: Shield Bash,
Stalwart]

SKILL WINDOW [9/10].

SKILL: Shield Bash (UC), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Use shield to attack with
an extra 50% physical damage and inflict
[Stun] debuff with a 30% chance.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

DURATION: 5 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 31 Stamina

NOTE: [Stun] causes the target to lose
all ability to move, attack, and use
skills or spells

SKILL: Stalwart (R), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Absorb all damage for 5
seconds and heal all received damage.

COOLDOWN: 10 Minutes

REQUIREMENT: 40 Stamina

Aldon's corpse had brought me almost up to level
twenty-eight, which meant that I finally had enough
unallocated essence stat points to go on a spending spree.

That wasn't the most dramatic notification, however.

My [Absorb] ability was now greyed out, and I
couldn't use it until Chester's stored mass dropped.

That was good to know.

In a situation where I could only absorb a few people,
I'd better save it for the strongest adventurers. Of course, I
hadn't really had a choice this time.

All four people had been trying to kill me, and I
needed those skills to defend myself and clear the dungeon.

Plus, Chester would have thrown a huge fit if I skipped
a meal on him.

Still, this situation did show me something pretty important.

Even if Chester wasn't willing to give me information, the System was. After hitting this limit, I'd gotten some helpful information on the Stored Mass stat.

Maybe if I tested some more limits, I could learn even more.

Just had to make sure I was in a safe environment to do it.

As of right now, at least the blade's bonus stats and specialty were now within arm's reach. Doing what was needed, I invested just enough to lift my agility to thirty, then saved the rest in case I needed a specific stat boost later on.

Oh damn.

Before, I was just using the blade as a blunt-force instrument.

But *this*.

Man, this was using it as the System intended!

An incredible surge of power flooded me as my stats skyrocketed from just having equipped the obsidian Runeblade.

I checked in again and found my strength at seventy-seven, stamina at fifty-eight, essence at forty-eight, and agility at thirty-eight.

"Holy shit," I whispered. "Is this really happening?"

Then I remembered the blade's specialty skill.

"Chester, give me that green shield!"

Silence and crickets.

"Oh, right. He's in a food coma. The one thing more important than survival..."

I would have to remember that. Even with a not-so-beautiful assistant stuck to my shoulder, I would have to do a lot of things for myself.

I looked around the great hall as if I'd be able to find the shield that easily in a totally ravaged and crumpled room.

Then I remembered an even bigger problem. Anyone who saw me with an obsidian Runeblade and a green shield would recognize it as belonging to Aldon.

I wanted to keep the item, but I couldn't just wear it on my hip or back.

And even worse, I had no storage ring...

And the mimic was still asleep.

"Damn it, Chester!"

Footsteps and echoing voices suddenly resounded in the passageway ahead of me.

Shit.

People had entered the dungeon.

And even stranger, they'd entered it even though it hadn't reset yet.

What in the world could they be planning?

Cold sweat broke out on my brow as I struggled with what to do next.

I looked around the great hall, listened to where the voices were coming from, and then activated [Light Step].

I hurried over to a pillar, hid behind it, and then hurried off to the next in line.

It was furthest away from the passage I assumed the newcomers were coming out of.

The corner was dark enough for me to hide in.

I used the skill [Hide] next, and just in time as the new party appeared.

They stopped inside the entrance and formed up on whom I assumed was their party leader.

He was a large, bald man, wearing sturdy steel armor, a silver shield, and carrying a war hammer.

Behind him stood another man clad in yellow and brown leather armor. He wielded two swords, holding him at the ready to his sides.

Next to him was a woman carrying a large crossbow and sporting similar leather armor. Her face was set into a frown as she looked around the space.

Lastly, a tall young man in pristine white robes, a scroll in one hand, and a walking staff in the other followed the trio.

Shit.

Aldon's party had some nice gear—most of which I now owned. But this group had both nice gear and seemed to have more experience. Even walking into this warzone, they looked pretty prepared, so I didn't want to mess with them.

"This place has been looted clean, I tell you," the dual-wielder spoke, looking around and stepping past their tank. "Cass? Can you check for any traps?"

The woman looked around and shook her head.

"There used to be two, but I have no idea what they were. Someone's either still here, or it's already cleared out. They were both activated. The remains of one are still visible."

She pointed to the exploding tiles trap that had incinerated Aldon. The remains were still there on the ground, showing the areas that'd detonated.

Of course, the ceiling had also fallen in on him, but that was because of Melina, not some trap.

They wouldn't know that though.

Considering how calm they seemed, I didn't know why they were even there. Didn't they see the number counting down until the dungeon reset? It had already dropped to nine minutes and was still dropping.

"We'll take care of them if they're still around," the bald man said suddenly as if coming to a decision.

Maybe they were hoping to see the expired traps so they'd know what to expect, or they were doing a last-minute

sweep.

Or...

Were they already looking for me?

They said they were looking for “them” after all.

But...

How could that be?

That just wasn't possible. How could the Adventurer's Guild have possibly heard in time?

That was probably just my guilty conscience speaking and shitty luck.

Probably.

The group lowered their voices and gathered around their party's tank, then the woman with the crossbow, who was obviously their scout, pointed toward the northern passage.

Taking up their positions behind the tank, the party of four disappeared across the great hall and into the dark beyond.

I slipped toward the next nearest pillar, then the one just off to the side of the room's exit.

I stopped and thought for a moment.

Would I warn them about the closing dungeon?

Or would I just leave them behind and run? No, this was different. I couldn't let something happen to them just because I could.

Closing dungeons were a known variable that messed up every now and then.

There have been recorded situations where people died after a dungeon was reset.

It didn't happen often, but often enough people had to be careful. Usually, it just kicked everyone out and placed them in front of the entrance.

My mouth moved on its own. Warning people about this kind of danger... was just the scout's code.

I took in a deep breath and yelled, operating by instinct.

“The dungeon is about to close! You have seven minutes to leave!”

I bolted for the exit, forgetting all about speed walking, and used my newly-found agility.

I ran as if another mimic was chasing me, speeding through the passageways, into the room where we faced the first skeletons.

My heart caught in my throat as I almost instantly regretted warning them.

I could hear them cursing and shouting, wondering who had been hiding inside the resetting dungeon.

All I could do was curse my stupid generosity.

What had I been thinking?

Anyone coming this far out must have been prepared for a fight.

Not just that, the total disappearance—not just death—of the previous party would be a huge red flag, casting a lot of suspicion on me. If that had been the reason for their late arrival.

I couldn't do that kind of shit anymore.

I wasn't a random do-gooder scout, no, I was a half-man half-mimic who'd killed nobles.

Pushing myself faster than ever before, I saw the light at the far end of the last tunnel much sooner than I remembered. Then I noticed the collapsed part was cleaned out, most likely by the party I just warned.

I didn't even know if they were chasing me, but I could swear I heard footsteps thundering behind me.

If I turned around, I feared it would all be over.

I moved as quickly as my feet would carry me, hitting my shoulder on a piece of rock that was jutting out, but even then I didn't stop until I slammed into the swirling mass that would lead me out of the dungeon.

An incredible pain pierced my shoulder and then ran down my spine.

It was as if the dungeon's very essence was pulling me back to stay inside.

Or maybe it wasn't me the essence pulled at.

Maybe it wanted the mimic to stay.

It had lived there for a long-time, after all. It was a mimic, not a skeleton, so it wasn't naturally born there, but who knew how monsters living in dungeons worked?

Before coming out of the dungeon, a notification appeared as my body and spirit swirled around in the strange magic of the portal.

[You have cleared the Dungeon of the Skeleton Lord]

[Dungeon Rating: Easy]

[Dungeon Level: 3/5]

[Reward Received: You can now spin for an attuned reward based on your essence level and equipped items]

Hah, easy!

Yeah, right.

What had happened there was basically the wildest and most insane experience of a lifetime.

Still, I'd take the reward.

Three tarot cards appeared in the air before me, their backs facing me.

They flipped over once, showing me the three possible rewards.

The first looked like a sword scabbard, the second showed a stack of coins, and the third depicted a sort of leather mail armor breastplate.

All three cards flipped over once again and shuffled for several seconds.

The icons were just to let you know what the options were...

You didn't actually get to choose.

It was kind of weird. If I ever actually got to talk to the System—no idea how that would actually happen of course—I'd ask it what the hell that was all about.

I tapped the middle one, knowing very well I had zero input on what I'd get anyway.

Still, I hoped for the armor as my current one proved to be lacking.

After getting the Runeblade, my offensive capabilities had risen, and now I needed to work on my survivability.

My current armor pieces were ordinary leather with zero extra stats or skills, and they were damaged.

The card flipped over, showing me the scabbard.

It wasn't what I'd wanted, but I wouldn't look a gift scabbard in the hole either way.

That wasn't quite the saying, but you get the idea.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Scabbard of Masking, RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: The scabbard randomly changes the outer appearance of any equipped sword.

REQUIREMENT: 10 Strength, 10 Stamina

BONUS STATS: +5 Strength, +5 Stamina,
+2 Charisma

NOTE: The sword needs to stay inside the scabbard for at least an hour a day to get the masking buff.

The card exploded in a ray of blinding light and the scabbard appeared in my hands. I attached it to my belt, and

the System readjusted it for me, sliding it into place and resizing the scabbard so it wouldn't be in the way.

I stashed my sword into place and felt the new boost hit me. It wasn't nearly as strong as when I equipped the ring or the sword, but twelve stat points with a single item was already incredible in my book.

Really, the best thing about this scabbard was the special ability. It would disguise the sword. People would probably get suspicious if I walked around using the extremely expensive and powerful sword of a noble that'd recently disappeared.

I stepped out of the dungeon. It was dark outside, and I couldn't make anything out for a moment after the bright light had blinded me.

I took in a deep breath, smelling the air. It was clean and fresh, unlike the stale, smelly air inside the dungeon.

My vision returned almost immediately, but I felt someone grab my hand and jerk me to the side.

A soft hand tugged at mine and pulled me along.

It was accompanied by a dark cloak that covered the entirety of the person in front of me.

Normally, I would have been scared to death or tried to fight back as I'd just come out of the dungeon, under some extremely shady circumstances no less.

Luckily, I already knew who it was.

"Melina?" I whispered just loud enough for her to stop and glance over her shoulder.

She nodded with a stern expression, almost as if I'd done something to hurt or offend her.

The young woman suddenly stopped and looked around, then knelt and crawled into a large bush just off to the side of the dungeon entrance.

When I didn't follow right away, her head poked out and she tugged at my pants.

“Get in here!”

I held onto my sword and scabbard, then dropped and followed her.

For a moment I felt as if a thousand needles were pricking into me as thorns and barbs cut my skin through the mimic’s armor, but then I was already in the clear.

“Be quiet, please. Don’t make me regret this!” she hissed.

“I—” I started to say but nodded.

Instead, I looked around to see where I was.

I couldn’t stand as there was more brush all around us, but I sat upright and looked from left to right. It was almost as if someone had cut a small hideout within the bush. And there I thought I’d been sneaky.

The trunk of a tree was just on the edge of the miniature clearing, so I scooted over and leaned against it. Melina’s back turned and she seemed to be listening intently.

The mimic loomed high, glancing at Melina.

For some reason, Melina didn’t seem to have noticed it yet, which was good. Maybe other people wouldn’t notice it either.

Maybe because it was using [Hide]?

The creature had my skills, only at a much higher power level...

Maybe even enough to deceive a spellcaster as powerful as Melina.

Well, that was a huge relief. I wouldn’t be able to go into town with Chester on my shoulder. Now, there was a way I could live as a more normal human, albeit still someone who had to be exceedingly careful.

“Find them, whoever they were! Now!” a rough voice yelled. “I want to know who it was!”

I assumed it was the bald guy speaking, or perhaps the one with the two swords. They sounded angry and tough, which only made me even more curious.

I hadn't heard either of them speak enough to distinguish between them, however.

"They can't be far! Find them, Cass!" the other male voice yelled.

"You find them if you're so smart!" a much higher-pitched voice angrily retorted. Judging by the sound, that was obviously the woman.

Her rebuke was met with a growl and then silence.

"No, we're going back," a new voice said. "We just came to check out a new dungeon, and we've stumbled into something else entirely. First, we report back, and then we see if this has anything to do with the bounty contract."

It could only belong to the young man accompanying them I assumed. The voice sounded younger than the other two, but it was the one in control. I'd been around enough parties to recognize the one calling the shots.

"Why? We just wasted several hours!" the woman asked, demanding an explanation.

"Because if it was an adventurer, they have to report back to the guild. We'll just wait to see who shows up. And besides, we don't know who warned us. It might be the person of interest, or it might be someone else entirely."

Alright.

So these guys had the brains and experience to know something weird had happened.

But what was this about a "bounty contract" and a "person of interest?"

I narrowed my eyes and leaned forward to see better through the bush. I could make out their outlines, but not much more than that.

They, however, couldn't see us, I was certain. We were hiding within the darkness after all.

Melina turned to eye me, and her previously stern expression turned into a smirk of relief and triumph.

“Are they dead?” she whispered.

I held up my hand, not wanting to speak even though we were hidden. Logically, I knew they probably wouldn't be able to hear us if I whispered, but still.

A guilty conscience was a hell of a thing.

The party of four turned away from the dungeon entrance and walked down the cobbled path leading in the town's direction.

I waited for a good minute until they were far enough before replying.

“They are, but they didn't go easy. I've just caused a shit storm. When they don't come out in a few hours, people will know something's wrong.”

“Good!” she snapped. Her voice was visceral and pleased, and I could sense the long pain from her enslavement.

Then she caught herself. “I'm sorry, and... thank you. For saving my life and... well, punishing them. I hope they burn in the pits of the Zilmar.”

“Zilmar?” I asked, sure I'd heard the word before, but I couldn't place it when or where.

She just shook her head distractedly but combined with everything else, it made me deeply curious about her identity.

I blinked. “Are you...”

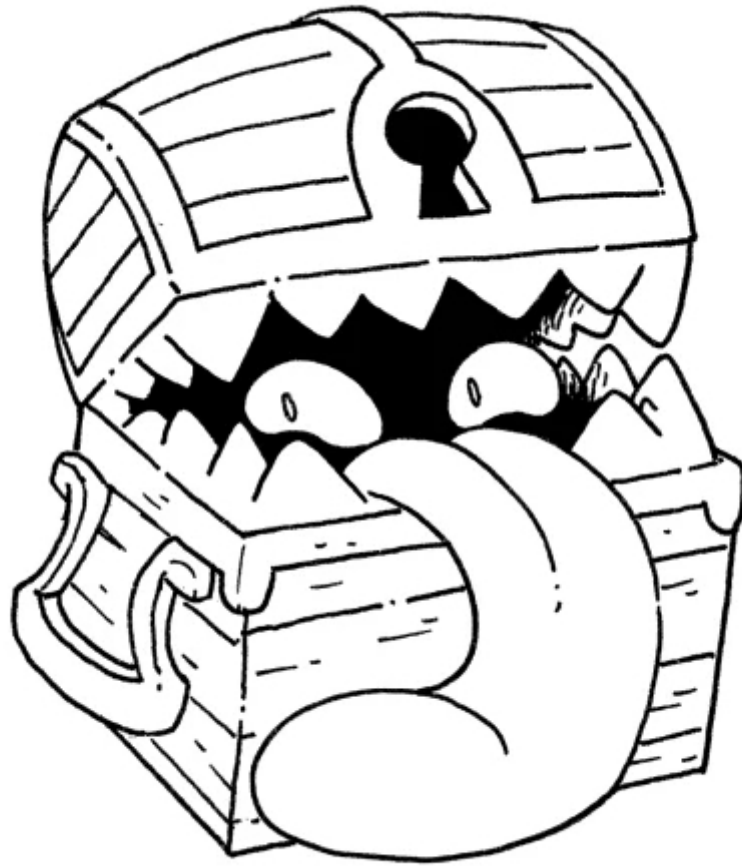
She looked at me, and then reached for her cowl and slid it back.

A mane of golden, silken smooth hair flowed free from the cape, and with it two long, pointy ears that wiggled as they shook free. Forest green eyes stared back up at me.

Her tunic was ripped in several places, and she had a cut just above her right knee.

“You’re... an elf.”

“In the flesh,” she replied with a chuckle. “So, what’s next, human?”



CHAPTER 9: RETURN TO ESLANT

We sat there for a while as I tried to process my thoughts.

After seeing her odd eyes, and her unique magical ability, I'd guessed what was going on. But still, guessing and knowing were two very different things.

Elves were rare in Krowaz, but not so on the other continent from what I gathered.

Sometimes elven delegations visited the cities and larger towns like Eslant, but that kind of visit happened only once in a blue moon.

Because I only saw elves every few years, every delegation looked almost unearthly, especially when compared

to ordinary adventurers like me. Every elf in their delegation had looked stunning with their shiny armor, long carved bows, swords, and magic staves. They looked like a real army, not a ragtag group of adventurers with mismatched armor. The elves would have put even noble parties like Aldon's to shame.

The thought of Aldon and his band of thugs enslaving an elf...it just felt unreal. Then again, I supposed that enslaving a human would be bad enough. But capturing another species and taking them from their home...

The races usually kept to themselves, and their own enclaves. There were a lot of people whose lives were basically completely unaffected by the different species on Basania.

In general, the most common were orcs, elves, and humans.

Humans were pretty weak compared to the other races. Orcs weren't as learned, but they had strong bodies. Elves were smart, agile, and adept at using magic and brilliant strategists.

There were more races too, obviously, but those three were the most common and present on the central continent.

I supposed one of the other races was mimic—though mimics were monsters, not beings.

The System said so.

I felt a pair of eye stalks staring at me with irritation. The mimic had shifted again from its pumpkin form, right back to the chest from before.

I thought about asking why I felt that pull from the dungeon. Wasn't that just more proof that Chester was some kind of monster?

However, I wasn't sure I wanted to talk to it in front of Melina.

[Hide] or not, that would reveal the mimic's presence.

I wondered if I could talk mentally...

Kind of like how it talked to me.

Then again, it could read my thoughts, which was kind of like talking out loud.

Come to think of it, why couldn't I read the mimic's thoughts?

"Heh."

The laugh echoed in my head, and I saw the eye stalks above the chest staring at me mischievously.

Well, Chester sure as hell wouldn't tell me about the very one-sided mind link—and he wouldn't tell me about that weird pull from the dungeon either.

I could see it just looking at his eyes.

Gah.

That dick in a chest.

"Do you have any way to get rid of these?" Melina asked, breaking the silence and cutting through my highly unproductive thoughts.

I looked down at the coral cuffs and shook my head.

"No, sorry. I don't," I muttered.

Just the sight of them angered me.

They were a sign of dehumanization and subservience I wouldn't even wish on an enemy.

"How do they work?" I asked, unsure of the cuff's limitations.

They looked like bracelets when I looked at them up close, but coral was too brittle a material to make anything fancy out of.

"There are many ways to use them, but these dampen my essence powers to that of a second-stage adventurer. They also limit me to a handful of spells."

"And to not attack the cuff's owners?" I asked, repeating the rumors I'd heard.

She sighed and stared down at her wrists, nodding a little.

“Cuffs are usually imbued with the essence of people the wearer has to serve. They then prevent the slave from attacking them directly.”

It did explain why she was able to hit the ceiling, thus hurting them indirectly.

I reached toward her face, suddenly noticing the thin scar that ran there. It'd been hidden before by the hood, and it looked like it'd only healed recently.

“I'm sorry, is that from—?”

“Earlier? Yes,” she replied and pulled away, her cheeks turning a hint of red. “He hit me hard. And it wasn't the only time. It happened a lot. Whenever I did things he didn't like. The woman would laugh as she healed me.”

“I'm...sorry. Not all humans are like that.”

She nodded, but still didn't meet my eyes as I spoke. She was glad I freed her, but she clearly didn't trust me. Then again, why would she?

I sighed and rubbed my temples, then peeked through the brush again.

The four adventurers who'd suddenly entered the dungeon were already gone from sight, but I didn't know if they were waiting somewhere close by to see if we would show up.

“Don't worry, they're pretty far by now,” she said, reading into my action. “Far enough gone so they can't hear or see us, is what I mean.”

Her ears twitched from side to side, making me wonder if elves also had better actual senses than we did. She'd probably noticed them leaving through essence detection—just like how she'd noticed me absorbing the stray essence from the dungeon—but you never knew.

“Good. We're about four hours out from town, so if we hurry, we could get there before they do.”

Melina held her hands up and then shook her cuffs as if pointing out the obvious. “I can’t run at maximum with these on,” she explained. “I lose my balance when running faster.”

I hadn’t known that at all.

Damn those cuffs! They were even worse than I thought...

“What’s the fastest you can go?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“You saw me running out of the dungeon, right?”

I nodded.

Though the cuffs restricted her to just the second stage, she was probably way higher than the second stage once she had her full magic.

I’d seen that fireball.

“It should be fine then,” I said. “Your idea of top speed is probably much faster than anyone else here. Your current level should be good enough.”

After all, Falin had been an archer—a relatively fast class—and it’d taken him the whole dungeon just to catch up to her.

She nodded, a little hesitant at first, then faster. “I’ll manage, but...what was your name again?”

“Damon. It’s nice to meet you,” I replied, offering her my hand.

She stared at it with a frown, but then took it.

“Am I supposed to—?”

“Yes, we humans shake hands when we meet someone for the first time,” I said, shaking her hand, gently. “And it’s just Damon. I have no surname.”

“Then it’s only Melina, as well.”

She looked down at our hands and then up into my eyes again. I could tell that she was frustrated by her weakness, and it bothered me as well. It seemed like such a

damn shame, not only cutting her off from magic but also restricting her considerable powers and abilities. The knowledge that she was a spellcaster interested me, especially since I knew that she had some kind of unique magic.

We humans had mages, wizards, warlocks, and things of that nature, but every race had different relationships with essence and magic.

“Now, shall we get a move on?” Melina asked.

Her tone didn’t change, but I could see the urgency in her body language from how her fingers twitched to how she leaned into the bush.

As for me, I wasn’t so sure, *we* should be moving.

We.

It was a good sentiment, but was it really that smart for her to come along? Before, I’d been thinking to myself that we had no choice, but now that the moment had come...

It might be better for me to sneak into the city by myself first before joining her. I was pretty enthralled by Chester’s [Mimicry] and I knew it’d let me get into the city without problems. I could just turn into a log and get on a carriage carrying lumber. Of course, I would have to make sure I got out before getting to the carpenter’s shop, but that’d be easy enough.

If I brought Melina on with me though, no transforming gimmicks would work. And it’d be a bigger problem afterwards too. An elf would stand out among humans like an oasis in the desert.

“Maybe you should stay here and wait for me? I can find you again once I’m...”

Once I was what?

What would make it safe for me to travel with her?

I could barely take care of myself. If I was ever seen, the Adventurer’s Guild, which had a record of our trip, would be on my ass about what’d happened to Aldon.

He was a real jerk-off, but he was a *noble* jerk-off.

That meant people had to pretend they missed him, and they'd try to find out what'd happened to him.

“No, that's not happening. I can't stay alone here or I'll go mad!” she replied right away. This time, her voice was slightly higher pitched.

“I understand, but you just regained your freedom. It's too risky to go back.”

I looked right at her, then gestured at my bloodied clothes and gear, pointedly reminding her what'd happened to secure her freedom. I didn't need to tell her about eating Aldon and the others, but they were dead, that was for sure.

She looked away, pursing her lips.

She was reluctant to be alone, especially after being enslaved for so long. Not only that, I understood where she was coming from.

Damn it all!

I wanted to show her that humans were different and that we weren't all cruel slavers.

I'd met plenty of terrible assholes, but right now, I suddenly felt very responsible for humanity's reputation.

Way too responsible, if you ask me.

I understood how she felt, but it was just a stupid decision to go back into the lion's den.

I wanted to promise her that everything would be alright and that I'd help her get the cuffs off, that she'd return to her home, but I couldn't flat-out lie. It would lose any possible respect she might have gained for me.

“Then we should move, but stay cloaked, please, or we'll get caught right away. Your ears are a dead giveaway.”

“I—yes, you are right,” she whispered, touching her right ear.

I smiled encouragingly and nodded, and then pushed past her and out of the brush. Just as I was about to exit our hiding spot, I stopped and turned to look at her.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked.

“We go back to my home, then—”

“Back to your home?” she asked.

To my surprise, I even saw a small smile creep onto her face at the mention of the word home.

She seemed excited, almost eager, to have a place to stay.

Sadly, that was not to be.

“Only for a while,” I replied. “I need to get my money and stuff or we won’t have enough for the trip. Then we leave. Aldon’s from one of the noble families that rule Eslant. I can’t be seen there any longer.”

Her face fell.

“How familiar are you with the area?” I asked, trying to get a gauge of how long she’d been here. Traveling with someone with local knowledge would undoubtedly make living on the run easier.

“Unfortunately, not at all, They usually kept me inside. You will have to lead, I’m afraid” she replied.

“Well, I’ve done that before,” I replied. “I’m not sure if you heard Aldon talking, but I’m a scout.”

That drew a thin smile from her. “Yes. The dullard could not be bothered to remember your name. He *was* like that.”

I couldn’t help but smile a little at the immense satisfaction in her voice when she said ‘was.’

“What kind of skills do you have? You are a spellcaster, right?”

“I am a spellslinger.” She replied simply, but with more than a touch of pride.

Just from context, I could tell that it was a powerful class—maybe one only earned after several rebirths. Each rebirth led to further specialization and power gain.

“Spellslinger? I’ve never heard of it before,” I said as I crawled out into the clearing. “What is your spell set like?” I asked as I got to my feet.

I noticed she was having a hard time getting back up, maybe because she’d been kneeling on the ground for so long. I then offered Melina a hand.

She hesitatingly took it and stood.

When we touched, I could barely feel any essence radiating from her. That might be a good thing once we got back to Eslant, but it wasn’t if we came across any monsters, or even worse, adventurers.

It was either the cuffs or the strenuous fighting to get her freedom—probably both.

“Spellslingers are attuned to nature magic, both offensive and defensive. I can use fire magic to destroy things or I can use earth magic to protect them.”

“That sounds impressive. Dual-element casters are rare where I come from. Well, the good ones are rare. Any caster can learn most elemental spells, but casting spells is different than using skills. The elements clash with each other.”

“Spellslingers usually have two elements, some even three,” Melina said proudly. “My people are very attuned to this world and the elements. Maybe that is why?”

“Yeah, probably,” I replied. “Who knows?”

Elements didn’t play well with one another, so most people just opted to focus on a single element.

Melina’s guess was as good as anybody’s. Despite a lot of research efforts being put into it, it was hard to figure out what exactly the System’s whims were.

We started moving.

The sun was fading into the distance, casting more shadows over the forest.

I looked up at the sun, scowling a little.

“It won’t be too long before it’s too dark to move outside. And these woods are full of monsters come nightfall.”

Melina sighed. “It wouldn’t be a problem if I had my full magic.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t matter anything unless we get rid of the cuffs,” I said and pointed toward the direction I’d come from. “Anyway, we go there.”

“We go through the forest?” Melina asked as her ears moved.

“Yeah. It’s the way I came here,” I said, trying not to stare at her wiggling ears.

Since I saw a lot of humans, but rarely other beings, I always found their unique traits to be extremely interesting.

Hell, give it a few days, and I’d probably find Chester’s eye stalks adorable too...

Maybe. Those big veiny eyes *were* pretty mortifying. I pointed my hand toward Melina, palm outward, and cast [Light Step]. She frowned and was about to speak, but I stopped her with a raised finger, knowing what she was going to say.

“We can’t run in the dark, that’s true. But with [Light Step], we can walk quickly and silently.”

“I...see,” she replied, clearly impressed. “That’s a pretty strong skill. My people have something called [Windwalking]. It sort of works like that.”

“That’s interesting. I didn’t know elves and humans had different skills.”

“We do,” Melina said.

Then she purposely stepped on a small branch.

Instead of hearing a loud crack, some of the free essence around us swarmed the branch and muffled the sound.

She grinned, marveling. “This is much more effective than ours. [Windwalking] mostly just boosts speed. I find this skill of yours very useful, Damon. I like it.”

She cracked another small branch, but there was barely any sound.

It seemed like she was having fun with it and reminded me of a kid stepping through a bunch of dried leaves.

“I guess it is useful, yeah,” I smiled. “Maybe your people don’t need it because you elves are more agile. Avoiding stepping on branches shouldn’t be a big issue for you, right?”

“That is surprisingly observant,” she whispered, eyeing me.

I’d been watching the way she moved, even while inside the brush, and hadn’t heard even the tiniest rustle as opposed to me who wasn’t doing a perfect job at staying silent, despite my scout background.

“All right, now follow me, please,” I said. “And stay close. The way back home will be a little tricky.”

I turned toward the less-traveled forest path and walked for about fifty steps, then found the hidden entrance I’d used to get here.

It wasn’t the safest way, but it was the only way we could get to Eslant and arrive before that adventurer group. Maybe we’d even win some extra time.

I hadn’t seen them around before, so it was good to have a home-field advantage.

The sun was starting to disappear beyond the mountain as we set off.

Animals and monsters roamed about.

I could hear and even see some of them as we went, but they were mostly smaller creatures, nothing larger than a

wolf.

I kept checking over my shoulder, making sure Melina was keeping up.

Thanks to the spell, she was right behind me and didn't seem tired.

I didn't know how much time had passed when we arrived at the edge of the forest, but it had gotten darker still.

The sun was gone.

Now, only the moon was shedding its dull bluish light on the road ahead.

"How much longer?" Melina whispered.

It would take us just about half an hour longer until we got to Eslant.

The last part was the hardest one, as we'd be visible to anyone with a high perception skill.

The town was visible in the distance, tiny lights flickering about as the wind blew.

The wind tossed Melina's long, golden hair about, and it was only becoming even stronger. She kept tucking it behind her ears.

A storm might be coming, but we couldn't worry about it.

"What now?" Melina asked as she caught me staring into the distance.

"I wish I'd taken all my belongings with me and stashed them somewhere," I muttered.

"But you could not have known, or am I wrong?" she asked.

A single dungeon had changed my life forever, and not for the better. It was funny how a seemingly random decision could change everything. "No, I couldn't. And I'm sorry, I was lost in thought for a moment," I said apologetically. "We can't

just walk in through the gate. We should climb the wall or swim up the river.”

“I... don’t like either option.”

I glanced at her and saw her arms and legs trembling.

She’d moved quickly to get here, but with the cuffs...

Maybe that was beyond her.

Hell, did elves even know how to swim?

Damned if I knew—I’d never seen it before.

“What if...” she said, and then cut off as if thinking about what to do next. “Yes, we could create a distraction. I can use my fireball and—”

I shook my head.

“The town of Eslant has specially trained guards who can use their essence to detect others. At a high enough level, they can detect if the essence in question is hostile or not.”

“So if I were to cast a simple offensive spell near your town, those essence-reading guards would spot us?”

I was just about to nod, but then my heart stopped beating for a moment.

Something was off.

“Shh!” I hissed, pulling her to the ground with me.

“What? What is it?” she whispered, keeping her head down.

I didn’t reply right away but kept my eyes peeled on the forest edge where I thought I’d heard and seen something.

Seconds passed, but nothing happened.

“I’m sorry, I thought I saw something along the edge over there,” I said, pointing toward the main road.

Melina narrowed her eyes, squinting a little, and then shook her head.

“I can’t see anything there,” she whispered. “You can trust an elf’s eyes in the dark, Damon, our sight is perfect.”

“I trust you,” I said, mulling over how to proceed.

If I used [Hide], it would effectively blur me in the darkness, but it wasn't a skill I could use on her.

And besides, once we got close enough to the wall, the skill wouldn't be as effective with dozens of burning torches and braziers.

I decided to try again and see if she'd listen to reason.

I just didn't see a safe way to bring her inside with me.

A guy sneaking in late at night was scary enough, but one sneaking in with an enslaved elf...

There was just no way to do it clearly, and if she couldn't climb or swim, I didn't know what we could do. I decided to try leaving her behind again.

“Look, Melina, you can see the town from here, so there's no need for you to follow me. I have a way to get really close and maybe even inside, but I can only use the skill on myself.”

She bit her lower lip and looked away.

“I also have a way to hide in the dark. Please, let me follow you. I promise they won't see me.”

Man.

She really didn't want to be alone.

I felt conflicted.

All I knew about her was that she had a dual-element spell caster class.

What were her skill and spell sets like?

Was what she just proposed even true? Could she really hide?

If we got caught, we were totally screwed.

When she didn't elaborate, I used [Hide] on myself and just started walking. I didn't have the heart to leave her.

Her footsteps were muffled behind me, and when I glanced over my shoulder, I couldn't make her out anymore.

A party request invitation popped up before me, and I almost tripped over my feet.

I stopped and crouched low, then accepted it.

What a blunder.

I should have added her right away when we met up outside the cave.

It would let us keep track of each other better and communicate—I was just unfamiliar with the party system after so many years of not being included.

I smirked a little to myself.

It was really kind of funny.

After years of thinking of myself as a sad sack scout, I now had some real teammates.

Sure, they were a mimic monster-buddy who ate humans and a mysterious elf determined to stick with me live or die...

But they were both good people from what I gathered, and it was good to be valued.

Her name, Melina Lunesca, popped up in the upper right corner of my vision.

A small green orb floated next to it, representing she was alive and well. I knew that my name and orb would appear there for her as well, but would anything look different now that I was merged with a mimic?

Melina's blurred outline sprang to life next to me.

Now that we were in the same party, we could follow each other despite using spells and skills to hide.

"I'm sorry, Damon, but it took me a while to figure out how to add a human to my party. It's very different for us elves," Melina explained.

Her words appeared before me and then rang out in my mind.

It was thought-speech, much like what I and Chester had, only much better and much more convenient, as we didn't have to actually fuse to talk.

I found that utility to be the best of all the others. We could communicate using our thoughts, and they were always equally loud. And it all worked up to a hundred yards, sometimes even beyond that.

"I should have thought of that as well," I replied with a thought.

The road was only about two hundred paces away, so I kept my distance and walked parallel.

If our hiding skills dropped for even a second, someone might spot us if they looked our way.

"This is fun," Melina said. *"Sneaking into a human town. We've been doing that since childhood."*

"And you were never caught?" That was kind of mind-blowing. Maybe I'd been seeing elves for a long time, just without realizing it. I supposed that other than the ears and the eyes, it was easy to hide them, and a nice hood did the job just fine.

"No, not once. Maybe today is the first time?"

"I'd rather not."

I could live without that experience, especially since I knew how the guards and the mayor treated criminals. And in a way, we had become criminals—our crime just hadn't been discovered yet.

"Anyway, we should be getting to the first patrols soon. Stay close and..."

A rumbling noise reverberated from behind us.

I stopped and looked back, ready to fight, only to see a long carriage moving our way. There were no horses or other pack animals, just floating orbs of essence pulling it along.

Carriages like these had a low top speed on these bad, cobbled roads, but they didn't need animals to pull.

On top of that, the carriage's command modules could memorize various destinations and then drive themselves.

Even better...

I met Melina's eyes and then nodded toward the carriage. It was still several minutes down the road, which gave us enough time to come up with a plan.

"I have the perfect way to get us onboard," she said. "Let's hurry."

I eyed the elf curiously but ran after her toward the main road.

If she was going to trust me, I'd just have to trust her as well.

We replenished our *[Hide]* skills just as they were about to run out. I didn't know what skill she used, since the party tool didn't give that information, but it was almost identical to mine.

Melina and I dropped to our knees behind a large boulder and waited.

She rummaged through a small pouch on her hip and then handed me a thumb-sized seed. It almost looked like one you would find inside a peach.

"What do I do with this?" I mentally asked.

"We'll roll in between the wheels and grab onto the underside of the carriage. Once you're safe, push some essence into the seed and it will cover you with a thin layer of essence-repellant vines and weeds. That should cloak us on our way in."

"How very interesting," I said and eyed the seed. I loved these kinds of stealthy magical tools. *"I'd like some explanation on how it works another time."*

All along the road, there were ruts large enough for someone to lie inside. I pointed.

“We should let the carriage pass overhead and grab on. Much safer.”

She nodded and moved to lie inside what looked like a deep enough rut in the road.

I lay next to her and tried to adjust my scabbard. It was partially in the way and poking into my side.

Oh, how wonderful it would be if I had a storage item that worked. And not one that had an acidic gut.

“Here it comes,” Melina said. *“Ten, nine. eight...”*

She suddenly lurched upward and shot past me.

I cursed under my breath and grabbed the underside of the carriage, lunging up.

Jumping up at eight?

This elf sucked at counting!

The sudden force pulled me along the road.

Small rocks dug into my legs as the carriage pulled me.

I'd gained a lot of power in the dungeon, but that didn't mean I was ready for anything the world threw at me.

Pulling myself up to the underside of the carriage was much harder than it looked.

Fortunately, I managed.

I took a moment to breathe in and out, then pushed some essence into the small seed, and several vines sprouted from within, grabbing hold of various pieces of wood and steel, covering and keeping us safe from any sharp and larger stones on the road.

I felt a strange sensation wash over me, almost as if I'd been covered by cool and rippling water.

I could hear three or four different voices coming from the carriage.

One was definitely older, and the others were younger, maybe even somewhere my own age.

I almost jerked back in surprise, but I pushed past it, holding on tight.

Damn.

Although automatic carriages didn't have drivers, they usually had riders. I guessed these people were either hitching on for a ride, or they wanted to monitor their goods.

The good thing was that it didn't matter thanks to Melina's seed. I didn't know how it worked, but the seed had prevented anyone from feeling our essence.

The voices spoke loudly about something I couldn't make out.

Lights slowly grew brighter all around us as I tried to remain unnoticed, and then the carriage slowed.

More rumbling ahead of us broke through the silence, and a voice carried through.

“Open the gate!”

The familiar feeling of probing essence flooded the carriage as we passed through the wooden gate, but it was different than usual.

The very sensation that usually probed deep into my body, bounced off me and was redirected toward the ground.

I'd definitely have to ask Melina about the seeds if we got out of this mess alive.

I grinned, unable to believe my good luck for a change.

A lot of bad things happened during the day, but the young elf woman wasn't one of them.

Voices rang out all around the carriage, and I could see armored boots protruding past the sides.

There were easily a dozen people standing and walking around the carriage, more shouting followed, and then a strong essence appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

The carriage door creaked open and several pairs of feet stepped down the stairs, joining the guards and attendants.

I barely suppressed a cry of surprise.

Just who the hell had been inside this carriage?

It was a power beyond any I had ever felt in this town.

Two other essences were mixed up along with the strong signature, but they were much weaker, though I'd almost dare say it was on the rank of an Eslant's baron.

The mimic stirred on my shoulder and the head turned around, the one eye that wasn't shut closed focused on the feet.

For a moment, I was afraid Chester would jump out from under the carriage and attack the person, but he didn't.

The head turned back around, and then the mimic flashed me its sharp teeth.

"Still hungry? You glutton." Though he could read my thoughts, I carefully directed this one so he could hear me.

"Always. Where is my cake?"

Sadly, a missing cake was probably the least of our troubles, considering our super precarious position.

A reassuring hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed gently.

Melina's eyes focused on mine, and all she did was nod, but it made me feel safe for some strange reason.

Despite the strong presence and everyone around us, she seemed calm.

I could tell there was much more about her than what I could see at first glance, but who didn't have any secrets of their own?

"Enough!" the new, gruff voice yelled. "What is with this circus? Get lost and let my carriage pass! I've got business with the mayor! Bring me to him!"

Even the man's words radiated essence.

"Duke Harholt! It would be an honor!" a voice said.

A Duke?

We usually didn't have any visitors of his rank. What had we gotten ourselves into?

But there was no time to think. The Duke's impatient voice echoed down from above me.

“Yes, yes, hurry along. And I don't want anyone near the carriage, do you understand? If there's even so much as a scratch on the paint, you will all pay dearly! Now go! Let it through!”

The guards and attendants scattered, their feet disappearing in every direction as the carriage lurched and started moving.

For now, we were in.



CHAPTER 10: CAKE DIVERSION

The problem was, getting into the city wasn't enough. We also had to get off. Unfortunately, the duke seemed like he was in a hurry. He wasn't going to stop anytime soon, and I had a feeling that the Duke wouldn't be happy about hangers-on.

"Shit," I cursed in the party chat. "Aren't these people going to stop any time soon?"

"I think they are going straight to their destination," Melina replied. "Are we going to have a chance to get off?"

"Probably not."

"Doesn't a carriage this size need to stop somewhere? It's so large. Aren't some of the roads going to be too

narrow?”

“Unfortunately not,” I replied.

I was a little surprised to hear how much Melina knew about the supply carts. From the sounds of it, she'd done this vine trick before.

Normally, she'd be right.

The large supply carriages would stop by in a local shed, then just sit there until people came to move the supplies.

That'd be a perfect place to slip out.

Unfortunately, while Eslant wasn't very big compared to some of the sprawling cities on the continent, it was large enough to have roads that could accommodate such large carriages. Of course, even roads like this were a fairly recent development.

We would have to find a bend in the road.

“Has this place always been like this?” Melina asked. *“It was a lot larger than I thought it would be when Aldon brought me out of his estate.”*

I shook my head.

“No. Eslant used to be a small hamlet until a few decades ago when dungeons started appearing around the place.”

“So dungeons help a place prosper,” she said thoughtfully. *“We usually close dungeons once they appear.”*

“Why?”

I was stunned.

There was no reason for anybody to close down dungeons—they were invaluable resources.

“The monsters that come out?”

“Yeah, about that.” She was right, but it was more of a matter of perspective. *“We don't see any value in closing down dungeons. If you think about it, monster remains are also*

resources. Besides, adventurers only stick around if they have something to do at all times.”

Dungeons weren't closed very often, only when something was wrong with them.

Even then only large parties could close them down for good. Dungeons were usually a sign of great change, and with them came great advancement, treasures, and ultimately, power.

For the elves, who were already wealthy and powerful, it made sense to keep the balance.

For us humans, any amount of power was appreciated.

The carriage bumped into a large piece of rock on the road, and I instinctively tightened my grip on the underside for a moment, before remembering the vines were keeping us in place.

No wonder Melina seemed so relaxed beside me.

“Do you classify dungeons?” she asked, pushing to know more.

“We have three categories: easy, medium, and hard, all with their own individual ratings. Easy has five ratings—one to five, with one as the easiest. Normal goes from one to ten, and then Hard goes from one to twenty.”

“Strange. We only use numbers one through fifty—all dungeons are categorized by the same scale.”

In my mind, that made a lot more sense.

Mishearing someone's “Hard One” and thinking it was an easy dungeon due to the number one was a great way to get yourself killed for no reason.

“Yeah, I don't like the rating system people put in place, but we make do with what we got.”

Eslant was surrounded by over twenty known dungeons, and only one of them was rated hard.

Seven were normal difficulty, and the rest were all easy-rated, like the skeleton dungeon we'd just fought

through.

If it weren't for Chester, who was stuck inside for a reason I still didn't fully understand, the dungeon would indeed have been easy.

The abundance of dungeons made the town ideal for beginner teams still trying to settle into their roles. People came from all over the place to get in some extra practice or to fight through their first dungeon.

Normally, they were more successful than Aldon and his team.

Of course, the average adventurer wasn't trying to kill their scout or enslave an elf.

The carriage rolled to a stop for a moment, and another gate opened, letting us through.

This second gate separated the wealthier inner town from the less wealthy outskirts.

Just under ten thousand people lived inside the inner town during the year, with another thousand or so returning for the annual grand monster surges.

It would be almost impossible to house everyone inside had the Builder's Guild not come up with residential buildings.

That was the funny thing about nobles—they would rather live nowhere, or even stay at home instead of adventuring, than live in the slums.

However, the inner town was originally built for the city's local lord and his closest advisors. It was only after Eslant's rapid expansion that other people wanted to live there too.

Before long, Eslant had grown from a small outpost into an actual town, and soon it was becoming a city. And now, it had five big noble families, instead of just one small one.

Not only that, the squabbling nobles insisted that all of their buildings had to be as grand as the others.

When it came to guys like me, they didn't give a damn about inequality, but surprise surprise, it became the most important thing in the world when it came to themselves.

It'd fallen on the town to create an appropriate compromise.

The residential buildings went up instead of spreading out, conserving as much space as possible while still remaining comfortable and impressive.

They were the pride of their most renowned engineer, and unlike almost every other structure in Basania.

Most of the buildings stretched up to eight or ten floors, an uncommon sight even in the bigger cities. Sure, plenty of nobles lived in castles, but very few of them were so space efficient.

They were made of solid stone and wooden beams, thatch, hay, and other cheap roofing materials. Not only that, the buildings were mildly charmed with magic, keeping them reliable despite their cheap materials.

A little bit of essence went a long way in preventing any rain from passing through, so using light materials kept both the cost and weight down.

The carriage lurched again.

"Did Aldon ever bring you inside his home?" I asked Melina.

"No. He'd only just..." she paused for a long moment. *"He'd only just bought me before entering the dungeon."*

Now that was a surprise, as it'd seemed like Melina had been enslaved for a while. Then again...she might have been bought from someone else.

The thought made me shudder, but her next question cut through my thoughts.

"Was he an important noble?" she asked.

"Yeah, he was," I replied, suddenly feeling screwed again.

The pompous tank had told me about his genealogy right away. He was one of the heirs to Sherazad, one of the five ruling families.

The Sherazades were known for forging artifacts and putting together mercenary forces. There weren't too many standout fighters among the Sherazad, but they had plenty of mid-tier adventurers.

"Damon? Do you know where we are going?" Melina whispered, nudging me.

She didn't use the party chat, which I found odd considering our predicament, but party messages couldn't convey emotions as well.

She sounded very afraid, which made sense.

We were just supposed to sneak into the town, not into the sanctum of the wealthy.

This situation was the very definition of mission creep.

"The carriage is probably going to the mayor's estate. We've entered the wealthy part of the city," I said, trying to remember which turns we took. "I mean, that's what the Duke said, right? It wouldn't make sense for the mayor to be anywhere else at this time."

The mayor was also from one of the five noble families, but despite his wealth and power, he was a rather ordinary man, beloved for his just and fair ways.

He was definitely an odd duck compared to the other high-ranking adventurers, but I guessed part of that was his understanding of the ordinary folk.

It was widely known that with power came corruption, and with that, a loss of sympathy for anyone weaker, but the mayor had never changed.

He'd stayed the same for the last decade, never abusing his authority, at least not to the public eye.

He was someone the common people looked up to and the other nobles frowned upon.

I couldn't help but wonder what such a strong figure like the Duke wanted with the mayor, but I sincerely hoped he hadn't changed and become like the corrupt nobles. That would be the downfall of Eslant.

I glanced to the sides, trying to get a better grip on our surroundings, but it was dark enough that I couldn't make out all the details from the carriage's underside.

Still, considering what the Duke said earlier, it was the only destination that made any sense.

Besides, the carriage was too expensive to leave lying around just anywhere.

It was an autonomous supply carriage, so even if the Duke had removed all the supplies to make himself comfortable, the essence orbs were already worth plenty. And even if they knew who it belonged to, there would always be a few morons who would try and steal either the carriage or parts of it.

Still, we couldn't get all the way to the mayor's house.

That was just asking to be discovered.

I thought for a moment, then came up with a plan.

"We need to get off before we pass the small bridge. I live nearby."

Though they probably couldn't hear us over the rumbling wheels, I wanted to move the conversation back to the party chat. I had sympathy for Melina being scared and forgetting, but silent communication was just an important best practice.

"You live in the wealthy part of the city?" Melina asked, catching onto my lead.

Though she was using the party chat, I could tell she was shocked. Maybe I should have been offended, but she had a point. I didn't look like a rich noble.

"Long story," I replied. *"Basically, rich nobles need entertainment too. Anyways, do you have any way to distract them? Or to muffle the sound of us falling?"*

“Leave it to me. Just let me know when.”

Only several short minutes later, I could smell a familiar scent: a mixture of booze and burned meat.

I was home.

Rolo, my adoptive father of sorts, was a shitty cook, but he was a great tavern master, both caring and easygoing.

He let me stay in exchange for doing the odd job of getting booze, meats, and other things when he needed to restock.

The room was small, but it was all I needed.

Besides, I didn't want to leave him.

I owed him my life.

Ever since I'd met him, Rolo made sure I had at least a future ahead of me. It wasn't bright, but it was much more than anyone else had done for me.

The problem was, he might be in danger if anyone found out about the adventurer group I'd killed.

I would have to sneak into my room, grab my money and goods, and then disappear for the rest of my life.

He would never know where I'd gone off to or the real truth behind the disappearance of Aldon and the others.

He would probably have his suspicions, especially after my stuff disappeared, but hopefully, he'd trust that I wanted to do the right thing instead of believing the rumors people would say about me.

And as much as I hated to admit it, there'd be rumors, lots of them. Nobles didn't just go missing without a massive shit storm.

That was my biggest problem right now: the Adventurer Guild's log.

Everybody knew I was the one who'd brought Aldon, Jesabel, and the others into the Skeleton Dungeon. When they

went missing, there was only one person to possibly blame—me.

Even in the best-case scenario, people would think that I'd died alongside them after having led them into a trap.

Still, I had a lot more to worry about right now instead of just a tarnished reputation as a scout.

"There's a turn coming up ahead," I said. *"I live right there. Be ready."*

"Okay. I'm going to remove the vines, then muffle the sound. Be ready." Melina said. *"Just be careful."*

"Okay."

A brief whistle echoed through the air, gently tickling my ears. I didn't know exactly what it was, but it was obviously some kind of skill, sort of like [Hide] but only for the sound I guessed.

The greenery holding us in place shrunk and then retracted, leaving us dangling by our hands and feet. All that remained from the thick vines were the two small seeds we had used earlier.

I caught it and handed the seed back to her. Then I renewed my [Hide] spell, feeling a trickle of essence wash over me. A moment later, I felt Melina do the same.

We were just in time as the carriage slowed down and started to turn.

I felt the bridge coming up as the carriage rose, and then let go of the piece of wood I was holding onto. It wasn't that far down, but I still managed to bump my head.

Fortunately, there was no thunk.

Otherwise, I might have given us away.

What mattered was that we were safe, only I had a lump on my head and felt like a fool.

I supposed that was a worthy trade-off.

I cursed under my breath as Melina fell next to me, but with much more grace than I managed. It made sense considering she was an elf, which among other things, were known for their agile bodies and natural grace.

The carriage drove off as we lay there on the ground.

I got to my feet and helped Melina stand, then we hurried off to the side of the closest building.

We slid in behind a large barrel and several half-rotten wooden crates. I merged into the shadows and knelt, peeking over the barrel. Seeing how our hiding skills were still active, I hoped no one had spotted us.

I didn't know what the limitations of [Hide] were, and even then, the skill was new to me.

I'd only gotten it a few hours ago, so I didn't fully trust it to do as advertised.

If we were spotted falling off the Duke's carriage late at night after a noble went missing, they'd rightfully think of us as the guilty party, that was for sure.

I carefully scanned the surroundings, looking through the entire street.

From behind Rolo's tavern, I got a pretty good glimpse of the surrounding area.

The tavern was located south of the river Ksigna that cut Eslant in two across the center.

Eslant itself was a town within a town, with a secondary wall and four gates cutting it up further. There were the northern outskirts, the northern quarter, the southern quarter, and the southern outskirts.

The north was wealthier, with ordinary folks having it much easier than most that lived in the southern quarter. Even though the town was sliced up into four parts, most people were allowed to move about freely.

Only the estates of the five ruling families were guarded.

Rolo's tavern was right next to the first of three steel bridges that connected the two different sides of Eslant.

Back in the day, long before my time, or even Rolo's, Eslant had been two separate towns until the bridges connected them.

Across the road, facing Rolo's tavern, was a cluster of residential buildings, that framed a large bakery and convenience store in one. Most of the windows in the building across the street were dark, which was odd as I knew many of the adventurers living there, since they were Rolo's primary client base.

A good half of them were usually out subjugating minor monster surges, but considering even that number, too many of the windows were dark. I'd usually see at least ten to fifteen candles glowing in the windows every night.

"Something's off," I said.

"What is it?" Melina whispered.

Chester stirred just then, which was perfect timing.

Hah.

The mimic might have been a lazy goofball, but he had a good sense of the moment.

Of course, that was probably because we were connected together. He could feel the tension rising.

"Hold on," I said to Melina, focusing on the mimic instead. "*Are you awake?*" I asked.

"*Yes. What you want?*" I didn't hear him yawn, but through our mental link, I could tell that he was tired and disgruntled.

Well, that was too bad. I'd have to toss him an extra cookie or something, but this was urgent.

"*Can you move across the street and peek into the windows? See if anyone's watching the tavern.*"

Chester did as I asked.

I felt the thread connecting us stretch to its limit, but it never snapped. It was strange how a mimic could shape its body to its will, but I meant to use that extremely convenient skill as much as possible.

I turned back to the elf as she eyed me with a curious expression.

“Sorry, I’m using a skill to check the buildings. Wait a second.”

She nodded. “I didn’t realize you had a skill like that. It seems powerful.” Then she frowned a little. “I can’t even feel you activating it.”

“It’s kind of a special skill,” I replied, leaving it at that.

Of course, it was a bit of an understatement to describe Chester as a skill...

She didn’t respond, but I felt her tense up beside me.

It was only understandable as there were hundreds of adventurers always within city limits.

Then there was the city guard, which was curiously absent today as well. Normally, we didn’t have trouble with gangs as the mayor’s people stomped those out within an hour of learning about troublemakers.

I pushed the thought aside and eyed the far side of the road. Something just bothered me about the windows and the absence of light.

“Six people watching the street,” Chester said.

I nodded.

“Have they noticed us?”

“No, they are fools. Now, where is my cake?”

“Wait. I still have questions,” I said.

“Come on,” Chester groaned. *“You promised cake hours ago! Where is it?”*

I tried protesting, but he cut me off. *“No work! No work until cake!”*

Fucking hell.

I was about to call him something very rude, but a promise was a promise. He'd eaten a freaking skeleton for me, so I owed him big time.

The mimic had done everything I'd asked for, and even more than that.

"I'll give it soon," I said, trying to sound soothing. *"I live close by. I just need to make sure nobody spotted us. Why are the windows so empty?"*

"Don't know," Chester replied. *"Some rooms are messy, like you. I see clothes and shoes lying around."*

"Got it. Do you think the people still in the building will spot me with [Hide] active?"

"No. They are weak. Their essence control is laughable. Now give me cake!"

Excellent.

The situation was a little confusing.

All the good adventurers had left, leaving just a few beginners inside the residential area.

I had no idea why that was—maybe they'd known the duke was coming?

Still, I wasn't going to waste our good luck.

If they couldn't find us, then we were probably in the clear.

I nodded more to myself than him, then turned to Melina.

She wasn't watching me, and instead was sitting with her eyes closed.

It felt like an odd time to rest her eyes.

Maybe she was meditating or using some kind of essence absorption skill. I had no idea how elf skills—or even their physical bodies—worked.

“Stay here for a minute. I’ll be right back.”

“What? Aren’t we going into your house?”

“This skill has a weird cost.”

Before she could protest or ask any further questions, I pushed out from behind the barrel and crates, making my way to the bakery.

It was a place I liked to frequent whenever I had any spare coins.

They made the best pastries, sweets, and freshly baked goods. The owner’s son, who was a baker, took over when his father died.

Living in Rolo’s tavern for so long, I’d enjoyed waking up every morning to the best smells.

The front door was luckily wide ajar, and I could already smell the sweets before I even got close. I just hoped that Chester and I wouldn’t spook anyone inside.

Just imagining a door opening and then closing by itself had the hairs on my neck standing upright.

I stopped near the entrance and peeked inside.

The place was empty but it was time for dinner so most people were home or eating in one of the many taverns and inns across town.

Another thought crossed my mind. I didn’t have a single piece of working storage jewelry, so grabbing a cake and running wasn’t working. Not tonight.

“Chester, can you come over here?”

The mimic grew from my shoulder, eyeing me hungrily.

Both its eyes were now open. The mimic leaned past me, lolling its tongue as it stared into the bakery.

“This is...tasty!”

“Yes, it’s tasty, but only take one cake, and make sure they don’t see you. I’ll buy you more when I get my money.”

Chester didn't bother listening to me, which wasn't a big surprise. All I could do was watch the mimic as it made its way into the cake display and then started eating.

He definitely wasn't eating just one, gobbling them up as if his life depended on it.

I'd heard of the term a baker's dozen before. It meant thirteen instead of twelve since your baker would sneak you an extra piece as a bonus.

They'd have to come up with something called Chester's dozen soon, just to quantify the damage he was causing.

The snarfing and lip-smacking were just disgusting!

"Stop! People will hear you!"

"Oh no, friend. This snarfing is just for you! That's how mimics say thanks for a good meal!"

Now that was fucking great.

A disgusting torrent of noise, just for me.

And as a thank you no less.

I guessed it was better than being caught though.

But even though he had the [Hide] skill active, he wasn't hiding the other devastation. Imagine a miniature meteorite smashed into a shelf at your favorite bakery, sending cream and dough all over the place.

That was Chester.

"Damn it, Chester. Someone will notice! Drop those cakes!"

"Cake! So good! Just like promised, friend!"

Now he was *licking* the plates, leaving green saliva all over the shelf in place of cream.

I had no idea what people would think if they saw this.

The lady working the store was busy cleaning several shelves and had her back turned to him.

She didn't notice the disappearing cakes.

Yet.

Then an idea came to mind.

"Hey, can you create a diversion?"

"Yes! Diversion! Cake diversion!"

The mimic didn't wait for me to finish, and let out a garbled noise. Two cakes suddenly floated in the air as the lady turned toward him.

I knew it must have been a frightening sight seeing two floating cakes being devoured by something invisible, but she did a much better job than I could have even asked for.

Her eyes went wide, and she stumbled back. "Ghost! Ghost! Cake ghost!"

"What the?"

"What's going on?"

"Are you alright?"

Several voices from inside the bakery resounded. Well, everybody was focused on her, meaning we could just walk right out.

The only problem?

The fool hadn't waited for me to get out of the store.

"Next time, wait until I say go!"

Chester didn't respond, and why would he?

Cakes were heaven, so I could only imagine what it was like for the creature to get its hand on an all-you-can-eat buffet.

I saw the last cake disappear and Chester rub his small tentacles gleefully.

The sound of opening doors and sliding windows resounded from overhead. Shit.

"I have idea. Use [Mimicry]. Turn into shape to escape!"

I did as he said, thinking of the first shape that came to mind—a barrel. Maybe I could roll my way to safety.

Before I could say or do anything else, I felt my body suddenly condense as essence flowed through me. This was even weirder than transforming into a wall.

My arms disappeared, my shoulders grew broad and turned round, and my legs fused together.

“What the hell?” I muttered. Before I could figure out if this was even possible, I was rolling across the street, an incredible pain shooting up my body and gathering in my skull.

We hit the wall, and then I was me again, as essence suddenly spasmed out of my body.

“What—fuck! What did we just do?”

“Hah! We turn into a small barrel and roll across street! You funny!”

The good news, if you could call it like that, was that nobody seemed to have noticed a small, invisible barrel rolling over the street.

The bad news was there’d be a hell of a lot more eyes on the bakery and road now.

Fucking Chester!

I also couldn’t help wishing I’d thought of the [Mimicry] skill earlier. Maybe I could have pretended to be a shopping bag or something, and just let someone fill me up with cakes before ducking out.

I hurried to hide next to Melina, feeling as if a knot was tied in my gut.

She scooted over, making space for me to sit. Her eyes had been closed, so I guessed she missed the whole...fiasco. Or she was the world’s best actress.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“We have a problem. I wound up attracting a lot more attention than I thought I would.”

The first adventurer jumped from the third-floor window and landed with a cat's grace. He spun around and hurried into the store.

“What did you do? Why did they start screaming?” Melina asked as she peeked over one of the crates, but then she gasped.

Melina stiffened next to me, and her fingers dug into my arm. Her eyes widened and she stumbled backward, pushing into the wall.

“Wh—what is—that?”

Her right index finger pointed at Chester, who settled on my shoulder and stuck a sharp-nailed tentacle into his right nostril, then wiggled it around.

“They will hear the long ears. She should be quiet.”

“What—by the frozen fires of Zilmar! Damon! What is that beast?” Melina asked.

“*Shh,*” I said over our party chat, trying to hush her. “*People will hear you if you are so loud. And I will tell you about it later. Come on, we need to go up to my room. I want my gold back.*”

“*I'm not going anywhere with—*”

“*A beast? I am no beast. I am cake monster. Give me cake.*”

“*C—cake? And why does it speak?*” Melina protested, seemingly unable to come to terms with seeing a cake-munching mimic.

I couldn't blame her.

It's not like I'd reacted any better at first.

“Friend asked nice, long ears. Listen or I eat you,” Chester said, baring two rows of sharp, long teeth and smacking its lips.

Her face paled even further, which was almost impossible as she was already as pale as snow.

“Chester, that’s enough. Don’t frighten her. And besides, why did you show yourself to her anyway?”

“Accident, I show myself on accident. Skill ran out. Hurtful words. You like long ears, right? I will not eat her.”

He was still rummaging his tentacle up his nose, and even though I had to know better, I still asked.

“Why are you picking your nose like that?”

“Cake. Cake piece stuck up there.”

For crying out loud.

I swatted at the mimic, hitting the side of its boxy body, and sent it flying. It just lay there on the ground for a moment, staring up at me with its orange, stalky eyes.

“Oww,” he whined.

“This is madness,” Melina muttered. “This is complete and utter madness! Why do you have a monster growing out of your shoulder? And why does it speak? And why—”

I put my hand over her mouth and pushed her against the wall, taking care that she didn’t bump her head.

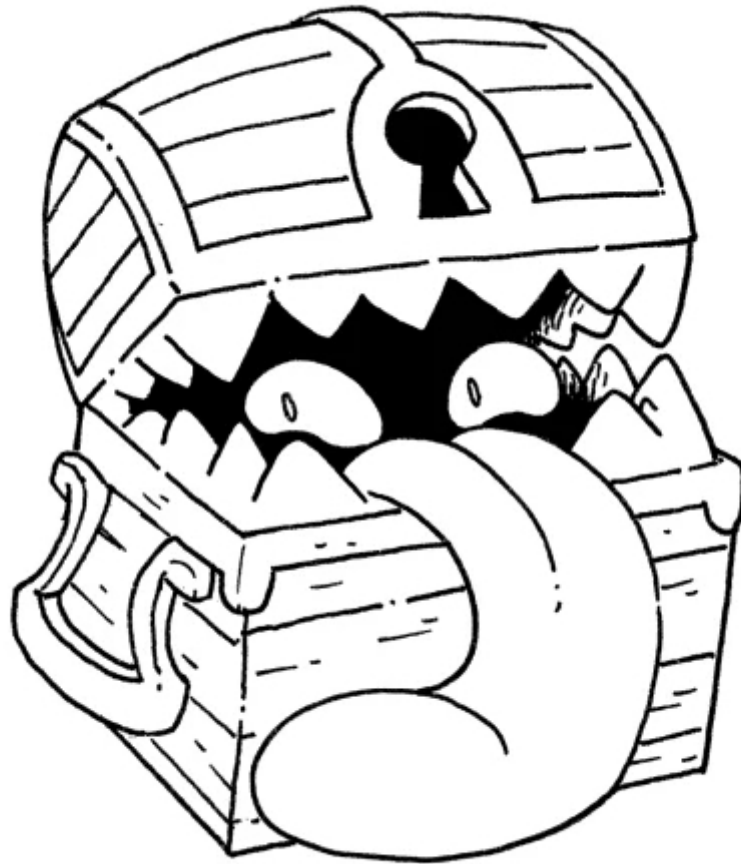
It was a risky move, but Melina was making too much noise. Sure, she could send me flying with a slap or hit me with a fireball, but I knew she didn’t want to get caught.

Any more screaming from her, and people would *know* this commotion was about us.

“Melina, please, refresh your hiding skill when I let go of you. Then follow me to my room. I’ll explain everything when we get there. If you want to leave after hearing me out, I won’t stop you.”

As if awakened from a dream, she nodded hurriedly and looked right into my eyes. I could see the battle raging in her mind for a moment, but then she pushed me off her.

“Alright,” she hesitantly replied. “I’ll...I’ll trust you.”



CHAPTER 11: CAUGHT

Melina and I refreshed our hiding skills.

Chester joined us, floating and muttering some obscene curses I couldn't even understand. I had no idea what had happened to the mimic during its latest food coma, but he now talked like a grumpy, drunk adventurer.

Man.

Maybe it was the sugar?

Who even knew how a mimic's body worked?

Sensing my thoughts, Chester started explaining, but all I got was some rambling incoherent blabber in a language I didn't understand. Even if I could understand him, I wouldn't have listened.

We didn't have time for a biology lesson right now.

I grabbed Melina's hand and pulled her along as I pushed the short conversation with him to the back of my mind. The adventurers from the inn were still searching the street, and from the sounds of it, the woman at the cake shop had fainted.

I felt pretty bad about that.

She'd always been pretty nice to me—I'd have to make it up to her once I got my money.

We rounded the corner of the Burning Bosom, Rolo's tavern, and almost bumped into the door as it swung wide open.

"The Burning Bosom?" Melina asked. I could almost imagine her raising an eyebrow.

"That's another long story," I replied. "Let's just say Rolo is a passionate guy."

The name originally came from the idea that a proud adventurer had a burning bosom, that they were fired up and ready to fight. Of course, that was also a double entendre about a woman's breasts...

Let's just say we had plenty of both most nights. "What is going on outside?" a raised voice resounded from the tavern's entrance.

I recognized it as if it was my own.

My heart thumped in my chest as I laid eyes on the burly man stepping outside.

He was bald, dressed in brown pants, a white loose shirt, and an aged apron that was stained with spilled food and drink.

I opened my mouth to speak, and prepared to dismiss my [Hide] spell.

Melina pulled me aside as Rolo stomped out. His bald head glistened against the lantern's light hanging above the door.

“Why are you just standing there? He’ll bump into us!” she urged through our party chat.

I sidestepped him, feeling my heart sink.

After a particularly shitty day, seeing a comforting face was often all we needed.

But not this time.

We couldn’t get him involved, at least not now.

Before all the commotion outside, maybe I could have just settled back in my room, pretending that nothing had happened, as I figured out what to do with Melina.

But the catastrophe in the bakery told me that was no longer possible. Freaking cake-eating mimics...

Trying to hide a formerly enslaved elf—one enslaved by one of our city’s ruling nobles nonetheless—was already a huge risk.

Bringing a loose cannon mimic with me only made things more dangerous.

“You’re right,” I said. “Let’s just keep sneaking through.”

It’d be a long time before I could come back here.

First I’d have to somehow get Melina to safety.

After that, I’d have to figure out a reasonable alibi for what’d happened to Aldon and the others.

The Adventurer’s Guild had clearly listed me as the scout for the party. Now that such high-ranking nobles had vanished, people would ask questions, and until I answered those questions, I would be a wanted man.

I spotted a group of vaguely familiar faces sitting in the far corner: the party of four from the dungeon. They sat around a table and were looking out the window and toward the bakery.

I could hear them muttering among themselves, wondering what was going on.

“What is all the ruckus outside?”

“It doesn’t matter. We need to focus on what we found inside the Skeleton Dungeon. Was it a full party wipe? If so, who was the person who shouted out to us?”

Little did they know that both problems had the same root cause.

“You really shouldn’t have shouted out to them,” Melina noted.

“Definitely not,” I dryly replied, cursing my instinctive generosity. That’d been a really stupid thing to do, but after killing four people, it would have been too much for one day.

Thirteen more tables were all occupied by other adventurers and the ordinary townsfolk alike. Mugs of ale and plates filled with cuts of meat, cheese, and slices of bread filled the tables.

Even through the chaos outside, the people here only wanted to peek out the window.

They had no actual intention of leaving.

Despite my melancholy, I grinned to myself.

That was how I knew that Rolo was a great tavern owner.

Even without me, he’d be okay.

The bar sat on the far side of the ground floor, and it was occupied by Rolo’s wife, Renata, and his brother-in-law, Renko.

Renata, Rolo’s wife, was much younger than him and closer to my age. In her early thirties, the red-haired woman was just a few years older than me.

As for Renko, he was an oddball at times, but I still thought of him as family. Despite his grumpy nature, he was Rolo’s brother-in-law, and that meant I’d do anything for him.

“Move, Damon. They’re going to spot us.”

I took a step toward the hallway, feeling Chester's comforting presence push the jumble of emotions aside.

I knew he had a calming effect on me and that he could drain away all fear using whatever abilities I didn't know about, but it was still weird.

Hopefully, I wouldn't become addicted to mimic stimulants.

Man, that would be another sudden messed-up thing in a long line of them. I'd met some adventurers who became addicted to specific potions. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"What are stimulants?" the mimic asked, genuinely curious.

"Don't worry about it," I replied.

He might be able to snoop into my mind and figure out what they were, but I wouldn't just tell him of my own volition.

For one thing, even though the mimic could be a really selfish asshole at times, I knew that Chester was actually trying to help by regulating my emotions. I'd try not to fault him for it. Maybe it was even his weird way of making up for the bakery fiasco.

For another...

Man.

If Chester was freaking out over cakes, I didn't want to see him on drugs. No fucking way.

I hurried into the hallway leading to the first-floor staircase.

The floors were luckily made of stone so we weren't making any noise.

I should have remembered to cast [Light Step] on us both before we entered, though. It was a stupid oversight I wasn't going to repeat again.

Come to think of it, I probably could have done it beneath the carriage too, instead of letting Melina use her skill.

Despite my naturally careful nature, I was really losing track of all the new abilities I'd gained. It made sense in a way, due to how it'd happened and the chaos of today, but if I wanted to live life as a fugitive, only the results mattered.

I had to improve my performance.

Quickly.

We took the stairs two at a time, hurrying up to the first floor.

The boards were made from good, strong timber.

Three of the eighteen steps creaked, so I warned Melina not to step on them using the party chat.

Once we were at the top and rounded the corner into the hallway leading to my room, I sighed in relief.

My room was the last one on the far side of the narrow corridor. A sense of relief passed over me when I saw no one was standing guard in front of it, meaning the Adventurer's Guild either didn't find out yet about Aldon's death, or they thought I'd died with them.

Maybe the party that'd been there had given a bad or incomplete report.

Still, something nagged at the back of my mind, and it wasn't the mimic.

I stopped and held my hand out for Melina to wait, then used [Detect Trap]. There weren't any traps outside in the passageway, at least none that I could see.

Alright.

So it wasn't a trap...

"That one," I said, pointing at my door, proceeding slowly while remaining on guard. It might have just been my paranoia, but something felt off somehow.

I eyed the doors to my left and right, but they were all shut. No sounds came from inside the rooms, which was another good sign.

We stopped in front of my room. The door was painted yellow, but most of it had peeled off over the years.

I pulled my key free and unlocked the door, hurrying inside before anyone noticed us.

Melina, very quietly, stepped in after me as Chester popped out from my shoulder, looking very much oblivious to any danger we might be in.

The elf closed the door behind us as I stopped and looked around, eyeing every piece of furniture, even the dust that had set on certain surfaces.

My bed sheet was immaculately placed, the small coffee table was exactly at the center of the room, and my workbench and chair were also perfectly aligned.

That was how I'd set it up myself, though.

I liked tidy spaces.

Everything seemed to be in order at first glance, even the flowerpot on the windowsill.

"Is something the matter?" Melina asked as she cautiously touched my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, no, everything looks to be fine. But give me another moment..."

I stepped over to the window and peeked into the pot.

The gold coins were still there, but it was too dark to see if they were all accounted for. Since my room faced the road, I couldn't light any candles or someone might spot us.

I wasn't willing to take any added risk.

Cold sweat broke out on my brow as I realized how stupid I was just standing there in front of the window. Any observant adventurer might have spotted the curtains move or catch a glimpse of me in the moonlight.

I fell to my knees, motioning for Melina to do the same. She followed suit and dropped to her hands and knees, shooting me a curious look.

“What is it? Did you see something?”

“No, but someone might have spotted me if I made the curtain move. Beginner mistake.”

“Beginner...mistake?” she asked.

“It’s just something humans say when they make a stupid mistake.”

Shit.

I might have been an experienced scout, but I was a level one fugitive.

Detecting traps and disarming them was one thing, but being sneaky and trying to hide from other adventurers was something else entirely.

“No one watching. Why so afraid? Some human wannabe adventurers?” Chester sneered. “I eat them. They are nom-noms!”

Melina stared at me, then up at the mimic, and her eyes went wide with realization.

She probably hadn’t guessed what he was when we were downstairs, but now that he was talking about eating people, that changed quickly.

“Is he a monster? Did he eat Aldon and the others?” Melina asked on the party chat.

Before I could reply, the mimic responded.

“What you think, long ears? I cuddle with food? No, I eat it just like you do! And I’m not a monster!”

“Hey, I liked you more when you talked less,” I snapped at the mimic.

“And I like cake. So? Give me cake! Cake make me happy.”

“You—but...you just ate seven cakes! And why are you yelling?”

His eyes focused on me, the stalks wiggling.

“A mimic needs to eat. Nom-noms help grow strong. Help you grow strong. I yell because I want nom-noms.”

“How can he read our party chat?” Melina whispered, her voice laced with a mixture of panic and shock. “That’s not normal!”

“And why can she see you in the first place? You said it was an accident, but what about now?”

“Now? I want her to look at me. Long ears pretty.”

I stayed quiet for a moment as the mimic and I eyed each other.

There was a very good possibility that he was just messing with me. If so, I’d slap him silly.

“You tell lady, or I tell?” Chester asked, wiggling his stalk-eyes at me.

I turned to Melina.

“Yes. The mimic ate Aldon and the others.”

Melina just stared blankly at us, her eyes wide as dinner plates. Either she didn’t understand what I said, or it was just so bizarre and overwhelming that it went into one ear and out the other.

The only person who wasn’t shocked was Chester.

“Hey, friend, what do with gold? I can eat. Shiny is pretty.”

“No way I’m giving you all my gold coins, you little freak! Your acid would melt it all.” If Chester wound up with a gold addiction, that might be even worse than drugs!

“Mimic... a mimic fused with a person,” Melina whispered, seemingly unable to come to terms with the revelation.

“Stomach acid not ruin gold coins! Impervious to acid!” Chester protested. “And mimics can use coins. We not barbarians!”

Chester grew his eyestalks several inches longer, pulled them back, and hit my cheek.

I gasped in shock, frowned, growled, and then bitch-slapped him.

Then, two rows of sharp teeth appeared out of his lid and clamped down on my hand.

“Hey! Stop that!”

“Fool,” he muttered and turned to stare at the elf. “Listen up, long ears. Friend and I are now one. I can read his mind, I can read party chat. I am big bad monster, so be good to friend. We be friends too if long ears want.”

“This is a dream, yes. Aldon or Maz must have knocked me unconscious,” she muttered. “I should wake up any moment now.”

She pinched herself, and obviously, she didn’t wake up.

“I’m sure you aren’t dreaming, Melina. But look, he’s not so bad... I think.”

“You think?” Chester snorted.

“Well, he helped me survive and take revenge on the four. All it wants in return is to be fed. Right? Tell her.”

“Ahh, yes. I on strict diet. Lots of human nom-noms. Tasty people. My storage mass degrades every hour. I need eat tasty human every day or get cranky. Don’t want see me cranky.”

Now it was my turn to get pissed.

“Wait. Every day? You never told me that! You said we could just get revenge, and then escape together! ”

“I said not ask many questions,” Chester said, tapping me again with his eyeballs.

“Wait, please,” Melina urged. “Let me see if I understand everything. You two,” she said, pointing at Chester and then at me, “Ate Aldon, Maz, Falin, and Jesabel.”

You two?

That was a bit too much culpability for my liking.

“Well, no. Chester ate them,” I replied. “And let’s try to use the party chat instead of talking out loud. People will hear us!”

Melina’s eyes looked like they were going to explode.

“Chester? It’s name is Chester?” she squawked. I’d never seen or heard an elf sound so inelegant before.

“It? I am not an it!” Chester protested. “Call me he, long ears! I am a man! A big man, in fact! And I want to get even bigger, too! By eating lots of humans!”

I facepalmed, but that didn’t feel like enough.

I wanted to lie down on the floor and curl up into the fetal position.

“What’s wrong?” Chester asked. “Why is your hand on your face? Are you in pain? I know I’m strong and hit you hard, but not so hard. You are weak.”

Melina could finally speak. “Eat humans? You want to eat more humans?”

She turned to me. “Yes, maybe Aldon and the others deserved it. But can you do this? Are you a murderer? I’m not going to travel with you if you’re going to go from town to town killing people!”

“Well, I no travel unless he does!” Chester exclaimed. “And if we separate, he dies!”

I swore.

My plan to quickly get in, grab my money and goods, and escape was totally falling apart.

I sat up, raised my hands, and took a deep breath.

“Wait, it doesn’t need to be that bad, right? You probably don’t want to be stuck by yourself in Eslant either. And by the way, let’s use the party chat. We cannot afford to be caught!”

Luckily, we kept our voices relatively low. If someone was in the adjacent room, however, they could have probably heard us.

From Chester's silence and the somewhat worried look in his eye, I could tell that was true. Yes, Chester was strong, especially after he'd gained those new skills.

But a monster in a town of adventurers would die sooner or later, and die painfully at that.

"I—" the mimic started.

I cut him off, not particularly interested in hearing what he had to say right now.

Besides, he still wasn't using the party chat.

"Just listen," I said mentally. *"Neither of us needs to abandon the other. I've got an idea."*

I turned to the mimic, and it stared back, the eyestalks bobbing up and down. Chester didn't seem to have any eyelids. I guess he was always just staring back.

"What?" he asked.

"Is there anything else we can get you? Instead of eating humans?" Melina asked, finally picking up on my queue to talk silently.

"I don't know. Arguing is fun. I want eat. I want make small mimic, and do many things!"

Just going down the list, all of those sounded unappealing as vacationing in the twisted dead trees of the blighted hell.

He thought just causing trouble and arguing was fun, which sounded like a nightmare.

Instead of eating humans, Chester just wanted to eat in general.

Hell, considering the fact he'd kept the Stored Mass stat's true meaning from me, what did that even mean?

Eating orcs?

Eating elves?

As for making a small mimic... *“Gross. Don’t you even think about having sex with another mimic. We are one now. I don’t need to see that.”*

“I let you do the thing, horny human. Then I do the thing, too,” he said, jollily wiggling his body back and forth as he started talking aloud again. “As you said, we are one now. We can love us one! Maybe you can have the thing with other mimic and I watch.”

I grunted and closed my eyes.

“I give up, this guy is hopeless,” I said, leaning against the wall.

“Wait, it is not all bad,” Melina said after a short moment of silence. *“I have read about mimics in our books. They love food and shiny things. What if we got you shiny things, Chester? Can I call you Chester, too? And I can cook very well. Maybe I could make us all some delicious food. Not humans, but still delicious.”*

The mimic suddenly looked over at her with much more affection. “Shinies? Like... gold?”

I felt a spark of hope.

Chester seemed very interested.

It looked like Melina had struck gold—maybe literally.

Not only that, something had obviously changed inside her because she suddenly didn’t seem to be afraid of it anymore. Whatever the reason, she was either a fool or had balls of steel. And not just that, but the mimic also seemed to have a change of heart.

“And gems. Diamonds. Sparkly, shiny gems,” Melina said, excitedly. She looked at the mimic with a bright smile on her face, and she kept slipping back into normal speech because of how excited she was.

Huh.

It seemed like she really knew what mimics liked. Traveling together might really work out, especially if the two of them got along.

Chester was almost going to bounce off my shoulder.

“Yes!” Chester exclaimed. “Mimic love shinies! Love shinies! Maybe even better than nom-noms. Maybe not.”

Chester suddenly fell silent, but I could see the intense look of concentration in his eyes. He was trembling, and it seemed like he might almost explode trying to figure out if he liked food or gems more.

Maybe to mimics, that was their version of what came first, the chicken or the egg.

“Well, I’d be damned,” I said. *“You got Chester to fall silent. Never seen that yet.”*

Gem-loving mimics.

I’d never heard of that before.

It was a good thing that Melina had known that, and thinking about it more, it made sense.

Not even my taunt could rouse the mimic. He was just muttering to himself like a madman. “Nom noms! Shinies! Nom noms! Shinies!”

She smiled. “I’m glad my book skills came in handy. I love magical creatures.” With Chester preoccupied, Melina was just staring at him and smiling. I guessed like an infant, the mimic was a little cuter when silenced.

“Say, what’s with the sudden change of heart? Just a minute ago you were about to scream,” I asked, unsure of what to think of the elf.

Maybe in a different world, it would have been Melina who fused with Chester, possibly after a crazy encounter that wiped out Aldon’s party.

Considering her knowledge of the mimic’s unique likes and dislikes, Melina might be even thinking of studying or domesticating it.

Elves were far greater scholars than humans from what I've heard. All we knew about mimics was that they were dangerous beings that pretended to be chests and other inanimate objects. Like trap walls...

"Everything is just fine," she replied. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I have never heard of a mimic and a human becoming one... or what it is that you two are now. I could study you and maybe—no, not that, but maybe—ahh, yes, definitely!"

The elf spellslinger trailed off.

Now it was her turn to talk to herself, and I had no idea what she wanted.

She had just vanished into her own scholarly world.

It seemed like my party—as it were—was much crazier than I thought. With Chester and Melina both preoccupied, I started packing up for our much delayed escape.

The good news was, our strengths balanced out.

I was probably going to have to lead the way, but if we got into trouble, their strength and magical ability would blast people to kingdom come.

Once I was done getting the several items I wanted to bring along, I pulled the chest out from beneath my bed next, making sure I didn't make any noise.

I paused, looking at it for a moment and squinting suspiciously.

It was my own chest, but I think after what'd happened with Chester, I'd always look askew at chests, which was probably a good thing overall.

Once I was done removing the necessary items, I grabbed my spare bag. I'd been saving it just in case I needed it for a longer trip or a special occasion.

Today was the day it would finally pay for itself.

I stuffed extra pants, two shirts, undergarments, and some smaller tools into the bag, then grabbed what potions I had left.

I stopped, shaking my head and taking them back out of the bag.

I'd learned [Heal] and [Cure] after absorbing Jesabel.

They would do a much better job than the level 1 healing potions, and besides, I still owed Rolo some money.

The potions would sell for several gold pieces, so I'd leave them on the desk along with a small note.

Yes, that would probably be the best thing for everyone.

He would probably know what'd happened after seeing all my stuff vanish, but I'd like to think that he would be happy for me.

Rolo had always hated authority.

He disliked the noble families, and the Sherazad was no exception.

Hopefully, he'd even realized that I'd done it in self-defense.

Melina and Chester busily chatted about some kind of essence theories, the two of them suddenly best of friends.

I just ignored them.

To be honest, I didn't really care about their theories right at this moment. Both of them had just met me today, and they'd never been in this room before.

I was the only person throwing my life away. I realized I couldn't resist the urge, and decided to write a note to Rolo before leaving.

Despite my determination to vanish, he was like a father.

I wouldn't include the sordid details, but I just couldn't leave without a word.

When I finished, I checked the room for one last time.

It had been my life for the last half a decade, so leaving it all behind felt... troublesome, to say the least.

Many of the small things littering the space had some sentimental value, but I couldn't let them weigh me down. My strength stat had gone up, but that didn't mean I should encumber myself with dead weight.

I gathered everything that made sense to bring along, then sat back down on the floor and stared at the door.

It was harder than I thought it would be.

Even though the time I spent there was shitty most of the time, it was *my* life and I'd treasure the many moments I spent at the Burning Bosom with Rolo and Renata, the regulars, and even some of the adventurers that liked to take me along on dungeon runs.

Not all of them were bad.

Some had treated me more or less as an equal, though they still didn't let me take any leveling essence...

"Alright," I said. "Let's get out—"

Chester suddenly squeaked and turned transparent, playing dead.

His tongue lolled out of his mouth, and the stalky eyes dropped down the side of his chest-shaped body. One of the eyelids was slightly open, so I knew he was faking, well, whatever he was doing.

"What are you—?"

Everything changed as the door creaked open.

A man walked in.

It was someone I'd seen several times over the last few years, and his presence was the worst news possible.

Alfonse Sherazad, Aldon's father.

"You don't think I'd just let you leave like that?" the man asked.

He was clad in a pristine white suit with polished black shoes.

The man held an ornate, ivory walking cane in his right hand and a small note in his left.

A blank expression was set on his face, revealing nothing.

Even though I knew why he'd come looking for me, I tried to keep calm as he shook his head, throwing his shoulder-long black hair over his shoulder.

“You—how—is that—?” In the blink of an eye, he'd taken my note from the table and now he was squinting at it angrily.

“Oh, yes. You didn't even notice me picking it up, did you? Now, what does it say... Ahh, so you planned to leave this 'Rolo' behind with a note and payment in potions? He must be thrilled to have you as a friend, young man.”

Alfonse's telekinetic spellcasting was pretty famous in Eslant, so I guessed he'd probably just used his power to get the note from my desk, nothing fascinating about it.

However, feigning ignorance helped when facing someone stronger.

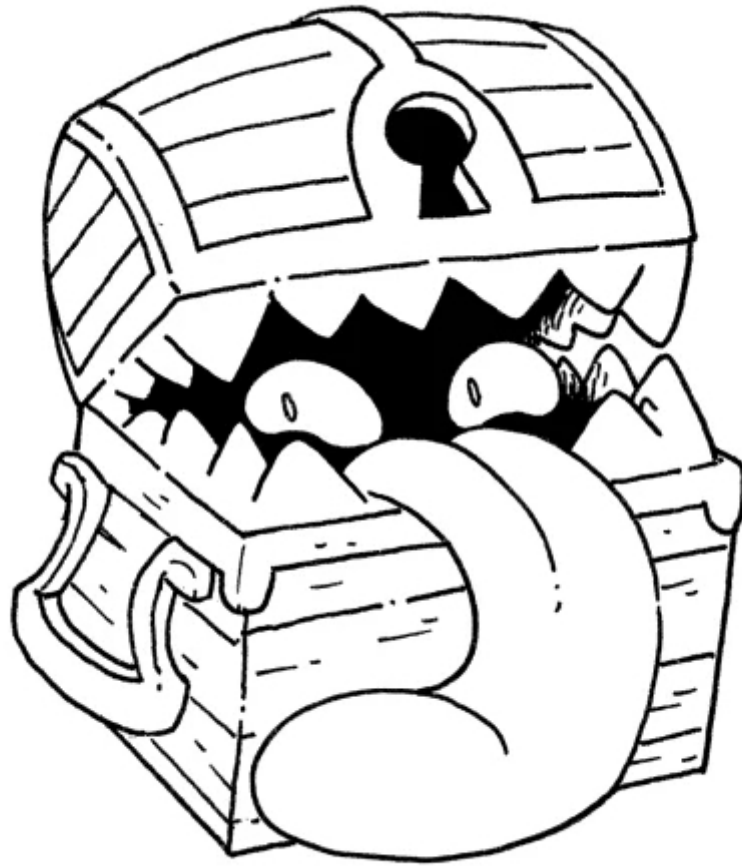
“What do you want?” I asked, trying to steady my voice.

The immense pressure of his essence bore down on me like a massive stone. Melina didn't seem much better off as she breathed hard, her hands planted on the floor.

Nobles were just on a different level.

No wonder Chester had played dead.

The man's voice was like iron—nothing like his blabbering son. “You probably already know, but I'm Baron Alfonse Sherazad. Now, tell me, young man. Where is my thirdborn?”



CHAPTER 12: UNEXPECTED FAVOR

“Hide!” Chester screeched. “Use [Mimicry]! Turn into something! Anything!”

“Shut up!” I mentally hissed. “He’s way too experienced for that. It’ll blow our cover right away!”

Playing the fool wouldn’t get me very far.

I knew this man by reputation, and just looking at him, that reputation was justified.

With that in mind, I decided to do things a little differently.

“Can I reach into my pocket?” I asked. “To show you something?”

His eyes narrowed, and to my surprise and relief, he nodded.

“I just returned from the Dungeon of the Skeleton Lord. It had already reset,” the Baron said. He spoke slowly, and his eyes were narrowed.

“I know,” I replied, reaching into my pocket ever so slowly. “And I know what happened to your son.”

“You do?” he asked with a hint of surprise.

“Yes, I do. But first, please, can I give this to you?” I asked.

He eyed me, and then my hand.

I pulled the three rings and the bracelet out and held them out between us.

For a long moment, he was quiet. His mouth briefly trembled, and he closed his eyes.

I thought about striking him then, but even Chester was frozen with fear. The man’s essence was practically flowing out of his body.

All things considered, it was probably a massive blessing that the Baron couldn’t see him—at least, based on the fact the man wasn’t freaking out, he couldn’t see him.

Even compared to the brash mimic, the Baron was like a god.

The noble’s expression finally shifted into a snarl showing his teeth.

Even more essence bore down on us.

My sight grew blurry and dark, and I couldn’t breathe. It was a tremendous weight pushing over my head, almost like a waterfall of pure power.

Was this some kind of skill?

Or was he just making a show of force by blanketing the room with his essence? To tell me how futile it was to try

and wiggle my way out of giving him his answers? After all, the Baron was known for his obvious brutality.

The pressure suddenly let up as he reached for the bracelet.

His hand trembled as he clutched it to his chest, then moved over to take a seat on the bed.

Melina and I eyed each other, while Chester considered him through narrowed eyes, but no one spoke.

“You do realize that I can’t let you live after this,” he said with a weak voice, still staring at the black bracelet. “You were supposed to be the scout. You should have done everything to protect him. Instead, you left my favorite son for dead.”

Aldon was his favorite son?

What were his other kids like?

Thankfully, I managed to keep my mouth shut, just this once.

Not that it helped us.

The Baron finally seemed to notice Melina. “You... aren’t you that slave I bought for him?” He sat upright and looked at Melina, his snarl shifting into a deep scowl.

“Yes,” she replied weakly. “I am...the slave.”

Alfonse snapped his finger, and the young elf keeled over, her eyes rolling back into her head.

My chest tightened and my heart skipped a beat as I watched her head hit the floor.

She’d already gone through so much just to escape her captors, and now this man had just casually stricken her down?

Something within me broke, and I lunged for him.

“Fuck! Why? Why did you kill her!”

My hands hardened into claws, and I reached for his throat.

“Oh, shut up, boy!” he sneered, backhanding me before I remotely made it to him.

His hand felt like a sledgehammer.

I slid across the wooden floor and slammed into my work desk. There was a loud crack, and I could have sworn it'd been split in two.

“I haven't killed her, but I will once I'm done with you! Now tell me, how did it happen? I want to see if your stories match!”

He wanted to see if our stories matched, huh?

Well, we had a way around that—the party chat.

Because of standard adventuring procedures, the Baron wouldn't expect me and Melina to be able to communicate automatically. Normally, people wouldn't invite a scout to their party, and there was no reason for me and Melina to have partied up afterward.

For the first time since he entered the room, I saw a flicker of hope.

I tried to sit up but failed.

My head hurt as if I'd been knocked over by a carriage.

Then I noticed my left arm was hanging limply next to me and the pain finally registered.

With just a single blow, the Baron had broken my arm.

I glared at him and pushed myself upright, then leaned against the work table for support. Pain flared in my back where I'd hit the work desk.

The man gazed down at me impassively. There was no mercy in his eyes. He might have broken my arm, but he didn't care. To him, it was no less than swatting a fly.

Still, there was no point in enraging him. Considering his power, our getting out of here depended entirely on his mercy.

I swallowed my pain and anger, keeping my voice somewhat respectful, or at least as respectful as it could be. “Your son was eaten by a mimic!”

His mouth opened but no words came out. He stammered for a moment, like some kind of carp. For a brief second, he even looked like his son.

It was a strange and comical sight, one that would have made me smile if the situation had been different.

“A mimic?” he asked, his voice rising in pitch. “How was a powerful mimic in an Easy-level dungeon?”

Funnily enough, I was wondering the same thing.

“I don’t know,” I replied, totally honestly.

At least, based on the fact that the Baron hadn’t asked me about the mimic on my shoulder, I knew that confirmed that he couldn’t see Chester.

The Baron shook his head, his brow furrowing. “That would explain the remaining jewelry...but...how are you still alive? Aren’t mimics ravenous? Don’t they eat anything they can?”

“Can you heal me or something? This hurts,” I asked, nodding to my limp arm.

Indeed, the spikes of pain kept interrupting my thoughts. I needed to think on my feet to lie past this man and keep me and Melina alive.

The Baron waved, flicking his fingers almost dismissively. He might as well have been tossing out coins to a beggar. A wave of warm light enveloped me and the pain disappeared.

“Now speak before I change my mind. Explain carefully. Make your words count!”

I was about to ask him what else there was to explain, but I changed my mind as he wasn’t in the mood for stupid questions.

“I hid, Lord Sherazad,” I deliberately spoke with a weak voice as if I was embarrassed. “If someone as strong as Aldon’s party couldn’t do anything, how could a lowly scout in the first rebirth stage? I waited until it went to sleep, picked up the jewelry, and came straight home to return the items, but first I wanted to—”

“Do you take me for a fool, boy? That bag means you were thinking of running.”

His eyes narrowed, though I sensed a little bit of hesitation in his voice.

“Exactly. You just said you’ll kill me even though I didn’t do anything wrong!” I protested. “Of course I would run!”

“No, but you were at the wrong place at the wrong time. I’m usually not a cold-hearted monster, but this is too big. My favorite son, dying in an Easy-level dungeon. It would make him a laughingstock. Not only that...”

He nodded his head at the unconscious elf. “My Aldon was well-liked. I can’t let you live and spread rumors about him. I want him to be remembered as a strong boy.”

He grew quiet and his eyes closed as if mourning his son’s death.

Essence crackled around his body as if wanting to be released. I had no idea if it was genuine sorrow he displayed or only an act, but I would try to play him just as he was playing me.

“Wait, please. Can you just give me a moment?” I asked, holding my hands up so as not to appear threatening. Not that I could do anything to him, but still. “I risked my life disarming dozens of traps, so I did my part of the job. Your son owes—owed—me money for a job I did to the best of my ability. I got rid of all the traps at the entrance and in the first several rooms. We can... I mean... is there a way that I don’t end up dead? I can dismiss the owed payment. Maybe even do another job for you for free.”

The corners of his lips curled upward.

He seemed even pleased by my proposal.

And just like that, he pulled out an oath orb and handed it to me.

“Very well, boy. Take this and speak the truth. I just might grant your wish.”

I tried to gather my thoughts quickly as I stared at the round sphere laying in my hand.

It looked like a slightly darker orange pearl. Essence surged from the orb, hitting me with wave after wave with immeasurable discomfort.

The oath orb had a simple effect.

If someone lied while holding it, they were severely punished. Depending on the type of lie and the essence that surged out of the orb, you could even die.

I needed to play the truth in my favor, that was the only way I'd get out of this alive.

The orb demanded the truth, but I *didn't* need to explain myself fully. The more concise my statements were, the more truthful I would appear.

It was honestly worth a shot.

“I swear on the orb that Aldon Sherazad and his party were eaten by a mimic that almost killed me as well,” I solemnly intoned.

Nothing happened for a moment, but then the orb glowed with a sudden burst of green, confirming I was speaking the truth.

“What else? How did it happen?” Alfonse asked, studying me.

“The mimic ambushed them,” I replied, again using the same solemn tone as before. Swearing on an oath orb was even more serious than swearing to a god, thanks to the immediate effects.

It was the truth in a way.

Well, it had been *me* doing the ambushing with the mimic's help, but I didn't need to elaborate on that.

We waited for the orb to glow yet again, but it didn't.

At the same time, it didn't punish me either.

At least not for a good ten seconds, then it lit up, but not nearly as bright as the first time.

"You manipulate the statements!" the Baron cried, anger and essence bleeding out of him.

Shit.

My guts almost fell out of my stomach.

I'd never sworn on an oath orb before. I had only heard of them by reputation and didn't realize that they could detect lies by omission.

"No! I'm sorry! Aldon was hit with a trap that was only supposed to activate when someone exited the room!" I spoke very quickly, saying the first thing I could think of, and the panic in my voice was genuine.

This time the orb lit up right away.

That was a purely true statement.

Alfonse watched me for a moment, trying to gather his composure.

But then he let out a long sigh, and I felt safe, at least for now.

It was up to Melina, that is if he really wanted to check our stories.

I eyed the elf.

She still lay on the ground, unmoving.

The Sherazad family head sighed and rubbed his temples, all while clenching the black bracelet. Then the orb floated out of my hand and back to him as he retrieved it with his telekinetic powers. He stashed it away and held the bracelet out in front of him.

"Aldon was an honorable young man," he whispered.

I could barely make the words out, but I didn't dare rebuke him. Honorable wasn't what I'd call him, but if I had to kiss this man's ass to get out of this alive, I would gladly do so.

"He was, your lordship," I said, coming up with a way to do just that. "He tried to save Jesabel as the mimic descended on them. She...was the first to die, then Falin, Maz, and finally Aldon. He fought until his last breath."

A lone tear formed in the corner of his right eye but he quickly wiped it away.

"I hate you, boy. You have no idea how much I despise you for your cowardice, but if my brave son couldn't win against the mimic, it was no wonder why you ran. And besides, you brought back my property."

My guts tightened at his remark.

Was Melina just that to him?

Property?

Somehow I knew what was about to happen even before he spoke.

He was going to let me go, but only if I gave him Melina back.

Three items and a stack of gold coins appeared between us, floating in the air as he summoned them from Aldon's storage bracelet. The Baron used his telekinetic powers to arrange the items and then placed them on the ground.

"Your payment. I will also allow you to keep your life. Consider that a thank you for telling me about his last heroic moments. I trust you to keep other things, like the cuffs, silent."

Melina rose off the ground and floated as Alfonse got to his feet. She was still unconscious. He was moving her purely through the use of his powers.

My eyes locked on her prone body, and he smiled.

“What? Did you really think I was generous enough to let you keep her? She cost me fifteen thousand gold coins, *boy*.” He emphasized the last word, making it clear what he thought of me.

I thought he’d leave then, but instead, he stopped and stared at me, and then a smirk replaced the previously somber expression. “You want to have her for yourself, don’t you? I can see it in your greedy little eyes.”

I quickly nodded, deciding to play to his ego and his greed.

People like him only respected two things: power, and people who were just like them. If he was in my position, he would want Melina as a slave, not as a friend and companion. The very thought disgusted me, but I had to play it up.

“She’s... pretty,” I muttered. “I like how she looks.”

He cocked his head to the side and watched me in amusement.

“You know her price, boy. You can come to see me when you’ve advanced. I might hook you up with some better-paying jobs, but don’t expect to find her in this state. She might not even live long enough,” he laughed wickedly, and his eyes gleamed.

The change of character was jarring, to say the least.

Earlier, he had some semblance of nobility and even the kindness of a ruler. But now, he was nothing more than a crude and disgusting beast. “And you know what? Come here. Let me do something else for you.”

I stood involuntarily as he used his telekinetic powers on me to jerk me up.

It felt weird, almost like I was a mannequin.

Then I took several steps toward him and held out my hand. My muscles seized up, jerking forward all the while.

A blade appeared in his hand, and then I knew it was over.

I must have overdone it and was now going to pay for it with my life.

Maybe I should have just taken the money and run, but I felt compelled to help Melina. She'd said she trusted me, after all.

None of the clients—and definitely not Aldon—had ever done that before.

And yet he didn't kill me.

Instead, he traced the blade across his own hand, and drew a trickle of blood, letting it fall onto his son's black bracelet.

Then the blade twirled through the air, cutting into my palm, and my hand shot forward. Blood dripped onto the bracelet, mixing with his. A small blastwave erupted from the bracelet, and then I was flying yet again, only this time I hit the far wall.

The Baron bound the storage bracelet to me.

“Take it. Do your best to advance quickly and become worthy of serving me. I could always use a disposable scout.”

Alfonse threw the piece of jewelry my way. It hit my chest and then clattered to the ground.

“I won't put a bounty on your head after all. Consider that the last of my gifts to you.”

Before I could say another word, the Baron was gone.

And so was Melina.

The door closed automatically behind him, but the items he'd removed from Aldon's bracelet were still sitting in a pile on the floor.

All that was left were me and my thoughts.

I couldn't believe the Baron had wanted to put out a bounty on me. Anyone could technically put a price on somebody else's head at the Quest Board, but for obvious reasons, this was closely inspected and regulated.

Eslant was meant to be a commerce town, the city couldn't have people just slaughtering each other constantly. Adventurers were allowed to duel and fight outside the city walls, but even that was usually frowned upon.

For Alfonse to put out a bounty on me, he must have really wanted to find me, and it was also a reminder of the powerful family I'd crossed by interfering with Aldon and Melina.

It was a good thing I'd talked my way out of the mess.

Although, it did make me wonder about the party I'd seen in the dungeon...were they sent by Alfonse? But that just didn't make sense.

The timing wasn't right.

I eyed the black piece of steel.

I reached out to it, then hesitated. It felt strange to put it on.

I'd always dreamed of having a storage item, and now I had one that once belonged to the baron's son.

Back when I'd killed Aldon, I never could have dreamed that things would turn out like this.

As for what had happened to Melina...

I sat down and took a deep breath, scowling. There was a lot for me to process right now. The Baron intended for me to serve him eventually after I grew strong enough. That only added to the danger hanging above our heads.

The Baron's strength was a sword that could kill me at any moment, especially if he found out the *full* story of what'd happened to his son.

"Shit. That was close," Chester said as he shifted into his physical form again.

"You think?" I said, using our mind link. *"Couldn't you have eaten him or something? And **shit**? Since when do you know how to curse?"*

“Remember. I have memories of foul mouth Maz and Falin. They curse lots.”

“Great. It’s the cursing he remembers,” I grunted. “Not the charging into battle no matter what.”

“What? You want us dead? Caster much stronger. He fourth rebirth stage. And he uses spells. I’m weak against spells,” Chester protested, but this time he looked away as if embarrassed.

I could almost imagine him nervously scratching an invisible beard and was about to chuckle, but the whole mess didn’t warrant it. I stared at the items, then looked at the door, and finally where Melina had been mere moments ago.

My eyes lingered, and a lump rose in my throat.

I gulped. Complications or not, it didn’t matter. There’s no way I would give up just like that.

I made her a promise.

No matter what it took—even if it meant growing far stronger and serving the Baron—I would free her somehow. After living as a slave for god knew how long and being sold to the vile Sherazad, I knew she deserved that much.

Buying her freedom one day...

Breaking her out of jail...

Maybe even assassinating the Baron, as utterly insane as that seemed right now...

By hook or by crook, I would get her back.

I swore that to myself.

“I help you,” Chester said, reading my mind.

He floated next to me, having taken up a vaguely human form. He was still connected to me by the strand, but he’d grown somewhat bigger, gaining arms and limbs. It reminded me a little of the form he’d taken against the final boss of the dungeon, only lumpier, and not nearly as orange.

He looked a little like a big gingerbread man.

“I don’t think he hurt long ears. He give lot of gold for her. Gold is precious,” Chester said.

I nodded, “Yeah, hopefully.”

He was right, but just because something was expensive, it didn’t mean they wouldn’t break and throw it away. Especially if they were angry.

After all, the Sherazad had so much money that even 15,000 gold coins would be more of an inconvenience than a crippling loss.

I stood again and looked out the window just in time to see him fly away, with Melina’s body jerkily twisting behind him.

She seemed to still be unconscious.

I couldn’t imagine what would go through her mind once she woke up in a cell somewhere on his property. Maybe he’d give her to one of his other sons or daughters.

“Shit, I don’t like this, Chester.”

“Me too. Long ears is much smarter than you. I enjoy chatting with her. We should save her.”

“We will,” I replied. “But we need to get stronger first. *Much* stronger.”

Trying to focus on the task at hand, I turned back to the items laying on the floor. “Even if it’s a shitty consolation prize, getting anything out of him is still better than nothing. Let’s see what Alfonse gave us.”

Before anything, I picked up the bracelet and slid it onto my wrist. It was an understatement to say that everything changed the moment I gained my new storage item.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Black Suflid Bracelet, RARITY:
Rare

SPECIALTY: Allows the user to carry up to 300 various different items inside the bracelet.

REQUIREMENT: 15 Strength, 15 Stamina,
15 Agility

BONUS STATS: +10 Strength, +5 Essence

NOTE: The stored items can't be heavier
than the user

Damn.

Not only did this storage bracelet have much more storage space than the usual items, but it also provided additional stats, which was an uncommon but highly appreciated bonus.

New power flooded through me, forcing a smile to my lips despite everything that had happened.

I could feel my muscles hardening, even my mind expanding.

The added power was addicting, almost euphoric. It flooded my body, reminding me why adventurers went to such great lengths to grow stronger.

Ten to strength and five to essence.

Every stat point only increased my survival chances.

A new window named “storage” opened before me.

The window was much wider than the usual notifications and immaculately detailed. I had never seen the kind before, but I had heard about it from adventurers—it was only unlocked after gaining a storage item, and it allowed you to fluidly manage your items, both equipped and stored.

Hundreds of small, empty compartments hovered on the right side. Despite not being able to see them all at once, I could still feel every single one of them, almost like invisible pockets that had been added to my clothes.

Those were my stored items.

To the left was an image that resembled *me*.

That image described my currently equipped items.

It had more of those same compartments floating above my head, shoulders, chest, hands, waist, legs, and feet. Two more hovered next to my hands. The right one was split down the middle into two compartments.

One was occupied by the Scabbard of Masking, and the other by the Obsidian Runeblade.

Come to think of it, it was a good thing the Scabbard of Masking disguised any sword that was hidden inside of it. Had the Baron seen his favorite son's sword at my waist, I would have probably died the instant he stepped into the room.

I instinctively felt there was a second page on the left side of the window and mentally flipped through it. More boxes appeared, but this time they covered different parts of me.

Both my hands, neck, and wrists were shown.

The Black Suflid Bracelet covered my left wrist, while the right one was empty.

My neck was split down the middle again, but I had no idea why—maybe if I got some kind of two-part necklace?

Two fingers of each hand were shown, but only one of the two on my left hand had the Ring of Courage pictured inside.

I tapped the coins next, and 312 shiny, round pieces of gold floated before me.

The moment I touched them, a message appeared, offering me to store the items. I did so, and a small tug pulled at my left wrist. I opened the storage again and noticed my gold coins occupied one of the compartments.

“Hah, there goes your shiny kingdom, Chester.”

“Not funny. I can eat you and your precious bracelet.”

“Sure, but whatever's in this bracelet stays inside unless I choose otherwise. So you can't get it anyways, sucker!”

He didn't bother arguing with me, which seemed odd considering his obsession with coins.

It bothered me to the point I had to ask.

“What is it? Why are you quiet?”

“I miss long ears.”

“You miss...Melina? Already?” I asked, somewhat surprised by his response.

“Yes, so what! You don't talk bad to me, I am stronger than you! And I—”

I could feel his emotions by the sudden shift in my mood. Since we were one being, I felt just as much as he did. The sudden flood of guilt from Chester only added to my own. “Still couldn't protect her? Join the club, buddy.”

He didn't respond right away. He just floated there feeling sad.

“Yes. I need cake. I need food. Get me? I am sad.”

I felt a sudden pressure pushing out through my skull and eyes, a dull pain that was just strong enough to give me a headache.

Man.

He was *really* sad.

I was too, but based on what I'd seen of Chester so far, he usually didn't feel any strong emotions. It made me briefly wonder what he'd done after his old friend—the one before me—had died, but I hurriedly dismissed the thought before he could scry it from my mind.

Reminding him of that right now would be fucked up, and even though Chester was an annoying brat, I still liked him. After all, he could still feel burdens and responsibilities.

“Let me finish up and I'll take you down to have some food and ale. You'll love it, I promise.”

“Okay. Hurry.”

I smiled.

It was interesting to see how the two of them had changed their initial reactions to one another.

The sad thing was, it might have just been too late.

I cursed Melina's stubbornness.

Why did she have to join me in Eslant?

Why couldn't she have stayed outside?

Maybe I shouldn't have gone back to get the coins to begin with...no, that was just wishful thinking.

Without coin, we wouldn't have made it very far.

I just had to deal with our current situation.

I got to my feet and picked up the pot, placed my hand inside, and accepted the offer to store more coins.

All 77 gold coins were there, which made a grand total of 389 coins. It was a fortune for someone like me, but it was a world away from what I needed to free Melina.

15,000 hard, golden coins.

What was I supposed to do?

I needed ridiculous blessings from the System just to get started, that was for sure.

I returned to the other items next.

The first one looked like a small wooden container. I picked it up.

[ITEM RECEIVED: Spatial Tent Tier 3]

[DESCRIPTION: The 3rd tier spatial tent is a reusable item that deploys a fully-equipped tent, which resides between dimensions. The tent will be deployed in the state it was last stored in]

Not bad.

Aldon had lived well.

This was another insanely helpful item that could potentially last me a lifetime. A Spatial Tent made living in the

wilderness much easier, and the longer I lived in the wilderness—close to monsters and dungeons—the faster I could grow more powerful.

Items like these were rare in Eslant, so merchants imported them from the larger cities.

Even then they were extremely hard to come by because of the shortage. I had only ever seen one, and it was as luxurious as some homes in the northern part of town.

The tent occupied another compartment, right next to the coins.

I experimentally tried pulling the tent out, just to see what would happen and to familiarize myself with the storage system. It was as easy as breathing. All I had to do was imagine the box coming out, and that was it. I stored it back into my new bracelet and picked up the second item.

[ITEM RECEIVED: Advanced Repair Kit]

[DESCRIPTION: The advanced repair kit is an item that can repair any weapon, armor, or accessory up to the LEGENDARY rarity]

[REMAINING USES: 27]

It was another item that I'd seen several times before, but only in the hands of wealthy adventurers.

The kit was basically a magical hammer that did all the work for you once you touched it to a damaged item. Charging the kit was expensive, however, and went anywhere from half a gold coin to ten gold per charge.

The Baron had given us quite the advantage. I could grow more powerful at a rate comparable to nobles, even without mentioning the added skill diversity I had from fusing with Chester.

The last item was a liquor bottle with translucent yellow liquid. I had no idea what it was, but considering he'd given it to me, it probably had some use. I picked it up last.

[ITEM RECEIVED: Infinite Essence
Extract Bottle]

[DESCRIPTION: The infinite essence
extract bottle absorbs any monster essence
through the process of sacrifice. The
stronger the monster, the more essence the
bottle will extract]

[VOLUME: 0.2/5 Liter]

There was barely any monster essence left in the bottle so I'd have to get it filled. Once I did, I could consume it and let my body absorb the leveling essence, or I could sell it to someone who would pay handsomely.

Or so I hoped. Getting that essence first required monsters.

“Cake time?” the mimic asked.

I shook my head, grinning.

Chester and I might be on the same page about rescuing Melina, but that didn't mean I was so high-minded I wouldn't avoid blackmail.

“Now, before I even make my first step toward feeding you, spit out all the weapons, armor, and jewelry. I want it all in my storage bracelet.”

“Blasphemy!” Chester protested, his big stalk-eyes jiggling uncontrollably in their sockets. “How dare you take shiny from me! I fight you to death!”

The mimic's exaggerated protests and mocking grin weren't in accord with his statement, so I just stood there and waited. Just like his ability to blow his body parts out of proportion, it seemed like he could do the same thing with his attitude.

“Fine,” Chester laughed. “Cake is better than wood.”

A moment passed, then another, and he started shifting, growing, and then throwing up.

I recognized the Javana Axe, the Sharot Staff, and the Hawthorne bow. They were all great for a beginner adventurer, and aside from the axe, which was too heavy and didn't fit the habits I'd learned as a scout, I could see myself using the other two.

I stored the three items inside the bracelet.

There were two more items I hadn't tested yet, and those were Aldon's armor and shield.

Here, I benefited from an odd rule.

If an adventurer died, their items would be left in the real world for a full week so that anyone could loot them. Normally, that week was a long time. Someone would loot the items.

But if they weren't claimed in that week—or if the dungeon they were left in closed before the week ended—the items would automatically be sent back to their storage bracelet.

This was a weird eccentricity that scientists were still studying, but here, it greatly benefited us.

I had Aldon's goods because Chester ate him.

But now, to an outsider, those same items just seemed like my reward for bringing his bracelet back to the Baron.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Chitin Shield, RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: Negate 50% of any incoming physical or essence-infused damage. There is a 20% chance to reflect any received damage.

REQUIREMENT: 60 Strength, 60 Stamina,
40 Agility

BONUS STATS: +10 Strength, +25 Stamina

I set the shield aside as I was just short of being able to gain its benefits, and without the added specialty and bonus stats, it just wasn't worth lugging around.

Besides, I wanted to check the armor first before I spent my last two free stat points on agility.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Gigas Breastplate, RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: Negate 20% of any incoming physical damage.

REQUIREMENT: 45 Strength, 45 Stamina, 30 Agility

BONUS STATS: +10 Strength, +15 Stamina, +5 Agility

Excellent.

This was how many adventurers were able to equip more and more items—using the bonus stats of one item to qualify for the other.

With the Gigas Breastplate, I automatically qualified for the Chitin Shield. Perhaps Aldon himself had done the same thing.

I equipped the breastplate and felt it shift around to accommodate my body.

The piece of armor adjusted itself so that it sat perfectly around my chest. When Aldon wore it, the armor shimmered silver, but it looked more like polished amber now that I had it equipped.

I didn't know what the color change was about, but I thought it certainly looked better.

Once the initial wave of status point pleasure had dissipated, I picked up the shield and equipped it, enjoying the high again.

The chitin shield shifted and reduced its size by about half, reaching from my shoulder to my knee.

The base third of the kite-like shield was silvery-black and thicker at the center, with the sides having been merged with a second layer of a shiny dark-green substance. Both

layers were angled outward and would probably serve to deflect incoming attacks better.

Interesting.

So the item would change itself to suit the user's needs. That was uniquely powerful. No wonder the Baron had given it to his favorite son.

I immediately took a liking to the shield now that it was much lighter. Not just that, the armor and shield had turned me into a tank-scout, an interesting hybrid I could take advantage of with the smart application of my skills.

My mobility would be much lower than most normal scouts, but with [Light Step] active, I would still be able to move at a decent pace.

I pulled up my status window to check the changes.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	Human
STAGE	Rebirth 1	LEVEL	27
LEVEL ESSENCE	99%	SKILL ESSENCE	3,932
CLASS	Scout	SUB- CLASS	Mimic
STRENGTH	102	ESSENCE	53
STAMINA	103	AGILITY	43
CHARISMA	15	FREE STAT POINTS	2

SYMBIOSIS	14%	STATE	Discontent
STORED MASS	96%	DIGESTING MASS	0%

Everything was much better than before, albeit much riskier.

What if Alfonse decided to torture Melina and ask her about me?

Would she tell him I had a mimic as a pet?

And that I'd been the one who ate Aldon?

Now that she'd been pulled away from me, we could no longer coordinate our stories through the party chat, which had been my initial plan.

I could only hope she stayed loyal or I'd have every adventurer searching for me.

But all things considered, I believed in her. She'd told me she trusted me, and I'd promised to help her in turn. From what little I knew of elf culture, they were honorable beings, and their word was law.

Besides, she had as much of an incentive to lie as I did. Even if Melina was an unusually dishonorable elf, sheer self-interest told her that lying was the only way to maintain her life and freedom.

Besides, there was nothing I could do about it right then, so I'd have to focus on things I could control.

I supposed that was the one small relief of being captured by the Baron—I could stay in my home.

I had a long day ahead of me.



CHAPTER 13: NEW PREPARATIONS

I stood in front of my mirror after making myself presentable. Equipped stats didn't affect the body, but raw stats did, and mine had gone up several times since getting stuck with Chester.

My muscles were more defined, even my cheekbones looked stronger, or at least more angular. In just a matter of days, my chest had expanded and my limbs had thickened out.

Overall, I just looked a lot tougher than before. There was an even more determined look in my eye, perhaps due to increased Essence or Charisma stats.

It kind of made me wonder about some of the lumpier or out-of-shape adventurers I occasionally guided. What in the

blighted hell did they look like without their stats strengthening their bodies?

I left the mirror and quickly got to work. Moving my body helped clear my thoughts and push back my worries about Melina. A bit later, the room was cleaned up and my new gear stashed away inside my bracelet.

I decided on black pants with a white cotton shirt and black shoes. It was the only set of clothes I had that made me look somewhat presentable.

Although this was probably just another ordinary day for Rolo and the guests at the tavern, I didn't feel that way at all.

This was the first day of my new life, as an adventurer in my own right. Though there was enormous pressure on me because of what'd happened to Melina—and the risk of the Baron discovering me—it still felt important to do things the proper way.

Chester didn't say anything while I got ready.

From what I could tell, he was still thinking about everything that'd happened in his own way, which was fine with me.

I could use some downtime on my own, get my thoughts straightened out, and try to come up with a plan.

Before anything, I would need to tackle another dungeon by myself. I needed stats, gold, and levels. That was an easy way to grind them out.

Alternatively, I could join the minor monster surge, or even try to participate in the grand monster surge. That was a seasonal event that led to many more monsters appearing in the woods than normal, as well as greater prizes for killing them.

Nobody knew why it happened, but everybody was grateful to the System for providing it. Adventurers treated monster surges the same way farmers treated an influx of rain. It was an inconvenience at the time but surely appreciated.

The monster surge would provide even more growth than the dungeons, but there was an additional risk.

Thanks to Chester's absorption, I had a very unique fighting style that combined both skills and spells. Although the two seemed quite similar, they used different kinds of magic and tools.

Spellcasters didn't wear plate armor or carry swords, nor did fighters use a staff, and yet that was what I needed to do if I wanted to make the best out of my new powers.

Normally, people focused on only one of those, with the other playing a supportive role.

For example, Melina had access to both skills and spells, but her skills were mostly for utility purposes, whereas her spells were her main damage-dealing focus.

As for me, after absorbing both skills and spells, I had a mix of damage and utility from both sides. Anybody seeing me fight would ask questions, and I wouldn't know how to answer them adequately.

The first thing I was going to do come morning, would be to visit the Adventurer's Guild and level up some of my spells and skills.

There was no need to keep all my skill essence in reserve, as whenever I had a skill or spell removed, eighty percent of the invested skill essence would be returned. As far as I was concerned, that twenty percent loss of essence was a very worthy price to pay if the added power or utility saved my life.

While I was there, I'd have to register my stats on the rankings. It would give me an approximate of how I compared to other adventurers who had registered in Eslant.

There'd never been a point before, and signing up for the rankings was still a risk, as it could bring further scrutiny on me.

However, I didn't have a choice.

To get back Melina, I needed to impress the Baron, and the rankings were the best way to do so. Not only that, I was genuinely curious about how my new powers after fusing with Chester stacked up to others of my rank.

Next, I would have to check the market and see if I could buy some uncommon or rare equipment.

I only had a single piece of armor and two pieces of jewelry. Any extra stat points were more than welcome.

Lastly, I'd have to stock up in the sundries—a shop that sold anything from whetstones to arrows, tools, and more. They also recharged repair kits, which would make sure that all my tools remained in good order.

Normally, weapons, especially magical weapons like Aldon's runeblade, didn't wear or tear too much. However, if I was going to seriously grind levels, that would all add up, and I might even fight some more serious opponents.

If it weren't for Chester, I would have had to battle that giant skeletal wizard myself, and there were many other tough dungeon bosses besides that.

With everything planned out for tomorrow, it was time to talk to Rolo and finally get some food. I closed the door to my room, locked it, and then made my way downstairs.

It was easily past midnight by the time my feet hit the bottom of the stairs. Only several drunkards remained, a few seated around tables or lying on the floor. One snored loudly.

Rolo and Renata were busy cleaning while Renko was washing plates and cutlery behind the bar. The two seemed to be angry with each other. Again. I could see them shooting not-so furtive glares from a mile away.

That was one of the most irritating things about living in the tavern. When I liked both of them, I really didn't need to hear the yelling at night when trying to fall asleep.

Both stopped and stared at me.

Renata wiped her hands on her apron. Not that it had done much to keep her ivory-white dress clean. There were

stains all over it.

The dress was *very* revealing, which was probably why the couple had gotten into another argument.

There were only two times when the big man was drunk: when he reminisced about his old adventuring life, or when his thirty-year-old partner started flirting with young adventurers for an extra tip. The latter happened more often than not.

But after seeing me, Rolo's anger suddenly vanished.

"You son of a bastard! I thought you were dead!" Rolo cried and stormed over to wrap me in a big hug.

But then, he suddenly stopped and frowned, looking me in the eye.

"Hey, something's different about you."

I grunted as his thick arms threatened to break my ribs. He was never one for subtlety and wore his heart on his sleeve.

"Enough, Rolo! You'll squeeze him to death!" Renata said, throwing a mug at his back. It struck him just below the neck, and the burly man dropped me.

At that moment, it was actually appreciated.

"You witch! Cover up when the kid's around, will ya?" Rolo scowled, his anger abruptly returning.

It was sort of funny that he called me the kid. Technically, Renata and I were only a few years apart in age.

And of course, that wasn't the real complaint. He would have told her to cover up no matter who was around.

The red-haired tavern mistress stood with her hands on her hips and a glare on her otherwise pretty face. Now she looked like an angry cat.

I put my hands up to stop them from going any further, and to my surprise, they did.

"We can do this another time," I said, having been present in more of their fights than I liked to recall. "I'll just

grab food and go back to my room.”

“No, you’re not,” Rolo said resolutely. “So, tell us, what happened? Several groups of adventurers have been looking for ya all afternoon and evenin. What did ya do?”

Several groups, huh?

“About that,” I muttered. “Well, I need to get my food first. You got any meat and potatoes left? And a drink? I’m famished.”

“I got it,” Renata said, hurrying off into the kitchen. “Don’t start without me!”

I took a seat behind the table closest to the bar and Rolo joined me.

Renko wasn’t much of a talker, but he usually threw a comment our way whenever we were chatting. Sometimes, it felt like he was glaring at me, though I never knew why. Whenever he was in one of his weird moods, I just stayed as far away from him as possible.

I just had no idea what he was thinking and didn’t want to cause any trouble in Rolo’s family.

“I was afraid this time they’d have your skin,” Rolo whispered, but his voice carried through the whole tavern.

“By all means,” I said, looking away. “Let’s wait for—ahh, she’s back.”

“Already had some prepared, was just keeping it warm,” Renata said with a smile, placing two plates in front of me, along with a full mug of ale.

The first plate had three cuts of perfectly cooked meat spread out. They were smothered with Renata’s signature smokey sauce to the point I could barely see the meat. It was just as I liked it.

On the second plate were two loaves of bread, some cheese, grapes, several baked potatoes, a knife, and a fork.

“So, where have you been?” Renata asked as she sat on Rolo’s lap.

If anyone was watching the two right then, they'd probably think them real lovebirds.

Sadly, that was far from true.

She mostly did whatever she wanted, flirting with heavy-pursed adventurers, nobles, and the like. She had never crossed the line and bedded a stranger as far as we knew, but the way she got the patrons to leave some extra coins was masterful.

I'd often wondered why Rolo didn't leave her, considering their many arguments and his constant irritation with her flirting. While I liked both of them, it just didn't seem like it was worth the trouble for the two to constantly scream at each other.

However, I never brought it up. It was none of my business, and I felt like asking would only make him even angrier.

I took a sip of the ale and smiled.

She'd poured me the good stuff, so before I started to eat, I pulled seventeen gold pieces from my bracelet and set them in front of her.

"With this, I've paid my debt, right?"

"Yes, you have, but you don't need to—" the heavy-set man said.

"I do, Rolo. Please, I can afford it now."

I took another sip and placed the mug to my right, picked up the fork and knife, then started eating and retelling the same story I had sold Alfonse.

This version was heavier on details, but I still left out the part where the mimic became one with me. Nobody needed to know that, not even Rolo.

I shook my wrist for good measure, showing off the black bracelet.

"I don't know if ya're the stupidest or luckiest person around," Rolo grunted. "Scouting'll get ya killed, boy."

“So will anything else, *dad*,” I replied.

His frown was replaced with a broad grin.

Whenever I wanted him to get off my back, I’d just call him dad.

It was the one thing that would get me out of trouble with him. Sure, he wasn’t my father, but he might as well have been considering how much he’d done for me.

“There we go again,” Renko muttered as he sat on a barstool nearby. “Say, what do you plan to do next?”

Both Renata and Rolo looked at him, seemingly surprised by his question. He wasn’t the prying type, so hearing him ask for extra information was more than odd.

“I...have some things in mind,” I said cautiously, not wanting to reveal anything in front of the man.

We’d never been on particularly good terms and I had a risky path ahead of me, so why indulge him?

“Well, what’er it is, ya got me, boy. Just tell me what ya need,” Rolo added, grinning. He waved his hand a little as if dismissing Renko. Rolo had never liked Renko much either, finding him weird.

“Thanks, Rolo,” I said, then pulled another gold coin out of my bracelet and placed it on the table.

Both he and Renata frowned.

“You already paid more than you owed, Damon,” she said with a motherly tone. Renata was a natural nurturer, though since our age was pretty close, she was more of a big sister than anything else. “Put that away, alright?”

“Can you prepare me several more plates and two more mugs for that?” I asked, tapping the coin.

“Aye, we can,” Rolo replied. He seemed a little surprised, but he was willing to take my money. After my story, he knew I could afford it, and he also knew that I wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Will bring it up in a bit. You

go rest, we will talk more in the morrow. All that matters is that ye'r good n healthy."

I nodded in thanks and finished my food and drink, leaving them to close up the tavern.

The place never opened up before noon, so they'd have enough time to rest and get ready for another day.

I slogged back up the stairs, feeling bloated as I'd eaten more than I should have, but the meat had somehow tasted better than normal.

Maybe it was my brush with death or the fusion with the mimic, but whatever it was, I'd needed the food.

I pushed my chair over to the window and lit the vanilla-scented candle, then made myself comfortable with a book I'd been reading.

Chester was perched on my shoulder and reading along when the food arrived.

Renata was pushing a small cart, which she left in my room.

"Anything else?" she asked.

The tavern mistress stood just inside the room, her hand pressed on the door. I knew she wanted to ask me a hundred different questions, as she was a busybody that pushed her nose where it didn't belong, but I knew that she always meant well.

"No, I'm fine. It was just a shitty day," I said. "Crazy to imagine everything happening at once."

She lowered her hand on her hip and then turned to me, walked over to the bed, and sat down.

"You can't hide this stuff from me, Damon. I know you too well. What's wrong?"

I'd told them about Melina, of course, and how Baron Alfonse took her back.

Seeing her being enslaved yet again bothered me beyond end. There was also a hint of self-preservation at work,

as she could tell him all kinds of things about me and Aldon's death.

Renata saw right through me, which wasn't all that hard I guessed.

"Did something happen between you and the elf? Was she pretty?"

I closed my eyes and just shook my head. In a way, that was Renata—she was a hopeless romantic at heart, so whenever she saw even a shade of something, she assumed the maximum.

She would push until I spilled whatever I wanted to keep hidden, so I might as well get it out of the way.

"No, nothing happened. But I could tell that she was a great person. I think we could have been friends. Maybe we could even start an adventuring party together. She definitely doesn't deserve to be a slave."

I felt the words hurt more than they should have, especially considering we had only known each other for a day.

Sometimes that nagging feeling deep inside our chests was strong enough that we couldn't ignore it.

Right now, that feeling told me that Melina was very important.

I'd felt that way about Renata and Rolo, and we'd quickly become like family, so I wasn't going to ignore my instinct.

Renata bit her lip for a long time,

"What can you do for her?" she asked, scooting over closer to me and putting a comforting hand on mine.

"I don't know," I honestly replied. "The Baron said I could buy her freedom. But 15,000 coins is a lot. And I could also—"

She waved her hand, cutting me off before I could say anything illegal, like the fact that I might break her out of

prison.

“Wait, I don’t want to know,” she said, brusquely cutting me off. “What I do want to know is this. You know my friend Elka, right? She likes you and asked me several times if I could help her...you know.”

I frowned, shaking my head and sighing a little.

I’d heard about Renata’s friend Elka before and even met her a few times. I’d always given Renata a polite excuse each time—saying she was a little too old for me or something like that, but at the end of the day, she just wasn’t my type.

And now *really* wasn’t the time for that.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I saw an honest look in her eyes.

“Come on, just give it a try,” she whispered. “If it doesn’t work out, you tried, if it does, then that’s great.”

Renata left her real words unsaid—going against the nobles, or even being involved with the nobles, was dangerous.

I should forget about Melina and move on with my life. She wasn’t really talking about Elka right now, despite her many attempts to set us up in the past.

She was trying to help me get my mind off things and live a peaceful life. I appreciated that, but despite Renata’s best efforts, this really wasn’t the kind of problem that could be solved by finding a girlfriend.

I shook my head. “Renny, can we talk about this another time? There’s a lot on my mind right now, so I’d appreciate it if you—”

“This elf woman,” Renata mused. “You really want to free her, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

She raised an eyebrow and gestured. “Are you sure it’s not just to spite the nobles? I know how you and the other scouts feel about their...policies.”

“Well, I’d take any opportunity to screw over the Sherazad,” I admitted. “But no. I want to free her because it’s the right thing to do.”

Beside me, Chester stirred, invisible to Renata. Warm fuzzy feelings flowed through my body, and I could tell that he approved. If even a monstrous mimic thought justice was on my side, I knew for sure that I was in the right.

“Good, that’s good,” she whispered.

“Good? How so?” I asked.

“Well, you have a goal now, don’t you? To make sure she’s okay, somehow.”

I thought for a moment, then nodded.

In a way, she was right.

I *did* have a goal now.

Before, I was just trying to gain levels, survive, and make some money. I’d taken a lot of dangerous jobs to try and find gear, but after that, I didn’t have much of a plan.

Now, that new strength and wealth were going toward something.

But still, that goal felt very far away.

She stood and pulled me up into a hug.

It warmed my heart. I grinned and hugged her back.

“Thanks, Renny, I mean it. I don’t know what I’d have done without you and Rolo. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“See?” It’s not that bad,” she said. “You’re stronger now. And now it’s time to use that power for good.”

With that, she smiled, then waved goodbye as she headed back downstairs.

“Good night, Damon. And don’t overdo it with that food, alright? I have no idea why you need so much suddenly, but I won’t ask. You got an important day ahead of you, isn’t that right?”

“Sure is, Renny. Good night.”

She walked out of the room and closed it behind her.

“You can eat and drink now, Chester,” I whispered, pointing to the tray she’d just brought. “All of that is yours.”

The mimic slid down my shoulder and then crawled along the floor, then climbed up the cart.

He wagged his eye stalks and inspected the food before digging in.

After what had happened to Melina, all the ‘give me cake or I kill you’ enthusiasm was gone, but I could sense through our connection that he liked it and it helped alleviate his spirits.

It was hard to believe that he was so hurt by Melina’s capture.

“Go sleep. I watch over you,” Chester said, climbing back on my shoulder.

We eyed each other for a moment, then I nodded to him and he nodded his lid before jumping on the windowsill.

One of his eyes turned to the door, and the other out the window.

What a handy ability.

Not only that, it seemed like he was much more willing to work together now since he wanted to get Melina back.

For a brief moment, I leaned back into my chair and looked out the window.

Was it Chester who wanted her freedom so desperately, or both of us? Since our emotions were entwined, it was so hard to tell.

Then I stared at the night sky outside and thought of how happy Melina had been just to run in the grass outside the dungeon. I grimaced, then nodded solemnly to myself.

It was both of us. Both of us wanted to save her.

The Sherazad family had done her a terrible wrong, and while it wasn’t my responsibility, I would do everything in

my power to right that wrong. As fucked up as the situation was, Chester and I were the only people who *could* save her.

I undressed and jumped into bed. Renata's perfume lingered near the pillow. She knew how much we hated the strong smell of sweets and spices, but she never cared, saying it was part of being a lady.

Whatever.

All those stupid arguments didn't seem very important anymore. I was just glad to be back home in one piece.

I closed my eyes and thought about all the good things that had happened, and the power I'd finally gained after waiting my whole life.

My goal of rescuing Melina was daunting, but Renata was right. I at least *had* a goal now and with it the means to achieve it.

Lost in thoughts, I finally drifted off into a much-needed sleep.

I had a long day tomorrow.



CHAPTER 14: THE ADVENTURER'S GUILD

The sound of carts being pulled along a bustling street woke me up early the next morning.

I blinked the tiredness out of my eyes, turning a little from side to side.

It was barely dawn with the sun only peeking over the horizon. However, I felt strangely rested as the first rays of light hit my face through the window.

If anything, I felt better than before.

The strength I'd gained yesterday hadn't dissipated. Though I'd only slept for around five or six hours, I still felt sharp, mentally and physically.

“You up,” Chester said as I sat up and yawned.

“I am. So are you.”

“I don’t need to sleep.”

“Outside of food comas, huh? You tend to disappear after you’ve eaten your fill.”

“It’s good. I can dream of food.”

Without another word, he jumped from the windowsill onto the chair, and then scurried with his tentacled legs over to the bed, hopped on, and climbed to his now-usual place on top of my shoulder.

As he returned closer to my body, the cord shrank back into him, withdrawing until our bodies were directly connected again.

“We need start.”

He didn’t elaborate further, but I knew what he meant.

And he was right. The Baron had threatened to torture or even kill Melina. Whether or not that was an idle threat, I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

“Let’s get going then.”

I gathered my clothes, then walked down a separate staircase to the washing room and found Renata there. She had just finished bathing and was changing the water.

“Mind if I hop in next?” I asked, nodding at the oversized barrel we used as a tub.

“Just change the water after you’re done, please,” she replied with a wink as she walked past me.

“Will do, Renny. Close up behind you, alright?” I asked, starting to take my shirt off.

She grinned at the door.

“No one is interested in seeing you naked, dear,” she chuckled and walked out, then closed the door behind her. Even with her very flirtatious nature, we’d never looked at each other like that, which was just how I liked it.

I took a quick bath and even Chester joined me. He floated on his back and used several tentacles to paddle around the barrel. It was sort of funny. He swam like a combination of a human using a backstroke and an octopus.

“I like this,” he said, the boxy body a shade darker than usual. There was even a hint of red in there. It seemed like he enjoyed the heat.

“I can see that. You never bathed before?” I asked, shaking my head. “Yeah, never mind. A mimic taking a bath. I guess that doesn’t happen much.”

“I bathe in blood of my food! Nom-nom!”

His stalky eyes perked up and he stared at me, then we both started laughing.

It was a stupid joke, but in his case, it was very literal.

“Well, this kind of bath makes you cleaner, not dirtier. Maybe we can get a mix of those.”

I supposed it was a good thing overall that the mimic liked bathing. Even though Chester could disguise himself with [Hide], I didn’t know if that extended to smells, especially after a certain point.

It would have been a nightmare if people just thought I naturally smelled like shit all the time.

We finished bathing, got dressed, changed the water, and then had breakfast. Today was sausage, eggs, and biscuits. The food was fried in butter, and every bite warmed my stomach. I asked Renata to take some along with me, and she nodded eagerly.

Although she’d packaged it for me, there was no need. Now that I had the storage bracelet, I just stored it.

“Handy,” she commented.

“I’ll be asking for a lot more extras now,” I replied, causing her to grin.

The lady was a hell of a cook. Despite her and Rolo’s arguments, the two definitely knew how to run a tavern

together.

As always, Rolo kept me company until I was ready to head out.

“Where are you going today?” he asked.

“Well, I need to follow the Baron’s demand to grow stronger,” I replied.

The Baron had read my letter to Rolo. In a way, I could use that to my advantage. If I made a big show to Rolo of obeying the Baron, the word might get back to him, making me appear more trustworthy.

After all, plenty of adventurers went to the Burning Bosom tavern.

Rolo nodded, clasp my shoulder. “Hah. Getting stronger is the best thing ever! You know, back when I was an adventurer...”

For a brief moment, it seemed like Rolo was about to regale me with another long-winded story, but then he shook his head.

“Well, there will be time for that when you come back home. You should get a move on. It’s your time now, *son*, and I couldn’t be happier.”

I grinned, nodding. “Well. I’m off to the Adventurer’s Guild then. Got to start by registering everything.”

Rolo definitely seemed happy about my newfound privileges from the Duke, and the fact that I’d suddenly grown stronger.

If it weren’t for Melina’s enslavement—and the lingering threat from killing Aldon’s party floating above my head—I would have been happy about how it’d all turned out.

The moment I stepped out onto the street, I knew I was being watched.

Several two and three-man teams of adventurers were scattered about and I spotted the four from the resetting skeleton dungeon yesterday standing on the bridge.

Seeing I couldn't avoid them, I just started walking toward them. Unlike the other adventurers, who were just pointing and gossiping, it seemed like these four were laser-focused.

Why were they looking at me?

Had they somehow realized what had happened with the Baron?

No, that couldn't be it. He'd arrived late at night, and the nobles valued their privacy.

I was still curious about them. They'd gone there looking for a scout—probably me—even before the Baron's bounty. What in the world was up with that?

The bridge was crowded with pedestrians and horse-drawn carts.

Most streets were bustling with small vendors and people going about their business, adventurers, and town officials. I used the busy time to hurry past the four-man team, and made good time, leaving them behind.

They followed quietly, trying to look inconspicuous. It'd been the same as I walked past them. The group had all looked away at once, feigning disinterest, then turned towards me again as soon as they thought I wasn't looking anymore.

I was getting more and more perturbed, but there was no time to sit around worrying. Instead, I activated [Light Step] and trudged along, not even giving them another thought.

As I walked through the streets, I turned back and forth, soaking in the sights of Eslant. Yesterday's countless brushes with death had given me a new appreciation of my hometown, and I looked at it with wide and appreciative eyes.

The stone and brick buildings stretched as far and wide as I could see, reaching for the sky and in some cases underground.

Most of the residential buildings were seven or eight floors tall, some even higher. There wasn't much difference in

their outer appearance as most were painted brown, gray, or dark ochre.

The majority of the buildings in Eslant were residential.

Due to the unique ways of using essence, we'd been able to build up instead of outwards, taking advantage of magic to strengthen the otherwise cheap materials.

Even Chester seemed interested. His stalk-eyes turned back and forth.

"Building big. Like dungeon but up instead of down."

"It is, isn't it, buddy?"

For some reason, I was happy that Chester liked Eslant and was impressed by my hometown. Then again, I didn't know if he liked Eslant simply because my nostalgia was pouring into him or because we passed by so many people... errm, food as he'd say.

Fusing with a mimic and sharing its emotions was weird, I could tell you that much. Hopefully I wouldn't get fat becoming a cake addict either. There was no way I could keep up with the mimic's absurd metabolism.

After a short while, I walked out onto the Guild Square, as everyone called it.

The Guild Square was considered the second-most prosperous area of the town, after the inner noble's residence. Few of the people living there had noble blood like the Baron, but most of them were either fairly seasoned adventurers or successful artisans.

Over thirty smaller taverns, pubs, food stalls, and other vendors were all arrayed around the large, round fountain with the current mayor's statue standing on top.

Water sprouted from a flower he held in front of him.

The Mayor's statue had stood there for a very long time, and it'd been built during his first term. I still remembered seeing the construction, back when I was a kid.

Even then, it'd made me happy.

I couldn't remember much of my parents, but I remembered that they—like many of the other lowly-born people in Eslant—thought that the Mayor was fair and working for them.

The Adventurer's Guild was at the very opposite end of the square. It was much larger than any other building around, taking up half the width of the entire far side.

The building was made from granite and decorated with black marble. I didn't know when it was made, but the building looked like a piece of art that rose ten floors tall.

Large banners from the five classes hung to one side of the entrance, and five from the main families hung on the other, almost touching the ground.

They were easily twenty-feet-tall, but their whole purpose was to scream 'importance'.

After all, adventurers were what had grown Eslant as a town in the first place. There was a bit of a passive-aggressive competition between the nobles and the adventurers about who was of more importance.

I thought that the grandeur was a little ridiculous and pompous, but I couldn't deny that it worked.

There was one other building that didn't quite rival the Adventurer's Guild, but it was roughly half in size.

A large banner hung across the building with the word SUNDRIES written over it. The building sat just to the left of the guild. The reason for its size was quite apparent as it housed the town's smithies, the potion brewers, the tailors, the sundries, and living quarters for all the employees.

Eslant, the adventurer who originally cleared out the monsters and claimed this region as his own, was rumored to have hired people to build the town that he'd named after himself.

Not much was known about him other than his name and his class: he'd been a spellcaster and supposedly so strong

that he could blow up entire monster armies with a single spell. That was how the town's land was apparently cleared: using one of his massive area of effect spells.

I looked at the mimic, but it had turned into its transparent form so no one would spot it. I didn't exactly know how that worked—whether it was [Hide] or a mixture of abilities, including a skill innate to mimics, but I didn't bother asking. He'd tell me on his terms like with most things.

Many pairs of eyes turned toward me as I made my way across the square. Some of the adventurers stopped talking and eyed me curiously, while others didn't offer me a cursory glance, to the point that it seemed suspicious—almost like they were conspicuously giving me the cold shoulder.

Everyone was acting weird, and since Chester was invisible, I knew it wasn't because of him. If I had to guess, it was because everyone knew I was the scout who'd let his team die.

I didn't enjoy the attention but hoped that it would be over by the end of the week.

People in Eslant didn't tend to have long memories. Excitement popped up regularly, thus shifting attention. After today's dungeon run or beast killing, someone else would become the new focus of gossip.

I stopped at one of the stalls where a man was busily cooking meat skewers.

Even though I'd just eaten at Rolo's tavern, my mouth watered. Meat in general was a guilty pleasure, and I could live off it for the rest of my life.

Screw plants, that was my motto.

The man opened up early and had already over fifty skewers ready. I flashed him a smile, handed the man a gold coin, and waited for him to pack up the skewers.

A gold coin gave me twenty pieces, which was a good investment in my eyes. I would eat one or two now and store the rest in my bracelet for later.

Even though we already had breakfast, I could feel Chester sapping away my energy. He stirred, but I just grinned knowingly. After what happened last time, I had to keep him under control in public. If all the meat from the stall started disappearing, we'd have another huge commotion.

And after enough instances of vanishing food, people would start asking questions.

"Later," I said through our mental connection. *"I'll get you more cake."*

Chester just groaned. *"Always say later, later, later! Friend is hungry and wants tasty food now! Not later!"*

I didn't indulge him with a response, and instead enjoyed my snack.

When I arrived at the guild entrance, I'd already finished my second skewer. Maybe I should have eaten less back at the Burning Bosom, but Renata was a good cook. All her food tasted good, so it was a waste not to fill up.

"Serves you right," Chester whispered in my ear. *"You waste food! Rather stuff yourself than feed me!"*

This time he was right. Only this time though.

"Alright, alright, I understand." I laughed. *"Just wait until we're done with this. Then you can have your share."*

"Yes! Share!" Chester cried. *"Sharing is caring! That's a mimic saying!"* I couldn't tell if he was making fun of me or not. I was pretty sure that was a human saying. I just kept my mouth shut, dismissing Chester for now. His angry squawks bounced off of me as I walked up the stairs, eyeing the two guards standing at the entrance.

They were clad in a combination of plate and scale mail.

Both held wicked-looking halberds that were easily six-foot-long. It was obvious why they preferred those weapons. Halberds had reach and versatility. They were very reliable, particularly for soldiers whose job it was to keep people away from important objectives or people.

Still, I could do with a little bit of variety.

Maybe dual swords, or two shields.

That would look awesome. I could be a one-man shield wall.

“Idiot,” Chester said flatly.

Now it was my turn to groan. *“Shut up dude. I know that two shields don’t make sense, and it was just a thought anyway. If you don’t like it, stop reading my mind!”*

I walked past the duo, and neither even so much as blinked, which told me a very important thing: they didn’t view me as a possible threat.

There was no warning out there about me, even after what had happened with Aldon. Even though ordinary people were whispering, it seemed like they all judged it as an innocent mistake.

Good. I liked it that way.

On top of that, it confirmed that Chester’s cloaking abilities were powerful enough to evade even the Adventurer Guild’s professional guards. Of course, I’d already suspected that, after seeing him hide from Melina and even the Baron. Still, it was comforting to realize that the second rebirth mimic could deceive even professional detectors.

I entered the building.

Right in front of the entrance was a majestic lobby desk made from gray monster bone.

Legends said that part of the building had been constructed using the skeleton of a Lefarian Behemoth, a monster easily a hundred feet tall and half as wide. No one really knew if it was true or not, and those old enough to know about it stayed quiet.

There was nothing else of note in the entrance.

Two long corridors led to either side of the building and into rebirth chambers, offices, and even soundproofed

rooms where people could trade information and goods with zero percent chance of being overheard.

Six clerks, all young men and women, stood behind the bone desk and stared at me with blank expressions. If I didn't know better, I'd think they were mad at me.

All of them had the same outfit, almost like uniforms. They even had the same hairstyles.

They were all immaculately dressed in black suits and white undershirts for the men, and long, black dresses for the ladies. Similarly, their hair was cut short for the men and tied into ponytails for the ladies.

The clothes, and blank expressions, were the Adventurer's Guild's idea of professionalism. For some reason, they thought that the workers here should show as little emotion as possible.

Outside of the desk, the inside of the building just wasn't what people would expect to see in such an important institution. Not just that, but there were barely any adventurers and staff walking about.

It's always a pleasure visiting this lifeless place.

I headed for the center clerk, the one in charge of general adventurer issues.

"Good morning, young sir," the man said as I stopped right in front of him.

I nodded in greeting.

"Greetings. I need several of your services. The first is to update my rankings, and the second is to see what I need for my advancement."

"What class will you be advancing in, good sir? And what rebirth stage?"

"I'm just about to hit the second rebirth stage. Need just a bit more," I said. My voice sounded a lot more excited than I'd realized. Until yesterday, my second rebirth had seemed infinitely far away.

The clerk eyed me for a moment as if asking himself ‘does this guy even have enough coin?’ so I beat him to it.

“I want the special treatment.” I’d heard other wealthy adventurers talk about the “special treatment” before. It wasn’t all that special, but mentioning the phrase at least told the attendants that you knew what you were doing and weren’t some random rube wasting their time.

“Oh, I see,” the man replied promptly and then walked out from behind the counter. “Please follow me so we can update your rankings, then we can discuss your rebirth.”

We made our way toward the back of the building, walking through long, white corridors.

Every door looked the same to me, but it shouldn’t be that hard to find my way out. All I had to do was follow the white marble floor.

A short while later, we stopped in front of a black door. The clerk opened it and peeked inside. I could see a large clear crystal floating in the center of the room. Several chairs were placed around a rectangular table on top of which glowing stone scanners were placed. There was one in front of each chair.

A young man stepped out of the room and strode past us, his face set into a scowl. Must have been disappointed by his lack of power, I guessed.

As the young man walked by, the clerk smiled to himself and just stood there for a moment, then motioned for me to join him. I felt as if I was part of an in-joke I didn’t understand. Considering the Adventurer Guild’s strict rules, I supposed the staffers needed some way to amuse themselves. Truth be told, I felt bad for them, as their jobs seemed almost tragically boring.

“You have done this before?” the staffer asked.

The walls were carved out of more stone and were reinforced with steel pillars.

The basic design looked fairly odd for such an important place, almost like the inside of a smithy, but who

was I to judge?

“Yes, I have,” I replied, eying the crystal.

I walked up to it and pressed both hands into the indentations, then released some of my essence.

The crystal reacted, glowed a bright green, then turned an ominous black. The clerk grunted something unintelligible, and all I could do was imagine that somehow it had sensed the mimic.

Shit.

I should have expected this to happen.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, turning to face him and keeping my voice calm. If needed, I could just play this off as an innocent mistake.

“Oh, not at all,” the man replied. Now that I’d turned to look at him, I noticed that he wasn’t looking at me at all—he was staring at the crystal, a slightly perturbed expression on his face.

“Do you know why the crystal is black?” I asked.

The man nodded. “I’ve seen this, but only once before. The crystal turns black when it isn’t sure of how to categorize you, sir. It’s also possible because you are on a threshold between multiple different classes, so it happens sometimes. Now, do you wish to check the updated rankings? I will wait for you outside in the hallway.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right out.”

I picked one of the glowing stone tablets and again released some essence.

My name appeared before me along with several others both ahead and behind me.

“Not bad at all,” I whispered.

I wasn’t quite sure, but I could swear I’d been ranked around the 7,500-range last time. 7,331 if I could remember correctly.

I'd never closely looked at my rank since I hadn't imagined advancing so quickly.

Now, I was ranked 5,992—a jump of over 1,000 in just a single day.

I selected the top-most name displayed, the one that was highest on the tablet, which was centered on my name.

That adventurer was ranked 5,985.

I couldn't see his gear, only the class, and stats. Fortunately, other people would also only be able to see my main class and my stats, which was preferred.

[NAME: Kleman Parles], [CLASS:
Gladiator]

[STRENGTH: 104], [STAMINA: 112]

[ESSENCE: 29], [AGILITY: 73]

I wasn't that much weaker stat-wise, but unlike me, he probably already had a full set of gear equipped.

Or so I assumed, as adventurers didn't pick the Gladiator class unless they had the items to make it worth it. It was an interesting hybrid class that relied heavily on adding additional stat boosts to gear.

If this man's stats were comparable to mine, and he was a Gladiator with a lot of gear...

Just to be sure, I inspected another adventurer, and then another.

The situation was similar. There seemed to be a soft cap on how far people could go after one or two rebirths. My base stats were very high relative to others of my ranking.

I couldn't help but smile and throw a wink at my mimic companion. It'd done me a great service, by...errr, almost eating me and settling for some cookies and sandwiches instead.

Considering how strong I'd become, I wouldn't mind if he tried to eat me again.

As long as he failed...

“See? I make you strong,” Chester whispered. “I make you more strong. Then we save long ears.”

“Let’s just hope we don’t die before I get that chance, Chester,” I replied. “Speaking of which, I’m curious about what evolution paths you have.”

“Don’t know.”

My happiness was promptly replaced by my usual exasperation.

Why did I even ask?

I’d been excited about the Evolution Chest I earned in the previous dungeon, and now we needed gear for both of us. With another ingredient—which I didn’t know about—I could have helped Chester evolve.

Unfortunately, it seemed like Chester didn’t know what he would evolve into.

It was a good thing that the mimic was strong since brains definitely weren’t his forte. The mimic barely knew anything useful, and based on what Chester told me, his whole species thought that way. It was only because of their incredible strength and versatility that the species of damn fools wasn’t extinct yet.

“Sir? Are you done?” the clerk asked from outside.

Normally, it was looked down on to spend too much time scouting out the spots around you, but the stat difference was just so compelling that I’d forgotten.

Besides, it was a good ego boost to realize I was stronger than others at my stage. I had no delusions that it was earned, no, it was all the gear I’d gotten in the dungeon and from Aldon...but I didn’t mind. All was well as long as I became strong enough.

“Coming,” I said, joining him in the hallway. He waited with his arms crossed, but I was in way too good of a mood to let his attitude get me down.

With one major nuisance out of the way, I could focus on the next several issues: finding out how much my second rebirth cost, and then leveling up my skills.

Once I was done with that, I'd visit the sundries and the market, just in case someone was selling cheap magical gear.

We made our way back out into the lobby where he handed me over to the clerk assigned to scout-class duties.

"Sir, you said you wanted the full package?" the young woman asked. "Are you ready to be reborn as a second-stage scout?"

"Not yet," I explained. "I need to get two more levels, but since I'm already here, I want to make sure that I have enough coins."

"Certainly, sir. The rebirth process costs forty gold coins for a basic scout class advancement. If you wish to have a higher chance of getting a more advanced class, there are two other packages. The first one costs seventy gold coins, and the second is one-hundred-and-twenty."

I nodded.

In fact, I already knew the prices, but I wanted to check if anything had changed. Things did pretty often, but not for scouts, it seemed.

That was a benefit of having a lesser-upgraded class.

"And how does the process actually work? The most expensive one," I asked. That was the one thing that I didn't know much about. Normally, only nobles could afford it, but after getting Aldon's purse, the one hundred and twenty coins wouldn't be a problem.

"Shouldn't we save money for long ears?" Chester asked, sounding shockingly sincere.

"No. We need the power now. It's an investment."

I replied to Chester without taking my eyes off the woman. Though it'd only been a day, I was getting used to his presence in my mind.

“By the way. Through our link, you can only have ten at a time. Ten skills, ten spells. Twenty total. Eat any more, and you need delete spells and skills,” Chester hurriedly explained. Now that we were actually upgrading, he felt like it was finally time to spill the beans.

“Tell me that earlier next time, idiot.” Truth be told, I was genuinely irritated. I liked planning ahead, and I needed to know important things like that ahead of time.

Still, I’d naturally assumed that something like this would happen after seeing the numbers in brackets after absorbing Aldon’s party, so I wasn’t totally shocked.

While the System gave some individuals unusual abilities, there was still an underlying ethos of fairness. Even totally overpowered beings had some kind of weakness.

My fusion with Chester was an example of that.

Ten skills and ten spells—twenty total abilities from other classes—was something that any normal adventurer would die for. But in exchange for those skills, I would die if we ever separated.

As Chester and I argued, the worker continued explaining how the rebirth system worked, and what benefits I would receive from a premium payment.

“Well, it doesn’t work much differently than the ordinary rebirth. The system will assign you a random scout class upgrade as it would with any kind of rebirth, but since it costs much more, we add certain items that our adventurers harvest to push the rebirth into a more contained direction. But it still is a game of chance, sir. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. I will need some time in an upgrade room.”

Although they had somewhat similar names—and somewhat similar ideas behind them—the upgrade room and the rebirth room were very different.

The rebirth room was for classes, and the upgrade room was for skills.

In a way, it reminded me of how there was essence for casting spells, but also skill essence and level essence. There was also essence in the crystals that gave us new classes. Ultimately, our powers came from the same magical substance given to us by the System, albeit different forms of it.

“Got some skill essence to spend.”

The woman nodded. “Ahh, certainly, sir. How much will you be spending?”

I checked my status window.

“Just under four thousand skill essence.”

Her eyes widened and she raised her eyebrows. But instead of saying anything, she quickly brushed off her surprise, returning to her usual placid and eerily professional self. “The fee is three gold, sir. Will you please follow me?”

I paid her with three gold coins from my storage bracelet, and then followed her into one of the upgrade rooms.

It was rather small with just enough space to sit comfortably.

A skill stone similar to the ranking one floated inches above the table. It was bright red and pulsed as I placed my hand on it.

Now comes the fun part.

A new window popped up, with both skills and spells lined up on the left side, and costs on the right.

The cost to upgrade any common spell to the second level was 17 skill essence, for any uncommon spell 34, and for the one rare spell I had, it was 68.

I upgraded all the spells to the next level, which cost me 204 skill essence. With every new level, the costs doubled, so taking them all up to level three cost me 408 skill essence. Finally, level four cost me a total of 1,428 points.

To most adventurers, this would have been absurdly expensive, but I’d been saving skill essence for a ridiculously long time. Plenty of scouts would have just given up, but I

hadn't, and now through a stroke of luck, it was finally paying off for me.

I decided to upgrade all of the skills evenly, which was the opposite of most adventurers, who closely specialized. However, I had a ridiculous array of skills thanks to Chester. If I developed an all-round skillset, I could be a wild card that fit well into any adventuring party.

In the long term, I still wanted to free Melina and form a party with her. So for now, I would focus on building my own power and ability rather than specializing, which would let me go through temporary questing partners without problem.

The only downside to upgrading all my skills was lost essence. Even if I deleted them through the guild, I would lose twenty percent, but that was a decent price all things considered, especially if those skills helped me make more essence in the first place.

Like with all things done through the System, power begot more power.

I pulled up my spell window and then read through the changes to all descriptions.

The requirement tab was gone, as I had already gained access to all of the skills and spells. Instead, the changes after the upgrade were shown.

SPELL WINDOW [7/10].

SPELL: Heal (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Heal a light amount of damage on a single target and close small wounds.

SPELL: Cure (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Cure all low-level debuffs, toxins, and burns with a 65% chance from a single target.

SPELL: Barrier (UC), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Decrease received physical damage by 19%

SPELL: Dome (UC), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Decrease received essence damage by 19%.

SPELL: Light Step (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Muffle all footsteps and increase walking speed by 130%.

SPELL: Lightning Bolt (R), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Cast a lightning bolt on a single target and inflict 180% damage with a 55% chance to inflict stun.

SPELL: Lightning Resistance (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Decrease received lightning essence damage by 39% and ignore a single stun.

Damn. It really was worth it to make Chester eat the giant skeleton wizard.

None of the changes was as dramatic as the boost to the spell [Lightning Bolt], and I hadn't even tried it out yet.

It was a rare spell for a reason. It was just on a totally different level compared to the stuff I got from Jesabel, even though the healing and buffs were still appreciated.

With 2,504 essence points left, I pulled up my skills, which included my own abilities, as well as the abilities I'd gained from Aldon, Maz, and Falin.

The total amount of points needed for the first upgrade was 323.

Taking everything to the third level cost another 646, and getting them up to the fourth 1,292.

Just like before, I divided the skills evenly.

All in all, I was left with 243 points.

It'd take another adventuring run to gain more upgrades, but it was worth it, considering I had just upgraded 16 skills and spells to the fourth level.

Once they hit level five, I'd need to upgrade them using expensive ingredients and monster parts.

I wasn't looking forward to that as I still hadn't upgraded a single trapper skill past level five. Then again, things would probably be easier now that I could adventure on my own and keep the loot for myself.

Once I broke past the level five limit, that particular skill or spell could go up to level ten, but I'd have to reach a higher rebirth to even try and upgrade them.

I went through the skills and the descriptions after reaching level four.

SKILL WINDOW [9/10].

SKILL: Hide (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Lower the chance of being spotted

while hiding by 120%.

COOLDOWN: 60 seconds

DURATION: 5 minutes

SKILL: Sharpen Edge (R), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Increase your party's physical damage

output by 23%.

DURATION: 10 minutes

SKILL: Snipe (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Hit the target with a 100% chance and deal 40% extra damage, inflicting [Bleed] debuff with a 30% chance for 15 seconds.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

DURATION: 5 minutes

SKILL: Critical Strike (R), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Increase your party's
critical hit
chance by 21%.

COOLDOWN: 60 seconds

DURATION: 10 minutes

SKILL: Slash (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Attack the target with 70%
extra damage, inflicting [Bleed] debuff
with a 30% chance.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

DURATION: 15 seconds

SKILL: Thrust (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Attack the target with 90%
extra damage, inflicting [Pierce] debuff
with a 40% chance for 10 seconds.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

DURATION: 10 seconds

NOTE: [Pierce] causes the target's
defense to drop by 15%

SKILL: Heavy Swing (C), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Attack the target with
110% extra damage, inflicting [Stagger]
debuff with a 60% chance.

COOLDOWN: 20 seconds

DURATION: 5 seconds

NOTE: [Stagger] causes the target to
lose their balance

SKILL: Shield Bash (UC), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Increase inflicted physical damage by 80% and inflict [Stun] debuff with a 60% chance for 5 seconds.

COOLDOWN: 30 seconds

DURATION: 5 seconds

NOTE: [Stun] causes the target to lose all ability to move, attack, and use skills or spells

SKILL: Stalwart (R), LEVEL: 4

DESCRIPTION: Absorb all damage for 9 seconds and heal all received damage.

COOLDOWN: 10 Minutes

I left the remainder of my skill essence points intact as they wouldn't make a difference anyway.

Seeing all the powered-up new skills and spells, I couldn't help but grin a little.

Sure, Chester had gotten me those skills and spells, but it had been *me* saving all those essence points, with most of them acquired from my time as solely a trapper.

I had to give myself a bit of credit where it was due.

I walked out of the room only to find the young woman sitting on the floor. She got to her feet when she saw me, but I didn't really care where she'd been sitting.

It was somewhat odd behavior, that much was certain, but not really my business.

"Are you done, sir?" she asked, straightening her dress and hair self-consciously. Considering how strict the rules at the Guild were, she might even get fired if someone complained, which was stupid as far as I was concerned.

"Yes. You can go." I smiled at her to make sure she knew everything was alright. "I'll find my way out. I'm done here anyway."

She bowed and promptly hurried off down the corridor.

I was almost about to call back after her and ask about the skill and spell merchants within the guild, but then stopped myself. If I tried to buy spells as a scout, people might ask the wrong kind of questions.

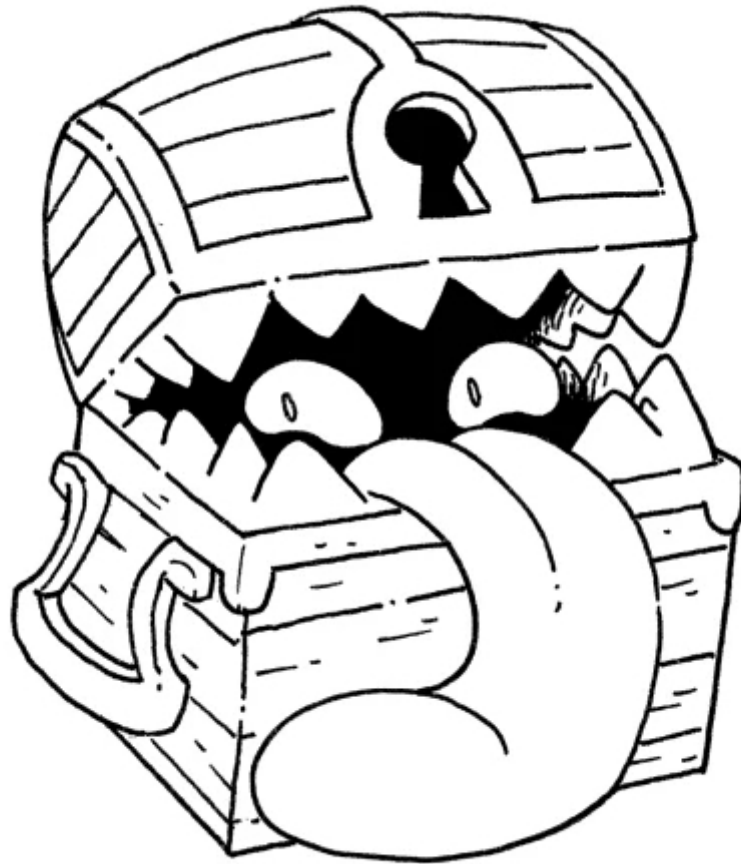
I left the guild hall and moved out into the square, then glanced up at the sun. It had already moved to the zenith, which meant that I'd have to hurry if I wanted any work done.

An odd thought came to mind.

Where was our new celebrity?

I wondered what Duke Harholt Fernz was up to. So much had happened since then that I'd briefly forgotten how Melina and I had gotten into town in the first place.

Still, deciding it was better to not linger, I made my way to the next destination: the market.



CHAPTER 15: GEARING UP

The market was a small building sitting in the center of a large park. It was roughly the same total square footage as the Burning Bosom, but roughly tower-shaped instead and three stories high.

Visitors often commented on the unusually small store, but it was more than enough for what it needed to accomplish.

Thanks to storage abilities, the shopkeepers were able to keep plenty of spare goods inside their rings or bracelets. There was no need to pay excess money and rent extra space.

I stepped inside, pushing through the wooden door.

Several display cases sat just inside the front door, mostly filled with weapons and jewelry.

These displayed the shop's most valuable wares.

I eyed the case longingly, idly kicking a thought around in the back of my head.

What if I turned into a case? Then people would just *give* me the powerful items. The problem was, the shopkeepers here were just way too familiar with the display case. If even a little bit of it was off, I would get caught.

That was one of the main problems with the [Mimicry] skill. It was great for tricking people in unfamiliar environments, but not so much when the person was a local. When it came to sneaking around, my [Hide] skill that I'd gotten from Falin was generally better, but I'd definitely get caught trying to use that skill at a store. People tended to notice when their valuable items vanished into thin air.

Still, it was hard not to dream. Any of these items would greatly boost an adventurer's power but at an absurd cost.

Price tags had been affixed to each, showing insanely high prices. Some of the lowest items started with prices over five thousand gold coins but went up dramatically from there.

For some of the priciest ones...

If I had that amount of money, I wouldn't need to be here. I could just buy Melina's freedom myself.

"Some things never change," I muttered to myself as I made my way past the displays. "The poor adventurer stays weak, and the rich get only stronger."

Still, it was time to start using that to my advantage. There wasn't really time for pointless complaining, even if it did make me feel better.

Four guards stood inside, two by the entrance and another two milling about.

They were dressed just like the ones standing watch at the Adventurer's Guild and probably were on the same payroll. Since the Adventurer's Guild was technically the authority on all classes and abilities, the other shopkeepers and storeowners in the area often paid them for additional protection.

The two guards walking around held a staff and a bow, while the men by the door carried swords. A full high-tier party standing guard. It would deter anyone, really.

Again, neither of the guards even so much as looked at me, so I made my way forward uninhibited.

Benches were all arrayed around the walls, with adventurers sitting in them and holding stone tablets in their hands. I already knew how this place worked, so I grabbed one from the counter at the center of the room and sat down.

I activated the tablet by pushing some essence into it, which seemed how everything worked nowadays, and a new window appeared before me.

There were two options that I could choose from.

The first was buy, and the second was sell, which made this place so convenient. It was even fun, in a way.

Since all the prices were listed out from the spot and pre-registered, buying and selling items was easy. If I wanted, I could call over the specific seller who'd put up the item to try and barter, but for most people, it just wasn't worth the time.

The prices were genuinely fair, and the Eslant store did so much business there was rarely a need to fold to a single customer.

On top of that, the Eslant store was linked to the broader System, allowing the transfer of goods and money to other System-linked towns. The System was like a broker that did all the work of registering, storing, and selling the goods. It made bartering easy and convenient.

After going into buying mode, I had several ways to narrow down what I was looking for. I could sort by price, stat requirements, stat bonuses, and or type of equipment.

I chose the lowest to the highest price option, which only made sense as I didn't have much equipment. Equipping multiple solid items would be much more effective than spending everything on a single powerful item.

Jewelry was particularly effective.

Since there were so many slots, it was basically a highly effective way for me to increase my stats.

A massive list appeared in front of me, showing shoes, gloves, capes, jewelry...anything I could possibly want.

The only problem?

Even the cheapest item started at a hundred gold.

They were magical, after all, and would add various stat bonuses and special traits beyond helping me cover up my naked body parts.

There went the plan of spamming jewelry.

As of right now, I only had a single piece of armor from Aldon, so I could add a few pieces.

Maybe I should consider selling the items...

Just out of curiosity, I looked for breastplates, since I wanted to see how much Aldon's Gigas Breastplate was worth.

Aldon's gear were the most valuable things I had. I scrolled and felt my eyebrows rise as I found the breastplate. The item was even more valuable than I'd thought.

Even though there were quite a few on the market, which should have created competition and driven down the price, the lowest appeared to be 920 gold coins.

I searched for the Chitin Shield next. It felt even more valuable than the Gigas Breastplate, since it'd shifted to match my fighting style.

Only one option appeared, and it showed the shield going for 1,840 gold coins.

Holy crap.

Almost 3,000 gold coins, just between the two of them.

Cold sweat broke out on my brow as I considered Alfonse.

Shouldn't he have inquired more about his dead son's gear?

After all, the man had just tossed me the storage rings like it was nothing.

But this pair was worth a small fortune...at least to a commoner like me. Maybe the Baron just didn't care about it anymore. He probably had so much money that even this life-changing sum was nothing to him.

I took a deep breath and scrolled through the swords next.

If the breastplate and shield were worth this much, what was the Obsidian Runeblade worth?

That was clearly Aldon's best item.

The swords started with 270 gold coins for basic items that gave shitty boosts like +3 to strength.

I didn't remember things being so expensive...but then again, it had been a good two years since I'd last visited the market. Before this, I only picked up basic items from the local blacksmiths, the spares that weren't good enough to sell to the guilds.

After scrolling for a few minutes, the sword prices had risen insanely high where a Flaming Longsword that added +20 strength and +10 essence cost 7,290 gold coins.

But still, there were no Obsidian Runeblades on the market...not a single one.

"That sword is good. I don't think anyone sell on market. Too expensive," Chester said over our mental connection. *"You had big luck. Aldon rich."*

"I was just curious, is all," I replied. *"It's a good thing the scabbard keeps it disguised."*

Then I brought up the cloaks and capes.

Either the Baron would let me keep the sword or not, but I didn't want to draw attention to myself, both from him and from any greedy adventurers.

That was where a cloak or cape came in.

Whatever I got wouldn't provide me with a lot of stats, but it could help me hide the sword and shield when I was walking about town, out on the road, or in dungeons.

I had three choices in the coin range I was comfortable with.

There was a red Flourishing Cape that added +4 charisma, a Brown Leather Cloak that added +3 stamina and +2 essence, and a Black Hooded Cloak that added +4 agility.

None of the options were all that compelling, but I ruled out the Flourishing Cape. It only covered my back, and not my sides, which defeated the whole purpose of getting it as a cover-up. Plus, the red was a bit too flashy for someone trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

The Brown Leather Cloak had an odd shape, and honestly looked kind of cheap, and it would only cover part of my back.

The Black Hooded Cloak looked to be the best choice out of all three.

It was made of a thicker material and was more likely to keep my gear hidden. It had a clasp at the front, which when used would hide most of my chest.

The downside was the steep price of 330 gold. That would leave me with a measly 20 gold coins for living expenses and the sundries.

My crossbow, which had always been a back-up weapon anyways, was gone after the clash in the dungeon... but I now had a bow too.

Unlike Aldon's gear, his party's tools wouldn't attract much attention. They were basic, but functional, which was good in its own way.

I quickly looked into my storage and then inspected the Hawthorne Bow.

The requirements were pretty low at 25 strength, 20 stamina, and 40 agility. The Runeblade added five agility, so when I unequipped it to fit the bow, I was short...

No.

I shook my head.

The cloak added four Agility, putting me over the qualification mark. That was the benefit of special “clothes” type items that provided an innate bonus.

When it came to items, I had to switch them in and out of my inventory to fight, I couldn’t equip both the Runeblade and Falin’s bow at the same time.

However, I’d always have my clothes on in the wilderness...

Hopefully.

After meeting Chester, I didn’t want to get any “closer” to dungeon bosses and monsters, if I could avoid it.

There was only one downside to using the bow.

Without Aldon’s Runeblade, all my stats would be so much lower. Maybe I should just keep the Runeblade on at all times, and focus more on a tank build.

“No, that doesn’t make sense. My biggest asset is versatility. I will need something to pick off ranged targets or lure away monsters out of larger groups,” I whispered to myself, staring at the bow and its stats and trying to reason everything out.

The difference was 30 strength, 5 stamina, and 10 essence.

However, I would get another 20 agility with the bow equipped, and ranged physical damage was calculated via agility.

“Alright, I’ll buy an infinite quiver then. It’ll be a big upfront cost, but a lot better than wasting my money reloading all the time. What do you think?” I mentally asked, deciding to bounce ideas off of the mimic living inside of me instead of just talking into thin air.

“You are getting smarter. Good cloak to hide, and good bow to shoot. I am happy,” Chester said.

I snorted and shook my head.

For some reason, I was happy that Chester approved of my plan. That was probably common sense, though. He'd killed a lot of adventurers—or human nom-noms as he called them—in his time.

Who would ever think I would care so much about a monster's approval?

Certainly not me.

I brought the market window back up and searched for the cloak. My eyes widened as a second one showed up in the meanwhile, and at no more than 280 gold.

That was a lucky break.

Sometimes, sellers put items at lower prices to undercut other people if they were strapped for cash and just wanted to sell their items quickly.

Right now, I'd come in at the perfect time.

I hurriedly bought the Black Hooded Cloak and equipped it right away.

It appeared around my body and shifted until it had adjusted to my build.

The money disappeared from my storage, and I felt Chester's sorrow for losing the money.

"My shinies!" he squawked indignantly. *"So many shinies!"*

"Sorry, bud, if you want to get Melina back, you'll just have to get used to it."

He paused for a moment, then I could feel him mentally nodding. *"Yes. Lose shinies and pretties for long ears. But you need to get stronger. Fast."*

Huh.

It was really weird how Melina made Chester suddenly so selfless, though to be honest, I basically felt the same way. There was a reason I wasn't taking my new money, items, and

skills, then running for the hills where nobody could find me. Melina had inspired both of us to be our best selves.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Black Hooded Cloak, RARITY:
Common

SPECIALTY:None.

REQUIREMENT: 5 Strength, 5 Stamina, 5
Agility

BONUS STATS: +4 Agility

I unequipped the sword, scabbard, and shield, then equipped the bow. It appeared strapped to my back. Since my main class was Scout, anyone inspecting me wouldn't see anything wrong. It wouldn't be that much of a stretch for me to be carrying a ranged weapon.

A message appeared before me.

[WARNING: You can not use the Hawthorne
Bow without arrows]

Sometimes, I wondered just how stupid the System thought we all were.

Then again, the scholars said it'd been around humanity forever. It'd existed since before humans had developed fire or even basic tools, so I supposed it had rock-bottom expectations.

Maybe it still thought of humanity—and the elves and orcs for that matter—as little more than jumped-up monkeys.

As if mocking me, the notification grew in my vision and the font became bold.

“I know, I know,” I muttered, dismissing the notification and scrolling to the repeat-use quivers.

There were several varieties, and each one was very expensive.

The cheapest one was the Infinity Quiver (C), a common quiver that would replenish one arrow every minute.

It held up to fifty projectiles, which meant that if I used my bow often and exhausted my supply, it would naturally refill every fifty minutes.

It wasn't all that bad, considering the convenience.

On the other hand...

Maybe I would need more arrows than just fifty. Now I was reconsidering my original decision.

The bolts I used to buy for my crossbow were pretty cheap, and I could buy a hundred for a single gold coin.

Even better, there were different categories of arrows. Some added extra damage, others precision or certain elemental damage. Before, I'd always stuck to the neutral, ordinary bolts since the others cost much more.

Now, though, since I would only be using my bow in special situations, the more powerful arrows made some sense. Although the Infinity Quiver generated arrows instead of bolts, the concept was the same. The item would only generate cheaper bolts, to begin with.

Ultimately, I decided not to buy one for the time being.

I would decide after I checked the sundries. It was pretty close, so I could just come back if I didn't find what I needed.

I stood, feeling good about my purchase, and headed for the counter where I left my tablet.

Adjusting the bow on my back, I made for the exit when a faintly familiar essence flooded the entire market.

I had first felt this oppressive essence last night, and yet here it was again.

I gulped.

The essence belonged to none other than Duke Harholt Fernz, the high-ranking noble who'd entered our town yesterday to talk to the Mayor.

I moved to the side as he strode in as if owning the place, a long, majestic, white cape with scarlet trim hanging

off his back.

It fluttered behind him as if held up by the wind.

The cape was far grander than the cloak I'd just purchased.

Hell, *everything* he wore was far grander than anything I had, including even Aldon's Runeblade.

As wealthy and powerful as Baron Alfonse was, the Duke was just on a different level.

The Duke wore a set of ivory armor that covered his whole body and screamed power.

Painted accents of dark gold framed the edges of each piece of equipment. It was a magical set, that much was clear just by the appearance. Even the weakest of sets would send their owner's stats through the roof, so it made sense for someone as important as him to have such gear.

He stopped not even ten steps away from me and looked around.

There were easily a hundred of us there, and his eyes seemed to be searching the crowd for someone. Before long, he seemed fed up and snapped his fingers. The snappy sound reverberated through the silent market hall, and everyone turned to him.

"I'm searching for capable scouts. The pay is good, but your life will be on the line most of the time. If there are any volunteers, meet me at the fountain in an hour."

Just like that, he turned around, and at that moment, our eyes met. He winked at me and strode back out into the square where he started yelling the same thing.

"*What...was that?*" I wondered, unsure of what just happened.

Had I imagined it, or had he really winked at me?

Did he know that I'd hitched a ride on his carriage the night before?

Surely not as—no.

That couldn't be it.

And if it was, wouldn't he have done something about Melina?

As things stood, I couldn't report the Baron or anything like that. If I did, he'd know, and he'd take it out on Melina.

But surely, someone who could sense me under their carriage would also sense an elf in coral cuffs.

Or maybe not.

Who knew how essence worked? I wasn't powerful enough to access those secrets of the System.

Then again, the nobility was just odd. I was sure the Duke just liked to play games.

If I had to guess, I just looked like a scout.

Yeah.

Maybe that was it.

"What are you blabbering on about?" Chester asked, reading my thoughts.

"The duke winking at us. I am sure he winked. Didn't you see? He looked right at us."

"I don't know what you talking about. I played dead."

I rolled my eyes.

It was so typical.

The little bastard had a great self-preservation instinct, that much was clear.

"Didn't you say you don't care if you die? That it's just the way of life?"

"No!" Chester protested. *"I don't care if I die during a food coma!"*

"Alright. Whatever dude."

Chatter broke out inside the market, and I hurried out, analyzing how I felt about that strange interaction.

Maybe I'd work with the Duke, maybe not.

It seemed like a reasonable way to go forwards, but getting closer under his purview might be a bad idea.

My thoughts whirling, I made my way straight to the sundries building.

It wasn't that busy, which was good.

I found a clerk and waved him over, smiling. His outfit was rather odd and stood out from the other employees, but I didn't think much of it.

"Do you have any used quivers? Anything that isn't too expensive?"

The young man eyed me through a tangled web of hair. His clothes were a mess, and he didn't seem very interested in chatting.

If anything, it looked like he'd just gotten to work after a long night of drinking.

"I—don't know," he said and turned away.

"Wait, how do you not know?" I asked, frowning a little. "Don't you work here?"

There wasn't another reason why someone would stand behind the Sundries counter.

The man groaned. "Look, I just woke up after a long night's inventory. If you'd just..."

Then his expression shifted, and he surreptitiously waved his hand.

Without another word, he hurried and walked off into a side room as I just stood there, and tried to understand what he wanted me to do.

"Follow," he said, motioning for me to join him near the door. "Meet me out front."

The young man pushed past me and walked out into the front yard where the blacksmiths were busy hammering and toiling away.

I followed and found him standing in a corner behind a bellows.

“Look, I can give you this piece for ten gold if you want,” he said, holding out a worn-looking quiver.

Despite its obvious wear, the leather hadn't broken or torn anywhere, and the strap looked intact. It looked much more expensive than what he was asking for.

This was a valuable item, and I knew what was going on.

He was willing to sell it to me outside of the store, in order to get a larger cut.

“What—oh, I see,” I whispered. “You found it last night and it was nowhere on the list, huh?”

He smiled, flashing his rather perfect teeth. “If you don't tell anyone, I won't either. Come on, do you want it?”

I eyed it again, but couldn't tell what kind of quiver it was.

The item was valuable, but I wasn't going to blunder into something that I didn't know.

“Can I inspect it? I have no idea what I'm even trying to buy.”

He shook his head and sent me a trade offer. That would at least show me what it was called.

Quiver of Poison.

Well, that was pretty obvious. Between the name and the green color, it only made sense and struck me as a good deal. It was only ten gold coins, and even an ordinary empty quiver without any special properties would cost half that if I wanted it to last longer than a single dungeon run.

I accepted the trade and paid the ten gold. The familiar item message appeared before me.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Quiver of Poison, RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: Adds a poison debuff up to 50 stashed arrows at a time. The arrows need to be inside the quiver.

REQUIREMENT: 30 Stamina, 20 Agility

BONUS STATS: +3 Stamina, +5 Agility

NOTE: It takes 60 seconds for any type of arrow in the quiver to be imbued with the debuff

The young man had balls of steel to sell something like it in the sundries without reporting such a find. It was a really nice quiver that even added eight total stat points, which made it a much better option than the regenerating arrow quiver I'd been considering earlier.

If anyone found out, he'd be in a ton of trouble. Fortunately, I was in the clear both by their standard and the System's. If anything happened, I could show the trade logs to prove I hadn't stolen it.

"Thanks," I said and looked up at the young man, but he was gone.

I looked around and stepped out toward the middle of the walkway, but I couldn't find him. He probably wanted to get back to the store as soon as possible, so nobody would notice him missing.

Still, the sudden stealth was very unusual. "*What just happened?*" I asked, "*Did you notice anything?*"

"*I wasn't looking,*" Chester replied. It seemed like he wasn't doing a good job of passively keeping guard today. If I had to guess, he was just unused to the city.

"*We need to buy arrows and find the Duke,*" Chester chirped. "*Maybe I can eat him.*"

I didn't humor that with a response and instead walked back inside.

To my surprise, the man in blond wasn't behind any of the stalls anymore, which only added further to my suspicions.

Maybe he wasn't an employee at all?

He was probably a seasoned thief, as he'd sold the item to me without much nervousness, but maybe he was also using a skill.

It took a lot of willpower not to ask about the young man and show the quiver to some of the other clerks, but a trade was a trade, and I'd paid the man fairly.

"Excuse me, can anyone sell me some arrows?" I called out.

A man with a long beard bustled over to me, and soon, I'd completed my first non-sketchy trade of the day.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Basic Arrow 1, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: None

BONUS STATS: None

The notification continued popping up as more and more entered my inventory, but I quickly dismissed them. That was one negative of buying mass items like the arrows, but I'd rather take the notification spam than get caught without enough ammunition.

A few gold coins lighter and 250 arrows heavier, I had the System set to replenish the quiver automatically. It wasn't as handy as a quiver that could generate arrows on its own, but it was still much better than fumbling around.

I would still have to notch the arrows myself, but they would transfer from my inventory into the quiver after it was empty.

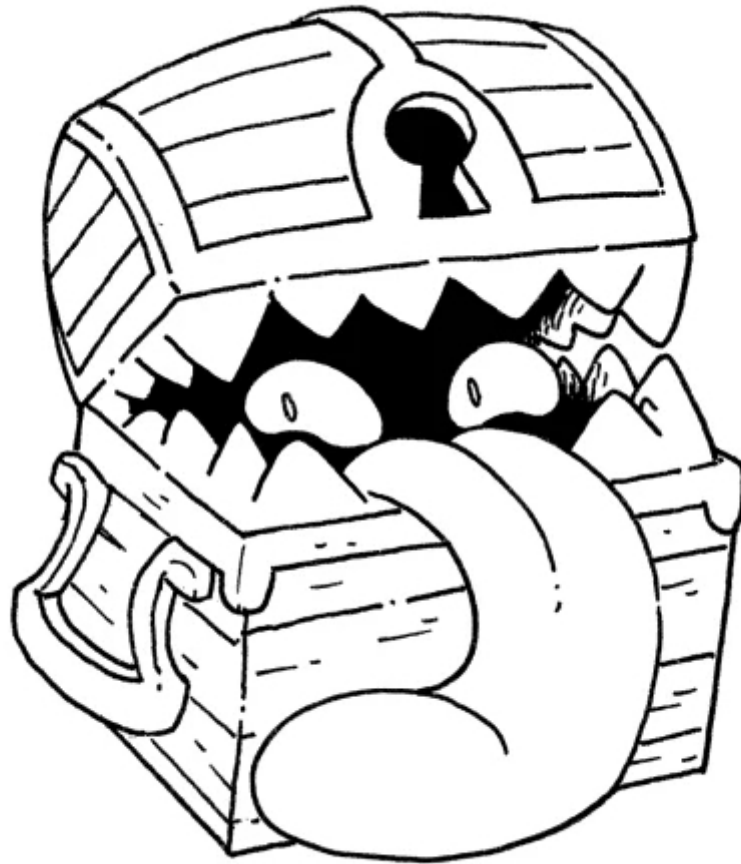
A timer notification flashed before me, counting down from one minute as my new quiver infused the arrows with poison, then it disappeared into my periphery.

Then I left the building.

The sundries sold many other items like tents, camping gear, fire starters, repair kits, potions, and even pots and pans for outdoor cooking, but I didn't need any of those things.

All I had to do was find the Duke in just over half an hour, and see if he'd hire me as a scout.

It did make me a bit nervous, but I'd always believed that everything happened for a reason. Maybe it was fate for me to run into him in the sundries store. If nothing else, I could at least find out if he'd sensed us the night before.



CHAPTER 16: UNEXPECTED HELP

The Duke's words spread far, as was expected for a man of his stature.

About fifteen scouts aside from me had gathered around the fountain near the quest board.

I had some serious competition.

Some were in their second rebirth stage, and others were already in their third. I could tell just from the essence flowing off their bodies. These people were much more powerful than most adventurers in Eslant, including even the nobility.

"What is this?" Chester asked. "I thought you said scout weak. Was it just you?"

“Damn nobles,” I grumbled.

Higher-ranking scout classes were rare here but not unheard of.

It usually meant that they had experience working in a constructed party, giving them a safer way to earn experience without participating in the battle. I’d never been lucky enough to find a party like that, but a group that valued their scout would allow them to quickly level up and gain the strength to battle in their own right.

Of course, it usually took connections—particularly blood relations—to find a party like that.

I was at the lowest overall level of everyone present, but that didn’t stop me from attending.

I could fight too, but it was in a very unique and horrifyingly disgusting way. Chester and the diverse array of skills he’d given me added a serious edge...so long as nobody saw me.

But despite my confidence that I could push through even normal-difficulty dungeons, I held back and stayed away from the others. I would rather observe them from afar than talk directly, especially because I recognized some of the faces.

They had always been a step ahead of me, and there was quite some animosity between some in the crowd.

Many of them were eyeing each other aggressively, and some had even pulled out their weapons. Though they wouldn’t attack each other—violence within the walls of Eslant was punishable by death—they were more than willing to show off.

Some of them even began casting spells, comparing their powers and levels.

To me, it looked stupid as hell.

Your best skills and items were wild cards—you were supposed to keep them hidden to catch opponents off guard.

Still, I could somewhat understand it. Just like the rankings board, there was a lot of competition to get the best jobs, and I'd been pushed aside by stronger scouts before.

And it wasn't just me; we were all competition as no party needed more than one competent scout. Some weaker or less experienced scouts banded together, trying to find strength in numbers, but none of them were good enough to answer a summons by the Duke.

Still, the large number of competitors made me curious.

Was the Duke only going to pick one scout and then send the rest of them away?

I found a man whose face I vaguely recognized. I couldn't quite remember his name, but I'd seen him around the Adventurer's Guild before.

He had long shaggy black hair and a cut across his cheek. Like me, he was just on his first rebirth level, based on the essence in his body and the fact that I'd competed against him for jobs before.

"Hey," I said. "Do you know how many scouts the Duke is taking with him?"

The man's eyes briefly widened. He recognized me, but like me, he probably didn't remember my name. As a lower-level scout, it was way smarter to focus on managing your clients than keeping an eye on your competition.

He grimaced, causing the scar on his face to wrinkle. "Just one. I'll be lucky to get it. I just want to see what kind of quests he ends up going for."

Just one, huh?

"And do you know how he is going to decide?"

The scarred man shrugged. "No, I only know as much as everyone else here does—but maybe he'll make us fight each other."

I took another look at the other scouts, then glanced at Chester.

“What do you think? Could we beat these guys?”

“Maybe if I eat them.”

The mimic was already drooling, and his tongue practically drooped down to my leg. It felt like his tongue was getting longer and longer the more he looked at the other scouts.

If we stayed here any longer, it'd go all the way down to the floor.

“Nom noms! Nom noms! Nom noms!” Chester cheered, his eyes bulging wider and wider.

Yeah, this was too dangerous.

I thought back to the Duke's wink.

The man was just playing a joke, or he had an eye on me.

Having the attention of a noble was a double-edged sword, just like how I'd grown stronger thanks to Baron Alfonse's mercy.

But if I used Chester in a fight—or if Chester was somehow exposed—that attention would definitely turn sour, and looking at the obvious greed in his eyes, I might not be able to control him.

“How about this?” the mimic proposed. *“We turn into the Duke's carriage with [Mimicry]. Then, when people step in, MUNCH! Perfect crime!”*

“Are you an idiot? Everyone will know it was us...”

“How!” Chester protested.

“Because normal humans don't just turn into carriages, asshole! We're going somewhere else.”

“Nom noms! My nom noms!” Chester pouted.

“Shut up. We have nom-noms at home—and in my storage bracelet. I'll feed you when we get out of the city. What do you think about sausage?”

“Sausage?” Chester asked curiously.

“Don’t worry. You’ll love it. Now let’s get over to the quest board.”

The mission from the Duke was just too risky and too public, and Chester’s truly stupid idea had only convinced me further. Until I built up my power higher, it would be best to operate as an ordinary adventurer and keep a low profile.

I walked over to the quest board, a special charmed tablet created by the Adventurer’s Guild, using magic in coordination with the System.

Anyone was allowed to post quests on the board, along with an associated payment of goods, services, or money. The System itself often added an additional payment as well, like leveling or skill essence.

There were usually all kinds of quests available, but they were actually always quite difficult.

The quest board had three different categories, just like with the dungeons: easy, normal, and hard.

Easy was mostly tailored toward second-rebirth adventurers, normal toward both second and third rebirthers, while only late third and fourth-rebirth adventurers would take on hard quests. Hard quests were a sure way to get you killed unless you had the bite to back up your bark.

Quests were much more difficult than ordinary dungeon missions. They came with a price, so people usually didn’t use the quest board unless they were either insanely rich or if they couldn’t accomplish the job for themselves.

Other quests were just created directly by the System—I had no idea if it charged itself or not, but that might have been possible as everyone said it was a real stickler for the rules.

The quest board was also where authorized people put down prices on people’s heads like the bounty Baron Alfonse had on me after Aldon went missing.

At my current stage, even with Chester’s help, I was as far from normal and hard difficulties as they got.

A sane first rebirth adventurer wouldn't even bother trying to do the easy-tier quest at all. They would stay near the city and kill the weaker monsters that occasionally appeared.

Easy quests included killing powerful monsters for crafting materials or delivering messages and packages between faraway places.

Scouts generally avoided doing any kind of hunting quest.

We couldn't fight large groups of monsters, and anything tougher than us was already too hard to beat. Usually...

Now that I had Chester, that was a very different story. The easy-level quests were actually doable. Maybe that was how I could quickly level and get ahead of my competitors. I definitely had power higher than my rebirth stage, I'd seen that much from the rankings board.

I was liking this idea more and more. It was probably a better bet than going with the Duke.

This would help me reach my second rebirth faster. By then I'd be stronger and would have a new main class, extra stats, and possibly several new class skills.

Even better, I could potentially accept five or even ten hunting quests, since I had a storage item to store up all the monster parts. While I was at it, I could also farm up leveling essence and strength against weaker monsters.

Maybe that'd also get Chester happy.

He'd mentioned liking monster meat.

I glanced over at the mimic, who was still staring longingly at the group of scouts. His eyes had glazed over, and green drool was just dripping from his mouth.

Yep.

We *definitely* weren't joining them.

With a new course in mind, I nodded to myself and opened the easy quest section.

There were over two hundred of them, which meant I could pick and choose strategically. Still, the number made me curse under my breath. There were too many of them to just decide on what next.

“What are you doing?” Chester asked, squinting at the board. *“Which are we going to pick? Let’s find one with warm monster meat!”*

I glanced at him, bemused.

The mimic could read?

Hell, that made him better educated than most people living in Eslant. There were plenty of people around who couldn’t read, especially if they didn’t have access to the Adventurer’s Guild and their tablets. I sometimes wondered how illiterate people read System notifications, but apparently there were other ways to transmit information into people’s minds.

The mimic reached over with a tendril, and I slapped it away.

“Stop!”

We were one now, so maybe Chester could accept quests on my behalf. That sounded like a great way to get into a shitload of trouble.

“You want to do something harder?” Chester asked.

“No, not that. I’m going to group my quests together so they’re all nearby. Or I’ll try to find a string of quests involving the same kind of monster, so I can get more ingredients from them. There are so many quests that we can optimize.”

“Oh, okay. Smart, I guess.”

Having earned the mimic’s exceedingly begrudging respect, I bit back a retort and refocused back on the board and its options.

There was a way to sort quests by monsters, region, required monster parts, or quest type.

I decided to start with the various hunting quests first, as it was the best way to fill all my goals at once.

Eslant was fairly safe as far as monsters went, so the closest real monster herds were four to five hours out.

Then if I traveled another five to six hours, I'd be able to participate in the closest minor monster surges when they happened.

Minor monster surges were a daily occurrence unless the spawns were destroyed, then it took up to 30 days to reconstruct themselves.

Keeping them in check was exactly why Eslant nobles had built a small forward base half a day's ride north. It was exclusively meant for adventurers and not non-combatants.

If accepting a bunch of quests and grinding them didn't help me grow fast enough, I'd have to consider relocating to the forward base and start living an even more frugal life.

Then again, I had the tent I'd received from Aldon's ring. If it was anything as I'd already seen from other somewhat wealthy parties, I'd be just fine.

I let the quest board sort through the hunting quests by body parts and ingredients.

An interesting creature popped up with a total of six quests linked to it: a kekuri. It was near the top of the easy list, which made it a perfect target for someone like me.

I'd heard that name a few times before, but I'd never battled one, so I opened one of the quests for more information.

An image of the monster popped up, and I shook my head.

“Fucking hell. This thing is disgusting!”

Then I glanced at my shoulder.

I guessed I couldn't complain too much. If I was being honest, I was pretty fucking disgusting too, as a half-mimic half-man.

Kekuri were green-gray monsters that resembled a mixture between a rat and a goblin. The creatures had strong limbs and thickly matted fur that looked very capable of absorbing weaker blows, and their main weapon appeared to be two rows of sharp teeth and clawed front limbs.

[QUEST ACCEPTED: Kill a Kekuri]

[DESCRIPTION: Kill any type of kekuri to cull the herd.]

[PROGRESS: 0/50]

[REWARD: 3 Gold]

[QUEST ACCEPTED: Kekuri Heart]

[DESCRIPTION: Gather Kekuri hearts and deliver them to the Adventurer Guild for a reward.]

[PROGRESS: 0/10]

[REWARD: 5 Gold]

[QUEST ACCEPTED: Kekuri Eyeball]

[DESCRIPTION: Gather Kekuri eyeballs and deliver them to the Adventurer Guild for a reward.]

[PROGRESS: 0/30]

[REWARD: 4 Gold]

[QUEST ACCEPTED: Kekuri Fur]

[DESCRIPTION: Gather Kekuri furs and deliver them to the Adventurer Guild for a reward.]

[PROGRESS: 0/20]

[REWARD: 5 Gold]

[QUEST ACCEPTED: Kekuri Head]

[DESCRIPTION: Gather Kekuri heads and deliver them to the Adventurer Guild for a reward.]

[PROGRESS: 0/15]

[REWARD: 7 Gold]

I quickly went through the quest list, hitting each of them in turn with my finger.

All of these kekuri quests were perfect for my purposes. They were pretty close to Eslant in comparison to the other monsters on the list. And besides, I wanted to be back for dinner if I had the chance so staying nearby was the name of the game.

Not wasting another moment, I closed the board menu.

Out of curiosity, I turned around, wondering who the Duke had chosen, but all the scouts were still mulling about, and he was nowhere to be seen.

That only cemented my decision to do this on my own.

Overall, nobles rarely respected the time of anyone but themselves and their kin, which was why taking jobs from them could be inconvenient, even if they weren't trying to kill you for discovering their slave.

The Duke himself had a quite fearsome reputation as an adventurer, but looking at the many irritated adventurers, it seemed like he was just like the rest of them.

I hurried to leave the square and moved through the winding streets, making my way toward the Northern gate.

A short while later, I came to the road leading me past the Sherazad family manor. The road ran past their estate's border wall.

I looked up, scowling.

"Long ears inside?" Chester asked.

"Yeah. Fuck this place."

Even just walking past their enormous estate felt wrong.

Still, it was the only way out of Eslant unless I wanted to waste another hour and walk back to the Eastern or Western

gates, and then make my way North.

No, I didn't feel like doing that at all.

I re-cast [Light Step] and walked at a steady pace, moving past the blocks of civilian homes, buildings, stores, bakeries, and even a nightclub.

The Midnight Bounties.

I'd had a bad experience there a few months ago, and besides, the name reminded me of the party of four that'd caught me in the dungeon...

My thoughts started to move in a direction I didn't appreciate right then, so I forced myself to think about something else.

Or rather, *someone* else.

Melina.

Would I see her outside if I dared a glimpse?

Thinking back to the dungeon, she'd felt genuine hope seeing me and Chester sneaking in. It'd be nice to give her some hope again.

Lost in thought, I made good progress, but Chester shook me from my reverie when I was close to the Northern exit.

"Two groups of parties following us. Those from yesterday, and one more of three nom-noms. That all I can see."

That he could see, huh?

It would take a a very strong cloaking skill to slip past Chester, but I wasn't going to disregard that possibility.

"What should we do?"

I had no idea why that group was following me. My mind jumped to the worst, like someone else wanting me dead, but since I'd fooled Alfonse, who could it be?

"I don't think they'll attack me inside the city, Chester. Even if this is their territory, they can't go around and attack"

people.”

“*Why not?*” Chester asked.

I supposed that mimics didn’t know much about laws. They were basically full-time fraudsters.

“If by chance they have received a contract on me, killing in city limits without a very good reason is punishable by execution. They kill me, the law kills them. That’s how it works.”

“Okay. But what about what we did yesterday? Is it okay to kill nobles? It doesn’t seem okay,” he smirked and then smacked his lips. *“I can tell, trust me.”*

“Obviously not, which is why we need to keep an eye on those people I got even more reason to make you work for your pie.”

“What? Am I already not doing enough? I told you in first place!”

The mimic started going on a long tirade.

“Yeah, yeah. Chester do this and then do that. Eat a bone skeleton without any shred of meat. What am I? Your slave?”

I rolled my eyes and ignored him, but still smiled to myself. Annoying attitude or not, the mimic was a blessing in many ways.

I kept up my pace and soon arrived at the edge of the Sherazad territory. Neither Chester nor I caught a single glimpse of Melina. Was she stuck in some dungeon somewhere? Or was she just deep in their territory?

The wall kept most of its secrets very well hidden, but not for a lack of trying from people like me.

It took me several minutes to pass the edge of the Sherazad wall, and I soon found myself in front of a rather large crowd.

They were adventurers going by their looks, but some regular workers also pulled enchanted orbs along with large

carts, filled with various goods.

It was an odd look—almost like a mixture of adventurers and merchants.

I assumed they either had no storage jewelry, or they were going to be hunting monsters that wouldn't fit inside their storage items. Judging by their appearance and the reasonable quality of gear, I would say it was the latter.

I pushed past them, greeting the guards, and then hit the road after they didn't even bother responding. Like the guards with the Adventurer's Guild, the city guards tried to be the strong but silent type.

The Northern area was just as clear of trees and obstacles as the Southern had been.

It was a tactical decision so guards could see people or monsters approaching from far away.

The road was wide and in much better shape than the one I'd traveled yesterday. There were no ruts or larger wear and tear in the cobblestones, which told me that the noble families were probably the ones making sure the road was in top shape. Yesterday, we'd entered through the poorer part of town, but today we were exiting straight from the noble enclave.

"They're still following us," Chester said, *"And they don't seem as interested in hiding. The smaller group is catching up much quicker than before."*

Two groups...

Not only that, I *still* didn't know why they wanted to follow me.

I'd known that leaving the town was dangerous.

However, walking past the Sherazad estate told me that there was something more important than my own safety.

Unfortunately, while violence was forbidden inside Eslant, it was very difficult to enforce laws in the wilderness.

There wasn't much I could do at this point, other than find a good place to turn and fight.

I also didn't have anywhere to hide as no group would take in a straggler and keep him safe, not when seven adventurers were hunting for me.

For now, I kept walking.

My buff more than doubled my walking speed, which should be enough to stay ahead unless they started running and used buffs of their own.

I made notes of the surrounding terrain if I needed it later, but there wasn't much to see, casting my buffs in the meanwhile so I was ready, just in case.

"What is your plan?" Chester asked. *"We can't just keep running. They will catch us!"*

"Go into the forest, and then use [Mimicry] to turn into a tree."

The mimic was silent for a long time.

Then he begrudgingly replied. *"Okay. Smart."*

The problem was, the forest was still a long way off, and there weren't really any trees around either.

To the right ran the river at least another mile, and all I could see to the side of the road was just grass. It was short and cut thin, with no place for me to duck down and hide.

"Chester," I asked. *"What happens if I shrink down to a blade of grass? Will it work?"*

"Shrinking hard. Not enough skill."

"Okay, what about a patch of grass?"

"Better hope they don't step on you. Then, splat."

Alright, so that wouldn't work either then...

I would have to keep walking until I hit my goal, or maybe find some other way to distract them.

Ahead of us was a forest, and far beyond that, a mountain range peeked past the tree tops.

I made to look as if I was sightseeing, stopping and staring out over the river, then toward the forest. I wanted to seem like an ordinary person going for a walk, not the specific person they were looking for.

I didn't know why the other party was following us, but the group from the dungeon was a problem since they could provide some hints and details that contradicted the story I told Baron Alfonse.

The less of a guilty conscience I showed, the better.

If they were stupid enough to fall for that behavior, I'd be sorely disappointed, however, I was just trying to get some time while I inched closer toward the forest edge.

A loud, earsplitting noise drew my attention over to the river where I noticed someone sitting on a large piece of rock while twirling a long black spear.

It was a man, probably a year or two older than me from what I could see.

He had dirty blonde hair that was just long enough to cover his forehead and one of his eyes.

He wore dark gray armor, so dark it was almost black.

Intricate silvery swirls and lines were painted across the breastplate, gauntlets, greaves, and his boots. A blood-red cape with golden embroidery hung off his back and fluttered gently with the wind.

When our eyes met, he jammed his fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly again, the noise another earsplitting shriek.

I didn't know what he wanted, but I started moving toward him. There was something about his appearance that suggested respect and honesty.

It wouldn't hurt to get some help, or at least an eyewitness. He jumped off the rock and landed without breaking his stride.

"What's with him?" I wondered.

“I have no idea, but those items look tasty. Look how they shimmer in the light...and he...is strong. You could probably get some great stats and skills from him,” Chester replied.

The young man held a long black spear with one hand and then pointed the shimmering silver spearhead right at me.

It was almost as tall as he was and as thick as his forearm.

“He looks dangerous,” I said, muttering the words and speaking half more to myself than Chester.

“More dangerous than the parties following you?” the mimic asked.

“Yeah, I think so. But there’s a difference. He might not be dangerous to me personally.”

I inclined my head in greeting and offered him a smile as we passed each other.

“Good day, adventurer,” I said, raising my voice a little bit.

I wanted to make sure the people following me knew there was a witness.

He nodded, muttering something I didn’t catch while staring past me.

His eyes briefly narrowed, and then we walked past each other.

“Hey!” the man called.

He laughed loudly, then quickly caught up to me.

I didn’t sense any hostility coming from him as he caught my arm and stopped in front of me, his arms spread wide.

“There you are!” he said, loud enough for anyone nearby to hear him. “I’ve been waiting for an hour!”

He pulled me in an awkward hug.

I frowned, confused. “What are—”

“You’re being followed, you fool. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Thanks, but I know—”

The man cut me off, an eager smile splitting his face. He had a wide grin and a strident voice. He spoke very quickly, almost like his body was bursting with energy.

“Good, good, but I just got a great idea. Let me in on the fight. I need to blow off some steam,” he said, his eyes glinting. It was a strange look. Before, I’d taken him as bright-eyed and excited, the sort of adventurer who loved a fun brawl. That was still there, but I could sense something different beneath, something as cold as steel. “Shall we?” he added, raising his voice again.

Several other adventurers and passersby looked our way, but they didn’t seem to think much of it.

Scenes like this where two long-lost adventuring buddies reunited were pretty commonplace, but I had to admit it looked pretty weird for an obviously higher-stage adventurer to be hugging someone in a dark hooded cloak.

“They’ve been following me for the last half an hour,” I replied softly, so only he could hear me. “I was planning to fight them up ahead in the woods. Thought I could split them up, get an advantage.”

He put his hand on my back and pushed me along, a surprised look on his face.

“A scout, and a first stage rebirther at that, wants to fight two parties by himself?”

I shrugged, pulling away from his hand.

“You’re being...awkward,” I said, my eyes narrowing a little in surprise. Before, I’d only wanted this man to scare off some of the party, but now he was being a little too intrusive. “How can you see my stage so easily, and why would you want to ask for trouble?”

“Kristan is the name, new friend. And I’m going to butt in, like it or not.”

He flashed me a grin that seemed pretty honest.

“Damon,” I replied politely. Since we’d just met, and he seemed powerful, I used the usual cheerful tone whenever I led noble parties. “And yes, I’m a scout, but I’m far stronger than you probably think. Still, if you’re really intent on getting blood on your gear, then I won’t try and stop you.”

“Good, good! That’s what I like to hear!” Then the man frowned, a little thoughtfully. “Now, why don’t you tell me why they’re after you? Just curious, is all. Or not...well, I want to know if I’m helping the good or the bad guy,” he said clumsily, almost stumbling over his words.

I thought for a moment, unsure of what to say.

“Just be honest. Best case, he stays, worst case, he leaves,” Chester said through our link.

He was very right.

Who knew that mimics had social skills?

“Yesterday there was a bounty on me. More like a misunderstanding, but it’s already been called off. Some people might have taken it a tad too seriously?”

“Ah, a bounty, huh?” he said. “Makes sense.”

The man answered without thinking much.

It was pretty clear that he was mostly looking to get into a fight and “blow off some steam” like he said, without much interest in the cause or reason.

That was good though, just how I liked it.

Eager to fight, and not that nosy about my personal life. For now, he was the perfect partner.

He eyed my gear, and it was only then I remembered I hadn’t re-equipped my breastplate. Before, I would have done it after getting into the forest, but now that I had a partner in this fight, I wanted him to have some amount of confidence in me.

I did so and found his lips curling upward.

“Alright, you’re not that bad. A Gigas Plate, that’s good. Sure, weird for a scout, but it’s a great piece of beginner

armor.”

Beginner? Wait until you see the rest.

We arrived at the edge of the forest by then, but neither of us looked back.

There were still many adventurers walking up and down the road, making their way to the forward base or back to Eslant. I didn't know what would happen if the two parties did attack.

Would people stand by and watch me get killed, or would they help?

Kristan decided for me.

“I know of a shortcut!” he said and pointed off to the left, straight into the forest. The forest was pretty dense, with good cover, so I assumed that was why he moved off the road. “Don't worry, I got it all under control.”

He put his hand on my shoulder and steered me away.

I had to admit that confusion was starting to set in. I had no idea who he was, and other than his name and his acting nicely, I knew nothing about the spearman. Sure, I'd had a good initial impression when I first saw him, but that wasn't something I'd bet my life on.

As if reading my mind, he flashed me another smile.

“Don't worry, just stay calm. I really, really need to blow off some steam. That's all.”

I unequipped my bow and quiver, swapping back to my melee items.

He seemed to notice but didn't say anything, not even when the edge of my shield poked past my cloak and my sword touched the side of his leg.

If anyone was going to attack me, I'd make sure I was ready.

The final preparation was adding him to our party.

To my surprise, the party I'd created yesterday was still active, but Melina was no longer in the party—the Baron had probably made her remove herself, but it was still a helpful note that told me she was alright.

A party could only be dissolved automatically if all the founding members were dead. Otherwise, people had to manually dissolve it.

I remembered hearing about that in one of Rolo's many winding stories, and it definitely helped now. I could feel Chester's spirits lifting too as he parsed through my thoughts and realized what had happened.

“Accept,” I said, sending Kristan a mental party invitation. It only lasted a single second before his name and orb appeared in the upper right corner.

I placed my hand on his back and looked up at him, as he was slightly taller than me, and then cast [Sharpen Edge], [Critical Strike], and [Light Step].

His eyebrows rose and he finally seemed to be taking me seriously. Kristan even stopped and frowned as he eyed me from head to toe.

“Nice buffs,” he said.

“Of course,” I replied.

I used that moment to refresh my own speed buff as well but didn't need to recast the other two as they were both party buffs that empowered the whole party, Chester probably included.

Next up were [Barrier] and [Dome].

They went on cooldown for thirty seconds, and as the essence surrounded my body, Kristan just gaped at me.

“What...how...how many buffs do you have?”

Then he shook his head.

“Never mind that. They are coming,” Kristan growled.

I nodded, having spotted the two parties from the corner of my eye, but even if I hadn't, the snapping of twigs

beneath their feet gave them away.

The seven spread out into three smaller groups with the bald tank and his dual-wielding warrior friend coming straight toward us.

Meanwhile, his party's priest and scout veered off toward their left and our right.

The party of three stayed together. They had their own dual wielder, but that one looked like a rogue specialty class along with a priest, and a spellcaster.

I didn't care for their menacing appearances and placed my hand on Kristan's chest, casting my two protection buffs on him the moment they went off cooldown.

"Well, I'll be damned—and level four at that. So there was a reason for everything that happened," he muttered, never even looking away from me.

A reason?

What was he talking about?

I shot him a sideways glance.

"What—"

"Later. I can tell you over an ale or something," he said.

Then Kristan cleared his throat pointedly and turned to the tank. "His bounty has been canceled, so what you're doing is unlawful, and will be dealt with as such."

"But we haven't done anything, good sir," the young male priest from his party said, trying a play at words.

"And just so you don't get any ideas," Kristan said, swinging his spear in a circle and marking the ground, "If anyone sets foot in my private space, I will be forced to defend myself and my friend here. Is that clear?"

The all-smile and constant grinning expression he'd worn for the last ten minutes was now gone, and deadly anger had replaced it.

I didn't know what had caused his mood to shift, but now he was no longer interested in playing around or blowing off steam. Maybe it had something to do with all the buffs I showed him. Then the 'it makes sense' part made me question his motives.

A shift in his essence told me he was doing something, but I wasn't sure what. Then two messages popped up.

[BUFF: Critical Aura]

[DESCRIPTION: Negates all incoming critical attacks and raise critical hit chance by 200%.]

[DURATION: 10 minutes]

[BUFF: Hoodwink]

[DESCRIPTION: Increases all movement, action, and reaction time by 27%]

[DURATION: 10 minutes]

I was just as dumbstruck as he'd been.

However, this was different. In essence, it was a comparison of quality versus quantity.

He'd been surprised by my range of spells as someone wielding a sword and shield.

On the other hand, he only had two buffs, but they were extremely powerful.

The rarity spooked me a little. I knew for a fact that [Critical Aura] was of exotic rarity, and maybe [Hoodwink] was as well as I'd heard Rolo talk about the skills during one of his many stories.

"You were saying?" Kristan said.

Neither of the enemy parties moved first, instead, they stepped away as if unsure about what to do.

I eyed them, narrowing my eyes and carefully gauging their steps.

They had come with an intent to cause me harm, and now they'd been called out.

Would they fight, or would they lose face?

“Tell me, why do you want me dead?” I asked, trying to steer the conversation to something that might at least benefit me.

The two groups looked at each other uneasily, and then the leader of the party of three spoke.

“Simple,” the dual-wielding rogue replied. “You were part of the reason why Jesabel and Falin died. Their parents have put an... unofficial bounty on your head. And since we already worked for the Hrenwar family, we want to make sure we get it. It's too good to pass on to someone else.”

An unofficial bounty.

The news dramatically changed my understanding of the situation.

While bounties were a confusing aspect of the System and the message board, Eslant had been forced to accept them.

The System was basically as powerful as a god—it'd given humanity and the other species a wide range of powers and tools, with many ways to grow stronger.

If one of your gods said you could kill people, well, then you would try to modulate it to keep a functional society, but you wouldn't be able to outright deny it.

The Baron canceling my bounty was supposed to mean a clean slate for me, but Falin's parents wouldn't let that go.

The unofficial bounty was illegal in every sense of the word, without even the gray area of the System's approval. However, that also meant that these people would be willing to go far out of their way to kill me—far past the legal limits.

But it was the rogue's next words that caught me off guard.

He jerked his fingers to the party of four. “These people were already looking for you. We thought it'd be easier

than not to team up.

For a moment, my blood ran cold.

It was just like I'd suspected. The group was already looking for someone when they stumbled into the dungeon.

But before I could ask any more follow-up questions, Kristan suddenly spoke, his voice crude and taunting. "Sorry. What was your family called again?"

The scout suddenly turned to him, a surprised look on his face. "This doesn't concern you," he spat. "But it's the Hrenwar! Remember that!"

I turned, too, glancing at Kristan.

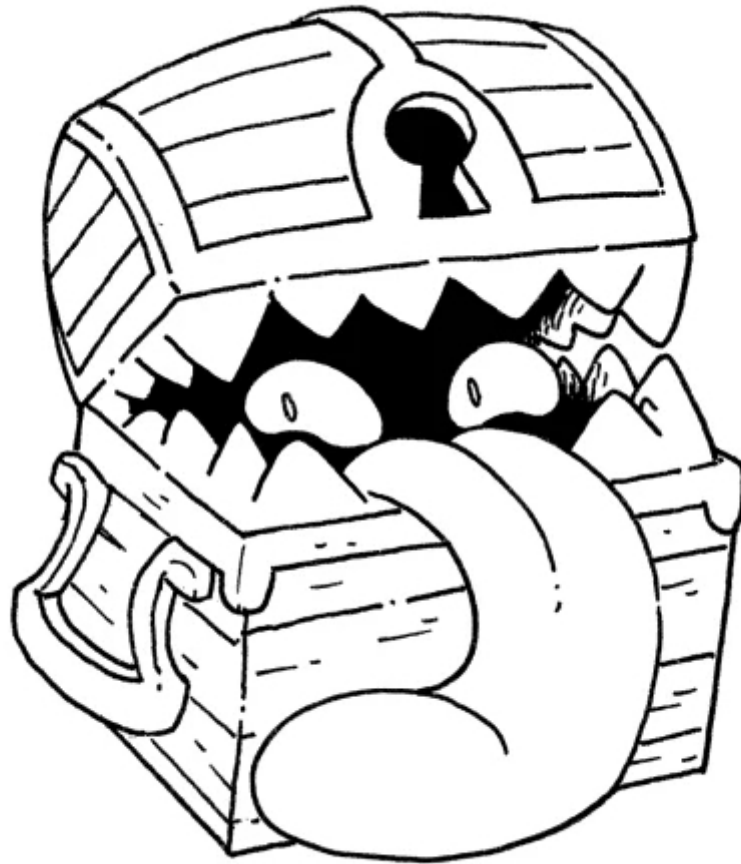
What was he playing at?

I thought he said he was testing them.

Then Kristan twirled his spear and jabbed it at me. "Yep! He killed them!"

I turned, utterly shocked. But Kristan didn't pay me any mind. He just kept on talknig. "He enjoyed it, too!" Kristan went on, as the rogue's face darkened. "So try and get him!"

Wait. What?



CHAPTER 17: BATTLE IN THE FOREST

The rogue moved first, his daggers flashing toward my face.

I had no idea what was happening, and why Kristan had deliberately provoked their wrath, but I didn't care right now.

My life was on the line, so it was time to fight.

A fireball exploded against my shield just before he made contact with me. I was surprised both by the sudden attack from his party member and by how well the shield absorbed the damage.

The spell rocked my body and sent me staggering backward, almost breaking the bones in my arm.

The female mage's spell had power, I had to give her that.

Then the rogue struck too. Two razor-sharp daggers pierced my armor, skin, and dug into my flesh.

The tips barely missed my collarbones as I hastily fell backward.

I tried to raise my shield but failed as incredible pain flared up inside me. I could see my blood spurting out.

[Heal] wouldn't be fast enough, so I used my one trump card, the skill I got after Chester ate Aldon.

I activated [Stalwart]. The skill healed all damage and made me invulnerable for nine whole seconds.

Blood suddenly spurted all over my face as the rogue's head exploded and a silvery spear tip flashed before me. It was covered in essence, which meant that Kristan had used a skill to kill the rogue in a single attack.

The rogue's body hit the ground, nothing more than a useless bag of flesh.

Kristan swung his spear in an arc and then stabbed out at the bald tank.

The tank let out a cry, then activated some kind of protection spell. Before long, everyone stepped into the fray.

Spells and skills activated on both sides, and they negated each other after a brief clash, but that was just the beginning.

Everything turned to mayhem, but I felt a surge of calm awareness flooding me.

Chester removed my fear, making sure I wouldn't panic and run, thus opening myself to back-attacks. Then the mimic's armor shifted into existence and covered me in mere seconds, giving me an added layer of protection.

I didn't feel any rise in stats.

The ooze surrounding my body was my mimic's, not my own. That probably meant the mimic's stats would count

toward absorbing the first attack that would inevitably hit me, and I would stay unharmed.

I turned toward the priest and mage. The male priest turned to run, leaving the female spellcaster to herself.

She turned around and cursed as I ran straight at her.

“No! Please don’t!” the woman cried, trying to block my attack with her staff.

Be it stupidity or my general chivalry toward women, I didn’t attack her and instead went for the running priest.

Unfortunately, he was faster.

He’d gotten out of my melee range in mere moments, but I had a solution.

I glanced over my shoulder and made sure the woman wasn’t targeting me, then I re-equipped my bow, quiver, and arrows, nocked one of the projectiles, and used [Snipe].

The telltale sound of the bowstring snapping resounded all around me, and a moment later the arrow struck the priest’s right shoulder. The force behind the blow sent him flying and slamming into a tree.

I quickly put the bow away and re-equipped my shield and blade combo, then turned to face the mage.

She was gone. In the several seconds it took me to hit the priest, she’d fled.

I glanced back and forth, trying to see if she was hiding in the woods, but then I heard a loud shout.

“Don’t mind her!” Kristan yelled. “Help me!”

Healing and protective spells rained down on the tank and dual-sword wielder as they danced around Kristan, attacking without any fear.

All the damage they took was quickly nullified.

The four adventurers seemed much more organized and adept than the three-man party. Then again, maybe it just looked like that as they had a single opponent.

The tank deflected Kristan's piercing attack and stepped back as the dual-wielder charged in, delivered a series of attacks, and pulled back out of the fight.

The two alternated beautifully, and had clearly been fighting for a while. But Kristan was obviously superior.

"Get him! Get the bounty!" the scout woman hissed and turned to me, nocked a rather large arrow, and released a barrage of oversized projectiles at me.

"Shit!" I cursed, putting my shield up and trying to make myself as small as possible.

Three of the arrows struck my shield, but they sent me staggering backward.

My shield was knocked aside and the last arrow hit me right in the chest, almost knocking me off my feet.

The female scout readied another attack as I cried out and dropped to my knees, catching myself. Our eyes met and I could swear she was grinning, but I was too far away to see clearly.

I threw myself to my right, using all the strength in my legs, and rolled behind a thick tree. The arrow dug into the bark a moment later, sending splinters flying in every direction.

I gambled and equipped my Sharot staff, ducked low, and then came out from behind the other side of the tree. A loud crack came from where Kristan was fighting the two melee-classed adventurers, and it was followed by a string of curses. I heard them mention his shield, so I guessed my new friend had punched through it.

Using the scout's moment of distraction as she looked away to see what was going on, I pointed the staff toward her and released my only attack spell, [Lightning Bolt].

Essence gathered at the tip of the Sharot staff, which I'd gotten from Jesabel.

The staff crackled for a moment, amplifying my magic prowess, before a lightning bolt dropped from the sky, hitting

the woman right in the skull. She shook violently, tiny sparks flying off her body and splashing off into the young male priest, who started screaming too.

A shimmering dome sprang to life around the two, and a wave of healing magic enveloped the scout, but it wasn't enough.

She still shook and then convulsed, falling unconscious. "Enough!" the tank yelled, lunging back and putting away his sword and shield. "Kill me if you will, but there's no need to—"

The words died in his mouth as the spear passed through his armor and came out the other side.

A wave of essence exploded outward and sent the priest sprawling.

My eyes widened, and I stared at Kristan.

The tank had disarmed himself.

Yes, the other group had attacked us first, and they probably would have remorselessly killed me if Kristan hadn't stepped in. But still, seeing someone puncture a defenseless opponent was a shock.

"You fucker!" the dual wielder cried, raising his swords and enveloping them in essence.

A skill was building up, I could see as much, but Kristan didn't seem to care. He just smirked and pulled his spear back, bringing it up in defense.

Judging from the other side's furious eyes, they were more than willing to kill me too. I didn't have time to think about what'd happened and I immediately jerked back toward the fight to the death.

With my attack spell on cooldown, I re-equipped my bow and nocked another arrow.

My fingers were unfamiliar with the bow, and they fumbled.

It took me a whole four seconds, which was at least three seconds too long. Still, I managed to activate [Snipe] and the projectile flew straight at the dual-wielder—that was just the advantage of being long-ranged.

To my surprise, one of his blades came down seemingly on its own and cut through the arrow.

If it hadn't been a skill, I would have expected it to end there, but it was an essence-reinforced shot, meaning it was more powerful.

Thanks to [Snipe], the dual-wielder's sword was luckily knocked back as it met the arrow, and it dropped to the ground.

Kristan's spear glowed with essence and the tip extended a good two feet. With a slight jerk forward, he jabbed the long weapon into the dual-wielder's shoulder. The bladed tip punched right through the leather shoulder pad, ripping his arm clean off.

The scout cried out as she got to her feet, then nocked an arrow, aiming it at Kristan.

A hail of arrows jumped to life and flew at him. After taking my lightning magic, the woman looked as if she was barely standing upright, but her face was twisted in a demented snarl of anger.

The arrows slammed into his armor, bouncing off and falling to the ground, all but the one that deflected off his arm and pierced his cheek.

Kristan's expression shifted from anger to excitement. He grabbed the arrow with both hands and broke the shaft, pulled the remainder free from inside his mouth, and then turned on her.

“Please, stop, in the name of the gods! We will pay you, just let us live!” the priest pleaded, but Kristan shook his head and stepped slowly toward him, a feral grin painted across his bloodied face. At that moment, he looked totally manic. It might have just been my eyes, but the blood on his

face looked like it was glowing somehow, like magical tattoos of some sort.

“I like him,” Chester chuckled. *“He’s just like me!”*

“A mimic?”

“No, you fool! He’s a predator! A strong one!”

I could see that, and since these people were stalking me, I understood it too. I just wanted to be left on my own after all, and these people had tried killing me.

The problem was that even more people would come for revenge.

Just like how I’d fallen into deep shit for killing Falin and Jesabel, massacring these two parties might just lead to further problems down the line, and after seeing Kristan now, I wasn’t sure I wanted to fight by his side for much longer.

It was almost like he had a split personality. One was super nice, but the other was utterly psychotic.

I glanced at the begging and defeated man, then turned to Kristan. “Kristan! He’s a noble. Are you sure we should—”

It was like he didn’t even hear me.

His spear flashed through the air and then a wet, sloshing sound filled my ears. The back of the young priest’s head exploded as the spear tip punched through, showering the scout in gore.

Pressure built in my head as Chester started laughing and screaming in joy.

I couldn’t quite make out the gist of it, but it was obvious that the mimic would have *much* preferred bonding with Kristan instead.

Hell, I probably would have preferred that too.

“That’s too bad because you’re stuck with me,” Chester snickered. *“You forget what I am, human, and I’m getting hungry. Part of my mass storage has already dried up so there’s room for a single body. What stats do you want?”*

I didn't have time to think about that right now.

I stared at the decapitated corpses all around us and winced, feeling sick to my core.

Fucking hell. This bloody scene made me sick to my stomach, as I hadn't ever fought against so many humans before. Not only that, Kristan had executed most of the opponents after disarming them.

This wasn't even remotely like what I'd done inside the dungeon. Sure, I'd eaten Aldon and his friends, but I'd fought for my life. Until the bitter end, all of them had tried to kill me.

These people had actually quit fighting, and I wanted no part in needless killing. It was one thing to defend myself, but humiliating them like that was too much.

"No killing is needless!" Chester protested.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," a voice said, startling me before I could respond to the mimic.

I looked up at Kristan and took a step back. I hadn't realized that he was speaking, but now his eyes bore into me.

He watched me with that manic smile of his from earlier. Since I knew what he was capable of, I couldn't help but shudder.

"I'm sorry, what were you—"

"Kill her. She shot you, didn't she? So kill her. Go on."

I looked at the young woman and my eyes went wide.

She lay on the ground with her legs cut off at the knees.

When had he...

"Don't look at me like that," Kristan said, his smile faltering. "I know what I am, Damon, but I also have a feeling of what *you* are. We're alike, so I...just recognized you for what you are."

That sounded suspicious.

“Chester, can he see you?” I asked.

“No, he’s full of shit, but he’s strange. A red power covers him, too, just like I cover you,” Chester laughed. *“I like him!”*

Red power?

What did that mean?

I stepped back, re-equipping my sword, scabbard, and shield.

My throat felt dry and drops of sweat formed on my forehead as I eyed him and then the two survivors.

The dual swordsman and the scout lay on the ground, both bleeding out but trying their best to stop the bleeding. They would be dead sooner rather than later, and yet Kristan still wanted me to kill them.

I licked my lips and gulped, unsure of what to do. Part of me knew that they wouldn’t have shown me any mercy, but this bloodshed was on a different level. Our enemies were totally defanged and pitiful, so it was hard not to feel mercy.

Not only that, they’d been shredded past the point of usefulness. I wanted to ask them who had come after me, but neither of the injured foes could even talk properly. Kristan had hurt them so badly that they were just whimpering, not speaking.

“Are you going to kill me, too?” I asked, not even realizing the words were rolling off my tongue.

“No, why would I? You’re an interesting one, and I think I like you. There’s an aura of death hovering around you, a stench that normal people can’t see or smell, but I can,” Kristan said calmly.

The enemy dual swordsman groaned in pain as he seemingly had cauterized the wound using a skill.

The stench of burnt flesh filled my nostrils, making it even harder to think rationally.

The swordsman gasped, pushing himself away from us with his one good arm. Then he looked to the scout and cried in shock.

That was the last thing he ever did, as Kristan cut cleanly through his neck.

The dual-blader's head dropped next to the body, an expression of horror eternally frozen on his face.

That left just the scout, who was still bleeding out. The red liquid poured from her severed thighs, and she didn't have much longer to live. She didn't even react to her teammate's death—her eyes were rolled up in their sockets, and she was probably in shock.

"I've seen it many times before, Damon," Kristan said and knelt next to the man.

He lifted the spear and wiped it off the dead man's pants, his whole body shaking angrily. "They would have killed you, or even worse, taken you back with them and had you tortured, healed, and then tortured some more. That's what my father used to do, and most of the time, I had to watch."

"So you are a nobleman's son?" I asked, eyeing him up and down. He didn't seem anything like any of the other noblemen I'd seen before.

There wasn't an ounce of softness to his body, and his eyes and expressions seemed much more suspicious and hardened than they had any right to be.

I looked him in the eyes and saw a pained expression buried deep within. Even though I'd just seen him cut through the party like they were nothing—and kill them after they surrendered—I felt a spark of pity.

Something horrible must have happened to have made him like this.

He shrugged.

"I wasn't always like this. Things happen to change when—never mind."

He shook his head hastily as if pushing away gnats.

I wasn't entirely sure how to reply to him, or how to even look him in the eyes. Based on what he'd told me, at least I managed to figure out he was either a discarded noble or maybe even a lone survivor of a destroyed family.

Neither of the two options could be very good for one's sanity. I knew first hand how crude and cruel the nobles were, but they were never so cruel to us as they were to other nobles who'd lost status.

I looked down at the scout, but she was already dead, having lost too much blood. Her chest had stopped rising and falling, and her eyes stared up at the sky with that disturbingly familiar lifeless expression.

"I'm going back to the river to clean up, alright? I see you have a storage bracelet, so loot whatever you want and then come see me. Maybe we could do this again if they send more people after you?"

His voice lilted hopefully at the end, and I could tell he was looking for a fight again.

Then Kristan bowed low and stashed the spear away into his storage item, walking off slowly and whistling a joyful tune. It was like he'd totally forgotten what had just happened mere seconds ago.

"Shit," I cursed. *"What just happened?"*

"I've just found a new friend for life, that's what happened," Chester laughed. *"Why couldn't I have merged with him? We would be unstoppable!"*

So he was still ranting on about that.

Asshole.

I slapped the chest that just sprouted from my shoulder and sat on the ground, carefully considering my options.

Kristan wanted to create a party with me, that much was clear.

Not only that, he was a capable fighter, and he had at least *some* noble connections. Plus, he'd already shown that he was the kind of person who'd mind his own business.

All of those were major plusses.

The only problem? He was crazy. He loved bloodshed more than anyone I'd ever met.

It reminded me of all the dirty jokes I'd heard about crazy tavern wenches.

Who knew that also applied to party members?

"What are you doing?" Chester yelled. *"Bring him back! Who cares what he's like. Kill enemies and helps us. Great!"*

I thought for a moment longer, then nodded.

Chester was right.

Watching this battle was a hard dose of reality. The road ahead of me was long, and that just went to show how good gear didn't necessarily make a good adventurer.

Even with Chester, I was a mere scout and a clumsy one at that. If this had been a real fight, I'd be dead several times over.

It was only because of him that I survived, and not just that, once the Hrenwar found out about the disappearance of their adventurers, they would probably send out even more people. On top of that, I still didn't know who'd hired the other party to come after me. I couldn't just set out on my own with so many enemies, both nobles and people lurking in the shadows.

"I might just need him," I whispered to Chester through our mental link. *"No, I definitely need him if I want to stay alive and free Melina one day."*

But then, a new thought—a very dark one—crossed my mind.

"I could try to eat—"

Chester immediately cut me off. *"Patience. I've lived for many years as a weak, basic mimic. You can live as a weak basic human for one or two years. There's no need to eat"*

someone who can become an ally one day...you and that man have more in common than you think."

I frowned and turned to stare at the stalky eyes.

"How are you so sure?" I asked.

"He's lost, I can see it. This isn't who he is..." The mimic trailed off for a long time, and I felt a strange emotion pouring into my brain—wistfulness.

Chester, for all his brashness and hunger, felt regret just like a human, and now that he'd decided to talk normally, he could communicate it clearly.

"Jesabel was lost too when I looked at her memories. I almost feel bad for eating her."

I frowned, combining Chester's words with what Kristan had said. I didn't know about Jesabel, but maybe this man wasn't so bad after all. Aside from being a murderhobo...

Lost? You think that—hmm, maybe you're right. Maybe he's searching for a good place to die. Or redemption. Then there's the stuff he mentioned about his father. Just who is he?"

"Ask him. I doubt he'll tell you shit, but you can always ask. Maybe he'll even help us. Tell him our story, he tells you his. Tell him you lost someone dear to a wicked noble and that you're trying to pay their debt. The worst thing he can do is leave."

I rubbed my temples and squeezed my eyes shut.

The sudden headache from earlier was gone now, and I had a lot to think about.

I glanced over at Kristan, who was probably in the water by now. I still wasn't sure what to do, but I was leaning toward going with him.

Still, I had other stuff to do—Kristan wanted me to loot the corpses, and I had another, much more unsavory, way to get stats.

The first thing I needed to decide and get over with was who to eat. Others would be here soon and if we weren't gone by then, we could be drawn into another battle if they saw anything untoward.

I brought my stats up and eyed them for a moment.

My agility could use some work. That was the main scout stat, after all.

Who would be the best fit?

I stared through the corpses, but then I suddenly jolted, realizing who I'd forgotten. I pushed back into the woods, searching for the priest from earlier, only to find him where I'd shot him.

He hadn't even gotten up and his body was contorted with an eternal expression of anguish on his face.

I couldn't tell how he'd exactly died without, well, asking him. Though that would be quite hard considering he was dead. Maybe the arrow had done the job, or the poison coating the arrow.

I stopped and did a quick mental damage calculation, trying to balance the different factors.

My initial agility was high enough to cause decent damage with arrows, since arrow damage was calculated based on agility. As a scout class, agility was my forte.

That meant that poison would be able to finish both people and monsters off. Well, unless we were dealing with something that had an enormous health pool.

Or the undead. They were mainly immune to poison.

The priest, despite being a class that should have been able to cleanse the debuff, hadn't managed to do so in time and thus died.

"Chester, should we eat him?" I asked. *"He was pretty fast."*

The mimic coiled out a tendril, touching the man briefly.

“Let’s check the scout woman,” he said. “She is better for agility. Besides, this man is poisoned. Smells nasty.”

“Then go ahead and eat her,” I said, pointing at the legless scout. I still felt a little bad about how Kristan had killed her, but it didn’t matter anymore. “Think you can do it stealthily?”

Chester’s boxy body turned into some kind of black, slimy ooze that slithered down my arm and leg, then made its way over to the dead scout.

The cut-off legs were first to go.

“Appetizer!” Chester exclaimed.

But without even waiting, he went straight onto her body.

A hissing and bubbling sound came from her corpse as he absorbed every drop of her.

Once the mimic finished, he pulled away and all that remained was blackened, molten soil as if someone had spilled a large bucket of acid over it.

“Talk about having a bad case of stomach acid,” I muttered, watching the scout’s remains. Everything was gone but the bones.

“I thought it a nice artistic touch for whoever comes searching for them. Maybe they will think they were hit by a poison spell.”

Artistic touch...yeah right.

[You have used ABSORB on: Miranda]

[Leveling Essence Received: 137%]

[Stats Received: 7 Agility, 3 Charisma]

[Symbiosis has risen by 2%]

[Skill Received: Multishot]

[Item Received: Storage Necklace]

SKILL WINDOW [10/10].

SKILL: Multishot (UC), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Release five arrows in quick succession, with each arrow dealing only base damage.

COOLDOWN: 40 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 37 Agility

My mouth opened wide as I read the skill description.

Release five arrows in quick succession...

That was what she'd initially done to me, launching those oversized arrows. I'd wondered how she'd done it so quickly, though I'd suspected some kind of skill.

What if those five arrows were all dipped in poison, would the poison debuff stack?

A sudden and very unwelcome chill ran up my body as Chester retracted. It was a strange feeling, as I felt both the warming stat bonus and the coldness of his wet body at the exact same time.

I had to be honest...seeing him eat people, even though I'd seen it a couple of times before, was equally gruesome. Even more so since he'd left an "artistic touch" behind. I swallowed the revulsion, shoving it aside.

"Did she have any decent items on her?" I asked.

"*A few,*" he said and spat them out.

A pair of gloves and a ring fell to the ground in front of me. They looked to be in a decent state.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Ring of Agility, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: None

BONUS STATS: +4 Agility

NAME: Hunting Gloves, RARITY: Uncommon

SPECIALTY: Receive a 5% bonus increase to obtain ingredients and monster parts when hunting.

REQUIREMENT: 10 Strength, 10 Stamina, 20 Agility

BONUS STATS: +5 Agility

The items weren't that good, but they were far better than what I had: two empty slots.

I equipped my new ring and gloves, then smiled.

Things would only continue looking up from here.

There were quite a few more items that needed looting, and from how they looked, I assumed at least some were magical.

I decided to start with the dual swordsman, then reached out and touched his corpse.

The System made it extremely easy when you wanted to loot a dead adventurer, offering up all items that weren't damaged or broken in a single trade. However, it made killing people a tricky business as you couldn't damage the gear you were looking to loot.

I didn't read through all the items, since there were so many.

Instead, I only checked if there were any of a higher rarity that would fit well with what I was trying to build toward.

The dual-sword guy's loot wasn't all that interesting as most of it was of uncommon rarity other than his studded leather boots and one of his swords, which were rare.

The boots added +8 stamina and +11 agility, with an added specialty that raised movement speed by 12%.

His rare sword added +24 strength and +19 stamina. Its specialty was a 13% chance to penetrate the target's defenses. Pretty good for a dual-wielder. The penetration could stack, giving the user a decent chance to ignore defense.

The Half-plate greaves, second sword, belt, two rings, and bracelet only added a handful of strength or stamina points each.

The tank dropped another rare item, his greaves, that raised +38 stamina and lowered -7 agility. I guessed it was a because of the weight. Items that lowered stats were relatively painful to equip, but they usually provided a significant upside. Since my plan was to balance out both being a tanky fighter and a scout, I'd have to make a careful decision on those.

The full-plate helmet and boots were of a similar type—they raised stamina at the expense of agility.

If I had to guess, most tanks weren't like Aldon, who could afford premium items that only improved his stats.

Even worse, these items were lower tier, so they raised significantly less stamina while lowering the same amount of agility.

I definitely didn't want to use the items, but could sell them for some profit. The rest of the items, a sword, two rings, and a bracelet, all raised stamina and strength, but not by much.

However, jewelry was easy to equip, so I'd consider them if I had any open slots. Although humans had ten fingers, not all could be used for rings. In general, the System varied the amount of jewelry we could equip depending on its power. Wearing a single all-powerful ring was usually worth more than wearing a few good ones or low-tier rings on all your fingers.

The first priest had dropped his rare robes, which raised +21 essence and +11 stamina. They had a specialty that decreased spell cooldowns by 17%, which made it a very interesting item for a spellcaster or a priest class. Since I had access to Jesabel's wand and some powerful spells from the skeleton lord—presumably with more to come in the future—that item would work fine on me.

After all, I had my most notable blow of the fight casting the [Lightning Bolt] spell I'd gained from the dungeon boss.

Still, I hoped to one day give that robe to Melina. That would be nice.

"Yes," Chester chipped in. "*Good for long ears!*"

The gloves, pants, shoes, and three rings were mostly essence oriented with some stamina. All were common and uncommon.

The rogue that Kristan had killed at the very start seemed to have the best gear. His leather cuirass, a special armor piece which combined a breastplate and a backplate, was rare and raised +15 agility, +11 stamina, +5 charisma, and had a special skill that added 9% to physical attack speed.

The belt was also rare, adding +12 to agility, +6 to stamina, and had a specialty that added a healing potion quickslot.

That way the user could just use potions as if they were a skill without having to manually drink them. Just reading it, I could tell that it was extremely handy, as you usually didn't have time to raise a glass in the middle of a fight. I'd heard of the skill before, but never met anyone who had it.

It was a good thing Kristan had just killed him in a single blow, stopping him from using his powerful utility item. It turned out that potions weren't all that useful if someone exploded your body with a single attack.

One of the two daggers was rare as well and looked quite expensive. The hilt was inlaid with gold, and twisted around an emerald. It added +21 to agility, and +18 to strength, with a specialty that raised the user's critical hit chance by 21%.

The gloves, pants, shoes, second dagger, rings, and bracelet were all uncommon, but they added agility and strength. Despite their lower class, I was definitely interested in using some of them, since the rogue felt like the best fit for my overall scouting build.

Lastly, the second priest's circlet was rare and added a generous +14 essence. It had the same specialty as the other priest's robes, but it was slightly worse, as this one only lowered spell cooldowns by 14%.

His shoes, gloves, and three rings were all essence oriented, so his quick death made sense. He just didn't have any health, so one well-aimed shot killed him.

In the end, there was one person missing—the mage from earlier. She must have slipped away using a hiding or teleportation spell.

I pulled up my storage again and checked which equipment slots were empty: the head, hips, legs, feet, three rings, one bracelet, a necklace, and a pendant.

I first chose the boots, as I already knew which ones I wanted.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Shadowstep Shoes, RARITY: Rare
SPECIALTY: Raise all movement speeds by
12%

REQUIREMENT: 15 Stamina, 25 Agility

BONUS STATS: +7 Stamina, +5 Agility

Next up was the belt.

Since I had no healing potions yet, the specialty wasn't of any help, but the stats were quite good.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Belt of Healing, RARITY: Rare
SPECIALTY: Add a healing potion quick
slot that allows the use of potions as if
they were skills.

REQUIREMENT: 5 Strength, 5 Stamina

BONUS STATS: +12 Agility, +6 Stamina,
+2 Charisma

I debated for a moment, thinking about whether to use the Gigas Breastplate or the Studded Leather Chestplate.

Both items were actually quite powerful, which made me wonder just how important this rogue was in Falin's family.

If anything, this was another reason to team up with Kristan. Depending on how important he was, that would probably cause more of their family members to come after me.

Even with what Chester said about Jesabel, I'd known enough people of their family's type. Falin and Jesabel had both been relentless social climbers, and those people would do anything to answer an insult.

In the end, the cuirass made more sense for someone like me, since my build was focused more on agility. Meanwhile, it still added enough stamina that it'd improve my defenses. That was the benefit of these kind of fused pieces.

I would keep the Gigas in my inventory but wouldn't sell it. The item was just too valuable, that much was certain. Besides, I'd gotten a lot of value switching up my items in the fight, and while switching up chest pieces and armor was much more difficult than handheld weapons, it was doable during long missions with many stages.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Acrep Leather Cuirass, RARITY:
Rare

SPECIALTY: Raise all physical attack
speeds by 9%

REQUIREMENT: 15 Stamina, 25 Agility

BONUS STATS: +11 Stamina, +15 Agility,
+5 Charisma

All the gear I'd gotten so far from this little skirmish was already worth several thousand gold coins, and all of that thanks to Kristan. I didn't like owing anyone, so I'd have to figure out a way to pay him back.

I checked the rogue's pants and decided to equip them as well.

They were better than the ordinary pants I was using, despite not being the best looking, but any extra stats were appreciated.

Better to look goofy than to look like a corpse.

That was what Rolo always said during his stories.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Leather Pants, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: 5 Stamina, 5 Agility

BONUS STATS: +3 Stamina, +4 Agility, +1
Charisma

Next, I checked through all the available rings.

My Ring of Courage, which I already had from the dungeon, was a no-brainer, so I compared the other rings to my +4 agility ring.

One of the rogue's rings added +6 agility, which was slightly better, but I kept both since I had four ring slots in total.

That was another strange quirk of the System.

Even though we had ten fingers, we could only wear rings on our middle fingers or ring fingers. Other equipped rings would look nice, but wouldn't have any added effect.

Lastly, I equipped the tank's ring, which added +11 stamina. The rest either added less agility than I had, or were strength and essence based.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Ring of Agility, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: None

BONUS STATS: +6 Agility

NAME: Ring of Stamina, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: None

BONUS STATS: +11 Stamina

For the second bracelet slot, I used the tank's item, which raised both my strength and stamina.

It wasn't ideal, but I could always replace it later and it was much better than having an empty slot. And besides, some extra sturdiness never hurt anyone.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Bracelet of Survival, RARITY:
Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: None

BONUS STATS: +4 Strength, +4 Stamina

I stashed all the other items away in my storage bracelet and let out a sigh.

Comparing gear, stats, and sorting through them was exhausting in its own way.

Was this how the market employees felt day in and day out? If so, I felt sorry for them.

I pulled up my status window, just to see where I was currently at.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	Human
STAGE	Rebirth 1	LEVEL	27
LEVEL	99%	SKILL	3,932

ESSENCE		ESSENCE	
CLASS	Scout	SUB-CLASS	Mimic
STRENGTH	102	ESSENCE	53
STAMINA	103	AGILITY	43
CHARISMA	15	FREE STAT POINTS	4
SYMBIOSIS	14%	STATE	Discontent
STORED MASS	77%	DIGESTING MASS	21%

Not bad, not bad at all.

Of course, the Digesting Mass wasn't full yet.

Maybe I was supposed to eat someone else.

"Hey, Chester," I said. *"Any interest in—"*

Then I broke off and froze, as I felt a pair of eyes on me.

"This is quite...interesting," Kristan said, startling me.

My head shot up toward the voice.

I found him sitting there, dangling his feet just over my head and eyeing me from a thick branch.

I thought he was taking a bath in the river... but that was obviously a mistake. I glanced at the bones and scowled. He definitely knew that Chester's "artistic touch" wasn't natural.

What was going through his mind? Or, had he seen us eating the corpse to begin with?

It was difficult to get past Chester's strong detection abilities, but if he was distracted eating or in a food coma, anything could happen.

Either way, the mimic couldn't say anything right now. After eating the woman, he was out in his typical fashion.

"How long have you been there?" I asked, unsure I even wanted to hear the answer.

Kristan eyed me curiously, his dirty-blond hair sitting perfectly even after all the fighting. The blood on his face was no longer glowing, but I still felt a few faint strands of essence trailing from him.

"Long enough."

Ah, shit.



CHAPTER 18: THEY BUILD HUTS?

I eyed him carefully, my eyes narrowed. Just how much would he tell me? “So you saw me—”

“Devour that woman? Why yes, I did. It was quite unexpected,” he said, dropping off the branch. His voice was incredibly casual, almost like he was talking about the weather.

“Are you...”

“Worried?” Kristan asked, raising an eyebrow. “No, not at all. Like I said, I noticed something strange about you. Now I know a little more is all.”

“He’s talking about me eating the scout just like how he talked about cutting off her legs.”

Chester didn't respond, but I had a feeling I knew what he'd say—he'd note that like him, Kristan was a man who understood the brutal ways of Basania and the System's laws.

Kristan was grace incarnate. Even though he'd dropped several feet from the tree, he landed on his toes and straightened himself, like some kind of two-legged cat. "I think we should go. One of their party members escaped me. That young mage from before used a spell to hide from us."

It was just like I'd suspected, and that meant trouble.

Kristan and I hadn't done anything legally wrong—technically, we'd just been defending ourselves. However, with their unofficial bounty, the Hrenwar family had already shown their willingness to violate the law, and now that we'd killed more of their adventurers, the danger would only increase further.

I pointed back at the road, away from the forest. "Yeah. Let's get moving. Their reinforcements could be here soon."

"What was your plan?" Kristan asked. "Before, you know, all this mess." He waved his hand dismissively at the mass of corpses.

"I was going to do some quests," I said. "A bunch of them about killing the kekuri."

"I see," Kristan replied. From how calm he sounded, you'd think that he saw people getting eaten every single day. "Well, two is better than one. Let's do those quests together."

The spearman turned back toward the road and then started walking as if nothing had happened.

My [Light Step] buff was still active on both of us, so even at a walking pace, we were getting away from the scene quickly.

I stared at his back, frowning a little.

"Did he see you by the way?" I asked Chester.

"No," the mimic replied. *"He saw a blob of flesh grabbing nom-noms. Does not know that I am mimic."*

“Alright then.”

“You still go with him?” Chester asked.

“Well, him minding his own business is a point in his favor, that’s for sure.”

For whatever reason, Kristan really wanted to stay in a party with me. I could tell this went deeper than just going into fights.

He was intrigued by my abilities, particularly my diverse array of buffs.

Not only that, he didn’t seem to care how I grew stronger. Kristan might have seemed blood-crazed in battle, but he clearly wasn’t an idiot. After what he saw, he could probably put two and two together and figure out how I gained skills.

It probably had to do with the darkness Chester and I had noticed earlier.

For some reason, Kristan needed strong teammates, no matter what.

That put us in the same boat, so I hurried after him.

“I wish I had his confidence and nerves of steel,” I said through my mind link, genuinely forgetting the mimic was away.

This guy had just thrown his lot in with someone he saw eating people. He didn’t know about Chester—but [Absorb] was an ability that’d already terrify most on its own.

Before long, we were both on the main street.

Other groups were coming and going from the forest, but they gave Kristan a wide berth. Once they noticed I was trying to catch up to him, they gave me a wide berth too, a dramatic difference from my days as a scout.

It was a strange thing.

People tended to get out of your way if you walked with purpose and had that royal air around you. Thanks to the powers given to us by the System, it was ingrained in our very

being, that instinct that made us want to avoid crossing paths with someone of a higher rank than ourselves.

“You’re an interesting guy,” Kristan said as I caught up to him. “And not just because you eat people.” At that, Kristan lowered his voice to a hush, so other people on the road couldn’t hear us. Despite his brash nature, even Kristan knew that wasn’t the kind of thing you shouted to the heavens.

“What do you mean?” I asked though I had a feeling I knew what he was talking about. His eyes were narrowed, and I could tell that he was investigating my essence.

I mostly wanted to know how insightful he was—was Kristan as good at essence detection as Melina?

“Your essence output increased after what you just did. Not just that, but it has also changed. Your stats are significantly better than before.”

“I’ve equipped gear that focuses on agility,” I replied, tapping the strap of my bow.

“Yes, I can see as much, but you’re not an archer. At least not an ordinary one. What is it with you?”

Before I could reply, Kristan’s body suddenly stiffened.

He turned to look at me, his smile now far less pronounced.

His hand shot out and he stopped me, pushing me briefly off the road.

“Enemies?” I asked, wondering what he’d seen.

With Chester out for the count, my detection wasn’t nearly as good as it should be.

Despite my scout background, I didn’t have the essence to detect powerful foes who wanted to be hidden, putting me a step behind people like Melina and apparently Kristan.

Kristan scowled, his eyes narrowing. “I don’t think so, but they’re in a hurry. Let’s wait near the water until they’ve passed. I really could do with some cleaning.”

“I thought you cleaned—”

“Nope,” Kristan replied, smirking a little. “I was spying on you from the tree the whole time.”

I snorted. “Alright. Let’s get cleaned up then.”

We hurried across the road, pushing through a small group of adventurers who hastily ducked past us, then re-entered the woods again.

It was only several minutes until we reached the river.

This time, we were farther downstream from the original fight.

Fishermen busied themselves with pulling nets of fish out of the water and throwing empty ones back in. Some men and women swam inside the river, hunting for larger shells, crabs, and eels in the riverbed.

I stared at them briefly, smiling.

I’d always respected the fishermen and their skills, which put food on everybody’s table, including their own.

I knew adventurers who looked down on them as ordinary people toiling away doing menial tasks, but not everybody immediately had the money or position to start dungeon diving or monster hunting, looking for their first rebirth.

If they’d put their all into adventuring, maybe they could eventually become strong, but by putting their heads down and working, they put their children and descendants into a better position to one day buy gear and train for their rebirth stages.

Kristan glanced at the fishermen, then nodded briefly and politely at them before walking downstream of them.

I raised my eyebrows.

Once again, that showed the utterly bizarre dual nature of the man. He was being considerate of the fishermen...while cleaning the spear he’d used to mercilessly slaughter six people.

It was almost comically ridiculous.

Not noticing my staring, Kristan pulled out his spear and dipped it in the water.

He wiggled it around, creating a scarlet cloud, then pulled it back out, and then produced a large piece of cloth with which he wiped what blood had remained clean.

Then he proceeded to do the same with his armor.

His cleaning was quick, neat, and diligent. It was clear he'd done this many times before.

I followed suit and cleaned what I needed to. Then I removed some of my old items from my inventory, such as my Gigas Breastplate.

I wanted to make sure they didn't have anyone's brain matter splattered against them.

When I finished, I settled against a tree.

Kristan was still washing one of his armor pieces, kneeling against the river.

I eyed him as he worked, and a sudden thought crossed my mind. Though I didn't perfectly understand his background, I knew he was connected to the nobility, so maybe he knew why the Duke had come to town.

"Do you know what the Duke was here for? And why he was looking for a scout?"

Kristan turned, put his armor back on, then walked over.

"Funny. Now that they're closer, I can see they were the group I noticed earlier. They're coming into the forest, too," he said, sitting next to me. "The Duke and his little procession."

"Why?" I asked, deeply curious.

Unlike me, the Duke wasn't going to be doing some easy quests. However, a high-ranking noble like him wouldn't go all the way out to Eslant for no reason.

He'd only go into the wild for a very high-level prize, but that also meant a high-level enemy. If he was heading in the same direction as us, we might be walking into danger.

Kristan shrugged a little. "I'm not entirely sure, but I heard they're targeting a new dungeon that popped up. It's actively encroaching on our land and devouring both forest and water."

"An aggressive dungeon?" I asked, unsure of what to make of it. I'd never heard of anything like it before.

Kristan's brow furrowed. "What? You don't have them this far out? No, I guess you don't," he muttered, trailing off as if into a memory. "I remember my father taking me into one. We lost half of our people against a—"

He stopped, sighed, and then dropped his gaze to the ground, shaking his head.

"If you don't mind me asking, where are you from?" I asked, deciding to be a little more aggressive with my questioning.

Considering his sudden flashes of anger, other people might be worried about prying. He'd hinted at some things so far, but I wanted to know more if I was to ally myself with him longer-term.

Besides, if Kristan wanted to kill me, I'd be already dead. No, he wanted something else from me, I could tell that much.

"A place far, far away." He snickered sarcastically, curling his lips. "I come from a land that was caught up in the sanguine hell called politics."

"Politics? Sanguine hell? What do you—"

He waved his hand dismissively. Though he wasn't angry, I could tell that he wasn't going to go on. "That's enough for now. Maybe I can tell you more at a later time."

"But you're from Krowaz, right?" Krowaz was the continent of Basania that Eslant was located on. When Kristan said far, far away, I wanted to know just *how* far away. The

fact that he said sanguine hell—instead of blighted hell—was an obvious tell. Every village in Krowaz generally agreed upon the gods, but each region had their own unique unending tortures.

He nodded, confirming my suspicions.

Even though Kristan had an odd fighting style and strange gear, his magic was still fairly similar to what I'd observed before. I'd heard that magic from other continents was downright bizarre, even involving beast-bonding or beast-fusion magic beyond what I could imagine.

“Of course, I am, aren't we all?” Kristan said, “This continent spreads for a hundred days on foot in every direction.”

That much was true.

Though I knew other continents existed, I'd never been to one, and neither had anyone I'd personally known, even Rolo.

I'd heard rumors that some of the higher-ranking nobles had traveled overseas, but that was about it. Krowaz was just so big that an adventurer could spend their entire life exploring it without even needing to go anywhere else.

The thundering sound of hundreds of hooves hitting the stone-cobbled road became loud enough that I turned to look at what was going on.

Kristan and I peered through the forests, and my eyes widened as I saw the sheer size of the Duke's party.

There were hundreds of men and women. Some were riding horses and carriages, but most were on foot. As they passed us by, it looked to me like the caravan stretched for a mile.

Kristan seemed lost in thought as he stared after them.

I tapped his knee and then motioned toward the road. It wasn't every day you saw such a large group, so I understood why he was so surprised, but if more bounty hunters showed up, things would get messy.

“Shouldn’t we be going?”

Kristan’s sad, longing expression shifted into a smile yet again as he got to his feet and offered me his hand.

I took it and stood as he helped pull me up.

“I have no idea what you are, but I think I like you,” Kristan said, his voice soft and musing. “And I like how fearless you are. Something like that is rare nowadays, so I’ll help you, Damon. I will help you as long as you don’t betray my friendship. What do you say?”

There was the offer that I’d expected. I pointed at my shoulder and raised an eyebrow. “Even after what you saw? That seems a little insane.”

He grinned.

“Maybe I am insane.”

There was no maybe about it, but the more I talked to Kristan, the more I liked him. Despite his brutal nature and the very strange start we’d gotten off to, I felt like we were kindred spirits.

However, it just felt wrong to have him join me without knowing the full story.

“Let’s get going then,” Kristan said. “You wanted to do some quests, right? That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“No, wait,” I said firmly, stopping him. “Let me tell you what my goal is, first. It’s not just some quests. It wouldn’t be fair if you didn’t know.”

Kristan crossed his arms and nodded, staring expectantly.

“Go on then,” he said, his voice still somewhat cheery.

So I did.

“My friend is a slave. If I ever want to see her again, I either need to earn a lot of money or do an unknown favor for her owner once I’m stronger. I’m down to barely thirty gold coins, and I’ve got people trying to kill me.”

“Good, yes!” he said excitedly. His eyes started gleaming again—that strange mix of hot and cold from before. It seemed like my predicament only made him more excited. “Is the person holding her strong? A noble perhaps? Tell me more!”

I eyed him, unsure if he understood the gravity of the situation. “He’s probably one of the five strongest people in Eslant. He’s the head of a strong house.”

“Well, that won’t be a problem,” Kristan said. He pointed at his chest. “A guy like me, once I fight with someone, I think of us as bound in battle. I’ll help you no matter what it takes.”

His eyes glinted dangerously. “Maybe, we won’t even need to *buy* your friend back. We could just take her.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

Kristan was powerful, but the Baron was just on another level. Still, there was no point offending my new friend.

“Well, then I accept your help,” I said. “But your armor and cape. People can spot you from a mile away. It might be better to travel incognito.”

Kristan paused for a moment, then nodded to himself.

“And now?” he asked. “This should be subtle enough, right?”

The armor and cape disappeared, only to be replaced by a lower-tier-looking half-plate suit of armor.

I nodded. “Yeah. That looks about right.”

If anyone looked at us, they’d think that we belonged to the same rebirth stage just by the look of our equipment.

That was good.

People would pry less and might even mistake us for someone else.

Kristan definitely offered much more protection, but I had a feeling his background would draw pursuers of their

own.

“Let’s get a move on, then,” Kristan said. “Do you mind sharing the quests with me so I don’t have to go back to town?”

“Of course.”

I did as he asked and activated the quest’s share function.

It was a unique function the System provided to parties. It basically allowed party members to act as a conduit for the quest board, directly sending quests to their fellow members so they could do them together.

Sharing quests was more of a convenience than anything else, but it was still greatly appreciated. It looked like Chester would get his wish—Kristan and the two of us were party members now and would be for the long haul unless something unexpected happened.

Though the mimic was still sleeping, I could swear the gelatinous monster was purring happily.

Kristan got the new quest, then smiled. “Kekuri, huh? I guess they’re as good as anything. We could...”

Then he suddenly trailed off, stiffening again. His eyes narrowed, and his hand fell to his spear. “Shit. I can feel someone with murderous intent coming this way. Their essence is almost boiling with anger. I think we should go.”

I turned to look around and see if it was anyone I knew, but he put his arm around my back and stopped me, smirking a little.

“You wanted to see if it was someone you knew, huh? Looks like you’re new to being hunted. You never want to look back and let them see your face. Just walk and act as if you have no idea anything is wrong.”

I nodded shakily and steeled myself. Kristan was right, but it was unnerving to have someone trying to catch up to us and I couldn’t even look back.

Kristan hadn't said how many there were, or where they were headed, but I'd trust him. I'd be dead without him anyway.

As we started walking, he leaned over and whispered to me. "Also, I can't feel the female spellcaster, so they probably don't know who we are. At least not exactly now that my red cape is gone."

I nodded again.

Before, he'd been a little reluctant to remove his cape, but now he seemed glad he did. Not only that, he wasn't looking to fight, at least not immediately. Now he just wanted to help me finish my quest.

The spearman was strange.

One of his quirks was how easily he switched between serious, angry, excited, and happy-go-lucky. It was either adapt or die when out on the road alone, but still, I had never met someone quite like him.

"So, what kind of food do you like?" he asked. "I'm not that big on fish anymore after traveling for so long."

Even though we were being pursued, he talked like he was over the dinner table. His voice was completely and utterly calm.

"Meat skewers," I replied without much thought. "Want some?"

His eyebrows slid up and he grinned and nodded in an almost child-like manner.

"Yeah, I do. I haven't had any good meat in a few days."

I pulled two sticks from the storage bracelet and handed them to him, then pulled out two more for myself. I'd already had breakfast from Renata that morning, plus the skewers earlier that day. But after the fight, I was starving again.

Maybe that was the good thing about staying on the run. It forced me to stay in shape.

We dug into the meat, savoring every bite.

Kristan looked content, even delighted, which piqued my curiosity.

If he'd truly been a noble, or whatever he'd been before, this shouldn't have been anything special. I wished we had some good sauce and fresh bread to go with the skewers.

"This makes me think of back home," he said, the façade finally shaken. "There was this one lady servant that liked cooking for me. Said good food would make me strong or some crap, but she was nice. I remember her making me meat skewers a few days before I—"

He stopped and looked up at the sky, breaking off again and shaking his head before biting his lip in frustration.

Some of the essence seeped out of his body, and it almost scared me how much rage and animosity I could feel in there. I was relatively new to essence detection—no expert like Kristan or Melina. But even I could glimpse his boundless rage.

That made me even more curious, but I wouldn't push, and it seemed like aside from that briefly interrupted memory, Kristan had no more interest in sharing.

After about fifteen minutes, Kristan muttered under his breath, his voice dark. "Our pursuers have given up. They probably couldn't figure out who we were, and they've gone back to report. That's a damn shame. Wish we could have fought."

Then he trailed off and returned to his own thoughts. We remained mostly silent over the next hour as we kept to the road.

Every so often, Kristan would use the party chat to let me know the coast was clear, but that was it. He wouldn't say anything else.

The number of adventurers roaming about was getting smaller the further we went, especially once we got off the main road to search for the Kekuri spawns. The farther away we got from the town, the more dangerous the woods became.

“So, what’s the deal with these monsters?” I asked Kristan. “Have you fought them before?”

“No, but I’ve seen them in books before. They shouldn’t be too hard. If you want more info, just pull up the quest logs.”

I nodded, bringing the prompt up again.

According to the System, kekuri were a race of sapient monsters that easily adapted and thrived in numbers. It was odd having to fight a creature like that.

“That’s weird,” I muttered. “Look at this.”

I showed Kristan the data, and he raised an eyebrow.

It was clear that we were thinking the same thing.

Despite their very different appearance, they reminded me of us humans.

The dividing line between “beings” like us, the elves, or the orcs, and “monsters” like the kekuri or Chester was quite arbitrary, and ordained entirely by the System.

Having been fused with Chester, I could tell that he was just as smart as most humans—hell, probably smarter considering the countless idiots I’d met in my life.

The landscape changed as we pressed on and the forest turned into craggy, hilly land.

Large rock formations dotted the landscape with a narrow river running along the center and disappearing off into the distance.

The trees were very strange.

They were very tall, much taller than the trees near Eslant. They went maybe two hundred feet into the air, with long and sprawling branches and thick green leaves.

Not only that, they were evenly spaced apart from each other, with a new tree every hundred feet apart.

The creatures looked just like in the quest description, a strange mix of rats and goblins, with matted fur.

Numerous kekuri roamed the field ahead of us, some drinking from the river, others grazing on grass, and some building huts.

“They have huts?” I asked Kristan. “That seems even more advanced than the System description.”

Kristan and I shared a look and then shook our heads in unison. I couldn’t read his mind, not exactly, but mine was a jumbled mess after taking in the kekuri and their near-human society.

Sure, I’d heard of monsters that could talk and even monsters that lived together, but this dwelling was on a different level.

“I’ve never seen anything like it either,” Kristan said as he pulled the deadly spear from his storage. “Monsters usually just roam the fields or dungeons.”

I wanted to turn to Kristan and ask what kind of monsters he’d battled so far, but I couldn’t get the words out.

One of the grazing kekuri saw us, and then it let out a loud ear-piercing cry. The sound split the air, and it made my eardrums vibrate, almost like my head was going to explode.

With eerie synchronicity, every single one of the kekuri suddenly stiffened, then jerked their heads toward us. Their eyes glinted pale green, and they let out an inhuman snarl.

That was the thing about the System’s designations.

There were some civilized monsters, but at the end of the day, they were at war with the other beings on Basania. The kekuri wouldn’t hesitate to ravage and destroy Eslant, and in war, we couldn’t show any mercy either.

Kristan re-equipped his dark set of armor and the red cape. “Let’s get started,” Kristan said, totally confident despite the shrieking creatures. “I’ll finish my quest quickly and then watch over you if you need me to. Otherwise, I’ll get a nap or something. I’m tired from all the walking.”

“I’ll support you from here,” I said. “I need some shooting practice anyways. I just got this bow yesterday.”

Kristan tossed his blonde hair back and smirked, but didn't say anything.

He then charged down the slope at the screaming kekuri, twirling his spear.

I pulled my bow free, then surveyed the scene as I notched an arrow.

A few other adventurers were just now peering out of the woods. It seemed like they wanted to do the quest too, but none of them were brave enough to actively charge into battle. They wanted to see what we would do first.

Meanwhile, Kristan was a whirlwind of destruction.

The spearman's movements were to the point, precise, and every time he swung his spear, a kekuri dropped.

"He's probably in his late second or early third stage," Chester whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" I asked, realizing that the mimic had just woken up.

"Because he's just as abnormal as we are! I can imagine him listening in on us."

Despite Chester's earlier bravado, it seemed like his natural post-eating self-preservation sense had kicked in again. Now he was scared of Kristan.

"And you think he can hear us from down there?"

"No, but...oh, shut up, just start killing those monsters," Chester groaned. *"I've got places to be."*

"Places? Like?"

"A certain bakery."

I snorted at the thought that Chester had anywhere to be other than stuck on my shoulder, and aligned my shot. Since the kekuri were all focused on Kristan, I could shoot without much danger. None of the enemies were going to run up the hill, allowing me to practice with the new and unfamiliar weapon.

I aimed carefully, then released the arrow.

The bowstring snapped, and the arrow flew right past a kekuri. It struck the ground some two steps off to the monster's left.

For a moment, all I could hear were crickets, then Chester's laughter rang out in my mind. It sounded almost as bad as him crunching on a corpse.

"Hah! Just look at you! You can't even hit a monster!"

"Shut it, Chester. It's much harder than you think."
With my old crossbow, I could just aim and point, pulling the trigger. With this bow, there were a lot more complications.

"Then get closer, you mimic-for-a-brain."

I had no idea what that insult meant.

Maybe he was saying that *he* was my brain?

Still, he had a point.

I was quite far away and the wind was blowing heavily. Kristan didn't seem to have noticed the failure as he pushed through the throng of kekuri, leaving dozens of corpses behind in mere minutes.

"I might be a scout, but I never used a damned bow before. Why don't you start being more useful and guide me or something?"

"What? You think any mimic ever has used a bow before? How would we use a bow?"

"No, but—ugh, you know what I mean!"

I took a deep breath and pushed his irritating laughter to the back of my mind, nocked another arrow, and stared at the closest kekuri.

It was barely four feet tall and ludicrously skinny. I could even see its ribcage pushing the skin outward.

A notification appeared before me.

MONSTER WINDOW

NAME: Kekuri Charger

TYPE: Minion, Pack, Rodent

STAGE: Rebirth - 1, Level - 7

“I almost feel like feeding them and coming back later when they grow some meat and muscle,” I muttered.

They looked quite weak and pitiful, even for beginner monsters.

Then again, it'd been creepy when they all stared at us, and I had a feeling this thing wouldn't be so pitiful if it got onto me.

Pushing the thought aside, I released the arrow and watched it fly.

My reasonable agility stat must have done the brunt of the work, as even though the arrow didn't even fly the way I intended it to, it was still plenty powerful.

I'd aimed for the monster's chest, but it veered upwards. Still, it struck home, splitting the monster's skull. It died in a single shot.

Several notifications flared up at once.

[You have killed a Kekuri Charger!]

[Leveling Essence Received: 90]

[Leveling Essence: 5.705/15.600]

[Skill Essence Received: 8]

[Skill Essence: 251]

[QUEST: Kill a Kekuri]

[PROGRESS: 1/50]

[QUEST: Kekuri Heart]

[PROGRESS: 1/10]

[QUEST: Kekuri Fur]

[PROGRESS: 1/20]

A single kekuri provided me with just over half a percent of my leveling essence.

That meant I'd have to kill about 120 of them to level up. It was rather slow, but since my main goal was fulfilling the quests, this was just a bonus. Not only that, the additional skill essence wasn't bad at eight points, and with all my skills, I'd be leveling them all up for a while.

Once I was done here, I'd go back to Eslant and level my newly gained [Multishot].

Unfortunately, the eyeball and head quests hadn't counted, and that was probably because of the arrow. It had obliterated most of the creature's head. I raised my bow again, refocusing my efforts. The weapon was powerful, I just had to keep practicing with it.

Then I turned and found Kristan off to the side and staring at me.

I breathed slowly and stared at my bow with new appreciation, then looked at the dead kekuri, then back at Kristan who was sitting off to the side and staring at me.

"What?" I asked, raising my voice so he could hear. By now, the battlefield wasn't empty from adventurers as a few onlookers had charged in and the kekuri battle cries were growing louder and louder.

"I'm done," Kristan simply replied.

I just stared at him blankly, trying to come up with a smart retort, but I couldn't think of one.

He was done, but I only had one kekuri.

The road to power was difficult. I still had a long way to go...

"Do you want to rest in my tent?" I asked, trying to be useful.

"I have a tent, thanks," he replied.

I wanted to know why he wasn't opening it, but I decided to just get going instead. Otherwise, Kristan would be stuck here for a week waiting for me.

I turned back to the monsters and nocked another arrow as I made my way down the hill.

A good minute later, I was a stone's throw from the nearest first real group of kekuri. To my surprise, some of the creatures even had very rudimentary gear.

One of them wore a few scraps that would have passed for leather armor long ago. Now, only two straps and a little piece of leather remained strewn about his thin and gangly body.

I readied myself and used [Multishot].

My single arrow split off into five as they made their way toward the group. All of the arrows had green, glowing, and dripping arrowheads, thanks to my poison quiver.

Given the choice, I sure wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of a poison arrow. It looked quite deadly, and when my attack hit, I saw that the results were just as good as I'd imagined.

The five arrows hit five different targets, killing three outright. The remaining two were blown off their feet, briefly flying into the air and hitting the ground with a loud thunk.

One died a second later before it could even try and get up, but the last kekuri started shrieking the same wailing warning cry I'd heard earlier.

I tensed, knowing that it was a cry for help.

Two groups of the little bastards looked my way and then charged. I was about forty yards away from them, so I had enough time to nock an arrow and use [Snipe].

Essence flowed through my fingers, strengthening my arms and guiding the shot, making it so I didn't need to spend much time aiming.

The arrow killed one of the nine, but eight remained.

I notched again.

A second arrow—this time fired regularly instead of using a skill—hit another kekuri, and it dropped dead.

Seven remained.

There was no way I could kill them all one-by-one. I needed to wait for [Multishot].

Instead of waiting for them to swarm me, I cursed and ran, checking my cooldown timer.

It was down to twenty-nine seconds.

Then twenty-eight.

My [Light Step] was active, so I managed to keep some of my distance.

I turned around and released one more arrow, then started running again. It struck one of the little creatures in the front leg, blowing it out from under the monster.

Though it didn't die, it let out a high-pitched shriek and hit the ground.

It stopped chasing after me, and even better, the other monsters were slowed down, since they had to pause and run around to avoid trampling their comrade.

Fourteen.

Thirteen.

The cooldown kept ticking, but I realized that it was no use.

They were gaining, and judging by their shouting, I had a feeling they'd attract more of their kin.

Throwing caution to the wind, I grabbed my sword and shield, then turned toward the charging creatures and let out a battlecry.

Fuck them.

If I had managed to kill a skeleton knight, I was going to survive some shitty rat creatures! All fear left me as Chester replaced it with a sense of battle lust. Not only that, his armored skin protected me and I could feel a strong urge to hack them all apart.

Kristan was there too, so I assumed he'd help.

Only, he didn't. He just gestured and smiled, letting the monsters run right past him.

I killed one, and then another, sending splatters of blood and fur flying into the air.

But then, four of the kekuri made it past my sword and shield.

They bit into my legs and my arms.

Chester's armor served me well, nullifying the enemy's attacks as they bit and slashed into me. Neither of the kekuri could really hurt me as long as there was enough stored mass inside the mimic, but their charge had knocked me off my feet and onto my back.

It was all I could do to try and stand.

I tried scrambling up, but the mass of opponents kept pushing me down.

"Kill them first and then get up, you fool! Who taught you how to fight?" Chester hissed in my ear.

"No one!" I snapped back, forgetting myself for a moment.

"Yeah, and it shows. You've got a lot to learn, green bean."

"You should just come out and kill them, you freak! I guess you're enjoying this, huh?" I grunted.

However, I still followed his advice, swinging the runeblade in a wide arc and slashing at the two remaining monsters.

One of them impaled itself on my blade, and the other turned tail to run.

I shot to my feet, breathing heavily and trying to catch my breath.

I re-equipped my bow and released another [Multishot]. Five arrows struck the running kekuri in the back, eviscerating it.

I let out a long sigh. “Thanks for the help, asshole.”

“*No problem!*” Chester replied, snickering. “*I always thought I could be a fighting coach!*”

“That’s one way of doing it,” Kristan said as he jogged up to me, cutting me off before I could yell at the mimic. “So...I’m sorry, but I had to see for myself. You’re really not a high ranker in hiding, huh?”

“Hiding my...rank? What are you on about?” I asked through ragged intakes of air.

My body had become much stronger than it was days ago, but that didn’t mean I was invincible.

Far from it, I couldn’t fight for shit.

Still, this was the perfect way to test my limits and learn how to do it properly. Well, not exactly. Due to my mix of classes and mimic abilities, I would never be a by-the-book fighter. But better, at least.

I was just glad to have Chester with me this time or I might have become rat food.

“I’ve seen it happen, so don’t even ask,” Kristan said. “Considering what I saw you doing earlier, I thought there might have been other things off about you. People hide their rank for all kinds of reasons,” he said and looked away as if recalling another memory.

The spearman fidgeted with his weapon and then looked back at me. The more Kristan hinted at about his past, the more confused I got. I decided to just shelve my curiosity aside for now and focus on growing stronger.

“No, I’m not hiding my rank,” I explained. “Look, I’m still in the first stage. Sure, I’m almost level thirty, but that’s it. I had some good luck with items due to...circumstances. That’s all.”

“Good, good. I’m going to have a short nap as you finish up, alright? Don’t die.”

The spearman walked off, yawning.

I just stared at him with a raised eyebrow as he left.

Many wealthy nobles rested in tents, but it was usually just to sit down and recuperate. The thought of sleeping on the battlefield was just totally foreign to me. It was another way that Kristan was bizarre and unique.

I grunted just as another group of adventurers arrived. They inclined their heads and moved past us. Seeing how Kristan hadn't said anything, I assumed they were just ordinary adventurers like us.

Fortunately, most adventurers were still looking for above-board ways of making money and growing stronger. Very few people would take the Hrenwar's informal bounty.

Good.

That meant it was time to finish things up and complete my first quest.



CHAPTER 19: UNDER THE STARS

It took me two good hours to carefully whittle the kekuri population down and finish all five quests. As I fought, I was able to gradually improve my skills.

Learning how to use the bow properly, or at least what Chester and I thought was proper, had made it all so much easier.

Now, I wasn't so reliant on [Snipe] and could more often than not hit a moving target.

My regular shots weren't as powerful, but they were reasonably accurate and I could reliably kill opponents whenever I hit a critical weak point.

After a while, I shifted to the Runeblade and shield combo. Though the sword was heavy, my newfound strength let me swing it around in wide arcs, just like Aldon had done.

When it came to melee weapons, I had a much better instructor.

Kristan taught me how to hold the weapon, how to use my body's momentum to add power to my swings, and how to use the kekuri's momentum against them. He explained how to hold my shield and how to shift back and forth to avoid attacks.

All in all, my movements weren't full-beginner anymore, now they were only half-beginner.

Finally, [Lightning Bolt] killed any of the monsters it hit outright. Even better, it scared the monsters, forcing them to run away.

That meant it was great for picking my opponents off, but since the cooldown was at sixty seconds, it wasn't practical to rely only on [Lightning Bolt].

Now, if I had several attack spells I could use, or some that targeted an even larger area...

Wouldn't that be nice?

After killing the kekuri, I was able to loot the corpses for the parts I needed. Thanks to the System, the monsters were automatically disassembled. I didn't need to get my hands dirty and cut them apart.

Every single monster part was neatly stacked inside my storage bracelet, which made me realize just how good we adventurers had it. Having to cut all the kekuri up into pieces would have probably stopped me from ever doing this kind of quest again.

Several other groups of adventurers came and went in the time I finished my five quests, killing hundreds of the monsters before I could even kill fifty.

It was a reminder of how behind I was, even with Chester's gifts. In general, only second or third rebirth

adventurers did quests. First rebirth adventurers just did Easy-tier dungeons.

However, if I wanted to save Melina, I couldn't waste my time comparing myself to first-tier adventurers anymore. I wanted to grow stronger.

I still had a good forty or so monsters to kill before I would gather enough leveling essence and hit level thirty, so I got to it.

As soon as I'd shifted away from using the sword and shield, Kristan had gone right back to his meditation. It seemed like he had no interest at all in ranged weapons or spellcasting—he was melee or bust.

By then, the sun was setting, and darkness fell through the town. Although humans had cut down plenty of the kekuri, it seemed like they were unwilling to give up their village. The rat-like goblins returned to their huts, with only a few sentinels peering out of the windows, staring at us with pale eyes that glowed green in the darkness.

Most of the other adventurers had lost their energy too, and they no longer had an interest in killing the kekuri.

Instead, an uneasy truce formed, where the adventurers either pulled back into the woods to make camp or they just outright returned to Eslant.

Though the second and third rebirth adventurers here were stronger than the kekuri, there were so many of them that there was no way we could eliminate all of them even if we tried—we'd die of exhaustion, even Kristan.

Such was the strength of the seasonal monster surges, which let monsters start reproducing like rabbits. I glanced over at the chest on my shoulder—Chester was also taking a nap, though he hadn't eaten any of the kekuri, claiming they were too weak.

Instead, the chest-shaped bastard had snarfed down some of our meat skewers, claiming it was his "tutoring fee" for teaching me how to use a bow. If anyone had ever tried teaching a noble scion the way Chester did, they'd get kicked

out of the town square with a bounty on their head, but still, it was the best I had.

I walked over to Kristan and he finally seemed to stir out of his meditation, blinking and scrunching his face, almost like pushing out of a bad dream. I glanced at him, wondering just what he thought about during his meditations. Whatever it was, it didn't seem to calm his roiling spirit.

Sitting upright, the blond young man looked up at me.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“I finished the quest, but I still need more leveling essence for my second rebirth,” I explained.

“That will help,” Kristan said. “You're pretty strong for a first rebirth fighter, I'll give you that much. But the second rebirth is a totally different level. I suggest you get that as soon as possible.”

We were on the same page there.

I pointed up at the sky. “Do you want to stay the night out under the stars?”

It would be easier to stay here, for multiple reasons. First, the people looking for us didn't know we were here. Second, we could just make camp and finish battling the kekuri tomorrow, until I got enough leveling essence.

Since the kekuri were stronger than the average weak monster I'd find around town or inside a dungeon, I would be able to grow much faster.

He shrugged. “I haven't slept inside for a week now, so yeah, what's another night? Do you mind if we use your tent? I don't want to show mine for personal reasons.”

That was a little odd, but I wasn't one to complain.

“Sure,” I replied.

We withdrew slightly into the forest. I didn't know what would happen when the sun rose, but making camp straight in the middle of the kekuri village wasn't a risk I

wanted to take. Things would just be a little safer inside the treeline.

Then I pulled the box with the tent setup from my storage.

It didn't pop up right away.

Instead, a red outline appeared around me. The lines moved as I moved the box around, so I guessed that was the space it would need.

I looked around for flat ground and found a single tall tree some fifty yards back. Just as I was to point toward it, Kristan shook his head.

“That's a spatial tent in your hand, right? You don't want anyone to hit you from above. Those are weak spots. Someone could just snipe us from that tree.”

“Yeah, sorry. I didn't know.”

Kristan just pointed at the edge of the tree line.

We were still not inside the forest, but not quite inside the boundaries of the village. “Just place it here. It will be fine. The kekuri can't get to us anyway.”

I nodded, following his suggestion.

Kristan was right as I hadn't seen the kekuri move so far out ever since we got here. The System said they were going to invade eventually, but for now, it looked like they were more focused on consolidating their resources and building out their encampment.

I moved away from him and placed the box on the ground, activating it. The tent promptly expanded, occupying a space roughly fifteen feet wide and twenty long.

“Quite the tent,” Kristan said as the steel frame jumped out of the box and expanded across the red lines.

Thick, black fabric rose from the box and covered the frame. It was so quick that a moment later I couldn't even see inside anymore. From the faint trickle of the essence I felt, I

knew that the spatial tent operated via magical means, but I didn't know the finer details.

Loud noises echoed from within, causing me to jolt back in surprise.

“What...is that?”

I peeked through one of the window flaps, but just then a second layer rose and almost caught my nose, breaking it off. This second layer was also fabric, but there was a larger amount of essence in it, making it stronger, almost as strong as bricks.

The new layer rose to form a sort of cupola—a small dome, almost like the churches in bigger cities—with a chimney at the top.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “This is overkill. This isn't a tent, this is like a small house.”

Kristan glanced at me, raising one of his eyebrows. Then he laughed, shaking his head. “You should see some other portable home tents I've slept in during my youth. This looks like an outhouse in comparison.”

I snorted, finding it hard to believe.

Then again, if Kristan was a former noble or something, it could possibly be true. Aldon was the favorite son of Sherazad, but there were so many cities and provinces larger than Eslant.

For all I knew, maybe Aldon was just a small fish compared to Kristan. Still, I'd seen these spatial tents before, but none were as lavish as this.

I pointed in front of me, gesturing to see if Kristan wanted to go in first. Though I wasn't of high birth or anything like that, I knew from Renata that you were supposed to invite your guests in first when speaking with nobles. “Want to go in? I got it from a dead man, so I have no idea if there's anything good in there.”

Kristan stiffened a little when I said “dead man,” but he didn't comment further, which I had to respect. He minded

his own business and respected my privacy too, which was only fair.

Without further comment, Kristan got to his feet, stashed his spear away, and made a curt bow. “After you, host.”

They seemed to be doing things differently in his part of the continent, wherever he was from. Still, I wasn’t going to say no and get into some kind of politeness battle.

I grinned and unequipped my gear, then threw the tent flap open and walked inside.

The feeling of entering the tent was similar to walking into a dungeon but much more pronounced. Both the dungeon portals and the spatial tent used similar types of portal magic.

One moment I was outside, and the other I was in a dimly lit tent spread out into two sections. A tent whose interior didn’t even exist within this reality—like dungeons, spatial tents used portal magic, albeit at a much smaller level.

Kristan stepped into the tent behind me, almost knocking me over, since I was still standing at the entrance. He turned, eyeing me strangely. “Sorry, I thought you would have stepped away.”

I shook my hand. “My bad. I was just wondering how this all works. There’s just so much we don’t know about this System that’s in place and how it all works and connects. It’s frustrating.”

“Mhm,” Kristan muttered as I pushed forward into the tent. It was pretty clear he didn’t care at all about the mysteries of portal magic, which fit with what I’d observed of him so far. Kristan was a hard-headed guy—so long as something worked, he wouldn’t bother wondering how it worked.

I stared at the tent and its split rooms, which were divided roughly in half, with the first area being slightly smaller than the second.

There was a bunk bed on one side of the entrance, and a sitting table with three chairs spaced around it on the other.

A cabinet sat just off the table's side and I could see snacks and bottles of booze. There were also several large candles placed on top, the sort that might be used for a romantic dinner.

It reminded me that this tent was Aldon's, and he'd been betrothed to Jesabel before their untimely demise... which Chester and I had caused.

Remembering what Chester said about Jesabel and how she was lost made me feel guilty, but only a little bit.

The second half of the room was hidden behind a thick red curtain. I pushed it aside and then grimaced.

"Ew," Kristan spat. He sounded like a kid afraid of getting cooties.

The second room was a love den.

There was a big bed covered with scarlet sheets, rose petals strewn all over the bed and floor, and scented candles. On the nightstand stood two half-empty glasses.

Aldon and Jesabel must have left them there on their last night.

I just hoped the sheets and bed had a self-cleaning system, or I'd be sleeping in their juices.

Now that was a traumatizing thought.

Weirdly enough, it was maybe even more traumatizing than the fact that I'd eaten them, which I supposed said something about human nature.

There was a small dining table sitting in the center of the space but it only had two chairs.

Off to the side was a large closet that took up the entire width of the space. It was half open and I could see both male and female clothes hanging inside.

To most people, it would have just looked like an ordinary wardrobe, but I could sense a faint whiff of essence. It felt like it was clinging to the cloth.

“Now this is interesting,” I murmured, walking over to the closet. I looked inside and found a bunch of different clothes, but I decided on a pair of black pants and a black shirt.

Black had always been my favorite color.

A notification suddenly appeared, causing me to jolt a little in surprise. Typically, I associated the System’s notifications with combat, or at least rare items, not random clothes I picked up from someone’s wardrobe.

[Would you like to equip a cosmetic item?]

[Yes/No]

The clothes weren’t just a pair of pants and a shirt, no, they were equipment.

I accepted the equipment prompt, and then felt the shirt slide down my chest and arms, wrapping around my body and adjusting itself just like any other equipment did.

The pants were next, and they just slid up my legs, shrinking a little to fit me.

The feeling was...disorienting, even a little disturbing.

All equipment adjusted to fit their user, but after what’d happened in the dungeon, the shifting clothes reminded me a little too much of Chester’s body armor.

Sure, it’d saved me in a bunch of fights, but a sudden layer of congealed ooze around your skin would be a disturbing experience for anybody!

[Stats Received: 4 Charisma]

“Oh, I like this,” I said, reading the charisma notification.

The charisma stat didn’t do anything in battle, but it had subtle benefits in your personal life. Simply put, it made people see you in a different light.

Hell, maybe that was how Aldon had seduced Jesabel to begin with if the wealth and power weren’t enough to do it.

Kristan didn't say anything, but once I turned toward him, he was wearing something similar. His black pants were almost identical but instead wore a bright red shirt.

“Did you get that from the wardrobe?” I asked, pointing.

He shook his head. “No. I have my own. It's just nice to have something to lounge around in.”

From the essence coming from his clothes, I could tell they were far from ordinary—probably much more expensive than Aldon's.

“Want to see what kind of drinks they stocked in here?” I asked, nodding toward the cabinet near the entrance.

“You're reading my mind,” he said wearily. “I sure could use a drink. Or five.”

Despite the tiredness in his voice, he still spoke in a calm and measured fashion. Like his powerful gear and rare skills, it betrayed his lineage.

I doubted he was older than me and he clearly wasn't doing it on purpose, which meant it had been ingrained into his very being from the day he was born. But maybe in time, I would rub off on him.

We walked out from the inner room and back into the outer area with the bunk bed and kitchen-like area. I opened the cabinet and pulled out a bottle with a dark yellowish, almost orange liquid sloshing inside.

It looked very appealing, but then again, what did I know of high-end booze? I was just used to beer and rum from Rolo's tavern.

“Good choice,” Kristan said, taking the bottle from me. “Whisky. Tis the drink for those who want to enjoy silent company. Though we could talk a little if you want?”

I nodded toward the dining table in the other room, past the curtain.

“I would like that. It's been a crappy day.”

Kristan shook his head.

“No, we need to set boundaries. This is your home whenever we’re out in the field, and I’m a guest. I will not impose on your privacy once you retreat, so we will sit here, in the outer area.”

It was a statement that didn’t allow argument.

Now that Kristan mentioned it, I suppose that was why there was a curtain splitting the two areas. I bet that Jesabel and Aldon lived inside, with Falin and Maz splitting the bunk.

Very well, I could live with some boundaries in my life.

I was slightly taken aback by how he said it, though. It was as if he’d been through a similar situation and already knew what to expect.

As I walked to the cupboard, I took a close look at the furniture, musing to myself. The current design just seemed way too stiff and formal. Whatever the reason, we would rearrange the tent’s insides sooner or later.

Making it more comfortable would be one of my goals for the time being. Maybe some rugs, artworks, and statues. Yeah, definitely rugs.

Just when I thought I’d seen it all, I noticed that something was wrapped in the tent cloth, tucked into a strange pouch just beside the cabinet.

There was a small stove with some stacked firewood next to it.

“Those things are a hazard,” Kristan said as I unwrapped the small stove. “The spatial tent is still made of cloth. It burns easily.”

“If you’re not careful enough, yeah,” I replied, eyeing it curiously. “I mean, there’s got to be a chimney for a reason. And now, we can cook dinner here.”

I pushed the table further out and then sat down on one of the chairs.

Kristan produced two glasses and some ice cubes from a bucket inside the cabinet, and then sat across from me. He opened the bottle with practiced ease, then poured me a full glass.

The way the liquid moved around in the glass and the candlelight bounced off the glass, was quite something. I had never even imagined that I'd enjoy myself doing something so, well, ordinary as drinking a glass with a friend.

There were perks to the high life. Rolo always said that part of the fun of drinking expensive alcohol was *knowing* that it was expensive.

I kept my mouth shut and waited until he was finished pouring his own glass, then raised it.

"To new friendships," I said, offering him what I hoped looked like a genuine smile. All told, I liked him, and I was glad we'd met. From how he smiled back, I must have done a great job.

"To friends, and to those we left behind," Kristan said.

We sat in silence for the first several minutes, sipping our drinks.

Even Chester was staying silent and enjoying the whisky.

He wasn't speaking, but he purred merrily, the noise echoing through my mind.

"You can taste this?"

"Yes, we are one. I told you!"

The information flooded my mind.

I didn't know how it worked, not exactly, but he could taste the stuff I ate or drank, but luckily, it didn't work the other way around.

I wasn't used to drinking in silence, enjoying expensive drinks, and acting as if it was the most ordinary thing. Normally, drinking was loud and boisterous, filled with

aggressive displays of friendship and competitive storytelling. That was how it worked in Rolo's tavern, at least.

To my luck, Kristan spoke, breaking the silence. It seemed like he finally wanted to tell me his story. It'd only been a day since we met, but still, fighting together built trust, or so I'd heard from countless adventurers.

"I was forced out of my home some years ago," he said somberly. "My parents were killed by my uncle. I stayed with him for a time despite knowing what happened, biding my time, and thinking I could get revenge. How stupid I was."

He poured himself another drink and gulped that down as well.

"I'm sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh, he'll be the one who's sorry one day. Anyway, when he finally understood that I'd never do his bidding, I was forced out with whatever I could take with my bare hands. My parents' will was done through the System, so he couldn't take my inheritance from me. I still own that land. But he sent a swarm of people after me to try and force me to give up my birthright..."

"I hope they had a bad day," I said, trying to lighten the mood despite knowing it could backfire. He grinned, though, surprising me.

"Oh, you have no idea," he laughed. "Their guts were all over the place. I even killed my cousin, his favorite son. Now that was—never mind that. But yeah. I'm a deposed noble, though I still have the will to the land."

I'd heard of things like Kristan's System will before. The fundamental mechanics were similar to our quests or the bounties that were posted at the Adventurer's Guild.

Since the System could reinforce promises, oaths, and things of that nature, the higher-ranking families greatly preferred it over words on parchment. A promise to the System was even more sacred than a promise written in your own blood.

The problem was, the System wasn't totally invulnerable.

He trailed off for a brief moment, then took another sip of whisky and started the story again.

“But once he kills me, the land will revert to him. My parents set up their will before they realized what a dirty traitor he is, and I knew I couldn't stay there forever. I might have killed the first group, but my uncle has many friends. I ran, and ran, and ran until I couldn't run anymore.”

“And now you're here.”

“And now I'm here.”

Even nobles had their tragic stories.

It made me wonder if Aldon had been all that bad, or if he's just been shit unlucky.

His father had only mourned him for a minute at best, at least in front of me, and he'd even claimed that Aldon was his favorite.

I couldn't even imagine him being any better when alone with his children. No wonder he'd turned out the way he did.

“I lost my parents at an early age, but I don't really remember them. And with no one to take care of me, I landed on the streets, stealing bread, fruit, and the occasional scrap of meat,” I said, the words welling up to the surface and surging out of me.

It wasn't a story I wanted to share, but I honestly felt like I could trust him, especially since he told me his own story. Not just that, we were probably more alike than we'd probably like to admit.

“No wonder you're still stuck in your first rebirth,” Kristan said, but he didn't sound as if he was mocking me.

“You could say that,” I muttered. “A man took me in and I lived with him until he died. I was in my twenties then and just reached my first rebirth. The old guy had some money stashed away, so I used it to be reborn.”

“How did that go?” Kristan asked.

I cursed, shaking my head. “I got stuck with the trapper class. It’s useless for killing monsters. Then I started taking odd jobs from adventurers, charging much less than any other scout just so I could get by.”

“And the thing I saw?” Kristan asked, pointedly. “You know. That ate the scout? Was that part of your useless class?”

I smiled. “No. That’s a different story entirely. And it explains how I got this tent actually.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to tell him about Chester. From what it seemed, he thought that the black ooze he saw eating the scout was an innate part of me, rather than another being that was joined with me.

“And now we’re both here,” Kristan said, stopping me from saying anything else. “I’m sure you’ll tell me this additional story once you’re ready. Let us drink one more for our past, and then we promise to leave them behind. There’s so much to look forward to, isn’t there?”

I raised my glass and clanked his, then gulped the hot, amber liquid down. It tore at my throat and insides, but it felt good nonetheless.

It served to remind me that I was still alive.

“I need your help, Kristan,” I said, deadly serious. “I want to save Melina. She’s a good one, I know it. And she’s a spellslinger, so she’d be of great use to our party.”

“Spellslinger?” he asked, leaning back into his chair. “She’s an elf?”

I raised an eyebrow. “How did you know?”

“That’s an elf-only class,” Kristan explained matter-of-factly. Truth be told, I’d suspected that already, but it was nice to hear the confirmation.

“Oh. Yeah, she is an elf. The bastard I looted the tent and equipment from bought her as a slave. She was tied to them through coral cuffs.”

Kristan sneered and clenched the glass so hard it shattered in his hand. “Coral cuffs? Even my uncle wouldn’t touch them. Those things can drive both sides insane. The pressure of controlling someone will crumple your mind.”

I stayed quiet, not sure what to tell him as I didn’t know much about the cuffs. I’d known they were bad, but I’d never heard of the second side before. Maybe that had also explained Aldon’s thuggishness and cruelty, but then again, maybe I was just working too hard to give him an excuse for his shitty behavior.

“Where is she?” he asked after a long moment of silence.

I was silent for a long moment, then decided to tell him. We were both fugitives, after all, so he’d understand.

“Hidden in a mansion in Eslant. She belongs to the Sherazad family.”

Kristan’s eyes narrowed, and he muttered “Sherazad” under his breath like it was a curse. Then he was silent for a long moment.

“Do you know them?” I asked.

“Only by reputation. The Baron is a real piece of work, or so my...”

Then he trailed off. He *did* know the Baron, and there was something more there, but he’d respected my privacy so I’d respect his.

“Ugh,” Kristan grunted, then looked away. “Let’s get you to the second stage first, then we can come up with something. Alright?”

I nodded. “I’ll have enough leveling essence tomorrow. But then I’ll need a few more days to gather the gold, but I should—”

“Nonsense,” Kristan said, his voice brokering absolutely no disagreement. “I will give you the rest.”

I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to be in his debt. He’d also let me have those items before too.

Kristan sensed my hesitation, and he just waved his hand. “Don’t worry about it. When I get my family’s estate back, these coins will be nothing more than a drop in the ocean. These quests should give us 48 gold in total. How much do you have?”

“I have 35 gold coins and some silver.”

Kristan smiled. It was clear that the difference was absolutely nothing to him. “Then I’ll give you the rest and we get you settled.”

I watched him for a moment, studying his expression and movements.

“You will *lend* me the rest,” I said, deciding to never let anyone take pity on me.

“If that makes you feel better, yes.” He raised his glass and winked at me. “Say, would you mind sharing what this elf looks like? I just might take her from you if she’s a fair maiden and all. Just saying.”

I snorted, unable to believe the gall. “I didn’t say we were together. But if we were, you’d just take her?”

He laughed and then winked again. “No, I don’t think I would. After all, Damon. You are my friend.”

It was then that I finally saw him smile truly.

There was something haunting about it, and it made me want to weep. At a mere glance, I knew just how much emotion must be bundled up deep inside him.

It was a stroke of luck for both of us that we met where we had, I guessed. Or was it some greater power that had interfered, putting us on a path where we would come together and help each other?

Maybe...just maybe, after he helped us here, Melina, Chester, and I would be able to help Kristan deal with his uncle and reclaim what was his.

Wouldn’t that be nice?

“Reclaim a kingdom?” Chester whispered in my mind. His voice was so disbelieving it sounded like he’d explode from doubt. *“How about you find me some food first? Maybe cake...or cookies...or cake...or cake...I’m getting cranky.”*

I groaned, *“I thought you were drunk or something, asshole. Leave it to the mimic to ruin a perfectly good moment.”*

“What? You know you missed me. And besides, this whisky thing is good. I could have some with the cake. Oh, whisky cake.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” I replied, shutting off Chester before he could whine any more.

Then I said good night to Kristan and we went to bed.

Early the next morning, a pleasant smell awakened me.

I yawned and rubbed my eyes clear to the clanking of pans and pots. Or so I assumed...

Judging from the smell and the sound, I thought Kristan was making breakfast. But after seeing how vicious and one-minded he was in combat, maybe he was just banging his spear against the wall, not realizing his arm was on fire

I pushed open the curtain and laughed.

So both sides were right.

He’d just finished making breakfast, but now he was working on his spear.

The food was laid out on the table, but he was busy sharpening his spear and hammering down on it using a repair kit. I’d never used one before so I didn’t know how it was supposed to look or sound. The noise was shockingly similar to cooking.

“Did you damage it that badly yesterday?” I asked, sitting upright and throwing my legs over the edge of the bed.

“No, not really. I’ve been meaning to repair my gear for a while now, but just didn’t feel like doing it out in the open,” Kristan said as he nodded toward the table. “Let’s eat

and then go out and kill the rest. I want to go back to Eslant and restock on some things.”

I joined him and we ate scrambled eggs, flatbread, and something that tasted like meat but didn't look like meat.

It was gray and tough and stringy, though still fairly delicious. If I had to guess, it was probably some kind of preserved meat, for long journeys. I'd heard that nobles had some innovative processes for curing meats, though that wasn't as popular due to the prevalence of storage bracelets.

Or maybe it was some kind of exotic animal from near Kristan's home. Who knew what he liked to eat?

When I finished the food, I popped out three more skewers for each of us, leaving me with four for later.

I had eaten a few more when battling the kekuri yesterday, so I was almost out. I'd have to stock up as we both liked them, and they weren't even that expensive.

Kristan reached over, grinning as he chowed down. “Hah! If I knew you had more, I wouldn't have prepared us kekuri meat!”

I stared at him blankly, gulping whatever I'd already chewed down.

I pointed at my empty plate, my eyes wide.

“You're...joking?”

He shook his head. “No, I already had some earlier. Needed to make sure it could pass for breakfast.”

I closed my eyes and groaned as Chester's laughter echoed in my mind. “*Monster eater! Now you're nothing better than me!*”

I didn't need to hear this anymore. “*Fool. I don't eat monsters 'cause I like to!*”

Still, it wasn't like I could really argue.

I *had* enjoyed eating the monster meat, even thinking it was a delicacy from Kristan's homeland. Fucking nobles from faraway areas...you never knew if you could trust them.

We finished eating and I stored the tent away.

It took about just as long as it had to set it up. Then Kristan returned to meditating, and I returned to killing.

By the time I killed my 150th kekuri, something very strange happened.

The monsters pulled away from me and huddled up into a group.

White light flashed, and from their midst rose a larger specimen that looked much more powerful and dangerous.

I had no idea where this thing came from, but I could tell he meant business.

He was easily three heads taller than the others and stood on his two hind legs. The limbs were thick and ripped with muscle rather than skinny.

In one hand, he carried what looked like a sword, and in the other a roughshod club. The kekuri's skin was a hint brighter than usual, and its eyes glinted with intelligence and malice that far outstripped its peers.

I stared, stumbling back a little inadvertently. "Is that a ___"

"Yes, I think it's a champion or a mini-boss. Why don't you go and have a look?" Kristan said, his voice cool and calm. "Show what you learned since yesterday."

A monster notification popped up.

MONSTER WINDOW

NAME: Kekuri Chieftain

TYPE: Minion, Undead, Reanimated

STAGE: Rebirth - 2, Level - 15

I nodded, then stepped forward again.

Now that I had the additional information, I knew that the mini-boss wasn't that strong.

The sudden appearance had me there for a moment, but compared to the Stormcaller, he should die pretty easily. The

strength of the kekuri came from their numbers, not their individual power, and it seemed like it was the same for the chief.

“You kill my people!” he suddenly cried with a chattering voice.

“You can speak?” I asked, genuinely startled out of my battle lust. “But you’re—”

“I kill mortal enemy! I avenge all kekuri!”

With that, he dropped to all fours and charged me, both his weapons digging into the grass as he moved in a straight line.

I pulled out my Sharot staff and pointed it at him, then released a single [Lightning Bolt].

A small storm cloud gathered above him and then a bolt dropped from the sky, hitting the kekuri chieftain and punching a hole straight through his torso.

Just like I suspected, this fight wouldn’t be too hard, but I wasn’t willing to sit around. It was time to pile on more damage before he could recover.

The monster tumbled and skidded across the rocky ground as I re-equipped my bow, nocked an arrow, and released an [Multishot].

Five arrows flew true and struck the creature in the face, the skull, and the neck. Poison dripped to the ground as the mini-boss twitched and spasmed, then died.

[Hidden Quest Complete: Kill the Kekuri Chieftain]

[Description: Draw out the Kekuri Chieftain and kill him to stop the tribe from spreading]

[Progress: 1/1]

[Reward: 13 Gold, Loot Card]

[Leveling Essence Received: 535]

[Leveling essence: 15.600/15.600]

[Skill Essence Received: 49]

[Skill essence: 1.438]

Three cards appeared floating in front of me, just like when I cleared the dungeon.

The first showed a stack of gold coins, the second an eye patch, and the third a head bandana.

They flipped back around and shuffled for several seconds. Like after the dungeon, I didn't get to pick the prize. It was just telling me what the actual options were.

"Lucky," Kristan laughed as he ran up to me. "Mini-bosses never drop anything too special, but it's still nice seeing the world throwing them at us."

"I'm somewhat disappointed by how weak it is," I said, still eyeing the cards.

"What did you expect? This is a starter zone. If you'd been in the second rebirth, I don't think it would have even shown up. He would have been smart enough to find an easier opponent."

I guess that explained why the chieftain hadn't shown up yesterday to battle the second and third-tier adventurers who'd killed so many more kekuri than me, but after all the bravado the chieftain had shown, I expected more from him.

I flipped the most right card, and a small stack of coins dropped in my hand, 27 pieces to be precise.

"I could have used the bandana," I muttered. "It would have looked nice on me."

"Huh?" Kristan asked. "Sorry, I didn't hear what you said."

I waved my hand, shaking off his worries. "Never mind. Well, I'll have all the gold coins I need if you give me your quest rewards. Just got some for killing the mini-boss. That's less than I owe you too."

Kristan grinned. “Then there’s nothing else keeping us here. So, why don’t we return to Eslant?”

“Wait. I could eat him,” Chester said. *“The kekuri chieftain looks like a prime cut of meat.”*

“I thought you didn’t want to eat the kekuri,” I asked.

“No, they taste pretty good,” Chester replied. *“I noticed when you ate it this morning.”* Then he started chuckling devilishly, making me want to leave on the spot.

But then I glanced at Chester’s information. The stored mass was slowly dropping, and the kekuri chieftain would probably keep him stuffed for a while.

“Kristan, do you mind going ahead? I’d like to...use the corpse,” I said, my voice trailing off a little.

He stared at me for a moment as if trying to understand what I was going at, and then gasped. His shocked face quickly morphed into a wide grin.

“Oh, no, don’t mind me at all! I don’t mind watching!”

“But I do,” I stated flatly.

This was a boundary I actually cared about.

I wouldn’t have cared much if Kristan ate at the dining table in my tent, but I didn’t want to make a habit of letting people see Chester eat things, be they humans or beasts.

Besides, I didn’t want to tell him about the mimic this early in our friendship.

Melina accidentally saw Chester, and Alfonse might know as well by now if he tortured her. Unless the situation called for the mimic to pop out, I’d have my new companion stay hidden from sight.

He turned around and walked off without another word.

My mimic came to life on top of my right foot and then proceeded to encompass the chieftain in black goo.

[You have used ABSORB on: Kekuri
Chieftain]

[Leveling Essence Received: 0%]

[Stats Received: 1 Strength, 1 Stamina]

[Symbiosis has risen by 0%]

To my surprise, I didn't get any new skills, spells, or abilities from the monster, but I didn't mind.

All that mattered was keeping the beast fed so he didn't come out to play at an inappropriate time. Now, all that remained was to go home and get my second-stage upgrade.

Before I left, there was one last thing to check.

I pulled my infinite essence extraction bottle from the storage bracelet.

The bottle had been only 0.2 liters full, and now it was up to 1.57 liters. I wasn't exactly sure what the essence bottle would do once it was full, but I had a feeling it would be of great help to me in the future.

Tucking it away again, I followed Kristan, content with how the day had played out.

A hard day's work, plenty of leveling essence, and a good friend to share food and drink with at the end of the night.

Yes, I could definitely learn to live like this.



CHAPTER 20: SALES CONTRACT

The road back home to Eslant was uneventful, a far cry from the chaos and ambush when we went into the jungle. After staying the night near the Kekuri village, it seemed like nobody realized who we were.

We quickly hit the main road and found it even busier than the day before. The Duke's main party wasn't here anymore, but there were many smaller groups headed toward the forward base.

On the other hand, there were only a few banged-up groups retreating into the town. Their gear was damaged, and they were covered in blood.

The chatter of both groups only added to my curiosity.

Almost everybody was talking about the Duke's mission. Some wanted to join in, while others were merely curious. The few groups returning to Eslant were lamenting that they'd joined.

Had the dungeon subjugation failed, or maybe the Duke wanted more adventurers?

Kristan's morbidly cheerful attitude soured the closer we got to town.

He grew silent and glared at the road, the travelers, and the forest around us. I caught him checking our surroundings more often than not, both for monsters and for adventurers who were after us.

Or so he said, but I wasn't so sure.

I could swear it was the battered adventurers who had ruined his mood. He eyed them with a strange mixture of pity and disgust.

"We should spread out," I said as a sudden realization hit me. "The Hrenwar adventurers are looking for a duo, right? What if you went ahead? Maybe forty or fifty steps? Anyone searching for us would assume we were traveling solo."

"Yes, I agree," Kristan said half-absently. "Besides, I make bad company right now."

I just shrugged and nodded. To a degree, I was mildly irritated by his mercurial moods and the fact that he was constantly on edge.

Then again, his childhood story had enough tragedy for three or four people, so it was somewhat understandable.

He hurried ahead and I slowed down, thinking of another matter I had to take care of.

"Hey? Are you listening?"

"Yes. What you want?" Chester replied.

The mimic sounded bothered by my question, which was nothing new. It seemed like Chester preferred delegating

rather than being delegated to. Unfortunately, there were two people like that in our little relationship.

“Alright. Tell me about your evolution. How do we evolve you? I got the evolution chest from the dungeon, but it doesn’t say anything about other prerequisites.”

“I already told you. I don’t know.” Now Chester was sounding even more pissed off than before. My right eyebrow slid into my forehead.

Before, I’d thought that Chester was just playing with me or being annoying, but he seemed genuinely flummoxed by how to evolve.

That was just bizarre.

Every human—even people who weren’t adventurers yet—knew about the rebirths and how to grow stronger. Even kids talked about what classes they wanted to be when they grew up.

It seemed like mimics just didn’t have that kind of ambition.

I wished there was a book that dealt with monsters and evolutions, but monsters didn’t make for great pets, so it made sense no one had such a tome.

Even if there was one, I’d never find it in a town like Eslant.

I tried a different approach. Seeing as Chester was on his second rebirth, he definitely had evolved before. Based on the little knowledge I had, monster evolution was essentially their version of rebirths.

“Do you remember your first evolution? How did you evolve back then?” I asked, probing for some kind of hint.

Chester suddenly flared up with excitement, undulating up and down. *“Oh, yes! I eat a big shiny gem!”*

Now we were getting somewhere!

“Gem? Do you remember what kind? Maybe its shape or color?”

“Too long time. How can I know?” He sounded annoyed again, which pissed me off.

“Who can know if not you, you little shit! I’m trying to help you!”

“You good help. Really good,” he mocked.

I stopped and balled my fists.

An adventurer almost bumped into me, but then just hurried past without a word. He didn’t even seem bothered that he had to step around me.

Mimics. I couldn’t even start imagining what must have gone through the System’s mind when it, well, created the mimic species. They were gluttons, sarcastic, annoying, and too smart for their own good.

“What color was the gem? You should at least know that.”

“Yes, I remember color. Yellow like lemon cake.”

My left eye twitched involuntarily at its remark.

Cake. Hmm...

Alright, well, that was a way I could communicate with the stupid thing.

“Was it round like a cookie? Or square like a cake? Or did it look like a star? Like candy?”

“Yes, like cookie.”

“Alright, now we’re getting somewhere. Yellow, round gems. Do you also remember what type of—”

“Monster I was?” Chester asked, completing my thoughts. *“No. I am mimic. Always mimic.”* He didn’t sound entirely sure though, and his voice trailed off in my head.

Now that was pretty interesting.

Either the monsters *did* transform and their memories were rewritten, or Chester would go from one kind of mimic into another more advanced kind. It was hard to say. For humans, we received enhanced bodies after our rebirths, but

we were distinctly still human, with our old memories and minds. But the System gave “monsters” different treatment.

I glanced at the mimic’s status, pulled up the System notification, and rolled my eyes.

After eating the kekuri chieftain, Chester was listed as content and well-fed. If he was showing this kind of attitude when content, it was just an innate part of his personality.

He wasn’t hangry, he was just an asshole.

Still, at least we’d made some progress. We hadn’t gotten as far as I’d liked to, but round, yellow gems were a start. I could ask Kristan about unique monsters in general, but I wouldn’t keep my hopes up. More horse drawn carts and carriages passed by, heading north to the forward base.

From the few snatches of conversation I heard, I assumed they were carrying much-needed supplies.

I frowned.

The more I thought about the new dungeon and the duke’s arrival, the more on edge I felt.

For someone so important to come by, maybe something was wrong. Things didn’t happen for no reason.

Eslant came into view shortly after Chester and I finished our conversation.

Tall, stone walls surrounded the town from all sides save for the east where the river Ksigna ran.

It branched off right across the center, separating the town.

“Hey,” Chester asked, suddenly surprising me. *“Why is there no wall? Can’t people swim in?”*

I was a little surprised by the mimic’s sudden interest in city design and architecture, but then again, he had been amazed by the Adventurer’s Guild buildings.

I thought about not saying anything just to piss him off, but then I decided not to be petty. I pointed up. *“There’s no*

need. Look. Two guardhouses along the river. Swim in and they'll spear you like you're a fish."

"Fish? What if I turn into a crab instead? Then they don't spear me?"

"It's just an expression, moron."

Tall stone buildings peeked out past the walls, and a thick layer of smog lingered in the air.

The town had access to an ore vein, so we smelted our own steel, and made everything we needed in our smithies. It came at a cost in the shape of smoke.

Five flags hung to either side of the gate, sporting the ruling family crests.

Up ahead of me, I saw Kristan suddenly pause. He shook a little, looking at the flags, and I could imagine that he was thinking of his lost home.

The sight reminded me of how unfair the world could be.

I'd grown up picking up scraps, while others like Aldon had everything handed to them. It was no wonder how people like that often turned into assholes or just plain bad people. Not that I was a ray of sunshine or anything, but still, I tried to treat everyone the way I wanted to be treated.

There was a heavy guard presence outside of town with the men and women of the city guard all wearing the mayor's colors: black and yellow. At first glance, I counted over thirty of them, all standing by the walls, but then I noticed many more inspecting the people going in and out of town.

"Something's wrong," Kristan said over our party chat.

I blinked, then nodded and replied to him. *"Yeah. It seems like they are looking for someone."*

I had almost forgotten about both him and the party chat after seeing the guards.

The whole swarm of them evoked a feeling of dread deep inside me as I'd gotten into trouble with guards over the

years.

Not in the northern part of town, though, as these guards were too professional to care about things such as small bribes. It was the guards in the south that made life hard for the lower-tier adventurers.

“What are they doing? They aren’t looking for us, are they?” Kristan asked, using the party chat.

“No. The Hrenwar bounty is unofficial. If anything, they’d be looking for them. And I’m still not sure about the other group, but I bet it was an unofficial bounty too.”

“Are you going to report them?” Kristan asked.

“No,” I replied simply. *“I don’t want to stay entangled with the Hrenwar. Let’s just hope both sides move on.”*

I wanted more information, but I wasn’t willing to talk to the authorities about the bounty, since I didn’t want to bring any more attention to what had actually happened to Aldon and the others.

“Either way,” I went on, *“A simple grudge is way too small for this. The mayor wouldn’t bring out all these troops for something like that.”*

“So, what is it? Has this ever happened before?”

“This only happened once before,” I replied, remembering the last time mayor enforced martial law. *“Something bad must have happened to one of the nobles. Maybe even—”*

“An assassination? A big theft?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said. *“We should stop someone and ask.”*

Of course, there was a small possibility, one that I didn’t want to admit. Alfonse might have gone back on his word.

Maybe the guards were looking for Aldon’s killer.

Kristan stopped ahead of me and turned toward the nearest group of adventurers that had just left the town

premises. He waved at them and started chatting, a big smile on his face.

I hurried to catch up so I could hear the exchange.

“Fellow adventurers,” he said with a slightly too enthusiastic tone. He even offered them a little bow, which took the adventurers by surprise. “Pray, would you mind telling me what the guards are doing? Did something, perhaps, happen?”

His voice was very grand and formal, even more so than his normal speech—maybe even a little too formal. I thought about warning him, but it seemed like it worked.

One of the three adventurers, a red-haired woman in her late thirties, nodded and stopped her companions.

Both of the men surrounding her were easily a head taller than me and built like tanks. Going from their heavy armor, shields, and one-handed weapons, they were probably tanks.

“Someone tried to kill Baron Felzing, but they failed,” the woman replied with a snort. From the disdain in her voice, it sounded like the assassin hadn’t gotten too close. Still, killing a Baron—the head of one of the five families—was a big deal, and it definitely merited this added security. “If you ask me, going after any of these nobles is a suicide mission. No amount of gold coins is worth it.”

“Yes, I guess so, my lady,” Kristan replied humbly.

“Did they catch the attacker?” I asked, having a bad feeling about the whole situation.

“No, but some of the servants think it was a woman that attacked him. Climbed from the roof down to Baron Felzing’s bedroom window. Pretty ballsy if you ask me.”

The redhead laughed as she punched the guy on her right in the shoulder. Her jewelry wavered as she threw her head back. Long, oval bone earrings hung from her earlobes, nicely matching her bone necklace inlaid with red and blue feathers.

“Do they know who it was?” I asked. “The woman I mean. Was it one of the local celebrities? One of the other family adventurers?”

The woman eyed me and pursed her lips. It was clear that she was eager to get going with her adventure, and she regretted sitting around to talk with us.

“Please, my lady,” Kristan said, taking over. “Would you please indulge my friend here? He’s rather curious.”

He offered her a coy smile and a wink, to which the woman cleared her throat and looked away. Her cheeks turned red, and the blush quickly spread across her face and neck.

Now Kristan was suddenly the pinnacle of chivalry. I had a hard time keeping my thoughts straight about the spearman as he changed character rather often and with great ease.

“No, they don’t know who did it, apparently. If you ask me, it was one of the Duke’s people. Who else would dare try such a thing?”

I didn’t know about that, but it was as good of a guess as any.

The assassination attempt didn’t make much sense.

Baron Felzing didn’t have many enemies as his policy was not to interfere with city politics.

He was focused on bringing innovation to Eslant and making life easier for everyone. Thanks to his efforts, many residential buildings had toilets, showers, and running water. The smithies worked day and night making pipes, and essence did the rest, heating the water, and pushing it through the pipes.

I looked to Kristan, who was oblivious to my thoughts, and then thought back to the Duke. It didn’t make sense for a Duke to come to a small town and try to assassinate another noble.

If anything, it was Alfonse using Melina...

Yes.

That made sense.

A woman with the strength and skill to slip into Felzing's home from the roof. I'd seen with my own eyes just how sneaky Melina was, and since she was a slave, she couldn't refuse Alfonse's order. Nobody else would want to kill Felzing, that was for sure.

It had to be her.

I was sure of it, but she wasn't strong enough...unless he removed the cuffs. But then, why would she continue obeying him?

From what she told me, Melina was on her third or even fourth rebirth. It might not have been enough to kill the Baron on her own, but she would have been able to escape.

That meant it wasn't Melina either, but who could it be?

Something wasn't adding up.

"Could it have been a set-up? You know, someone trying to stir discord among the nobles?" I asked, then caught myself and imitated Kristan. "My lady," I added.

"When you ask so nicely, I can't help but tell you more," she chuckled and tossed her hair back. "I have to disappoint you, though. I don't really know much about politics."

I bowed a little, thanking her as a new question came to mind. Before I could ask it, Kristan beat me to it.

"My lady, I assume you are headed north? Is there any news from the dungeon raid group?"

She nodded and then motioned for her party members to go on.

"Yes, we're going north, stranger. They're having trouble is what we heard. I want to make a name for myself, so I'm heading out as well."

She turned away from us and waved, walking off after the two men. They hadn't even opened their mouths to utter a

single word during our exchange.

Odd.

Were they mute, or perhaps just dedicated professional bodyguards?

I dismissed the thought from my mind, as it didn't really matter, and I had more pressing issues.

Like who was the assassin?

And where was Melina?

"I think she likes you," I said, nudging Kristan as they walked by. "She blushed, you smooth talker."

"You think?" he snorted. "Maybe, but then again, who wouldn't be interested in such a fine specimen? A true, valorous knight that isn't afraid to come to anyone's aid."

"Valorous knight, huh?" I grinned.

"Well, yes. I helped you out, did I not?"

I punched him lightly on the shoulder, eliciting a mock groan.

"I have some business to attend to in Eslant," he said, nodding ahead of us. "Where do you want to meet and when?"

"Why don't we meet at the Burning Bosom for dinner? We can discuss what's next."

Kristan nodded and walked off, pushing past a group of adventurers and disappearing into the crowd, vanishing almost like he'd cast a spell or skill.

Even stranger, not one of the guards seemed to notice him. He passed by without any questioning, which was utterly bizarre considering the heightened security.

I watched the spot where he'd been a moment ago and frowned.

"Did you see where he went?" I asked my mimic.

"No. Toothpick man gone."

"Toothpick man? That's a spear, not a toothpick."

“Toothpick. Good for big teeth.”

I rolled my eyes as I got in line.

This stupid asshole and his food analogies.

Dozens of other adventurers were already waiting or being questioned by the guards.

To my surprise, the guards didn't seem so aggressive in their approach, which was a first. Whenever something bad happened in the past the guards would rough anyone up. Then again, maybe that was another difference between the poorer areas of the city and the northern gate.

A short while later, it was my turn to be questioned.

One of the guards approached me, he was focused purely on my eyes. He had a strange air around him, and a too-stiff posture for my liking.

I'd never seen the man before, but that wasn't so strange with hundreds of guards in the mayor's employ.

He stood out in stark contrast to the ordinary guard, and I eventually realized it wasn't just him—there were a few other guards with the same permanently stiff posture too.

Where had they come from?

The man wore a silvery set of armor decorated with black and yellow lines of Orac Luferson, the mayor. A longsword was sheathed in the scabbard attached to his right hip, and a shield hung from his back.

A thick mustache protruded past the visor.

“Good day, guard,” I said, bowing my head a little.

“Good day, adventurer. I need to ask you some questions if that's alright?” his words were stiff and stern, and he spoke very quickly, almost like he was spitting out the words as fast as possible. It was phrased as a question but didn't leave any doubt that I would *need* to answer.

“Of course,” I said, pushing a false smile to my face.

“What's the purpose of your visit?”

I nodded toward the town and replied.

“I’m just heading home to the Burning Bosom, good guard. I’ve lived there for years now.”

He nodded thoughtfully, then took a step back and eyed me curiously.

“How long have you been out?” he asked. “And why is there blood on your armor?”

“I’ve been out for a day to do some lower-tier quests,” I replied, sharing with him one of the five kekuri quest notifications. He couldn’t see any details, but I could show him the name and status of the quest.

“And the blood?”

I thought I’d answered his question, but then I took a closer look at my armor and realized what he was asking about.

Most of the human blood on my body had dried by now, and I’d also washed off plenty of it in the river. He had keen eyes to notice those bloodstains. “I got into a fight with an adventurer. He didn’t make it.”

The guard snorted, then started laughing.

“He didn’t make it, huh? Very well. You can go inside.” He motioned for me to enter the town, but I had questions of my own.

“Are you at liberty to share what happened?” I asked, unsure of how he’d take it but desperate to know more.

He just shook his head. “No. Now go on.”

I pushed past the other guards and stepped onto the paved road leading south. It bordered the Sherazad estate for over a hundred yards. The wall made me think about Melina again, but after what’d happened yesterday, I knew I probably wouldn’t see her.

It was time to get a move on.

More guards milled around and adventurers walked with purpose. So I did the same and kept my head down, eyes

to the front, and thought hard about what to do next.

First, I'd need to go to the Adventurer's Guild and redeem the quests. Then I could talk to a staffer and get to my next rebirth stage.

Finally, it would be time for upgrades. I needed to check any new skills and spells I'd be able to get, go to the sundries and restock on arrows while getting my hands on some healing potions, then meet Kristan at the Burning Bosom.

I headed down the long, winding streets, keeping an eye out on the stone buildings lining either side of the road.

Many had broken windows and doors, crumbling patches of rock façade, and vines creeping toward the roofs and down the sides of the buildings. Despite sitting in the more wealthy part of town, many of the homes looked in a state of disrepair.

That was one of the sad things I'd noticed about Eslant. More and more wealth was going to the five noble families, and even wealthy people like the Hrenwar saw the writing on the wall. Their best bet was marrying into the upper echelon of nobility rather than trying to stake it out on their own.

Food stands and vendors were placed between buildings so as not to take up any walking space, and while some of the stuff they sold smelled enticing, I couldn't spare any money on snacks. Kristan had left me just enough money to get to my next rebirth stage, and none more.

Pulling the last meat skewer from my storage bracelet, I used my teeth to pluck a piece of meat off the long, thin piece of wood that dribbled with juice.

It was odd how storage perfectly preserved food and other perishables but killed living things like animals if they were placed inside. That was yet another one of the System's weird rules and regulations, yet none of us could comprehend its logic.

Maybe I should try it on Chester and see what happened, especially if he started talking back...

“You wish,” the mimic said. *“Fool. We bound together.”*

He made a good point there.

“Whatever. Make sure you behave.”

The creature scoffed and strangely didn't proceed to pester me with more insults. He just looked around us, seemingly enjoying himself. It looked like he liked living inside the city.

A city mimic—who had ever heard of such a thing before?

I made my way to the town square and past the fountain, then entered the Adventurer's Guild building. There were more guards than usual, but none of them paid me any heed. Instead, they stared out ahead and scanned the adventurers wandering about the place.

Like the guards outside, they were probably trying to find the Baron's attacker.

The guildhouse was much busier than the last time I was there, with dozens of adventurers standing around. The monster desk looked as glorious as ever, no matter how many times I saw it. Five of the six clerks were busy, all but the lady I met last time.

I headed straight for her, straightening myself and putting up an honest smile. Several adventurers looked my way, sneering and speaking just loud enough that I could hear their insults. Based on my outside appearance, I still looked like a trapper, and people loved taking their anger out on scouts whenever they were in a bad mood.

“Hello,” I said, eyeing her. Something was different about her, even though she wore the same dress.

Her hair was usually styled in a ponytail, but now it was braided instead. “New haircut?”

It never hurt to compliment someone or try and make their day a bit better.

“Yes, thank you, sir. What can I do for you?” she asked, her voice weaker than I remembered it last time. She sounded stressed out, maybe a little absent-minded.

Alright, something was definitely off, but who was I to pry?

“I want to hand in five quests. Can I do that here or do I need to wait for the general clerk?”

“Of course, sir. Can you share your—ahh, thank you,” she broke off and started looking at the info, which I already had pulled up.

There was no need to keep anyone waiting.

“Now, let me see—” she said before trailing off again. “Very good, sir. Five quests. That will be twenty-four gold coins in total.”

She pulled a small pouch from her storage ring and placed it in front of me. I picked it up and stashed the coins in my bracelet, then closed my eyes and groaned inwardly when I remembered that Kristan hadn’t given me the rest of the money.

Alright, not a big deal. I’d just have to come back later.

“Is there anything else, sir?” the young woman asked, her face set into a frown. “Did I—”

“No, I’m sorry, miss. I forgot to get the rest of my money so I can’t get my rebirth done.”

“Oh? That’s too bad, but we’re open all day.”

Her frown turned into a weak smile, and I couldn’t help but ask. “Miss, is everything alright?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she whispered, “But I’m not allowed to discuss my personal life or feelings. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, nodding in thanks. I figured it was worth a shot. Maybe whatever was bothering her so much was related to the Duke’s visit and the other recent strangeness. “I’ll see you later.”

I made my way back out of the Adventurer's Guild and stopped at the top of the stairs.

The weather was cooler than usual. It was mid-summer, and it shouldn't be this cool for months to come. Clouds were gathering far in the distance.

It was odd...

Normally, I wouldn't think much of the weather, but in conjunction with the looming bad feeling I had, that only made things even more eerie. There was nothing like unexpected gloomy skies to ruin a man's mood.

Still, I had somewhere to be—I needed the coins to get to my next rebirth stage.

"*Kristan?*" I asked, using our party chat to see where he was.

The message appeared in my vision, so I knew it was actually sent, but no reply came. Alright, maybe the man was asleep or already in the middle of chasing skirts. It was a mild annoyance, but I could respect his privacy.

I headed for the market, having no other choice.

Getting to my next stage was too important to lay off, so I'd try my luck with selling some of the looted gear.

The market was nearby, so I made my way there with a spring in my step. I was so close to getting to get my second rebirth that a grin spread across my face.

It would probably look ridiculous to any onlooker, but I didn't care. Years of hard work had finally paid off, even if I had cheated somewhat to get there.

There were eight guards at the market's entrance, which seemed like overkill as the items registered in the market couldn't be physically stolen. The System governed the sales and once anything was registered through the System, it was beyond human reach.

It was probably also because of the Baron.

“Gentlemen,” I said as I passed. They didn’t respond, but I was in too good of a mood to care. I was just so excited about finally getting my second stage rebirth that it felt like I was flying on a cloud. Nothing could get me out of my good mood, and I was basically lost in my own good feelings.

I headed straight for the counter at the center of the market building and greeted the clerk. “Hello. I’d like to sell some magical gear.”

The elderly man eyed me curiously as he straightened his gray robes, but then nodded.

His long white hair was tied in a top knot with a black piece of cloth. Glasses sat at the bridge of his crooked nose, threatening to fall off and get entangled in his long, messy beard.

“Show me your gear, young man,” he said with a low, stern voice. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was some kind of wise old wizard instead of a storekeeper. His whole appearance screamed age and knowledge.

I pulled the tank gear out first.

“Greaves, helmet, boots, and sword,” I said, placing them in front of the clerk.

He tapped each of the items in quick succession, and then looked back up at me, combing his hand through the ill-maintained beard.

“Would you like to sell your gear to the market, or let the System handle the sales?”

That was news to me. I didn’t know the market could directly purchase items instead of putting them up via the System auction. I’d never delved into the whole selling thing as I never had anything to sell.

“What can I get for these four items?”

“I will give you 130 for the rare greaves, and 30 each for the sword, helmet, and boots. It’s less than what the System offers, but you’ll get the money now.”

Considering I still had a bunch of other gear I could put up on the market, I accepted. The cold weather and the gathering clouds gave me a bad feeling, so I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. Besides, considering the benefits of hitting my second rebirth, it was just far more preferable to have the money now than later.

“I accept because I need the money, but I’ll place the other gear on the market.”

“Very well,” he replied before sending me a trade request. I accepted and stashed the pouch in my storage, feeling satisfied with my 319 gold coins.

Next, I placed the rogue’s uncommon dagger on the counter, the dual-wielder’s uncommon sword, half-plate greaves, and the spare belt.

I decided to hold off on all the other items and jewelry, just in case Melina might want it in the future. I didn’t know what she had equipped, if anything.

“Would you like for the System to automatically assign prices? The System takes the lowest current price for any given item on the market and offers it for one percent less. If there is no identical item, it generates a price after comparing what is available with what you’re offering. So for example, if there is no identical dagger, it compares the item to daggers with similar power and rarity, then assigns a price.”

“That’s fair, I guess,” I said and then nodded. “Yes, please. Have the market assign prices for a start.”

“Very well, young man. The market takes a ten percent cut for any automatic trade. The cut is not regulated by us, but rather by the System for providing the services and a safe environment to do business.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I replied.

I didn’t really care about any cut as long as I could fill my war chest. Arrows and potions were expensive, and so were repairs. Even more expensive still was better gear, and I would need it if I wanted to survive whatever life was planning to throw at me.

The old man registered the items surprisingly quickly and then handed me a contract. With that, I could get my money no matter which market I visited, even if it was in a different city. All of the markets were connected via the System, which made things very convenient.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” the old man asked.

“No, but thank you very much for your help.”

I bowed deeply and then offered him my hand. After staying with Kristan, I was in the mood to improve my manners. Hell, it seemed to do well for him.

The old shopkeeper seemed taken aback by my gesture but offered me his hand in return.

“It is too bad that the younger generation has lost all respect for their elders,” the man said solemnly. After a while, his solemn expression disappeared and revealed a tired old man who’d been working all day.

“I wish you a good day, good man,” I said, not knowing what else to say. It wasn’t as if I had this kind of encounter very often.

I turned to leave, and then stopped cold as I noticed a familiar young woman standing at the entrance.

She wore a smug expression, one that told me I was in for a world of trouble. It was the mage that escaped during our little forest skirmish.

She wore a red dress that fell to her knees and a black leather bustier. On the surface, it didn’t seem like the most practical outfit for combat, but mage clothing emphasized the essence woven into the cloth and the gems inlaid in the material, so I had no doubt it substantially boosted her power. The Hrenwar might have even given her a new item since she was the only survivor of their original party.

Her dark brown hair only reached to her shoulders and framed a freckled face with narrowed eyes. Her expression was a little too smug for my liking.

She'd only survived because I decided to let her go, the nasty little...

My heart skipped a beat, and my mind raced angrily, but only for a second. She couldn't do anything to try and hurt me as I was within the central square. Guards would quarter her before she even released a fireball my way.

"We need to talk," she said, raising her voice so I could hear her from where I stood. It wasn't that far, only ten steps or so.

"Hey, Chester. Can you check our surroundings?"

"No. Too many strong humans. Maybe they see me if I pop out," the mimic replied.

Damn it all.

Turning to the woman, I called out to her while keeping my distance.

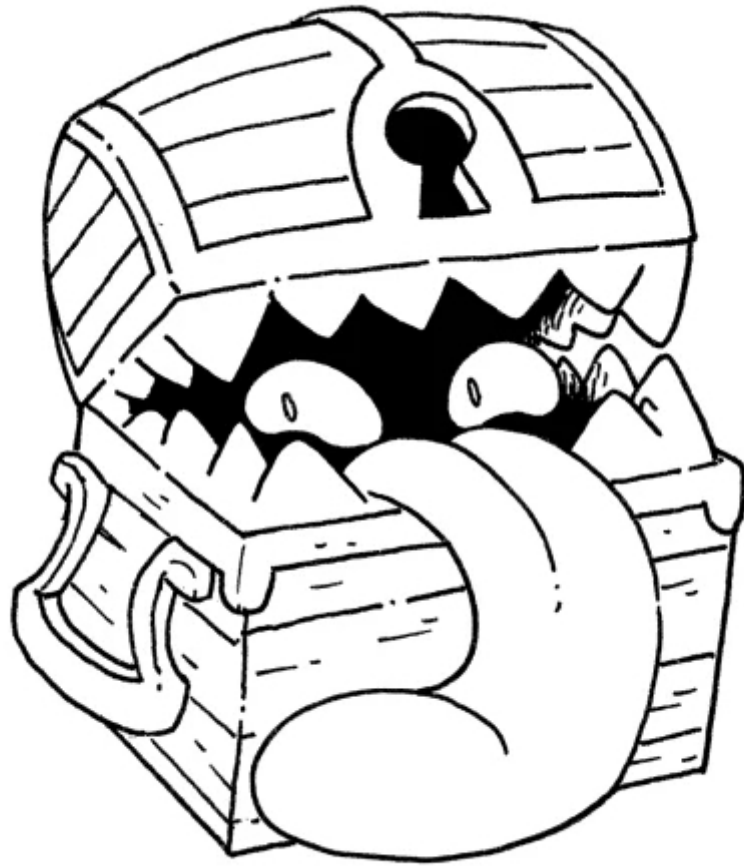
"What about?"

"The storage jewelry. That's all they want."

My hand went for my pocket on instinct and wrapped around the rings I'd looted off my first victims. It was a good thing that I hadn't sold them.

"In exchange for what?" I asked and regretted it immediately as I sounded a bit too hopeful for my own taste. It would have been better to try and scare her off or to act like the storage items would come at a heavy price. Years of instincts kept getting in the way of me putting on the tough guy act.

"You can discuss that with my employer. Now, are you coming or not?"



CHAPTER 21: SECOND STAGE REBIRTH

Go with her?

Why would I?

In fact, I was irritated just looking at the young mage.

“What?” she asked, raising her voice. “Is there something on my face?”

I snorted, deciding to joke at her expense. “That face would have looked a lot different with one of my arrows sticking inside.”

The young woman lowered her hands and balled them into fists as she stared hard into my eyes. She was genuinely enraged.

“You ki—”

She stopped herself from speaking and closed her eyes, visibly shaking. It seemed like one of the people—or several of the people—we killed had been important to her.

But then again, she’d come after me first.

“Where is your employer?” I asked, steering the conversation in the direction I wanted it to go.

“Both the master and the mistress are outside, sitting on a bench and waiting.”

“Any guards?”

“About twenty,” she replied honestly.

“But they’re all useless since the City Guard will cut them down.” I pointed out. “This unofficial bounty isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

She shrugged, and her angry expression shifted into one that looked somewhat bemused.

“But they’ll know your face,” she replied. “They’ll be there to attack you whenever you leave the city. So, what is it going to be?”

This was troublesome, and seeing as the guards were already on-edge because of the assassination, I didn’t want to play any games. Yes, technically I was obeying the law and the Hrenwar were violating it. But their family was much more important than me, and I knew how these things actually worked.

I thought for a moment before replying. Maybe there was a way to work things out in my favor, or at least delay the meeting until I was stronger. “Tell them to meet me at the Adventurer’s Guild in one hour. We can use their services to set up any contract or trade.”

A contract with the System telling them to get off my back—was probably the best way to solve it.

The mage shook her head disapprovingly.

“You’re only angering them further, but whatever. It’s your funeral.” Even though I’d let her live, it seemed like she didn’t have even the smallest ounce of gratitude. Her loyalty was to the family she served through and through.

She turned around and walked out of the market, disappearing down the long staircase.

I sighed in relief, feeling all wobbly on my legs. Sure, I could live without having to look over my shoulder, but the Hrenwar family, like any other nobles, wouldn’t want to keep any loose ends.

“*What?*” the mimic asked.

“*Nothing. I’m just curious about the Hrenwar. What do they really want?*”

“*Silence.*”

What the hell? He wanted me to shut up now? This situation was mostly Chester’s fault! If it weren’t for him, I never would have killed the Hrenwar! Then again, I would have died, but still, I wasn’t going to get into that now.

“*You’re a rude little box, you know that?*” I sniped back.

I could feel Chester rolling his eyes. “*No, not you silence. Silence dead son. You keep silent. Not to tell other humans. Alfonse said the same.*”

“*Yeah, that’s probably it.*”

That could be it.

Maybe they wanted me to be silent about their son and daughter’s deaths. It would be embarrassing for them if word got out that their kids died in an Easy-tier dungeon. Alternatively, maybe they didn’t want Falin and Jesabel associated with the coral cuffs. Not everybody was as blatantly brutal as Alfonse.

“*Well, I’m sure they also want the goods in the rings too, like the woman said.*”

“Sounds like we have to give up more shinies...” Chester groaned, with his emotions drooping like a sad trombone.

“It’s not like we can use what’s inside anyways,” I pointed out. I was also sure that the two rings would contain some riches, though I didn’t know what kind.

I’d think about that later.

First, I needed to get over to the guild and get my second rebirth. Only then would I be in the best position to deal with the Hrenwar and their guards.

With my hand on the storage bracelet, I hurried out of the market and across the square. I could see where the young mage was standing and I noticed her talking to an older couple.

Our eyes met for a moment as I passed them.

If the mage’s expression had been one of anger, the older man’s was that of searing hatred. If I had to guess, he was probably the Hrenwar family head—Falin and Jesabel’s father. Not much else made sense.

In that brief moment, I studied him. He was clad in a fine black suit that was a little too small for him. A top hat sat on his head, doing a good job of hiding the balding spot on his forehead.

The man looked over his hawkish nose at me, lips pursed into a sneer.

I pushed any thought about them aside and hurried back into the guild hall. The same young woman was on duty, and strangely, she smiled this time when I walked past the line of adventurers and stopped in front of her.

“I have the money, miss.”

“For your rebirth? That’s good news. Which stage are you going for and which package would you like, sir?”

I put my hand on the counter and showed her two fingers. In case anyone was following behind me, I didn’t

want to speak out loud. Maybe I was being overly paranoid, but that didn't hurt.

“It's hundred-twenty-gold coins, right?”

“Yes, it is, sir. I need you to pay the cost before we can begin, though.”

I pulled a small pouch from my storage and placed the gold coins inside, then handed it to her through a trade request.

She accepted and stashed the money away.

“Please, follow me.”

The young clerk walked out from behind the counter made of monster bone and waited for me to follow her.

“I will now briefly explain the process to you, sir,” she said as I fell in line with her. “Our attendants will prepare the rebirth chamber for you, placing one of the necessary ingredients in an octagram, one item per star point. Once they're ready, the second group of attendants will pour all the necessary essence into the summoning star. Then it will be your turn. You will lay in the center of the star and allow the System to start the process. Finally, you will randomly be assigned a subclass.”

That all made sense, but I had one more question.

“What are my chances for a better subclass, miss?” I asked curiously. “I know that there's no guarantee, but humor me, please.”

The clerk stopped and looked at me, then shrugged.

“You will have a thirty percent chance to get a rare subclass, and ten percent to get a legendary one.”

Forty percent, huh?

Knowing my luck, I'd get the worst of the worst ordinary classes, but I still needed to try.

Besides, my luck had been turning for the better recently. Maybe the same thing would happen here...

It'd be nice to have something that was my own strength, independent of Chester. The Adventurer Guild clerk turned back around and proceeded to walk down the long corridor. I followed after her in silence, thinking about what would make a good complementary subclass.

Problematically, there weren't many subclasses I could get at this stage. All the better ones were assigned at the third and fourth stages, but whatever it was, I hoped that it at least had some offensive capabilities. That was still the biggest bottleneck right now. I might have a lot of different weapons and skills, but none that allowed me to just barrel past my opponents with raw power. There was still some downside to being too diverse without specializing.

We stopped in front of a large, ivory-colored door. I reckoned it was made from bone, seeing similarities with the counter and desks at the guild hall entrance.

The woman peeked inside, exchanged several words with someone in the room, and then popped back out.

"Please, sit over there for a moment. I have instructed the attendants."

She pointed toward a sitting area off to my right.

There sat several comfortable-looking seats covered with red and black smooth fabric. Easily over thirty pillows were stacked in a corner, so I walked over, grabbed a few, and placed them in the seat, then sat.

The young clerk walked off to where we'd come from.

I sat there in silence, curiously examining the white walls, ceiling, and floor. I didn't know what kind of stone it was, but it was unlike marble, clean and without any discolorations or impurities. A single window was placed at the center of the wall, letting in ample light.

"Look at sky," the mimic said, noticing it before I did.

I stood back up and walked over to the window.

The clouds were dark and discharged lightning at a frightening pace. They were far out to the north from what I

could guess.

“Strange. I’ve never seen anything like it.” I said. *“Especially not at this time of the year. And it got so much worse in mere moments.”*

“I don’t like,” Chester agreed. *“Is...yes. Strange.”*

Just great. Now the mimic was agreeing with me. Considering that he was probably used to much weirder stuff than I was, it was a really bad sign.

“Sir, we are ready for you,” a voice spoke from behind me.

I turned to the door and saw a young man in a black robe standing there. He looked in his late twenties or early thirties with a bald shaved head.

A black tattoo that mixed regular words with strange runes and glyphs that I didn’t recognize covered his whole face.

“I can come in?” I asked.

“Yes. Please follow me, sir.”

I walked after him and stepped inside the room.

It was square, all white just like the waiting room outside, but the main difference was the mass of crystals growing from the ceiling. Most of them were yellow, some resembling stalactites, while others looked egg-shaped.

The sight reminded me a little of what Chester said. He was looking for a round, yellow gem. I didn’t think this was related to his evolution, but I resolved to keep an eye out just in case.

An octagram was carved into the floor and filled with a black and gold liquid mass that bubbled to the surface but never left the grooves.

“Please stand in the center of the circle and just relax. Once we activate the rebirth process, you will be asked to accept by the system. Please accept when it does, and then bite through the pain. It will hurt. A lot.”

“How reassuring,” I muttered. The first rebirth had felt strange, but it hadn’t hurt nearly as much as this man said the second would. Maybe that was just the way of the world, another strange quirk of the System.

“Good luck, sir.”

The attendant walked out, ignoring my worries, and closed the door, plunging the room into darkness.

Pulsating light spewed forth from the mass of crystals overhead, illuminating the room. I hurried over to stand in the center of the octagram and waited.

“Something wrong. I feel weak,” Chester said and stirred on my shoulder. *“I want to leave. Now.”*

His voice was worried and insistent, which made me feel very weird...

Chester hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary before when we were in the Adventurer’s Guild. Still, I’d been looking forward to the rebirth process for years, so unless it was something dramatic, I didn’t want to be bothered right now.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

The System prompt came just then, cutting Chester off before he could reply. The mimic grew from my shoulder and tried scrambling away, but I’d already accepted the process.

Light gathered at the very center of the crystal formation, a beautiful, oval amber crystal that looked a little like a dome, then washed over me.

A scorching heat passed over my skin, and the mimic cried in pain, filling my ears and my mind with gurgling screams.

My stat screen appeared before me, and then all the numbers started spinning before changing into random signs I’d never seen before.

“Run!” Chester cried, but it was already too late.

I couldn't move anymore as pain shot down my body, starting at the top of my skull. It was as if someone had bore a hole into my head.

Essence flooded down my spine, lower back, and finally my feet.

Normally, essence flowing into your body was a good sign. It meant growing more powerful.

This was just pure torture.

My skin bubbled and started peeling off, and then it all stopped, just as soon as it'd started.

I looked down at my arms and gasped in relief. My skin, in fact, wasn't gone.

Was it all in my head?

No, it couldn't be. The pain was still very real.

I fell to my hands and knees, gasping for air as the light started to die out, only a dull glow remaining overhead. Next to me sat Chester with his stalky eyes hanging limply down his boxy body.

"Are you...still alive?" I wheezed, still trying to gather enough air to breathe.

Chester's left eye twitched, and then he jumped to life.

The mimic's reply was slow, but he sounded a little different, and though he was confused, he seemed...kind of happy?

"Feel good? Maybe? What happen?"

I had no idea what happened, but something told me everything wasn't as it should be. Even more so as I looked up at the ceiling and found the massive oval crystal missing.

Alright.

Something was *very* wrong.

Then I put two and two together, realizing what had probably happened.

Fucking hell.

My eyes widened and I tapped my storage bracelet hurriedly. As I feared, the magic chest of evolution was gone.

Before I could say anything further, the door slammed open and several attendants, all clad in black robes, rushed into the room and gasped, one after the other.

They pointed at the ceiling and argued in hushed voices. My ears were still ringing and I couldn't make out what they were saying.

Two strong hands grabbed my arms and pulled me up to my feet.

Then I was dragged out of the room, my head swirling wildly as they pulled me along. I struggled to stay awake as we moved through the corridor and then rounded a corner, headed through another corridor, and then stopped.

I had no idea where we were anymore, my head was spinning so hard that I lost track of my surroundings after just a few steps.

Chester seemed very befuddled too.

Even though he'd grown more powerful, he was quite confused and just as pissed off that I hadn't listened to his warning and gotten off the rebirth altar.

A door swung open and I was carried inside, then placed on a bed.

"What is this? What happened? Who is that young man?" a voice spoke loud enough that I could hear their voice clearly.

I turned.

Whoever it was sounded authoritative. Were they in charge? would they know what had happened?

It belonged to an older woman dressed in a long, white dress. She had long red hair and thick eyebrows, a thin nose, and a sharp chin.

One of the attendants spoke, and she nodded, ushering them outside.

I just lay there, trying to regain my power, but I felt so weak that I couldn't even lift my head to look around the room. Turning to eye the woman took the last vestiges of my energy.

“So, young man, can you tell me what happened inside the rebirth chamber? I was just told that you absorbed the central crystal.”

I shook my head weakly and tried to speak, but no words came out of my mouth. All I got was a dull “aaah” noise, like I was a kid going to see a healer.

The woman tsked irritably and then produced a small flask, pouring some of the liquid down my throat. It was like a sloshing fire that coursed through my veins and threatened to burn me from the inside out.

I darted upright and jumped off the bed, swinging my limbs about.

What the hell? Had she poisoned me?

“That’s essence extract, young man. It will wear off in a minute, hold on.”

She stood and grabbed a large glass, then poured something into it from another flask, and handed it to me.

“This is just ordinary water. Drink. It will take some of the edge off.”

I took the glass from her and gulped it all down, but the water didn't help much.

Still, at least I was back on my feet again.

I started pacing back and forth, circling around the room for a good minute, trying to calm my racing mind, before I stopped and turned to the woman.

“Why am I here? Am I being held or something?”

“Held? Absolutely not, but you have destroyed the amber catalyst. The least you could do is give us an explanation.”

It seemed like she sensed my hesitation because her voice turned a little gentler. “And no, we won’t charge you. If the System willed it, then who are we to argue?”

I sat back down on the bedside and stared at her, trying to appear as honest as possible.

“I really don’t know, ma’am.” I started, trying to sound polite. “I just stood there in the center of the room and light washed over me from overhead. My body started hurting and I felt as if my skin was being flayed. Then it all stopped.”

She was silent for several seconds, but it felt as if the silence had stretched for a good minute. I had no idea what they’d do to me, or worse, if I’d be forced to pay up.

Despite what the woman had said, that was still the first thing on my mind as I had no idea how I could replace the crystal. How much gold did that thing cost? It was probably worth even more than Melina’s slave contract.

The lady got to her feet and combed both hands through her hair. It was an odd gesture, but it didn’t seem to mean much other than being stressed out. “Very well. You are free to go if there isn’t anything else. Are you well enough to walk? And is there anything else you need?”

“I can walk,” I replied. “And I would need a contract room if that’s alright.”

“Are you expecting guests?”

Hah.

Guests...

If you could consider Falin and Jesabel father a guest. But that seemed like another convoluted conversation in the waiting, so I just nodded.

“Yes, I am.”

“The contract rooms are near the entrance. Talk to the clerks there and they can see you in. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to come up with an explanation to the Guild Master.”

The woman swung the door open and walked out. I followed after her, but then an attendant motioned for me to follow him.

As I followed the attendant, I tried pulling up my information, but all I got was a simple note.

STATUS SCREEN STILL PROCESSING

Now that was even more weird, but I didn't say anything, as I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself. That was becoming a habit, but probably because of all the weird attention-gathering things that kept happening to me.

I would just have to wait and hope the stats became available eventually...

For what it was worth, I definitely felt stronger, and knew my essence had changed, I just didn't know in what way. Looking down at my body, I couldn't tell exactly how the System had reforged it.

Chester was silent, so I couldn't ask him for any details. I decided to just focus on my meeting with the Hrenwar family head.

A short walk later, we were in the lobby. I headed straight for the counter and smiled at the clerk. It was the same one as before, the one who'd looked worried earlier. Based on the fact that she was still sitting behind the same desk, I figured she was in charge of the scouts.

"Hello, sir?" she greeted me questioningly, looking me up and down. Now she just looked outright confused. "Can I do anything else for you?"

"Yes, you can. I need to rent a contract room for an hour."

She pulled out a piece of parchment and handed it to me.

"Please sign here and write down the guest's name. We will escort them in once—"

She paused for a moment, scowling a little. “Can you wait for a moment, please?” she asked, looking past me.

“Why certainly!” a new voice spoke from behind me. “I’m supposed to meet with that young man.”

I turned to confirm who the speaker was, and stared coolly at the Hrenwar family head.

“This fine gentleman will pay for the room,” I said, smiling a little to myself. “Could you please escort us?”

The man glared at me, his face turning red with anger.

I half-expected Chester to chortle about stiffing the Hrenwar some shinies, but he was still silent and unmoving. I could feel his essence pulsing through me, so I knew he wasn’t dead or anything. Seeing as he dealt with food comas, maybe this was some kind of essence coma.

Several minutes later, I was sitting across from the Hrenwar family head, who’d stiffly introduced himself as Beriz Hrenwar, in a small, square room.

It was barely half the size of the waiting room from earlier, but just as white.

Sterile was the best way to describe it. Everything was sparkly clean, yet also totally unfeeling. There was a single table in the center and two chairs across from each other. That was all.

His wife was absent, but that didn’t matter to me.

All I cared about was getting whatever this was over with so I could go to the Burning Bosom. I was hungry after the rebirth, and I felt dirty.

My clothes stuck to me and all I wanted was to get a change. I’d also have to ask Renata to clean my outfit as it was one of Aldon’s expensive sets. No way I was just throwing them away.

“Lord Beriz,” I said and pulled the rings out from my pocket, placing them in front of me. “Your mage said you wanted to see me because of these rings.”

His green eyes narrowed on me, but my eyes automatically wandered to his nose. It looked as if someone had broken it several times and healed it again. The shape just looked off.

“I will be short,” he countered, placing both hands on the table. He tapped his fingers against the wooden tabletop and looked down at the two rings. “I am ready to sign any kind of System agreement in exchange for those rings. I will cancel the outstanding capture order, and the Hrenwar family will stop trying to physically harm or capture you.”

I stared at him, trying to look as confused as possible. Beriz seemed like he was easily irritated, and I had a feeling he might give me some additional information for free. “My lord, why do you want to kill or capture me anyway? It’s not like I’ve done anything to you or your family.” I didn’t even mention the fact that I knew his bounty was unofficial.

His façade came crumbling down almost instantly.

“Alfonse told me about you! His tracking spell placed you with my children just before they died!” his eyes narrowed further, and he spoke quickly and angrily, almost spitting on me.

“Tracking spell?”

“Yes! A tracking spell was placed on the coral cuffs! That’s how we knew who they were with and where—”

He caught himself and closed his mouth, then hurriedly looked around as if searching for anyone who might have overheard.

“Coral cuffs, huh? I didn’t know about that,” I said, keeping my voice blank.

I took both rings and played with them for a moment. His left eye twitched and his lips curled further up to reveal a vicious sneer.

However, I could see the worry in his eyes.

He didn’t want information about the cuffs getting out, and he was afraid that the longer this conversation went, the

worse it'd turn out for him.

After meeting the Baron, I knew I couldn't get him in trouble for the cuffs—he was just too well-connected, I would need to somehow find an even bigger noble.

But the Hrenwar were a much smaller family, and that gave me an opportunity. It seemed like Beriz was a social climber just like Falin or Jesabel. Well, whispers and accusations were a great way to put a halt to that climbing.

“We will make a deal, Lord Hrenwar. It's simple. You will open the rings here, and I get to keep all their gold coins. If there are any items in there for the scout class, I want them as well. Equipment, skills, spells, accessories. Anything really. You can keep the rest.”

To my surprise, he agreed right away.

That meant there was something that much more valuable inside the rings. I thought for a moment, trying to amend our agreement, but then thought the better of it.

My main focus was growing stronger, then getting Melina back. The Hrenwar family was just a minor sideshow. Getting rid of these people was already more than worth it. If I got my hands on anything else, that was just a bonus.

“System, I agree to his terms,” Beriz said, staring at me proudly. Now that he had a deal at hand, all of his arrogance had suddenly returned.

“System, I want to clarify his side of the contract,” I said, wanting to make sure they'd never go after me again. “The Hrenwar family and anyone associated with them, past or present, will never again come after me, my friends, or my family. Once I hand over the rings, they will be actively forbidden from trying to capture, hinder, hurt, or kill me, my friends, or my family. They also won't be allowed to use unaffiliated parties to do the same, and they will cancel any existing contracts, bounties, hits, or whatever else they have out on me.”

I made sure I was as careful as possible, remembering a story Rolo had told me about his adventuring days.

Beriz's sneer turned into a small smile.

"You're not that stupid after all," he chuckled.

I couldn't help but wonder what it was with all these nobles and their appreciation for the criminal. It'd been the same thing with the Baron. It seemed like they loved nothing more than someone who knew how to slip one by someone else, which I guessed was a pretty good example of the kinds of people they were.

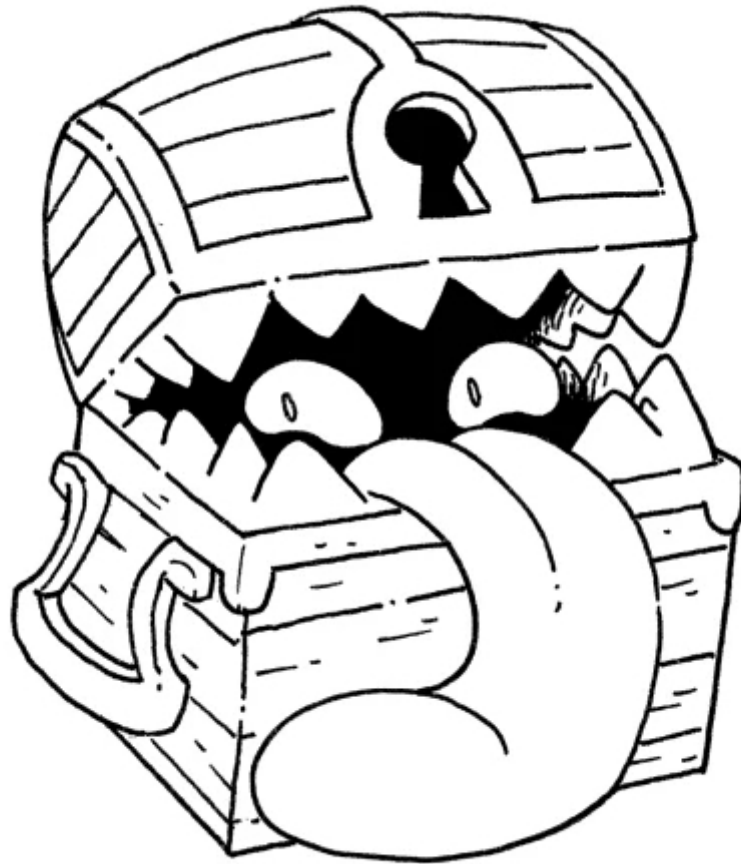
Hopefully, things wouldn't be like that outside of Eslant. Surely there were some nobles I respected, or who I could at least view as honorable, like Kristan or maybe the Duke.

Regardless, the System confirmed the contract after my amendment, and a prompt appeared before me.

I accepted and then handed the two rings over to the man. He slid them on his fingers and then went through their content.

Beriz placed two purses filled with gold coins in front of me, a skill scroll, an item I recognized as a finger tab used to automatically draw arrows, and a lot of arrows. About a thousand pieces to be more precise, and they weren't like the ordinary ones I'd bought, these had unique properties. There were two different kinds, though I decided to look at them later instead of fawning over the equipment right in front of Beriz.

"Very well, a deal is a deal. Goodbye, and may our paths never cross each other again," Beriz puffed, got to his feet, and rushed out, slamming the door shut behind him.



CHAPTER 22: BREWING STORM

After Lord Hrenwar left the room, I just stayed there.

I hadn't wanted to talk about it back when we were right in front of the Hrenwar or the Adventurer Guild staffers, but I was still very disoriented by what had happened, and I wanted to make sure everything was working well with respect to my second Rebirth.

"You back yet?" I asked, wondering what Chester made of this whole mess.

Chester absorbing the guild's gem...

It almost seemed improbable.

The mimic didn't reply, and the pressure in the back of my mind built further and further.

It wasn't like the usual dull, sleepy feeling, this was way more intense. Almost like an aftertaste of bitter food. Either my theory about him being pissed at me was correct, or absorbing the gem had somehow gorged him with power.

Either way, I guessed that if he wasn't in the mood, I'd just wait for him to speak first. For now, I'd appreciate the rare silence as I went through my new loot.

I first picked the two hefty pouches off the table and stored them in my storage bracelet.

The first pouch had 419 gold coins inside, and the other had 223, bringing my total up to 841 gold coins. It wasn't nearly where I needed my cash to be, but it would go a long way to pay for living expenses if I didn't splurge on new items.

With the emphasis on *if*.

That was another downside to my all-round build. If I was going to be swapping all the time, I needed a crapton of new items.

Next, I picked up the finger tab.

The finger patch was a special archer-use weapon that fit over the middle three fingers of my right hand, leaving the thumb and pinky open.

Finger patches let archers fire without having the drawstring chafe their fingers. Since I was more used to the crossbow—which used a trigger—I hadn't used one before, but I remembered seeing other parties I led using them.

Normally, the finger patch wasn't much more effective than gloves—although they did offer a bit more dexterity. But in this case, I noticed essence pouring out of the item.

It would probably add significant bonuses. Even to my untrained eyes, it seemed like it was in the “Rare” category.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Scorched Leather Finger Tab,
RARITY: Rare

SPECIALTY: Adds a 10% chance to
penetrate 50% of your target's defense.

REQUIREMENT: 50 Agility

BONUS STATS: +15 Strength, +15 Agility

I equipped the finger tab right away, only to find it replaced my hunting gloves.

That was an interesting piece of news.

A single finger equalled both gloves... I didn't find it that fair, but considering that the new item was better than the hunting gloves, I didn't mind the System's logic this time.

I would probably have to switch to the gloves every so often when doing quests, but the tab was just too damn handy considering that I needed to grow stronger as quickly as possible.

The tab was oriented toward killing armored monsters and adventurers. Not just that, but the tab also gave more stat points, which made them better even if they didn't have a specialty.

The skill scroll was next.

I tried activating it, not expecting much. Skill scrolls normally couldn't be used unless you were in a specific class. Since I was bonded with Chester—and could learn all skills—I expected the scroll to work under ordinary circumstances.

Now though, I had all 10 of my bonus slots filled.

I would probably have to pay someone at the Adventurer's Guild to remove a skill first before using it.

But to my surprise, the scroll warmed, and then briefly unfurled before dissolving into thin air.

Moments later, a new skill appeared in my skill window.

It didn't make much sense since I only had ten available skill slots, but then I noticed something interesting.

SKILL WINDOW [11/15].

SKILL: Shadow Seeker (E), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Attack the target with an invisible arrow and deal 230% extra damage. Inflict [Confusion] debuff with 25% chance.

COOLDOWN: 60 seconds

DURATION: 5 seconds

REQUIREMENT: 200 Agility

NOTE: [Confusion] causes the target to attack themselves or their own allies

The first thing that surprised me was the eleven out of fifteen possible skills. I remembered there was a clear limit of ten skills and ten spells, but now I could learn fifteen.

Maybe it had something to do with me getting to the next rebirth stage, or maybe even whatever happened to Chester.

Next, I noticed the skill's use requirement, which was a disappointment, but only a little bit—after all, I hadn't expected to get any skill at all.

I was still a ways off at the required 200 agility points, but that only made sense since it was an exotic rarity skill.

Exotic rarity skills usually had additional requirements beyond just purchasing the skill scroll. That being said, [Shadow Seeker] seemed exceptionally powerful, with lots of damage and a confusion debuff, so I didn't mind waiting for a while.

That got me thinking.

How much agility did Falin have if he hadn't learned it yet?

200 agility was nothing to sneeze at...

Thinking back, he might have been pretty close, but he probably just didn't have enough gear.

This kind of skill was probably worth a small fortune. I guessed that's where his riches had gone to.

Lastly, I picked up the two stacks of arrows.

Both looked mostly identical with long silvery shafts and arrowheads, only the feathers were different. Ordinary arrows had white feathers, but these were dirty white and faded yellow, almost like parchment.

However, when I touched the feathers, they were still sturdy and strong.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A NEW ITEM!

NAME: Basic Arrow 2, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: None

BONUS STATS: +10% Speed and Damage

NAME: Basic Arrow 3, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:None

REQUIREMENT: None

BONUS STATS: +25% Speed and Damage

I checked my storage space for the three stacks of arrows, which had all automatically compiled themselves in my inventory.

In total, there were 107 basic arrow 1's left, 634 of the basic arrow 2's, and 359 of the basic arrow 3's.

They would make for great ammo if used with the finger tab and the poison quiver, but I reckoned they were very expensive so I'd have to ration them. If I had to guess, Falin's arrows were probably somewhat worn out since he was constantly trying to pick them back up and re-use them again instead.

The upgraded arrows were expensive, so that made sense, and I'd try to do the same thing if possible. But even

then, arrows didn't last forever. I could always dramatically overfire and lose them, or they could get stuck in an enemy, or they could just break.

Despite having a bunch of the stronger arrows, I would stock up on ordinary ones for when dealing with weaker mobs. I'd keep the better ones for adventurers and boss monsters.

Having finished dealing with the immediate issues, I took a deep breath and pulled my status window open.

It'd finally finished loading, but I wasn't sure if I liked what I saw.

Things looked... different in there.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	???
STAGE	Rebirth 2	LEVEL	1
LEVEL ESSENCE	0%	SKILL ESSENCE	1,438
CLASS	???	SUB- CLASS	Greater Mimic
STRENGTH	92	ESSENCE	55
STAMINA	134	AGILITY	153
CHARISMA	38	FREE STAT POINTS	14
SYMBIOSIS	21%	STATE	Depressed
STORED MASS	0%	DIGESTING MASS	0%



The first changes I noticed were the red question marks for my race and class, as the color stood out against the white background.

The mere presence of question marks in any of the stats was worrying as the System should have been able to classify anything in this world.

I guess that's what you get when you cross a mimic and a scout. What a joke...

Next, I eyed the sub-class. It said Greater Mimic.

For me.

This was my window, not Chester's. This was the System's designation for me...Damon...

Goosebumps ran down my body as realization dawned. Chester had really become a part of me, and yes, it looked like the mimic had indeed evolved.

The evolution chest in my inventory was gone, and so was the yellow oval gem from inside the rebirth room.

Why would his evolution show in my status window, though? That didn't make any sense.

I closed my eyes, counted to ten, and then opened them again to check the information again, hoping the System had updated it.

It hadn't.

Then I took another calming breath and decided to shrug it off, resolving to adapt the best to my situation.

It wasn't *all* that bad.

My stage was now at Rebirth 2 and my level had reset to 1.

Good, at least that had gone according to plan.

With each rebirth, we fell back to level 1 before climbing up again. In order to hit the third rebirth stage, I needed to reach level 45, fourth rebirth stage was at level 60,

and so on. It was quite the climb, but I felt refreshed and optimistic, even if only in this particular moment.

Next I looked through my stats, checking to see how they'd improved. Agility had always been my strong suit, but it looked like my Stamina and Strength weren't far behind.

It was enough to see a difference, but not so much to put me in a whole new category. I was strong, but not a god or anything like that.

That being said, I was fairly certain that barely any adventurer at the start of the second rebirth stage was even remotely close to me in stats, though.

Strangest of all, my Charisma had gone up by ten points. I didn't know if that was normal or not, but I sure appreciated it. Between that and Aldon's clothes, I was getting more likable by the moment.

Then, I pushed past my stats to look at something far more strange and interesting. My symbiosis was up to 21%, which meant I was getting extra stat points from my monster companion.

All the Stored and Digesting Masses were gone, and the mimic's state now showed as depressed.

Now why in the world would it be depressed?

Maybe it was hitting him how long Melina had been gone?

That was probably it.

"Hey, Chester," I said, trying to get him to talk. *"I'll get you some cake in a minute, alright? Don't be so sad."*

Two eyestalks rose, one from each of my shoulders, and then swung about and stared me right in the eyes, looking at me from both sides. It was both disgusting and worrisome as the mimic had only been appearing from my right shoulder so far. This was another sign that we were bonding together.

Still, I didn't have time to think about that right now.

"Promise?" Chester hissed like a hungry cat.

“I’ll get you all the cake you want. Don’t be depressed, alright?”

“Ok.” Despite the promise of cake, his voice was still slow and stiff.

“Can we talk now?”

“No.”

Alright. It was worth a try.

The eyestalks pulled back into my shoulders and I almost instantly felt an emotional shift, showing that Chester was slowly moving into a better mood.

It wasn’t much better than before our very brief chat, but still...step-by-step improvement and all.

I finished going over Chester’s status notifications, and then saw I’d gained ten free status points on rebirth.

Ten points closer to [Shadowseeker].

That skill was my main focus right now.

Obviously, it was important to have both skills and stats.

That being said, I’d rather take a good offensive skill over high stats any day of the week—the best defense was a good offense.

Stats were only one half of the equation as everyone was made of flesh and blood. Me and Chester killing Maz demonstrated that best. A total nobody managed to kill someone in his late second or early third rebirth.

Flesh was still flesh and it would never be able to stop a cold, hard blade or a razor-sharp poisoned arrow. Stats only served to amplify whatever was already there, so unless I knew how to use my body, skills, and spells properly, all of it was moot.

A thought came to mind, and I frowned thoughtfully. The symbiosis factor indicated the stats Chester had shared with me. That meant he had to have his own stats and status window, right?

“Hey, do you have a status window?” I asked.

“Yes. Why?” his voice was a little more chipper than before. Normally, I wouldn’t notice that change in somebody, but since we were fused together, it was hard not to notice in this case.

“Because I want to see. That’s why. How do I open it?”

“Don’t know.”

“But you suddenly feel like talking again.”

“No. Go away. Get me cake.”

I cracked my knuckles and cursed under my breath.

Now I couldn’t really tell if he was depressed or if he was being his usual annoying and uncooperative self. Probably a mix of the two, but his depression was making me feel just bad enough that I didn’t want to curse him out or blackmail him with food.

Not being able to see Chester’s stats wasn’t that much of a deal, but I was still curious. I was sure his stats had risen fairly dramatically after his evolution because I would have otherwise only received several stat points each and not ten or twenty.

I closed my status window and storage inventory, then stood as I gathered my thoughts. I still needed to visit the sundries and buy Chester his cake.

Once I’d finished there, I’d go to the Burning Bosom and wait for Kristan to show up. Maybe I could even have a bath if he ran late.

I walked out of the small room and closed the door behind me, feeling like a whole new person.

Regardless of everything that had happened—and Chester’s depression dragging down on me—I was just in a good mood. People usually described the rebirth stages like euphoria, and they were right. It just felt good to be reborn through the System’s power as a new and better version of myself, even if that version had been compromised a little bit by Chester.

More power coursed through me than I ever possessed, and I was feeling more sure of my future than ever. Especially with Beriz having called off his dogs. For a while, I would still have to be worried, as I imagined that he'd already set certain things in motion. Still, the System oaths were technically unbreakable, so he couldn't go after me without suffering a severe price.

Time would tell.

I got up, and then left the long-abandoned contract table. Part of me wondered why nobody had gone in to check on me yet, but then again, there were a bunch of contract rooms, and it was probably one of the less popular ways to use the Adventurer's Guild, in large part due to the price. If I couldn't have pawned the price off on the Hrenwar family, I might not have used the System oath.

The entrance hall was empty of adventurers and all I could see were the six clerks.

I waved toward the young lady in charge of the scouts. If I had to guess, we'd be seeing a lot more of each other from now on, since I would have to return to continue upgrading my skills.

She looked rather pleasantly surprised by my waving. The Adventurer's Guild definitely had some pretty weird rules for employee behavior, making the lady sit there even though she was obviously bothered by something.

She paused for a moment, as if deciding whether or not to wave back, but I didn't want to get her in trouble so I turned toward the entrance and hurried outside.

Lightning lit up the darkness and thunder rolled across the city, drowning out any noise.

"What in the blighted hell is going on?" I whispered, turning to one of the guards.

The storm was getting worse and worse, going from clouds to rain and now to this. I hadn't noticed any of it while inside the contract room as it was sound-proofed, but now it looked as if it was the end of the world.

“Don’t know, don’t ask,” the guard on my right replied flatly. “Move along, adventurer.”

Before this, they wouldn’t even look my way, but now that I’d rebirthed to the second stage, he at least replied. That was the way of the world. The higher your rebirth stage, the better people treated you. Power was just as important—if not more important—than birth or standing.

“Thanks,” I said and made my way downstairs.

I didn’t wait and hurried to the sundries, wanting to stock up before I did anything else. I had a lot of gold to burn and wanted to make sure I wouldn’t get caught unprepared.

The wind buffeted my face along with the occasional raindrop splattering against my skin. It was cold, too cold for my liking.

This time of year was usually much warmer, and not just that, this kind of storm rarely visited the Eslant region.

“And it’s not even here yet,” I muttered, looking up at the sky. “The worst seems to be up north. Just how bad must it be up there?”

The square was mostly empty with only several stalls still open and several small groups of adventurers milling about.

An outsider might have blamed the rain, but I knew that wasn’t true. The marketplace was normally bustling rain or shine, since people always needed to trade in their loot or buy new items, though we hadn’t had a storm like this before...

I turned, looking at the gate.

I couldn’t help but think this had something to do with the Duke’s party and the chaos around the dungeon. Maybe he’d even brought some of the shopkeepers along with him?

This whole situation was so strange that I couldn’t help but wonder if it was natural. I’d bet my meager savings that something fishy was going on, but it wasn’t like I could ask anyone.

If only the System could tell us things. Wouldn't that be a kick in the balls, huh?

As a kid, I'd heard tales of faraway worlds where the System would actually speak with adventurers, sometimes mocking them and sometimes helping. That wasn't the case here though.

The sundries was already closing down for the day, so I hurried along a bit. The forges were quenched, and shutters had been put in place, preventing the heavy wind from carrying away tools, papers, and lighter goods.

Several store and smithy clerks were running around, tying some of the raw materials up with rope, while others swept the floors and cleaned the showcases.

I quickly stepped up to the counter. If they closed before I could do business, I'd be pretty bummed. Considering my bad feeling, I wanted full gear as soon as possible.

"Hello," I said, offering the lady behind the desk a friendly smile. "I'd like to do some business if you don't mind. And no, I won't waste your time looking around, I know exactly what I want to buy."

She looked up at me over the bent glasses sitting on the bridge of her nose. Her gray hair was braided and hung to her left side, giving her a slightly younger appearance.

Though she looked like she was in her early sixties, she wore worker's clothes—a leather apron, a white blouse, and brown pants—and her movements and words were quick, confident, and vigorous despite her age.

"You're just in time, young man. We were about to close shop."

I grinned at her and nodded.

"Yes, ma'am. I just came from the Adventurer's Guild. Hit my second rebirth after a few long years, and I'm very eager to buy items to go with it. I'd appreciate it if you can do me the favor."

Her eyebrows rose, and her sullen expression brightened just a little. She seemed the kind of person who grew happy at the accomplishments of others, which I admired.

“Well, I guess I could do you a favor, right?” She reached over the counter and briefly shook my hand. “What will it be?”

I hurried and pulled the three different types of arrows from my storage, and placed them in front of her. “I need these three types. Could you please tell me your price?”

“Certainly. How many do you want of each?” she asked.

“It depends on the price, ma’am, but I have 107 of these,” I said, tapping the Basic Arrow 1 type. “I’d like to walk out with two thousand of them total. That’s my first goal.”

The lady grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, then scribbled some notes down and looked up at me.

“I’ll give you the old stock for twenty-three gold coins if you want. Some have minor flaws, but they’ll do the job.”

“Sounds good,” I said and placed twenty-three gold coins on the desk in front of her.

Then I pointed to the type 2 arrows. “These I have 634 of. I’d like to have at least a thousand.” A thousand arrows was a lot...but considering the gold I’d received from Falin and Jesabel’s rings, I could afford it, and looking at the literal coming storm, I would rather be safe than sorry.

She scribbled some notes down again and nodded to the third type.

“How many of those?” she asked.

“I’d like 141 if possible,” I replied.

After several moments, she looked up and smiled.

“Another fifty-six gold.”

“Old stock?” I checked.

Though new arrows would be nice, my focus right now was on building up my ammunition, so I wouldn't mind older arrows so long as they worked just as good as the new ones. It was more nobles and stuff who were into getting items straight out of the forge.

I just wanted a good budget option.

The lady nodded and flashed me a grin, showing that she was missing several teeth. Considering the tough look of her work gear, I couldn't help but wonder if she'd lost them simply through age or in a fight. Though our entire interaction so far had been polite and enjoyable, I sensed she had a steely personality behind the guise of an old lady shopkeeper.

By the time we finished with all the payments, I was down to 762 gold coins, but I had my arrows.

"Is there anything else you need?" she asked.

"Healing potions," I said, nodding toward the shelf to my right. There were several different types, and every one of them had a different effect.

"What level?" she asked.

I thought for a moment, but I couldn't come up with a good response. In the past, I could only afford a single healing potion at a time, and I usually just automatically grabbed the highest level one I could afford. Here, I would actually have to make a decision.

"How much do they cost?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound too new.

She picked five different healing potions from the shelf and placed them in front of me.

"Level 1 goes for a single gold coin, level two goes for two gold coins, and so on. They're that much stronger as well, so if you get yourself with half of your leg hanging by the bone, you can use a single level three potion and it will do the work, but three level one potions won't. Keep that in mind."

I thought back to when Falin left me for dead.

I had a good potion then, and that'd made all the difference, even mending my muscles and internal tendons, aligning them all correctly so I could run again. I hadn't realized what the woman said—that three level one potions were actually shittier than a single level three potion. However, it seemed like my “just-in-case” mentality had wound up saving my life already.

That got me thinking. Gold was only worth anything if you got to spend and enjoy it. I didn't think too much about it and waved my hand over all the potions.

“Please, give me five of each. I don't want to regret not having a potion if I need it.”

She nodded as if I'd made a wise decision. That made me feel a little better, but then again, most shopkeepers probably thought it was wise for you to buy goods from them. “That's another 75 gold coins, young man. Anything else?”

I was down to 687 gold coins and knew I was splurging too quickly, but this was one thing I wasn't going to budge on. Staying alive came first, everything else came second.

“Anything else I can offer you? We have bombs, acid flasks, needle shots...you name it, we got it.”

“How much are the level one elemental spells?” I'd seen adventurers use them before—certain devices could cast basic spells for you, even though I didn't perfectly understand how. “What kind of contraptions are they stored in by the way?” I added, again hoping I didn't sound too new to adventuring.

The woman smiled though it looked kind and encouraging, which I took as a good sign. “Five gold each, and they come in flasks. All you need to do is throw them at your target. You can also hit the flasks with your bow if you're good enough,” she finished with a wink.

I closed my eyes and thought for a moment. This seemed too appealing to resist, especially since they could

complement by lightning spell. “Yeah, alright. Give me five each of fire and water, please.”

That left only one thing...maybe I could fill up my mimic for cheap. “Do you have any special types of rations? Something that’s really filling.”

She eyed me curiously and then shook her head. “No, we don’t, young man. This is not a restaurant.”

“Alright, my bad,” I replied, shrugging a little.

It didn’t hurt to ask. No harm done.

The old lady handed me ten flasks and then winced as a thunderbolt struck the front yard, splitting one of the bellows.

“There go our earnings,” she grunted, “We’ll have to repair that.” Then she hurriedly shooed me away. “Go. We need to close up shop.”

I stored the fire and water flasks, gave her a little bow, and then hurried out. I wanted to get out as soon as possible too.

The sky had darkened further and the clouds were now dark gray. Far to the south, the sun shone brightly. This was weird. Too weird.

I had only one more thing left to do before I could go back to the Burning Bosom.

Well, two.

Hurrying to catch the vendors before they closed for the day, I cast [Light Step] on myself, and moved across the square in under a minute.

Three stalls were open, and one of them was the guy with the meat skewers. He was busy packing them away when I stopped him.

“How many do you have? And are they all fresh?”

“Fresh?” he snorted, then looked up at the dark sky and winced as another lightning bolt struck nearby. “Yeah, they’re

fresh. How many do you want? I got almost a hundred of them.”

“How much for all?”

His eyebrows slid up and the middle-aged man straightened.

“Just what it cost me to make them. Ten gold coins.” He smiled a little to himself, and I could see why—nobody was out eating meat skewers on a day like today. I’d basically saved him.

I placed the coins in front of him and motioned for the man to hurry. He packed them up in neat stacks of ten, wrapped them in paper, and handed them ten apiece.

“Thanks. I was already worried I’d have to write them off as a loss.”

“You could have just stored them, you know?”

“Stored? Where? I don’t have a storage item.”

Now it was my turn to be surprised, but then I thought about it for a moment. He didn’t earn much, and even a cheap storage item was more than he’d be able to afford. Even more so if he had a family.

“You got kids?”

“Yes, sir. Three daughters.”

I chewed my lower lip for a moment, then added five gold on top. “Treat your girls to something. I’ll see you again in a few days.”

“Wait, I can’t—”

I turned my back to him and then hurried to the stall next to his, a tight smile on my lips.

It felt great doing something good for a change, even more so since nobody had forced me to do it. Tipping him had been my own free will, and that’s what made me proud.

I didn’t make much, and I wasn’t rolling in riches or anything, but now that I’d hit my second stage, I was a real

adventurer who made real money, not just a scout hoping for some odd coins.

As far as I was concerned, that was good enough for me, so now I just wanted to spread my good fortune to others.

Plus, it was just common sense to respect the man who made my favorite food. If I gave the cook some extras, he'd respect me back and not try to pawn off some stale skewers.

The second vendor was also busily putting his food away. My mouth watered as I saw all the fresh bread and pastries in front of him. Some were sweet, others salty, but all still fresh.

“How much for all of it?” I asked.

“What? All of them? I got enough to feed the entire square and then some—oh, wait. Everyone's gone,” he said, sounding irritated and sarcastic. Like the skewer salesman, it was clear this sudden storm had wrecked his business day.

I raised an eyebrow at his response and he sighed deeply, his shoulders sagging.

“I just heard you buy all the skewers from the guy next door for base price. Throw me a few gold coins on top and you can have it all.”

“How much is it?” I asked, not wanting to count.

“Twenty loaves of bread, twenty berry tarts, thirty pieces of baklava, ten containers of chocolate cookies, twenty apple flaps, and twenty pineapple buns. I haven't sold anything since setting up the stall an hour ago.”

“Oh, that's nice,” I replied, smiling a little to myself. “I have a friend who likes cookies. So, how much for everything?”

“Twenty-two...no, twenty-five gold and they're all yours. Containers and all.”

I nodded, counted the coins, and placed them in front of him. Screw it. I'd be out adventuring often, so having cookies around to please the mimic was preferable over Chester trying to take over my body.

“Got kids?”

He nodded.

“Two. One is three months old and—”

I added five more gold for his family as well and then hurried off to the last vendor. He was several stalls down, but I was there in a heartbeat.

“Hello, Tinko. Just show me everything fresh,” I said, already knowing what he’d have on hand. He was the guy I bought my cheese and ham from, before the fateful encounter inside the dungeon.

The other two salesman had been sitting around hoping for their fortunes to change, but I noticed Tinko was already packing up—not that that would stop me from buying from him. I liked Tinko, and like the other salesman, I wanted to get a mutually beneficial deal, taking his food off of him before it turned stale.

He looked up at me, his pale face wrinkling with surprise. Tinko was an odd sort of guy—no matter how long he stayed in the sun, he didn’t tan at all. I guessed with this storm coming, that wouldn’t change anytime soon. “Hey, why—no, I don’t care why you’re outside, but I shouldn’t be here.” He shook his head firmly. “Go home. This doesn’t look good, Damon.”

“Not before you sell me some stuff. Come on, hurry up.”

He frowned, bared his teeth, hissed like a cat, and then grunted all in a second. The cacophony of sounds was actually quite comical, making my favorite food vendor remind me of Chester. “Bah. You know what I got, so just tell me what you want?”

I rolled my eyes at his fake exasperation. “Come on now. Were you really going to throw anything away?”

“Throw—by the gods, no! I don’t throw food away.” It seemed like the idea mortified him.

I started listing everything I needed. “Give me some slices of cheese, some ham, dried beef, smoked fish—”

“Whoa, now. I didn’t bring much with me today. The weather and all.”

He showed me ten cuts of bright yellow cheese, all as thick as my clenched fist, ten slices of fresh, nice-smelling pink ham, five cuts of dried beef steaks double the size of my palm, and ten dried slammerfish, each the size of my forearm. The fish barely had any bones in them so they were a favorite around here and yet still pretty cheap.

“Fifteen gold.” Unlike the other vendors, this wasn’t a deal. I’d bought enough from Tinko to know this was his base price.

I scowled. Despite the coming storm, I still wanted to bargain a little. “You trying to rip me off? Come on, make me a deal.”

Tinko puffed up his chest, looking like he was going to explode. “I already am, you ungrateful—Every day at my stall is a—How dare you imply—” He kept starting sentences only to break them off, too indignant to finish.

“Alright, alright!” I laughed as he was about to hit me with a piece of wood. “I’ll take it all from you at fifteen, so go home early. Don’t let the storm catch you.”

I added two gold on top of it.

I knew he was a loner without a family to take care of, but I still felt obliged to tip him as well as I’d done with the others, especially after all the years buying from him.

Technically, his sandwiches *had* saved my life by allowing me to bond with Chester and kill Aldon’s murderous party, so there was that.

“*So much food. Give me some,*” Chester said as I hurried back across the square and toward the bridge that would lead me back to the Burning Bosom.

“*No, I’m not giving you any yet. It’s for later.*” Yes, I’d bought the cookies and others for Chester, but that was for an

emergency, not for him randomly pestering me. *“I’ll buy you some cakes, alright? Not giving you any of this, it’s all for me.”*

“Bad friend,” Chester replied, his voice peeved.

“Bad—you little bastard! Did your old friend feed you cake?”

“No.”

“Then why are you an ungrateful little—”

“Hungry! Consume all mass! Sad! In pain!”

In pain my ass, the mimic was just itching for a snack.

That was the problem with Chester. The fact that his depressed personality was just as annoying as his regular personality made it tough to sympathize with him even though I was in a good mood.

It took me about ten minutes to hit up the bakery.

Miss Fleur stood at the window and looked up into the dark sky. She didn’t even seem to notice me when I walked inside.

There was no one else besides her and me, which was just how I liked it. I didn’t feel like explaining why I needed all the cake.

“Miss Fleur,” I said, stopping in front of the cake display.

She only had seven of them, two were covered in chocolate, three were topped with wild berries, and two were all cream. They were pretty expensive, I knew as much, but I’d promised the mimic I’d get it some cake, so here I was.

“Damon. You here for a slice of cake?”

I smiled at her as she pulled her long brown hair back into a ponytail. The middle-aged woman had blue eyes that seemed to shimmer every time she smiled and a tiny nose, perfect white teeth, and the happiest smile I’d ever seen. Seeing her had always been a huge plus on any day of tough scouting, and today was no different.

“I’ll take all of them, Miss Fleur. That’s thirty-five gold coins, right?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but then stopped and nodded. I thought she would just happily sell me everything without asking questions, but after a moment, she must have realized she couldn’t resist.

“Why do you need—”

I put my finger to my lips and shook my head.

“Don’t ask, please. I just need the cake.” I placed thirty-five coins in front of her and winced inwardly. That was a lot of money for very little food. Still, it would help out Miss Fleur, who’d always been kind to me, and it would get Chester to shut up.

Win-win.

She took the money and then opened the display from the inside. I took each of the cakes and placed them in my storage just like I’d done with all the other food and snacks.

Then I shot Miss Fleur a friendly wink and hurried back out. She winked back and waved, clearly happy to have cleared out all her stock at such a fortunate time.

“Feed me!” Chester hissed. *“Now!”*

One of its eyestalks rose from my shoulder and slapped my cheek. I glared at it.

“Stop it!” I snarled. Thanks to the mimic’s hiding skill, people probably didn’t see the eyestalk, but in a weird way, that just made things worse, as it’d seem like I’d flinched for no reason. *“Give me a second, I’ll feed you in a bit. Let me hide from prying eyes first.”*

I hurried across the street and then hid behind the same crates Melina and I’d hidden behind when we first entered into town, then pulled the first cake out from my storage.

It was a cream cake. Chester gulped it down, so I fed him the second cream cake. Then two berry-topped cakes, and then the third.

Before long, it felt like we were in a factory or something. My hand was like the belt delivering food, and Chester's mouth was just disposal.

"You want to leave anything for later?" I complained. *"I'm not spending thirty or forty gold on cake again any time soon."*

Chester burped from both of my shoulders at once, the noise resonating in my ears like I was in a cave.

Gross.

I shook my head and shivers ran down my body from the mere thought of eating five cakes.

"I need all. Feed me. Friend." His voice lilted a little, like he was trying to sound cute.

"Friend my ass." I grouched. *"You just want me to give you cake."*

"Yes. You are my waiter!"

Well at least he was honest.

I rubbed my forehead and pulled the next cake out. The mimic was a very bad liar...which was a good thing as he wouldn't try to keep things from me.

I checked its mass in my status window and saw the stored mass had gone up to seventy percent, while my Digesting Mass was up to a hundred.

Now that was handy.

It seemed like the cake was quickly filling up his storage.

If cake could place him in a food coma when I needed him to stay quiet, then just that information was worth the thirty-five gold coins.

Indeed, having eaten the cakes, Chester's presence pulled away to the back of my mind as I walked out from behind the crates.

Thick raindrops struck my face, as the rain continued picking up, growing stronger by the second until it was pouring buckets.

I stood there in the rain, watching the northern sky worriedly.

Something was going on, I could feel it.

But what in the world could I do about it?

A ruckus around back behind the Burning Bosom tavern drew my attention and I made my way back and stopped next to the crates.

“What’s wrong?” Chester asked.

“Shhh!” I replied. *“Something is happening over there!”*

I took a furtive look around to make sure nobody saw me eavesdropping.

Then I climbed onto the crates and used [Mimicry]. Wood split across my body, and this time, I turned angular and boxy instead of like a barrel. Even after transforming into something without eyes, I could still see with essence. I supposed that was how mimics worked, since they didn’t bulge out their eye stalks and tendrils until they knew for sure something was coming, so using my magic, I peeked through a hole in the wooden fence.

What was going on?

To my surprise, I found Renko laying on the muddy ground with three burly men standing over him. He didn’t even look panicked or afraid, which was an oddity. Not just that, but he wasn’t pleading with them.

Instead, *he* was cursing and threatening *them* instead.

“I paid you to get rid of him! Not to let the bastard go!” Renko hissed.

Get rid of him?

Who? Was there someone Renko didn’t like?

Fear clenched in my chest.

Was he trying to get rid of Rolo?

It always felt like Renko was glowering at the two of us whenever we spoke.

I took a closer look at the men, and then I understood, or at least I thought I did.

These were headhunters. I could see it from the skull tattoo on the back of their necks.

Head hunters...Aldon's party hadn't known anything about the hit on me, and neither did the other party Kristan and I killed. There was a fundamental difference between bounties set by nobles and bounties set by ordinary people.

Families like the Sherazad or even the Hrenwar would come at you directly.

Ordinary people—like say a waiter at a tavern—would just pay thugs.

But did that mean...

Was that...no, it couldn't be, right?

Why would Renko—that didn't even make any sense!

“Lord Beriz is out, so it's just the three of us, and we're out as well,” one of the three men spoke with a clear, commanding voice.

It didn't leave any room for bullshit. “There's a rumor that anyone going after him will be killed. Either he's insanely powerful, or he has a protector. Two noble parties disappeared a few days ago, and no matter the hit to our reputation, I don't want to risk it. Here, have your twenty gold coins back.”

The man poured the coins out from his pouch and they all landed on the muddy ground.

Renko squawked indignantly, but the man just leered at him.

“I'll give you a friendly warning, Renko. Let it go. Sometimes it just isn't worth it.”

“It is!” Renko said. “I hate him! I can’t stand the sight of his face! The way he looks at my sister...it’s disgusting!”

I frowned, unable to wrap my mind around what he just said.

In all the years I spent in the Burning Bosom, not once had I looked at Renata in the manner he described.

If anything, I was probably one of the only men at the tavern who *didn't* think of her that way, what with all of Renny’s flirting and the fact that she was with Rolo.

What a psycho.

Renko must have had a screw loose—or two.

“We consider this matter solved. If you want him dead, then do it yourself. Now goodbye, Renko,” the man finished speaking, then turned around, his voice brokering no disagreement.

It was obvious that these men were pros, and I was glad not to have to deal with them. Kristan, Chester, and I could have probably taken them in a fight, but there was no need to risk.

The man turned to his companions and walked over to the wall on the other side of the backyard.

He climbed on one of the barrels and jumped over, the two others following right after him, their black capes fluttering behind them and then disappearing.

I eyed Renko for a second longer as the bastard greedily grabbed the coins and stashed them away in a pouch, then disappeared into the tavern.

Taking my time for everyone to leave, I changed back and climbed down as well and stopped at the corner of the building, leaning my back against the stone wall.

Fat, cold raindrops slammed into me, but I didn’t care.

I wasn’t even worried about the storm anymore.

All I felt was grief and worry. I thought I had a real home at the Burning Bosom, and part of me had even been

relieved when Alfonse caught us last night, as it meant we wouldn't have to flee.

But now, I'd accidentally seen something I shouldn't have, and now I wasn't sure if I was better off or not.

Renko and I hadn't seen eye to eye over the last years, but I'd never really offended or hurt him. He, on the other hand, did cause me a lot of distress along the way.

Constant distress, and all because of his absolutely delusional ideas. Fucking hell. I should have been the one putting a price on *his* head.

"What is it?" a now familiar voice asked. "Why are you out here in the rain?"

I turned and grinned at Kristan, wiping all my doubt away.

If I hadn't misunderstood and Renko was the one who put a bounty on my head, then I couldn't stay here anymore. It would only cause unnecessary death and sorrow.

But now, at least I had a friend with me—someone who was upfront, honest, and willing to fight by my side. Sure, Kristan and Renko could both be pretty psycho at times, but give me an honest well-meaning psycho over a delusional backstabbing one every day of the week—no, every day of the century. I pointed inside.

"Don't worry about it, let's go. I think it's time I left this place sooner rather than later. But let's go in first. I want to say goodbye at least."



CHAPTER 23: THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

I pushed the door to the Burning Bosom open and found Rolo sitting on a barstool at the bar, going through his ledger. A lone candle flickered in between Renata and him, and the two were glaring at each other.

The two were arguing about something, that much was clear. At this point, it seemed like the arguments were growing further and further.

It was either their income, which always stagnated a bit this time of year, or it was about the dress she wore. This one had a high slit that went all the way up to her hip.

“I like this place,” Kristan whispered, eyeing Renata.

I elbowed him and shook my head just a little.

“We can talk about it once we’re gone, but not now.”

“Whatever you say, mighty leader,” Kristan replied, snickering a little.

I wasn’t in the mood for an argument between Kristan and Rolo, especially not on the day I planned on leaving for good.

It was kind of funny how things turned out. Yesterday, I came in thinking I would pack my bag and go...and now I was thinking the same thing today, albeit for a very different reason.

I just wanted to find a place to settle down and relax, but it seemed like fate constantly had other plans for me.

“Oh, and congratulations on your second rebirth,” Kristan added. “The essence radiating off your body is different. It is almost frightening.”

I wanted to ask if that was unique to other second rebirth adventurers, especially since Kristan had probably seen many of them before, but I was interrupted before I could reply.

“Damon!” Rolo yelled, finally having spotted me. “And you’ve brought a friend. A noble no less.”

Thanks to his clientele, Rolo could spot a noble from a mile away, even if they were from the other side of the continent.

The tavern master closed the ledger and then hurried over to us, shaking my hand and then studying the crimson spearman.

Kristan evenly met Rolo’s eyes, but smiled and bowed politely. “My name is Kristan, good host. Do you have anything to eat and drink?”

Rolo bowed in return and then pointed toward the table next to the hearth. A fire was blazing inside, illuminating most of the dark room.

One of the two only windows sat on the wall next to the table. The rain was picking up even further, which just felt

ridiculous, I could tell how bad it was, as it hit against the leaden glass window panes almost like someone was casting some kind of water spell.

We sat down, and I waved for Renata.

“Sister? Can you do something for me?”

Renata started a bit.

I didn’t call her sister often, and it was usually during emotional moments. Well, considering what had happened with her brother, I was definitely feeling emotional right now.

Still, Renata joined us with a spring in her step. It seemed like her arguments with Rolo never bothered her, which was the problem—they deeply bothered him, and she didn’t seem to notice, or care. She eyed Kristan and played with a lock of hair, but replied to my question.

“What is it, Damon, hon? And who is this fine gentleman?” The red-haired woman eyed Kristan a bit too hungrily for my taste, but replied to my question first.

“His long-lost brother,” Kristan said, surprising all three of us.

A plate shattered behind the bar, and I turned to see Renko standing there with a gaping mouth, ogling Kristan. So, he was done changing and stashing away his money. And from the looks of it, the idiot thought that Kristan and I were literal brothers.

How could we possibly be related? We looked nothing alike.

“Long-lost...brother?” Rolo asked with a hint of confusion.

“No, good host, we are not bound by blood, but by an oath. He came to my rescue when I was...wounded.”

“Wounded?” Rolo muttered. “You? Just going from your looks, young man, I’d guess you could get hit by a fireball and just shrug it off.”

“Perhaps,” Kristan chuckled.

Rolo's confusion seemed to be rising further and further, which made me wonder why Kristan was introducing himself in such an odd manner.

It seemed like another one of his queer moods, but still, I was very glad to hear it, especially after what I'd found out about Renko. Out of the corner of my eye, I stared at the counter, totally unsure of what to say or do.

I wanted to just go in and out, but what if I told them about Renko?

What would happen then?

Around me, the conversation continued. Rolo and Renata asked Kristan for details, but in typical fashion, he parried their questions.

"Now, do you have anything we could eat and drink? We are rather famished."

"Renata? Can you—" Rolo started to say, but I held my hand up.

"Wait. Do you have any hot water? I'd like to have a quick bath and get my clothes cleaned and dried. Could you do that for me while Kristan eats?"

Getting in the bath would help me think about everything that happened.

Rolo placed his hand on my shoulder and nodded for me to follow. I got to my feet and slid out from behind the table.

"*Kristan, behave,*" I said over our party chat. He didn't respond but winked at me as Renata leaned over the table and started chatting him up.

I had a bad feeling about leaving the two of them alone, but if Rolo didn't mind, why would I?

It was a little weird seeing Rolo so seemingly unjealous, but the old man's life was his own, and he could do whatever he wanted.

We passed next to the bar.

I waved at Renko, not wanting him to notice any difference in my behavior, and then disappeared through the door after Rolo. I watched his back a little wistfully as I stepped after him. He was my adoptive father and a very old friend. It felt wrong for me to leave this place, especially because Renko was so clearly in the wrong.

Sure, I wanted to spare Rolo and Renata the grief of finding out about Renko's murderous impulses, but was it really the right decision to just leave?

A psycho like him might try something even worse if left to his own devices. Who was to say he wouldn't get mad at Rolo eventually?

A staircase and two corridors later, we were in the bathroom. Rolo played with the essence heater below the large, wooden tub, which as always looked more like the bottom half of an oversized barrel.

Rolo pointed, "Get inside, I'll clean your clothes while you bathe. I think it's time we had a chat anyway."

I frowned, not liking his tone or where my mind took me.

All kinds of scenarios flashed through my mind.

Rolo sounded weirdly perturbed, and I hadn't heard him sound that way in a long time. Sure, arguing with Renata was one thing, and dealing with irritating customers another, but he'd never sounded so unsure of himself.

I couldn't help but wonder if he was maybe terminally ill and dying or something.

Silence reigned over the room until I slid into the water and dipped my head in, then resurfaced.

Rolo was already busy spraying my set of clothes with essence-infused water. The cleansing magic served to remove dust and grime much faster than normal.

I waited for him to finish before saying anything. He beat me to it.

“I’m leaving Renata,” he said, his voice quivering. “I can’t stand it anymore. The wounds during my adventuring days hurt less than what she does to my heart.”

I frowned.

As far as I was concerned, it was about time. I liked Renata, and I knew that she loved Rolo in her own way...

But the two just weren’t compatible, not at all.

“I...did see that coming, I guess,” I muttered. “Still, I think she cares for you, but not in the way she should.”

He nodded and turned to me, a lone tear sliding down his cheek. I’d never seen Rolo that hurt, and I felt my guts constrict at the sight.

It was a damn shame. The two loved each other, but with the constant arguments, it was clear that they were unhappy together, or at least, Rolo was.

Renata always seemed to take the arguments in stride, always blowing Rolo off by the end of the night...which was how they’d landed in this mess to begin with.

“But it’s alright, you know? She helped me build this place, so I can’t complain,” Rolo said, shrugging his shoulders and trying to bite back his pain.

“Then how will you split up?” I asked.

“I thought of two ways. I can either pay her off, or I can take my share and leave. Go work for someone or move to the big city. Whatever is fine with me, as long as I don’t have to see her again.”

His voice turned terse at the end, and it was clear that this wasn’t a random whim. Rolo was the kind of person who thought very hard before making big decisions like this.

“So it’s that bad?”

He nodded, then turned back to my clothes and started washing them.

“I had a bounty put on my head,” I said. Now that I knew Rolo was leaving Renata, I didn’t feel bad about telling

him at all. I thought he'd be surprised, but he never stopped scrubbing. "It was Renko apparently."

Rolo stiffened a little, but by the way he stood, I could tell he wasn't truly surprised, which was all the more damning. It wasn't just me—Rolo also thought that Renko was psycho enough to put a bounty on someone who was basically a family member.

"Doesn't surprise me. That rotten kid has no love for either of us, which is another great reason why I want to leave. Back when things were good, it was worth putting up with him for Renata, but not anymore."

I watched him work for a minute as it thundered outside.

There was a single small window in the bathroom. Water had risen by another three fingers outside, and it showed against the glass.

I frowned, thinking to myself.

"How much do you need to start over if you were to leave tonight?" I asked.

A seasoned adventurer like Rolo could travel in this weather. He might have gained some weight while working as a tavern master, but Rolo was still tough, and he still had his stats, skills, and most importantly, his experience.

But looking at the rate this was going, not even Rolo would be able to travel if he waited any longer. And knowing the man, that'd be hell for him. He was the kind of person who wanted to follow through right away once he made a decision, which I respected.

Besides, the sooner he got away from Renko, the better.

"I've got enough, but I don't want to leave her without anything," Rolo replied flatly. "But look at the weather. I can't leave her alone—"

I shook my head. "Go. Tonight. Just leave. I'll give you some extra gold coins so you can start out fresh."

He jolted a little, surprised. “Extra gold—”

I waved him off. “Let’s just say I got lucky. And don’t think this is goodbye between us, old man. Once I need a new place to stay, I’ll look you up.”

Rolo frowned thoughtfully, and I could tell what he was thinking. I knew the old man too well, and I knew he wanted to get out too.

“By the way,” I added. “I got a spare storage item, you can have it. We’ll just have to bind it to you.”

Rolo’s eyebrows almost flew past his forehead. “A spare...what? People would kill me to get their hands on such an item.”

“They would, so that’s why you will keep it hidden,” I said, grinning.

Rolo harrumphed. “Of course I will. I’m not some naïve first-timer. Still, you’ve grown strong now, Damon. I can tell. I think you’ll manage without me just fine—well, better than just fine actually. That’s another reason I feel comfortable leaving.”

He nodded solemnly and pulled my clothes from the basin, then spread them over a hot stone plate. Steam rose as the water evaporated.

“I’ll go to Moradon,” he said, shooting me a smile that was half-hopeful and half-sad. “I’ll start over from scratch or maybe throw my lot in with someone. If I survive the trip.”

Moradon was far to the south, which was a relatively safe territory. There were numerous dungeons, but they were mostly easy enough to clear, and not just that, the monsters roaming the land weren’t of that high level. Unless he had shitty luck and ran into a boss or unique monster like I had, but that was the kind of thing that could happen to anybody.

Still, I hoped that the next time I saw Rolo, he wasn’t bound to a gremlin or a kekuri or anything like that...

Rolo nodded to himself, firming his decision. “I’ll iron these for you and then I’m heading up to tell her the news. I

expect her to run to you, so that's when I'll leave, Damon my son."

He left the clothes hanging on a stand and walked out, closing the door behind him, but not before calling back over his shoulder one last time.

"Visit me in Moradon, alright? I'll keep a room ready for you. This isn't a place you want to grow old in. You're meant for greater things."

I let out a long sigh, frowning.

The problems between Rolo and Renata bummed me out. Sure, they were far from a picture perfect couple, but still, I liked each of them as individuals and wished things could be different. Their split, and Rolo leaving, really felt like the end of an era.

Frankly, it was hard to process, even after all the other crazy changes in my life.

Still, there was nothing I could do about it.

I shrugged and decided to relax. Sighing again, I slid back under the surface, wanting to rest underneath the warm water, and then two hands suddenly grabbed me, pushing me down.

A familiar face appeared above me, leering maniacally.

It was Renko.

Two rows of teeth grew from my right shoulder and snapped at his arm, biting it clean off below the elbow.

Renko cried out just as thunder rolled across the city.

Blood seeped from his shoulder as Chester hastily snarfed down his arm, sending even more blood and flesh flying into the tub. Soon, my peaceful bath had turned blood red. "*No, don't kill him!*" I snapped at Chester, gasping for air as I resurfaced. The mimic wasn't having it.

I could feel its emotions were in turmoil, wanting to end the barkeep then and there, but something was keeping him back. Normally, my emotions wouldn't be enough, but

there was something else there this time, I just didn't know what.

"He hurt friend! He hurt me!" Chester shrieked.

"No, look, you took his arm! No need to take his life!" I angrily replied.

Renko slipped on the wet tiles and fell on his back, crying out.

"Help! Help!" he wailed.

But it was no use.

He'd closed the bathroom door behind him, and like many of the personal rooms in the Burning Bosom, the walls were soundproof so that Rolo and Renata would be able to get away from their customers when they were trying to relax.

Renko had closed the door behind him, thinking he could end me without anyone realizing, but now it meant his doom.

Chester finally seemed to get over the indecision and separated from me, hanging by the fleshy thread that connected us. I could feel the anger almost radiating off my body.

It was weird seeing the mimic this angry and upset. I could feel every ounce of emotion so much stronger than any time someone else tried to have a go at me. Maybe it was because of my rebirth and his evolution, or maybe it was something else.

Whatever the case, there was no stopping Renko's death if Chester decided to attack him.

"You...hurt...friend," the mimic hissed, snapping its teeth toward the terrified young man. He was frozen in place and unable to even move as Chester's teeth snapped ever closer to his face.

It was weird.

It felt like Chester was genuinely furious that I'd been attacked.

I didn't know he cared about me so much...

In a weird way, it was touching, but I still wanted to put a stop to this. Killing Renko would hurt Renata, and seeing what Rolo had probably just told her, I thought she was hurt enough for now.

I was even willing to risk letting her psycho brother live if it'd help.

"Stop," I said, finally snapping out of the stupor and tugging at the fleshy strand. "That's enough!"

The mimic snapped its head around and I froze. Seeing it so up close and in all its monstrous glory had a very sobering effect.

"No one hurt friend and live. I eat all!" he shrieked

"But he didn't hurt me! He just—"

"Try? Yes, and now he's tried for the last time," Chester said, his voice laced with menace and righteous anger.

Renko's eyes looked like they were going to explode right out of his head as he gaped at the now-visible Chester. "Wh—what is that? You! You aren't even human! I knew it! I'll report you to the—"

That was that.

Chester let out an angry cry. "You dare!"

It was all over before I could even think.

Chester's mouth snapped back and closed shut around Renko's head, biting it clean off.

Renko's beheaded corpse hit the ground with a loud thud.

Now he was spurting blood from both the hole in his neck and the hole in his arm. I wasn't too worried though. I had a feeling he didn't need that blood anymore...

I closed my eyes and looked away, too horrified to even think about what the mimic just did. He had killed Renata's only family, and now that Rolo was gone, she'd be

left all alone. “Fuck, Chester,” I cursed. “Why can’t you just fucking listen to me?”

“You are friend. Only friend. I protect forever.”

Then the mimic proceeded to eat the rest of Renko’s body, and then even licked the floor clean of any blood. This was different from his artistic touch from before. It was like Renko had never existed.

“There. Now nobody will know.”

I gaped at him. “Are you fucking kidding me? Nobody will know? Do you even realize what this is about?”

“Yes. You are weird and don’t want the woman downstairs to know about her brother attacking you. So I get rid of all of him. I don’t even use [Absorb] so nobody sees your increased stats.”

Somehow, him not using [Absorb] pissed me off too. It was like Chester had wasted a perfectly good body...

Then I felt like the worst person in the world. How could I even think about such a thing when his sister was in the same building as me?

Those were my genuine thoughts, though, which made me think of a saying I’d heard before.

Power only made a person even more hungry for that same power. I could clearly see how I’d fallen into the trap myself, and I didn’t like it one bit. Chester retreated into my body, and I felt the mimic lingering there, peering outside.

He hadn’t disappeared like usual after absorbing a body. For some reason, there was no food coma, maybe because he hadn’t used [Absorb.] Instead, he was still there and I could feel how satisfied he was with himself.

“Fucking shit,” I cursed, unable to come up with anything more appropriate.

I cleaned myself up quickly and then toweled off, got dressed, and walked out.

Renata's voice came from upstairs, and she sounded distraught. Rolo must have already told her what he planned on doing.

I had no idea what I was going to say to her.

"Are you still upstairs?" I sent a message through the party chat, looking for Kristan.

"Yes, I am. This much drama is too much, even for me. Hurry up, my savior." It seemed like Kristan had no idea what to say to Renata either.

I snorted.

Savior.

Yeah, right.

I couldn't even save myself if my soul was on the line. But then again, I didn't have to when a monstrous entity was looking out for me...

"Yes..." Chester hissed. *"I save you. Save you from drowning."*

I ignored him, walking upstairs, and then I heard something shatter.

Hurrying my step, I pushed into the room and found Renata sitting on the floor in a mess of broken glass. Kristan was still seated where I'd left him. He had a mug in his hand and a frown on his face.

"That other guy just told her he's leaving," he explained. "He just walked out the door. Waited for you a bit, though."

I cursed, having totally forgotten that I'd promised him a storage item and gold coins. Killing and eating Renko obviously had taken more time than I thought.

"Renata?" I spoke. She shot me an instinctive glare, then she seemed to recognize me and her lips started quivering.

I offered her my hand and pulled her up, blood trickling from her legs and arms where she'd landed in the

broken glass. My hand slid to the storage bracelet, and I pulled out a healing potion 2 from inside, then pressed it in her hand.

“Drink. It will heal your wounds,” I whispered.

Renata nodded and pressed the vial to her lips, then downed the contents. I felt essence gather inside her body and then saw one of the small cuts close.

Spells and potions were a miracle, really, too bad they were so expensive, and not many people could afford them.

“He’s gone, Damon! He left me!” she started again, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I know,” I whispered, pulling her into a hug. I said the first thing that came to mind. “It’s best that way, even if you don’t see it now.”

Renata pushed me away and glared at me. “You...how can you say that? After all we’ve done for you!”

Right.

It was clear that one person didn’t see that way—the person who’d just been broken up with.

I decided not to say anything. Who was I to berate her? It wasn’t my business, and I didn’t have the right.

I decided on a different approach. “I’m sorry, Renny. I really am, and for what it’s worth, I’ll—”

Another flash of lightning struck the town, cutting off my words, and a second later, the blast of thunder rolled through the square, the streets, and the buildings. Several glasses exploded on the counter along with the mug in Kristan’s hand.

It spilled beer all over the place.

What the hell?

That was how Renata’s glass broke.

Kristan met my eyes and his expression turned from one of mild amusement to genuine worry.

“I need to go,” he said, shooting to his feet. “I will be back soon, so wait for me here.”

“Alright, go,” I said, waving him off. He was out the door a moment later, leaving Renata and me alone.

“What now?” she asked. “What do I do now? And where is that idiot Renko when I need him?”

“I...don’t know. What did he tell you?”

“That he’s going out to run an errand.”

I just looked at her evenly.

An errand.

Killing me was an...errand. That was how he’d described it.

Renata wrung her hands, seeming even more worried than before. “What if...no! What if something happens to him?” she gasped. “I know he’s not been the best friend to you, Damon, but...”

The words died in her mouth, and then she sat there silently.

A convenient excuse came to mind.

“I’ll go search for him,” I said, giving her a gentle and comforting hug. “You just close up behind me and...”

“And suffocate in this dreadful silence,” she whispered. “I’ll do just that.”

I had no other words of comfort for her, even more so since it was me who’d caused the pain.

Maybe I could have told Rolo not to go, and maybe, just maybe Chester wouldn’t have killed Renko if I’d struggled hard enough against him.

I knew in my heart that both those things were impossible though. Rolo was the kind of man who stuck to things after making his mind up, and really, so was Chester.

Besides, none of that mattered now. I couldn’t change the past.

I hurried outside, unable to withstand the dreadful silence, and equipped my armor over my clothes.

I'd need it where I was going.

It was dark outside, almost as dark as if it was the middle of the night. The water level in the streets had risen to well over my ankles. Adventurers were running about, civilians as well.

However, guards were ordering people back to their homes.

I first made my way to the southern part of town and found Rolo helping a family load their goods onto a cart.

They looked ready to leave this place behind for good, just like him. I called out to him and hurried over, picked the last storage ring from my pocket, and pushed it into his hand.

"Here," I said. "Sorry I was late."

He didn't ask me why I was late—I had a feeling he knew why.

"Do you have a dagger?" I asked, pulling him to the side. I wanted to finish this as soon as possible.

He handed the one sitting at his hip to me, and I traced it lightly across his thumb, then pressed it against the ring. Whatever had been inside was now gone as ownership had reset to him. It was a shame, but I didn't care—I'd give up any amount of loot just to help Rolo.

"What...why?" he asked, staring at me and then at the ring. "I thought you were joking."

I shook my head, unable to utter any words.

I pushed thirty gold coins into his hand and watched him stutter. Rolo hurriedly placed them into his storage, which made me smile. The man knew how to use a storage item without explanation, likely since he'd seen his adventuring buddies use it before. Like me, he'd probably dreamed of getting his own, and now he had one. Despite the shitty events, it felt nice to do something good for my "dad."

After storing the goods, Rolo put his arm around me and whispered.

“She’ll be alright, I know she will. Tell her I really loved her and—no, don’t. It won’t make things any easier for her.”

“As you wish.” He was probably right, just looking at how devastated she already was. “Are you going with these people south?” I asked, nodding toward the cart.

“Yeah, I am. There are over thirty of us, so we should be safe I guess. If I don’t start over now, I will regret it for the rest of my life. And maybe she can find a good—”

We didn’t really have time to chat, not with how the storm was going. “Hey, go. It’s fine. We’ll see each other again. The water level is rising. I’ll try and take care of her, at least for a few days.”

We said our goodbyes and I used [Light Step] and [Hide] on myself.

The smart thing to do was probably to head back into the Burning Bosom and wait out this storm.

But seeing everyone milling about like this, struggling to deal with the flood, I knew that this was an invaluable opportunity.

I made my way back through the streets and across the bridge. There were even more guards now. It seemed the mayor had finally noticed just how bad things were getting.

Spellcasters with water affinities stood along the river and used their powers to siphon the rainwater from the streets, but despite having the right elemental affinity, they didn’t have much success.

I hurried across the square, making sure I kept to the buildings and walls so no one would notice me. I didn’t want anyone to find me where I was headed.

Yes, it was storming like crazy.

But maybe it’d also provide some valuable cover. I was willing to risk it. Just watching the water affinity mages

struggle to clear the rain further confirmed the value of my risky plan. Maybe even the Barons would be caught off guard by this storm...

"Can you help me?" I asked as we drew closer to the Sherazad estate.

"Yes. What you need?" Chester asked. *"I do for friend."*

"I need to free Melina."

The mimic didn't reply right away, and I could sense its hesitation. I knew that he wanted to save Melina—he'd told me as much. However, I also knew that Chester was scared of Baron Alfonse, and he'd hidden the last time the man was in the room.

Chester had a strong life preservation sense, I knew that much.

But at the end, he replied.

"Okay."

"Okay?" I asked, making sure I heard right.

"Yes, okay. I help save long ears."



CHAPTER 24: PAGODA DUNGEON

I hurried towards the Sherazad family's tall wall, pushing aside the storm of emotions that were coursing through my body.

The mimic's emotions were all over the place and it was getting hard to deal with it all. After what'd happened with Renko, I already had plenty of my own emotional baggage, so the constant mix of emotions was starting to take its toll.

One moment, Chester was going on and on about how he was hungry and wanted to eat people.

The next he was freaking out about getting Melina back and fighting the Baron.

And then he was scared and trying to hide.

The mishmash of emotions was to be expected, but it made it hard for me to know how I myself was feeling. Not only that, it amplified my own worries, building into a whirlwind that neared blind panic. I grit my teeth, pushing it all to the side. I couldn't get distracted now—that would mean a long and painful death. Ahead of me, and at the end of the road was the Sherazad family's wall.

It was usually unguarded, relying more on its absurd height than anything else, but today I couldn't even feel any essence radiating nearby. It seemed like my intuition was correct—even the family guards had fallen back due to the terrible storm.

Not only that, the street was unusually empty of any town guards save for the group of people standing at the far end of the road, easily a hundred yards away from me. Since the nobles usually had their own people, the mayor almost never sent guards to provide additional security to the nobles. I'd worried things might change due to the recent assassination, but fortunately, they hadn't.

"Chester. Is anyone hiding around here?" I asked.

The mimic stirred on my shoulder, jolting out of its roiling thoughts. It floated high into the air, almost like a balloon, then quickly jerked back. *"No one here. Safe. Go now."*

I ran forward and jumped the wall, pulling myself over the ledge with great ease.

Bless my newfound stats and the strength I had from fusing with Chester. Normally, it would have taken a third rebirth adventurer or higher to clear the wall with a single bound.

For a brief moment, I hung in the air as I pulled myself over the wall. I used that moment to double check for anyone standing nearby, but Chester was right. I was all alone.

Fortunately, grass muffled my landing, but it also covered most of what I could see of the yard.

I briefly poked my head out, glancing around to take a quick check of my surroundings. Next, I activated my [Detect Trap] skill, making sure that there were no alarms, tripwires, or other security measures.

There weren't.

I ducked back into the tall grass, hurrying low until I got behind a group of small, leafy trees and hunkered down in the shadows. There was no one nearby, but I wanted to make sure before I moved on that there wasn't anyone doing the rounds.

I still had [Hide] active, but I was careful to obscure most of my body. Despite the skill's power, I was worried that a more advanced adventurer like the Baron himself could detect me.

A long stone pathway ran along the wall. It was probably used for guard patrols.

More stone pathways led toward the closest building and ended in front of a large fish pond, while another path led to a small bamboo forest nearby to my right. The bamboo forest obstructed the rest of the Sherazad estate from where I crouched, but it was enough to see that this place was a whole different world.

The finery and complexity was just on a different level, and since I'd never been here before, I had nowhere to go.

The left side was just grass and empty space, most likely so any intruders could be spotted before they managed to infiltrate the estate.

Some of the buildings were made from light-colored stone, probably granite, and charred wooden logs, others from a dark marbled stone, giving them an exquisite look.

Most of the structures were a floor taller than the wall surrounding the estate. Balconies ran all along the length and sides, and hand-crafted railings surrounded them. The roofs were a little slanted and made from more charred wood.

Adventurers and attendants were busily running around in the distance, leaving the walls unattended. I could only

make out vague shapes, but I didn't think any of them were high-level adventurers if I was to guess from the way they hurried along and moved, dragging their feet. They were probably just random trainees, which meant they shouldn't detect me.

If there was a time to run, it was now.

"Chester, where next? Can you feel her?" I asked. Chester's essence detection was much better than mine, and since I had no idea where anything was, I'd rather just rely on him.

"Yes. I feel, but weak. She there," the mimic said, pointing toward the eastern wall of the estate with a lengthy tendril.

I renewed my [Light Step] and [Hide] skills, refreshing so they wouldn't run out at the wrong time. The tall wall led all the way around the Sherazad territory, giving me ample chance to stick to the darkness. I hurried forward, activating [Detect Trap] off cooldown, just like I was in a dungeon.

"Is this whole place garden?" Chester complained. *"Looks ugly. Human decoration ugly."*

I just ignored him.

Now wasn't the time for a long discussion.

Still, the entire estate *was* filled with gardens. After moving past the bamboo forest, we saw what looked like a series of personalized sitting areas—maybe for the Baron's offspring.

Low-cut grass stretched from wall to wall with several small gardens strewn in between. The shrub was meticulously cut into square and round shapes. Several benches were placed in a circle inside the shrubs to give anyone sitting there a little privacy.

I narrowed my eyes, eyeing the gardens carefully, but nobody was there. Once again, the storm was the perfect cover.

For a short while, I continued moving forward following Chester's instructions, until I stopped in the southwestern corner and climbed on top of a tree, scanning the buildings ahead of me with my better vantage point.

At the very center of the large estate was the main family building, to the north were two smaller buildings, to either side and to the south four more, and then there was what looked like a wooden pagoda off to the east.

"There," Chester said, pointing a tentacle in the direction of the small oriental-looking tower. *"I feel long ears."*

The building was five floors tall, and about fifty feet wide from what I could guess.

There were no windows, balconies, or outer terraces, it was all closed off. The entrance was located on the side looking out toward the main compound. Everything around the tower was grass, stretching in between the buildings, making it impossible to reach the pagoda without being seen.

"Can you do something to hide me better? I'm afraid someone will see us."

"No. I use skill on me, not you. Not work."

Alright, that made sense...in a way. The mimic was still a separate entity no matter that we had merged.

I pointed at the pagoda, and activated [Detect Trap] again.

A pulse of essence shot out from within me, and blanketed my immediate area. It traveled about fifty feet in all directions, but I didn't get any response.

I jumped from the thick branch and landed with a cat's grace. The extra agility had done wonders for my reactions, my movements, and my speed in general.

I moved through the darkness stretching along the wall.

The wall was high enough so that a good ten feet width was fully blanketed in blackness. Some fifty yards in, I stopped and searched for traps again.

Nothing.

Keeping my eyes on the small tower, I repeated the same until I reached the tower, or rather the piece of the wall directly across from it.

Hunkering down, I watched for any guards or passing people.

Strangely, there weren't many around, at least not around the pagoda. I could only see two young men dressed in purple patrolling the front of the tower. They wore the Sherazad family's house color, which only made sense as this was their estate.

I waited for them to turn back around and hurried toward the back of the building and stopped, then sent out another pulse of essence for [Detect Trap] and waited.

Although using [Detect Trap] was probably the best bet, there was a small risk. Some monsters and high-level adventurers with enough skill in magic detection could detect the essence pulse, but with the hard rain and the constant release of lightning, I doubted they would feel it.

A single red blob appeared in my special [Detect Trap] view. It hung right above the entrance, but I couldn't tell what it was.

The skill gave me nothing, which was disturbing. I should at least have seen some kind of information even if it was a too high-level trap.

Still, I didn't like it, but there was nowhere to go but forwards.

I did a full rebuff, casting [Barrier], [Dome], [Sharpen Edge], [Critical Strike], and just in case, [Lightning Resistance].

Adventurers rarely knew what they were walking into, so anything that could add to my survival was greatly appreciated. The single instance of stun resistance could be the difference between life and death.

I grabbed one of the arrows from my quiver and nocked it.

Killing either of the two would probably alert other people on the estate, so using the bow was my last resort. But I held it ready just in case.

I took a deep breath and made my way around the southern wall of the pagoda, making sure I crouched and didn't make any noise as I stayed in the darkness. The moon hadn't come out yet as it was too early in the night, and not a single torch was lit.

I stopped halfway and sent out another pulse, only to see the red blob was now gone. Weird. I waited for the detect cooldown to refresh and used it again. It was really gone.

"Hey, did you see that? It's gone."

"No. I don't see. What is gone?"

I pointed at the door.

"Chester. Use [Detect Trap]," I ordered through our mental link.

The mimic raised his tendril and pointed, and I felt a stronger pulse of essence burst from him. It bothered me a little that the mimic was better than me at casting my signature spell, but at the end of the day, it only made sense, as he was higher level than me and had much more essence.

"No trap."

Now I was even more worried.

Had I just imagined it?

Or was the lightning playing havoc on my senses? Now that I was so close, the storm was a double-edged blade, one that both helped me get in unnoticed and prevented me from seeing what was truly ahead.

I made my way further and stopped just short of the corner.

The two men were talking about the expedition, and even though I couldn't catch every word, what I did hear was

more than enough.

“Shouldn’t they be back tomorrow?” one of the voices asked. “Or the day after? Maybe we can just take off.”

“Don’t even get any ideas,” the other voice replied worriedly. From the sounds of it, he was a bit older—and maybe a bit more experienced. “The last time you took off, they demoted you. This time it will be your head.”

“Yeah, but this time Lord Alfonse took most of the slaves with him. We aren’t even needed here! That woman isn’t going to break out.”

“Shut up and do what you are told!” the other man scowled. I shifted my bow a bit, pre-aiming for his neck.

In a way, it was a shame, as I respected diligence and hard work. Still, being a diligent slave guard was a bad thing, so if I had to shoot, this guy would die first.

The younger-sounding guard grew silent for a moment.

“*Let’s go,*” Chester said impatiently. “*Baron gone. Only weaklings are left. Go.*”

But then the younger guard said something that worried me, and I briefly froze in place.

“Do you think they’ll manage to close the dungeon?”

Was *that* why they were taking so long? Not even the Duke and the Barons could close the raging dungeon? And was that why the storm came out too?

The older man’s response was terse and impatient. “If they haven’t so far, the Lord will be on his way back. He could arrive any moment, so do you understand why I’m bitching like an old wife?”

“Yeah, yeah,” the younger guard grunted. “Let me ask what’s new with the scouts out front. Hold on.”

He grew silent, and I figured he must have been using the party chat to speak to the other guards. That was a problem for me. There was no need for them to yell for help, all they needed to do was to send out a party message.

“Hey, this isn’t good,” the guard said. “The sensory guards have spotted a large group of adventurers hurrying back to the city. From what they could sense, the group is making a fighting retreat. There’s a monster wave approaching the town.”

The two started hissing and whispering at each other, speaking too weakly for me to hear anything.

I scowled and pulled up my own party chat. Even though I wanted to save Melina right now, this was too dangerous to not get a better picture. If a monster wave was approaching the city, then we were in deep shit.

“Kristan? Where are you? I just heard something about a monster wave approaching the town.”

“Yes, it’s true. A monster wave is only twenty minutes or so out. The Duke and the three Barons are on their way back. Something happened, but I don’t know what. There are many dead from what I heard. I’m with the Mayor right now. Stay safe.”

“The Mayor? What do you mean? How did you link up with him?”

“Later. If we survive.”

Alright, I got his message loud and clear. He was in danger, and he probably needed help. I’d get to him as soon as I finished things up here.

The two guards hurried off then as well, presumably to back up the town troops.

Time to grab Melina, then get out of there.

I made my way around the corner and walked up the stone staircase leading up to the pagoda entrance. I stopped and scanned one more time, just in case. The red blob was definitely gone, but it didn’t make me feel any better. If anything, it only worried me even more.

“Alright, Chester. Let’s go save Melina.”

“Wait. I feel bad. Be careful. Something wrong.”

“Bad? What do you—”

A voice rang out from across the garden.

I crouched and listened in.

“My father likes that slave, so you better make sure she’s there when he’s home!” a female shout carried over the rumbling thunder. There was something vaguely familiar about her voice. She sounded like Aldon.

It was one of the siblings.

And what was that about liking a particular slave? Did she mean Melina?

I scanned the buildings across from the tower, and then hurried up the rest of the stairs and slid into the pagoda.

A familiar feeling surprised me, one I’d gone through dozens of times: the nausea of a portal activation. One moment I was outside in the hard rain, and the other I stood inside a real dungeon.

“Huh, isn’t this interesting?” I muttered, eyeing my immediate surroundings.

The portal was probably the red I’d suddenly detected—it turned out that the Baron’s dungeon was a literal dungeon.

How in the world was that possible?

But in a way, this helped me.

Party chat didn’t work through separate zones—someone inside a dungeon couldn’t contact somebody outside the dungeon. This solved one of my major problems, making it much harder for a single guard to bring everything crashing down on me.

Strangely, the first thing I noticed about the dungeon was how fresh the air was.

I couldn’t feel any draft or where it came from, but it was many times better than the suffocating stale air in most dungeons.

The entrance was a large open space with four thick black pillars standing on either side of the room and holding the ceiling up. Burning torches hung from iron sconces, but they barely gave off enough light. The walls and ceiling were clean, and so was the floor. There was no dirt, moss, growing fungus, or vines.

This place was very different from what I was used to.

I hurried further in and hid behind one of the pillars, afraid the young miss Sherazad would bump into me if I stayed at the entrance. From behind the pillar on the left side of the entrance room, I could see two more passages. The first one was opposite the entrance and the other was just behind me.

“Chester? Anything?” I didn’t want to waste my time fumbling around, so I’d rather have the mimic lead me to Melina.

A small tentacle grew from my shoulder and pointed toward the far passage.

“Is there a way you can map this place quickly?” I asked. *“I want to be out before the monster wave hits Eslant.”*

“No. Just go. Old dungeon different. I lived there. This one is new to me too.”

“Alright. We’ll just have to get in and out as soon as possible.”

I thought for a moment.

I was already invisible, but some of the higher-level guards around town had ways to pierce [Hide]. A higher-level caster like Chester or Melina could get away with it, but not me, so I decided to back-up my disguise with [Mimicry], using a transformation that’d already suited me well before.

I felt mass sliding out of my body, shifting and transforming. Chester’s essence poured into my veins, and then my body started folding in up on itself. My belly bulged outward, like I was suddenly getting fat, and then I started rounding out. My skin changed color, turning into wood.

Moments later, I'd become a barrel on its side.

"Really? A barrel?" Chester asked, a judgmental tone in his voice. *"Real creative..."*

"Why not?" I replied. *"It worked last time."*

"Not creative," he said, his voice flat. *"Mimic should take pride. Can turn into anything. Don't re-use shapes."*

I just groaned.

What even was this? An art project?

"How about a wheel?" Chester asked.

It was unbelievable...this mimic was literally re-inventing the wheel. And what did he think would happen if a wheel was rolling around?

"They keep supplies inside the dungeon," I patiently explained. *"Anything loose rolling around is weird, but a barrel is probably the least weird."*

"Fine. Get moving. They are coming."

I rolled from pillar to pillar until I was near the other passage, then slipped inside without even looking. Thanks to my [Hide] and [Light Step] skill, which was still active, the rolling didn't really come with any noise. If anyone saw me, they really would think I was just some tipped over loosed barrel. The only problem was that I got dizzy.

The narrow passage had a slightly different smell than the entrance. I stopped and pushed against the wall to make myself as invisible as I could, and activated [Detect Trap].

There was one some fifteen steps ahead of me. It was a simple pitfall with a trapdoor trigger plate mechanism. I didn't need to disable this trap, I could just step over the plate.

"Can you mark this with something so I don't fall in on our way back?"

"Yes. Open map. I mark."

I did as he said and opened my map.

It was a small square area of which the entrance already took up about ten percent of the whole size.

Everything but the first room and the passage in which I stood was black. A red dot now showed up where the trap was hidden.

“You can keep the map open. I will navigate for us. Hurry. People coming from behind us.”

That got me moving.

I hurried through the passage and stepped over the pit trap’s pressure plate, then stopped again at the entrance to the next room.

Three guards sat around a table in the center of the space.

All around them were cells, some smaller, and some larger. The smaller ones were mostly empty. I couldn’t see them all from where I crouched, but the bigger ones were occupied with monsters. There were hundreds of them.

“There,” Chester pointed before I could speak.

Tucked in between two large cells filled with hound-like monsters in one, and bat-like creatures in the other, lay a prone form on the floor clad in green fabric and had long, dirty blonde hair.

A lump formed in my throat as I tried to breathe.

This was barbaric. They’d stuck Melina alongside ravenous monsters. The message was obvious—the Baron saw her as less than human.

The monsters screeched and snapped their teeth at her constantly. Just the noise alone was enough to make anyone lose their mind.

I was in a dilemma, and not an easy one at that.

Behind me was one of the heirs to the Sherazad estate, probably escorted by several guards, and ahead of me, there were three more guards.

The ones in front of me were just sitting, drinking, and chatting, so I figured it was my best bet.

I pulled my bow out and nocked a Basic Arrow 3, just to make sure it did the job. It was drenched in poison, so if it didn't kill the first target, it would finish them off.

"Be smart," Chester said, stopping me just as I was about to release the first arrow. *"You have five poison arrows. Use all. Don't try and save."*

He was right.

The three guards sat very next to one another, so if I play it right... I decided to try my luck. In the worst case, I'd kill at least one of the three.

"Should I use [Multishot]?" I asked.

"Yes. I think so," Chester replied. *"But not now. Get closer."*

I rolled in closer. One of the guards turned, a quizzical look on his face, but then I undid my transformation before he could say anything.

My bow was in my hand a moment later, and I released the skill, feeling four more arrows fill with essence and appear in my hand. They were all translucent aside from the one ready to fly.

I stepped into the room, and the mass of monsters grew silent for a mere heartbeat as they sensed me, and then the air was filled with even more cries, shrieks, screeches, chattering teeth. The monsters hurled their body against the iron bars, making the din grow even louder than before.

"What the—what is it? Why are they—"

The words died in the guard's throat as the skill released, and five arrows flew toward my target.

The first two arrows hit the guard who'd spoken in the right cheek and neck. I angled the bow just to the side and the other three hit a second guard.

The third man shot to his feet and drew a long spear. He eyed the other two men, who were writhing in pain and crying as they lay on the floor.

I pulled the sixth arrow from my quiver, again a Basic Arrow 3, just to be sure, and released [Snipe].

There was more than enough place to maneuver and dodge the arrow, but only if it had been an ordinary one. [Snipe] was a skill that hit with a 100% chance and added a stack of [Bleed] debuff on top of it.

The arrow struck his chest, knocking the man off his feet. His spear clattered to the floor as he landed on his back.

“Can you eat them? Not absorb, but just eat?” I asked, hurrying toward the closest guard. I was loathe to give up on the stats, but [Absorb] took longer. Right now, we just needed to get rid of these people and make sure that Chester was on top fighting sleep. Not only that, transforming had taken out a good part of our mass—[Mimicry] was a handy skill, but one we had to use sparingly.

“For mass? Yes. Maybe asleep short time. Ok?” Chester asked.

“Sure. Do it.”

Chester grew from my shoulders and chest, then dropped to the stone floor and used his tentacles to crawl over the first guard, positioning himself for a feast.

His lid opened wide and long, sharp teeth appeared from inside. The long tongue slid around the first dying man and pulled him inside. With a single chomp, the man’s dull screams died out.

The two remaining guards, both barely alive, tried to crawl away.

Blood seeped from the second guard’s neck and cheek. The thick, red liquid of life was starting to turn a sickly green, and I knew he was dead, it was just a matter of time.

But the last one, who I’d hit in the chest with [Snipe], was trying to pour a healing potion over his wound. His hand

trembled and the healing potion fell to the ground.

I walked over to him and picked it up, then held it in front of him.

“Help me release the elf, and I’ll give this to you. I promise.”

To my shock, the man didn’t take my offer. He just peered at me, sputtering. “S—screw y—you, bastard! Someone will c—come and f—find you—”

The noise all the monsters were making was so loud that I had trouble even thinking straight.

I knew more people were on their way here, and without enough time to get the guard to comply, I stepped away and let the mimic eat him.

I pulled our status screen up really quickly to see how full he was. Unfortunately, his absorbed mass status percentage was only at 38%. He’d used up a lot of mass just getting us here in the first place.

The mimic was starting to fall asleep from gorging on the three guards, but I could still sense its urgency. It wanted me to just free Melina right away, but I knew that was foolish.

Even though I wanted to tear the cell door apart with my bare fingers, I knew that I wouldn’t do Melina any good if I was dead, and more guards—along with Alfonse’s daughter—were coming in after us.

If any of the guards made it out, they could ask for help. Unfortunately for them, party chat didn’t work between zones, and the dungeon was through a portal. So that was the only thing I could do for now. And then it all clicked into place.

I replaced my bow with my blade and shield combo.

Fighting multiple guards at the same time was impossible in such a small space. Sword to the gut was the way to go.

I hurried to stand behind the corner, hiding next to a small wooden desk and shelf filled with a mix of torture

equipment, empty vials, and medical tools. I considered turning into furniture, but the guards knew this place. I'd stick out, so just hiding was my best bet.

Then I held my breath as footsteps resounded from close by.

The first person to walk into the open space was a young male guard wearing purple guard robes. His left hand rested on the hilt of his sword, and his face was set into a scowl. He stopped and looked to the right, then rattled the monster cage.

“Stop making a ruckus, you pieces of shit!”

“Mouth! Watch your language near me!” a female voice said from behind him. “Slap him!”

“Yes, Mistress Franja,” the second guard replied. He stepped past her, and backhanded the young man.

The three were turned with their backs to me, and I couldn't help but snort to myself. If things went well, that lady would have a lot more to worry about than some foul language.

The Sherazad daughter—Franja—wore a long white gown with a purple shawl that covered most of her body. Her brown hair was tied up in a high bun, sitting on top of her head.

I stepped out from behind the shelf, and mentally discriminated between Melina and the Sherazad family's fighters. I wanted to make sure my skill hit them while keeping Melina safe.

Steadying myself, I used a skill I hadn't really relied on so far—[Shield Bash]. My shield sprang to life, drawing on essence from deep inside me, and struck the older guard.

A small icon appeared over his head—a pink swirl on white background. My stun debuff had taken hold.

Before they could even react, I brought my black blade down on the younger guard's side. His arm flashed yellow and

my sword bounced off. It took me by surprise, as skin shouldn't have deflected attacks, even with a skill.

“Hello, young Sherazad lady,” I said with a nod at Franja. The taunt caught her off guard, and she stammered instead of calling for help or attacking me. Then I brought the blade back down again on the guard with a [Thrust]. The second skill went through and bit into his hip.

A sharp pain erupted from my shoulder, and I turned around.

Franja shrieked like a banshee, swinging a dagger madly in her right hand. The wound wasn't as deep because of my buffs and gear, but it had still managed to go an inch deep at least.

Thanks to the Belt of Healing I'd gained from the bounty hunters, I could use potions while keeping my hands free. I reached out and shoved Franja back, then I used the weak healing potion I took from the guard earlier.

She stumbled and hit the ground.

Meanwhile, the younger guardsman was writhing in pain, and the older just stood there, stunned. I had one last skill I could use right away.

“This one's for you, lady!” I said, infecting my voice with fake merriment.

I stepped toward her, and she cowered behind the younger guard. Keeping my eyes laser-focused at Franja, I used [Slash], but shifted to target the older soldier at the last second. The blade danced across his neck and cut his head clean off.

It landed with a wet thud and rolled over to lay next to her feet.

“My turn!” Chester shrieked.

The mimic's tentacles grew from my back and sides, grabbing the young guard. His hand moved in an upward strike, bringing his sword to bear, but it was no use.

One of the tentacles pulling him up fell next to the dead guard, but more tentacles replaced it, grabbing the young man's arms and legs.

"That hurt!" Chester hissed, the sound coming from my chest. "Now I eat you! Nom-nom!"

Chester's comically large tongue elongated and wrapped around the guard, whose screams carried above the monster ruckus.

By then, the fight was over. Franja sprinted away, running in the direction of the dungeon entrance.

I drew my bow, losing several precious seconds, but my archery skills were more than good enough after all my practice against the kekuri. The first arrow struck the back of her left leg, and she fell not even fifteen steps away from me.

I hurried along after her and knelt next to the young woman, who was twisting on the ground, her face contorted by pain.

"Wh—who are you?" she stammered.

"Me? I'm Melina's brother. Now, how about you release her so I can get the fuck away from here?"

The young woman grinned without an ounce of fear. I was impressed, I had to admit it despite my anger. "That elf? Hah, no one can open the cell aside from my father. He's the only one who has a key."

I pulled the woman to her feet and dragged her along.

She almost stumbled over the guard's head, and to my surprise, she didn't look so squeamish.

If a severed head was nothing to her, then daddy dearest must have killed a lot of people in front of his children. It seemed like they thought of the guards and the slaves as totally and utterly disposable.

Shit, that very thought sent chills down my spine.

What kind of psycho trained his kids not to balk at death?

We stopped in front of Melina's cell.

Rage rose from the deepest depths of my soul as I saw her lying there on the cold, stone floor. The coral cuffs were still in place, and both her legs and arms were covered in streaks of dried blood. Her face was bruised, and a patch of her hair was missing.

"Stop. Don't kill her. We need that woman. That cell is made from same thing as long ears cuffs," the mimic added. He could sense my desire to cut down Franja right away, and this time, Chester was being the strategic one.

"The cell is made from coral?" I asked.

Franja perked up at my question.

"Of course. They all are," she laughed. "How do you think we keep them all contained?"

She sounded proud. Clearly the Sherazad had no problems with the hideous substance.

Melina stirred and looked at me.

Her one eye was swollen and shut, but the other wasn't.

I also noticed that she still had the cuffs around her wrists. In the back of my mind, I thought of why the town had closed down. Baron Helzig's assassin...whoever it was, it wasn't Melina. Baron Alfonse might not have been involved at all.

She gasped as she saw me standing on the other side of her cell.

For the briefest second, I saw hope in her eyes, but it was instantly stamped out by fear, misery, and dread. That brief flicker made my blood boil more than anything else.

"I d—didn't tell him anything," Melina stuttered and then grabbed for her ribs. "Why are you—no, j—just go. Please! You c—can't save me!" she pleaded.

"Is it true that only Alfonse can open the cell?" I asked, leaning as far as I could without making contact with the coral.

Franja nodded weakly.

I turned back to Melina stared into her eyes.

“Alright. I have an idea. Just hold on a bit longer, please. I’ll see you again...soon.”

Although I longed to reach out, I didn’t want to touch the coral. As far as I knew, it wouldn’t prevent me from attacking any of the Sherazad as that required some kind of magical contract, but it would sap my powers away momentarily and give Franja an opening to get away.

Melina nodded once, and then closed her eye again.

She fainted, which only made things even worse for the young woman standing next to me. A maelstrom of emotions raged through me. Maybe this young heiress hadn’t done anything to Melina, but she was part of the problem.

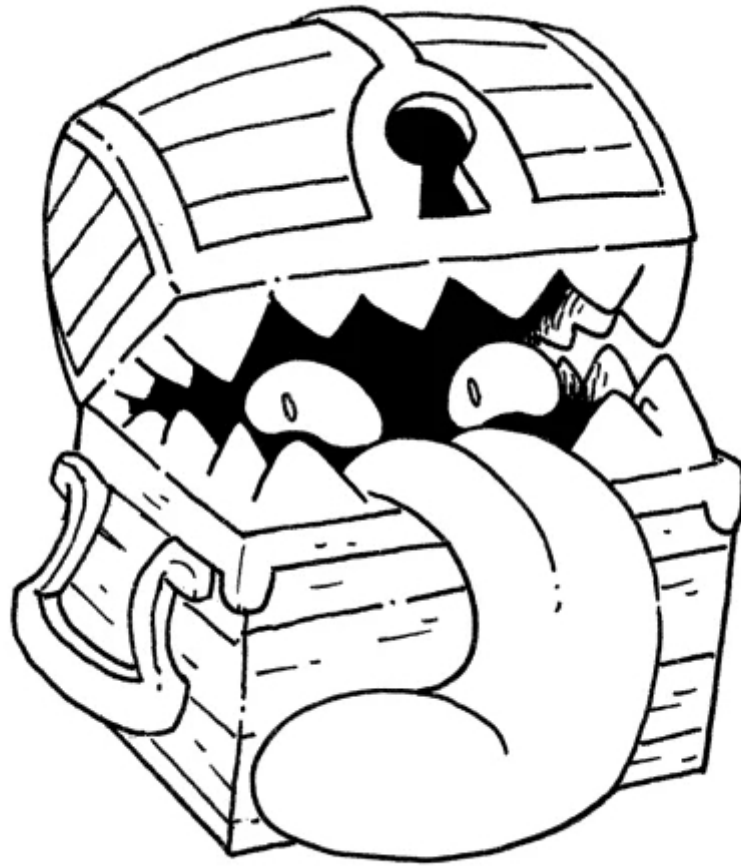
I turned to Franja and squeezed my hand so hard on her shoulder that she cried out in pain. Her flesh almost tore away.

If only the Baron could open the cage...then I’d give him a damned good reason to open it.

“Wh—what are you doing?” Franja cried. “This hurts! Let me go and maybe you get out of this alive!”

I shook my head, grabbed her arm, and made my face as stern as I could. I was playing a dangerous game here, kidnapping a noble’s daughter, but if that was what it took to free Melina, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

“No, I’m not letting you go, Franja. You’re coming with me.”



CHAPTER 25: ESLANT INVASION, PART 1

The portal magic activated, taking us back out into the world.

We were met with a downpour the moment we set foot outside the small dungeon. There was no light, save for the flashes of lightning. The bolts struck the town over and over again, every several seconds.

Franja let out a muffled cry of protest as soon as the raindrops started falling on her.

“Hard, huh? Without the guards holding an umbrella,” I commented, without much sympathy. She just stared at me sullenly without responding—not that she could respond.

She'd threatened to scream as soon as we brought her out, so I'd gagged her after cutting off some fabric from her dress.

The heavy rain and gag were definitely a far cry from the noble treatment she was used to, but I didn't have any sympathy, not after seeing how the Sherazad had treated Melina.

"We're going," I said.

It was beyond dangerous just being outside, so we had to get out of there quickly. At least Chester had eaten all of the bodies, so we had a decent chunk of mass to use.

I grabbed Franja and hurried down the side of the pagoda stairs, landing in a puddle of mud. The young woman screamed as she splashed in the muck, but the sound was just muffled.

I pulled her along the dark wall, making sure no one was watching, then pushed her behind the pagoda.

As we moved, I noticed that she was shaking with rage, and her eyes were narrowed at the indignity of this situation. I had to give her some credit again, as she was quite brave—much braver than her brother—but it seemed like she didn't know how things were going to go.

I stopped and pulled her in so she could hear me whisper.

"Your only way out is if Alfonse agrees to trade your life for Melina's," I said, trying to sound as calm as possible. "If he doesn't—"

A magical explosion shook the northern wall.

I ducked and pulled her in instinctively, shielding the young woman with my body. It looked like the monster wave had made it to the town.

Franja tried wrenching my wrist away, but I grabbed her back before she could flee. She squawked again, but I ignored her.

Instead of meeting her eyes, I muttered an apology and knocked her unconscious. I didn't feel great about it, but there was really no other way to quietly get her out of here.

"I'm sorry, Franja," I whispered. "But your father has done so much worse."

Then I threw her over my shoulder and made my way back along the western wall of the Sherazad estate. She was very thin and with my newly empowered body, extremely easy to carry.

Not only that, it was too dark for anyone to spot us, and by knocking her out, I made sure she couldn't call anyone for help over her party chat. The lightning storm interference proved to be more helpful than I could ever have imagined.

Melina's battered face flashed in front of my eyes, and I turned back to Franja, scowling at her unconscious form.

At that moment, I wanted to kill her, even though it was complete madness. The bloodlust and anger washed over me, but I held it in.

Maybe I didn't lash out because she was a young woman with an entire life ahead of her, or because I'd caused enough death down in the dungeon already, but regardless, I held back my rage and just kept on moving. Before the last few days, I never would have thought of killing someone, but bonding with Chester had changed me. In many ways, it was for the better, as I was stronger and able to stand up for myself, but I wasn't going to lie to myself, I'd taken on some monster tendencies as well, like it or not.

I climbed the tree that stood proudly in the southwestern corner and then studied the situation. It was the same vantage point from where I'd entered the pagoda dungeon, but now things were totally different.

The estate was now a beehive of activity, yet there were still barely any guards in my immediate vicinity.

A frightening sight played out at the northern gate, however. The Sherazad estate was under siege.

Hundreds of adventurers and guards alike were busy releasing spells and long-range attacks. Some cast protective and regenerative spells, while others intercepted flying monsters.

Monstrous birds and insects streaked over the wall, some getting shot down, while others headed toward the center of the town.

Larger bird monsters carried fellow monsters in their talons and on their backs. Some other monsters had natural tumor-like growths spread all around their bodies that pulsed with every movement. I'd never seen something like that before—were they egg sacs?

One of the birds suddenly dropped on the estate after it was hit by a massive bolt of lightning.

Chester's voice resounded in my ear. *'Heh. How unlucky does a monster have to be to be killed by a thunderbolt?'*

The growths that spread all across the monster bird's body popped and dog-sized insectoid monstrosities came into view. Some resembled a mix of a spider and a fly, others looked like ants with the heads of snakes.

"This shit is bizarre," I muttered.

The monsters didn't look like standard dungeon fare. They almost looked artificial, like someone had been experimenting to create mutants.

Not only that, I'd never seen such different kinds of monsters work together before with such coordination. Sure, dungeon monsters ganged up to fight adventurers all the time, but they usually followed a similar theme, like a skeletal dungeon with only skeletons.

It was just like Kristan speculated earlier—the rampaging dungeon was causing serious problems for the Duke. The beasts were all working together, just like the kekuri from earlier, only at a much higher level. There were different species all mixed together, and from the look of it, they were even somehow giving birth to each other somehow.

Overhead flew another purple bird monster with wide wings and more egg-sac growths spread across its body.

It shrieked and cried as flames ate at its feathers, likely a lucky strike from an adventurer.

The orange, pulsating blobs of flesh popped and smaller insect monsters fell from high overhead, some splattering against the hard stone, while others landed on rooftops or in the water before hissing loudly and going on the attack.

“Kristan, where are you?” I asked, trying to use our party chat.

“I was searching for a friend. Where do we meet?” he replied almost immediately.

I felt as if a large weight just dropped from my shoulders. Sure, I could take care of myself, but he was a lot stronger and dependable.

“I’m heading to the Burning Bosom. Let’s meet up there.”

I wanted to help defend my hometown, but I couldn’t do so with a hostage weighing me down. I’d drop Franja off, and then figure out what was going on and if I was even at the strength level to help effectively.

I edged over the tree and jumped over the wall, landing on my feet and barely holding on to Franja as she was slung over my shoulder.

The Burning Bosom was about fifteen minutes away if I were to carry her and walk, but more and more monsters were entering the city.

Adventurers were flooding from their homes and their estates, filling the streets as the fighting broke out. Most hurried to the northern wall, though, shouting orders and running without giving me a second glance.

I decided to risk it and cast [Light Step], then [Hide] to try and blend better in with the background and the shadows.

Anyone worth their salt would be able to spot me, but considering I carried the young woman over my shoulder and not in a sack or on a cart, it could just pass for me saving someone.

I hoped.

I hit the main road and hurried along the side of the buildings. Some of the higher-stage adventurers shot disgusted glances my way as if I was a deserter and running in the face of danger. If they only knew...

I crossed the Adventure Guild square next and hit the bridge without any issues. The tavern was just ahead of me when two figures appeared from the alley next to it.

“You’re here,” Kristan said, holding his spear out. “And you’ve brought... friends?”

“Not quite a friend,” I replied, nodding to Franja. “Speaking of which, who is—”

“This is Marko. He’s—”

“We have already met,” the man replied slowly as if dragging it out on purpose. He held his hand out to me. “I sold you the poison quiver.”

Two screeching insect monsters resembling ants with mantis blades rushed along the main street. Kristan rushed to meet them and killed them with two well-placed jabs, giving me and Marko some time to talk.

I shook his hand and eyed him questioningly.

I had never seen this man at all, and he looked nothing like the person who’d sold me the poison quiver. They even talked differently.

Marko now had curly, shoulder-length brown hair and a blank expression. We were about the same height, so I could see into his eyes, but they were just as lifeless as his face was.

Chain mail armor protruded from under his shirt, which was odd as most people wore it over any clothing. A feathered hat sat on his head and was tipped low, covering his forehead.

“We will explain everything later, Damon. For now, let’s just say it’s an unusual skill. Now is time to fight,” Marko said, pulling out a war hammer from his storage. A shield appeared a moment later, but it was fastened to his back.

I didn’t know what to say for a moment and just stared at him, then at Kristan.

“Who is the lady?” Kristan asked, pointing his spear at Franja.

“A bargaining chip. She’s Alfonse’s daughter.”

Kristan snorted, then started laughing, while Marko just stood there, still emotionless.

“Is there something I need to know?” Marko asked, letting the hammer drop to the ground, then took three hurried steps forward and swung the clump of steel, bringing it down on a monster’s head.

It looked like a zombie dog but was easily two times as large with festering strips of flesh hanging down its side. The monster died instantly.

I raised my eyebrows. Killing a beast like that so casually...

That suggested great strength.

“Should I add him to our party?” I asked Kristan.

“Please,” Marko replied instead. “Send me an invitation. We can share all the leveling essence.”

I noticed the three leveling notifications from the monsters Kristan killed, but I pushed them aside, sending him an invitation instead. The me of a few days ago would have marveled over the essence, but for now, the essence messages weren’t important.

We just had to get out of the street.

After inviting both of them, I pointed to the tavern and hurried up the stairs and stopped in front of the door, knocking three times.

“Renny? It’s me.”

The sound of a chair sliding across the wooden floor came from within, then hurried footsteps. A bolt slid on the other side of the door, and then it swung open.

“You’re back!” Renata cried as she threw herself at me, but then stopped short of pulling me into a hug. “Who’s that? And who are—ohh, the young knight. And another man?” she asked, eyeing me curiously.

It took her a moment, but then she seemed to notice we were standing in the hard rain and stepped aside. “Why are you standing in the rain for, Damon? Get inside! Call your friends.”

I stepped past her and the two joined me.

First I made my way over to the fireplace and lowered Franja to the floor, gently. Even if she was a captive, I didn’t need to hurt her. Getting Melina back was more than enough.

“Damon, who is she?” Renny asked as she knelt next to the young woman.

“A bargaining chip. Alfonse Sherazad’s daughter. He has a friend of mine, so I took his daughter.”

Renata gasped and pulled away, then slapped my shoulder.

“Idiot! Do you want to die? Rolo is gone, and I can’t find Renko anywhere! What if you’re gone too? What will I do?”

“Hold that thought,” I said and looked past her. “Is there anything we can give her so she doesn’t wake up any time soon? She might send a party message the moment she’s up.”

Marko, to my surprise, pulled out a small vial from his storage and handed it to me.

“You can pour that into her mouth. Half of the bottle should keep her out of it for a few hours considering she is all bones.”

A notification appeared as soon as I touched the bottle.

[ITEM RECEIVED: Advanced Sleeping Potion]

[DESCRIPTION: An advanced sleeping potion that can put even a high-ranked adventurer to sleep. Administer a drop of the liquid for every 10 pounds of weight.]

“A drop for—and you want me to give her half of the bottle?”

Marko shrugged and then lowered his hammer to the floor, pulled out a chair toward the fireplace, and put out his hands to warm them.

“I know,” Kristan chuckled. “He’s a weird one, but we’re...adopted brothers, so I vouch for him.”

“Adopted?” I asked. That was the same thing he’d said about me. I had more questions than ever at the moment, but held back since I didn’t want us to be stuck here forever. “Never mind. Let me—”

“No, you will let me do it,” Renny said, taking the sleeping potion from me. “You three just make sure monsters don’t come in here! And kidnapping people? Damon? Really?”

“Hey, I didn’t start with the—”

“So it’s alright to do this to a young lady?” Renata sharply replied.

I groaned and shook my head. Despite her complaints, it seemed like Renny would still do what we needed, which was enough.

“Whatever. So...do we leave the explanations for later?” I asked, looking from Kristan to Marko.

“Later. We need to go out there and help kill the monsters. Many more are on their way,” Kristan said with a hint of worry.

He was looking out in the distance and frowning, which was a little odd. It seemed like he knew our group would be safe, but he was worried about someone on the front lines. I decided not to inquire. It wasn’t the time or place.

“What’s the plan?” I asked, readying my sword, but Kristan shook his head.

“No sword. Use your bow, Damon,” Kristan said. “You make sure to keep the flying monsters off our backs, and we’ll do the rest.”

Marko let out a deep, slow sigh as he stood back up and grabbed his war hammer. The man was Kristan’s exact opposite: slow, lifeless, and he barely spoke.

I turned to Renata and nodded to the sleeping Franja. “Sure you can handle her?”

The young tavern mistress nodded and then looked around the main room as if searching for something. Or someone.

Worry over Renko was apparent on her face, but unfortunately for her, he was never coming back. It bothered me, but not so much I wouldn’t be able to sleep about it. I didn’t know if that was the mimic suppressing my guilt, but Renko *had* tried to murder me multiple times after all.

“I’ll take her to the basement and lock ourselves in there. You make sure you come back, Damon. And if you see that idiot Renko, tell him where I am.”

“I will,” I said, and then rushed out into the hard rain without looking back.

With every mention of her brother, it was becoming harder for me to look her in the eye.

“What is it?” Kristan whispered as he stopped behind me. “You know something about her brother?”

I didn’t say anything, but his eyes widened for a moment as he glanced at me. It seemed like my silence was enough for him to paint a picture. He didn’t ask again, and I was thankful for it.

More adventurers had now gathered in the street and most of them were busy climbing the rooftops or gathering in small groups.

It was always better to fight in a party. A dead man couldn't enjoy the spoils of battle.

"Do we help father?" Marko asked as he trudged down the small flight of stairs and joined us outside. "We can't just stay here, can we?"

Kristan nodded. "Yes. We'll bring Damon with us to father."

I turned to him and then to the spearman, frowning.

"Father? I thought your father was—"

Kristan smiled, cutting it off. "It is a long story, Damon, my friend. If you prove yourself in battle, I will tell you all about it. I will also ask him to mediate in the trade with your elf friend but don't disappoint him. He's put a lot of faith in you."

Now he was just talking complete and utter horse shit.

What father, and what faith in me?

My eyebrows were going to go pat my forehead.

Both men saw the look on my face but they shook their heads at the same time. It almost looked as if they'd rehearsed it.

"He is here? In Eslant?" I asked. Normally I would have given up the conversation and allowed Kristan to be mysterious, but I was just too damn curious. "I thought you said he was dead."

"He is, but we are talking about our adopted father, Damon, not our real ones. They're obviously dead. Now come on, and move to the front lines with us. Don't worry about Renata. This place will be safe. Just look at all the adventurers."

I turned to look down the street, and then up to the balconies and lower rooftops. There were easily thirty armed and armored people. It would have to be enough.

As if on cue, several shrieking bird monsters came flying, and as the growths on their bodies popped, they

deployed more insectoid troops.

Smaller monsters dropped to the roofs overhead and some splattered against the ground.

“Decide. Now,” Kristan said. “You might get angry, but I promise, it is in your best interest.”

There wasn't much to think about.

Whatever was going on, I felt like they did have my best interests at heart.

Marko had basically given me a free quiver that added absurd destructive potential to my arrows, and Kristan had saved my life. Without him, I wouldn't even be here.

“Alright. I'll follow you guys to the end. Lead the way.”



CHAPTER 26: ESLANT INVASION, PART 2

We made our way back to the Adventurer Guild square.

Kristan led the way. His nimble and precise movements were a sight to behold along with every jab of his spear and use of skill. It almost seemed choreographed.

The monsters were swarming around us, but he just cut them down without any problems. The zombie dogs, the strange twisted tiger-like beasts, and the oversized insects—none of them even stood a chance.

I hung in the back, just playing a support role.

I started out by casting [Light Step] on all three of us, and moved on to my party buffs next, [Critical Strike] and

[Sharpen Edge] to increase our critical hit chance and physical attack power. Those three buffs would do us the most good in any general situation.

Kristan followed up with [Critical Aura] and [Hoodwink], raising our critical hit chance and all movement speeds even further.

Then it was Marko's turn to cast his party buff. It was the first time I'd ever seen it, which meant that it was probably very rare. Since I'd guided so many parties, I felt pretty comfortable that I knew all the basic buffs.

Marko's buff was called [Firm Stance].

[BUFF: Firm Stance]

[DESCRIPTION: Increases resistance to staggering and skill or spell interruption by 31%]

[DURATION: 10 minutes]

It was a great buff for them and mostly useless for me while playing support. I didn't need anti-staggering or interruption if I was to use my bow.

However, if I were to take out my shield and sword combo...

My hand twitched for a moment and I honestly had a hard moment deciding on what to do. It wasn't every day you got to experience such a potent buff first-hand.

Kristan grinned knowingly, probably already having expected me to get caught in a dilemma. "You're thinking of taking out your blade, aren't you?" he asked. "This buff is really good for melee fighters."

"I can see that," I laughed. "It almost makes me wish I didn't have this bow."

A flock of monstrous birds suddenly shrieked from up ahead.

I counted seven of them as they appeared over the Adventurer's Guild, and descended on the square below where

we were. More monsters rushed out from the side streets, and the fighting broke out in earnest then.

Kristan rushed forward, joining the other fighters as Marko put a hand on my shoulder.

“I will stay behind and protect you, so make every arrow count.”

I nodded and then finished casting [Barrier] and [Dome] on myself, adding to the security.

The hawthorne bow I looted from Falin back in the dungeon had a nifty little specialty. It gave a 10% bonus on accuracy when attacking targets over twenty yards away. The birds were easily past that, so I hoped that their sheer size along with the passive buff would allow me to hit them with relative ease.

Oh, how wrong I was.

I released my first arrow and it went wide.

The hard rain and wind played havoc on the projectile, and the birds were way faster than I could have imagined. We were soaked from head to toe, which only made it even harder to concentrate on shooting arrows.

“That is exactly why he said to use a bow. If you’d missed with a sword, you’d be gutted like a fish,” Marko noted as he dropped his hammer.

Then he awkwardly grabbed my arms and tried to reposition me. “Spread your feet more apart, left foot in front of your right, and then straighten your back.”

He held an imaginary bow in his hands and showed me the proper stance.

According to him...

The offer of assistance—and the condescending way he offered it—rankled. Plus, it didn’t matter much in my opinion as my [Snipe] skill would hit every time, or so I assumed, but then I pushed my pride aside.

Relying on a single skill would hamper any real progression. Sure, I had practiced on the kekuri, but there hadn't been a hint of wind and rain around then, and they were much weaker than these birds.

I quickly shifted my stance, getting over myself and imitating what Marko taught me.

A howling wolf-like creature rushed out onto the square.

It was as large as a bull with thick glistening yellow and brown fur. Long sharp teeth protruded past its lips and two glowing red eyes stared madly ahead.

The creature spotted us, probably thinking we were easy pickings. It snarled, running toward us, and I shifted my stance, raising my bow.

Marko picked his hammer back up and with a speed that totally caught me unprepared, swung the massive weapon in a downward, diagonal arc.

The flat side of his hammer struck the monster's left shoulder. It let out a cry of pain and got stuck between the ground and Marko's weapon, its flesh utterly tenderized.

Marko pulled the hammer back up and turned it around so the spike pointed at the wolf-monster, then slammed it back down again. The sharp piece of steel punctured the creature's neck and then the full weight of the hammer killed it.

The notification confirmed its death, but it wasn't all—I was getting other notifications too, from the creatures Kristan killed.

[Leveling Essence Received: 90]

[Leveling Essence Received: 125]

[Leveling Essence Received: 85]

The messages kept rolling in as Kristan busied himself and his spear. Marko strolled back toward me and nodded at the flying monster birds.

“What? They’re not going to drop by themselves,” he said, pointing up at the sky. “Shoot.”

I breathed in and wiped the rain from my eyes, then focused on one of the monsters closest to me.

Spells came to life from further up ahead, and a lightning bolt struck one of the birds, knocking it out of the sky. Then a massive fireball and a shower of ice shards followed, all targeting more of the aerial monsters.

The sight of all the successful kills made me feel insecure. I wanted to contribute right away.

Instead of practicing as Marko said, I used [Snipe], gathering essence in the arrow and releasing it.

The projectile flew straight through the air, glowing a dull white as it streaked for the creature. This shot was dead on, piercing through its flapping wing and pinning it to the monster’s side.

With an ear-splitting shriek, the creature plummeted to the ground and landed with a heavy thud, skidding across the ground, and a second later, Marko finished it off.

[Leveling Essence Received: 290]

[Skill Essence Received: 11]

The single shot netted me just as much leveling essence as three of their kills together since the System gave me much more credit for bringing the creature down.

However, that didn’t really matter when Kristan and Marko killed ten times as many monsters in the same time it took for me to kill one. The points just kept rolling in.

There were only three of the flying monsters left as I looked up at the sky again.

One of them was circling overhead, popping the growths and letting insects fall to the ground. Then it swept around and seemed to target a group of adventurers ahead of us. Fifteen-inch-long talons readied to rip into their victims as I prepared to shoot again.

“They’ll be fine, don’t worry. Just practice shooting,” Marko said reassuringly.

“Fuck that,” I replied, unable to hold back.

This time, I released my second attack skill, [Multishot]. Five arrows released one after the other, flying in the general direction of the bird monster. The first three arrows missed, one strafed the back of its head, and the last went straight through its eye.

[Leveling Essence Received: 410]

[Skill Essence Received: 26]

“Cheater,” Marko laughed, though he sounded interested rather than angry. “How many skills do you have? You are a strange one.”

“One more,” I said, replacing my bow and quiver with the Sharot staff. “This one.”

I aimed, then activated the ability.

Lightning crackled at the tip of my staff, and then a wicked bolt streaked up into the sky, hitting the last remaining bird. It danced in the sky, twitching and letting out a last shriek before it plummeted into the side of a building, impaling itself on a long piece of steel.

Someone had already brought down the bird I’d wounded with [Multishot], leaving me with only three kills.

More or less.

[Leveling Essence Received: 410]

[Skill Essence Received: 26]

The hammer wielder eyed me curiously, then looked down at my new weapon, but he didn’t say anything. At least not for a few seconds. I could see the wild thoughts running through his mind, but I didn’t want to say anything—if he wouldn’t explain this strange “father” to me, I wouldn’t tell him about Chester.

Marko shrugged.

“It looks like you can take care of yourself, new friend. I am joining Kristan up ahead. Do not get yourself killed, alright? And if you can, try to practice instead of just blasting out your many odd skills.”

With that, he darted off, holding the war hammer up over his shoulder. I had no idea what was going on with the two, but I sure was happy to have them around and on my side to help defend my hometown.

Another screeching noise came from overhead.

I turned about, trying to stop the flying monster, but I couldn't see it. What I did spot was a ladder leading up to one of the residential buildings.

“I'm hitting the roof,” I said over the party chat. *“I can't do much from down here.”*

“Alright, but be safe,” Kristan replied. I saw him unleashing a new skill, and more leveling essence gathered inside me after the successful kills. There was a pretty big temptation to go hide somewhere and just grow stronger over time, but fuck that. This was my home and I was going to do my part!

“I am here,” Chester said, startling me as two eye stalks grew from my shoulders. *“I will help. We have much mass. Go.”*

“Thanks. Keep your eyes out on my back. I can't see everywhere at the same time.”

I darted toward the ladder, pumping my legs to get there as quickly as I could.

The air around me smelled of burned wood and the sickly sweet stench of rotting flesh. Screams cut the air all around me.

I knew that I couldn't do much, but even if I saved one person, maybe two, it would go a long way to push away the regret of devouring Renko and show that I was still a human and not a monster.

For a while, I just did as Marko said. I keenly searched the surrounding areas, notching my bow with the proper technique, then loosing arrows at any monsters that stepped too close to the human adventurers.

It took a while, but soon I felt like I was on a decent roll, taking down two or three of the insects in rapid succession.

But then, everything changed.

Somewhere behind me, a loud cracking noise rose to a deafening crescendo that cut through all the screaming and fighting and released spells.

The hideous crunching noise was followed by more screams and the sound of shattering rock. The ladder and building I was climbing shook.

“Watch out. A big monster came. Destroyed two buildings.”

“Wait, what?” I blurted, forgetting myself.

I looked over my shoulder to see where the ruckus was coming from and gasped. “Shit, what is that thing?”

“Don’t know. It’s strong. Much stronger than me. I think is high-level 5th rebirth stage.”

The monster looked like a horse with six legs only much wider, almost like a plow. The way the legs were set made the movements resemble those of a centipede.

Instead of skin, it had large scales running along its body and legs. A single central row of scales ran from the creature’s nose down its back, across the entire body. The central row flashed white, slightly translucent, and glowing.

Two arm-like limbs stuck from both sides. Unlike the rest of the body, they weren’t covered in scales. The arms were parched and beige, and they looked like tough hide.

A similar hide covered the head, which was comically small in comparison to the absurdly broad and muscular body. The head was slightly elongated with a glowing mane running along the top of the skull and down the neck.

There were four eyes on each side of the head, each glowing with different colors.

“Any of you know what that thing is?” I asked in the party chat. *“The monstrous horse monster with six legs.”*

Even though Chester wanted us to focus on the small monsters, I froze in place, unable to turn away. I scanned the crowd, and noticed that Kristan felt the same way.

Kristan had stopped fighting for a moment instead looking to where the monster was fighting dozens of adventurers. Spells and skills flashed from all around it, hitting the monster’s legs and body. Some did obvious damage as the creature reared up and swiped its arms toward the attackers, but others just bounced off its scales.

“I think that’s a nightmare,” Kristan said. *“It’s a unique type of monster that can spit dark flame if I’m not mistaken.”*

“Unique, huh?” I muttered to myself. *“And dark flames?”*

“High level monster. Just like me,” the mimic said, squeezing the eye stalks to the sides of my head. *“I wish I could eat. Absorb some of power. Tasty.”*

I definitely saw the upside, and excitement briefly flared through my heart. If Chester and I could eat that thing...

But it seemed so damn impractical.

“Eat? That thing is as big as a whole street!”

“So? I can eat small part.”

I rolled my eyes and then finished climbing, pulled myself up onto the roof, and looked around.

The building wasn’t that tall, only about seven floors tall, but it gave me enough of an overview of the streets around me and the northern wall.

I wanted to find a way to attack the nightmare, but then I saw something that was even worse. Right by the northern

wall, it looked like the very mouth of hell, with countless monsters scrabbling through.

“There’s a giant hole in the northern wall,” I said over party chat. *“Monsters are streaming in by the hundreds. I don’t think there are enough guards to stop them all.”*

“Focus on what you can do,” Marko replied. *“We’ll need to stop the rush and the nightmare...but if you die, you can’t do shit for the town.”*

I looked down at him, but he was in mid-swing, the hammer catching one of the insect monsters in the side and sending it flying into a nearby wall.

He was helping hold the wave back in this area, but couldn’t move either. And now, Kristan jumped in to help fight the nightmare. Much easier said than done...

The many options were overwhelming, and Marko was right.

I decided to take this step-by-step. I had to slowly make my way through, helping individual groups push through the monster hordes before we could all make it to the northern wall.

I hurried over to the other side of the building. The square was taken care of and more adventurers were rolling out onto the street. The clay shingle roof provided me with enough security that I could move freely.

I pulled an arrow free as I approached the side street behind the building, and nocked it.

Only four adventurers were fighting a full pack of wolf monsters. The wolves were similar to the one Marko killed earlier but much smaller in size. Still, they looked dangerous.

I targeted one I was sure I’d hit and released an arrow, using the technique Marko had shown me.

The wind knocked it aside again, but I’d accounted for that. It plunged into the creature’s backside, eliciting a painful howl.

Several of the monsters looked up at the roof as if knowing where the arrow had come from, but there was no way they'd make it up here. I was safe for now, so I nocked another arrow and released it, then another.

The four adventurers stepped back, reorganizing themselves as the monsters snapped their jaws at the sky, or rather, at the rooftop where I stood.

A massive thunderbolt struck a nearby building, but Chester's armor appeared around me in a heartbeat.

I hadn't even flinched either, which meant that he was doing the same thing as back in the dungeon. The mimic was draining all my fear.

That was good, I could live with that.

All my skills were off cooldown by then.

I used [Multishot] again, and targeted the center of their formation. Four arrows struck home, finishing off two of the wolves and killing a third.

Three messages appeared before me, showing the same thing every time.

[Leveling Essence Received: 290]

[Skill Essence Received: 18]

"Almost another thousand points," I whispered, but then noticed the rather extensive list of essence points gained and sighed. If only we could level up skills on the fly.

"Hey, we'll take it from here!" one of the four yelled from down below. "We can clear out the rest of these damned wolves!"

I lifted my hand and then looked down the street to see if anyone else needed my help. There were no more monsters or adventurers there, but I heard fighting coming from around the corner.

"Take care!" I yelled back and then started running toward the far side of the roof.

It was barely angled, making it easy enough to run across.

Still, it was slippery from all the rain and the gusts of wind threatened to knock me off more than once.

I stopped myself several steps away from the ledge and looked down onto a branching street. The one moving directly away from me led toward the Burning Bosom, which was safe the last time I saw it, but the one leading toward the poorer part of town was teeming with monsters and no one to fight them.

My stomach dropped almost to my feet.

Shit.

Of course the impoverished area was going to be abandoned...

But not if I could help it. Before Rolo took me in, I'd grown up there.

"Can you take them on?" I whispered. "I can't do this on my own Chester."

"Yes. I can do for you. But if human see me, I kill them. No one can see me."

There was no one outside anyway, but adventurers might barge in and try to help. If we killed even one of them, that meant one less able-bodied man or woman left to protect Eslant.

"Do you want to risk it? We can start. I use obsidian blade and shield."

The string between us lengthened, and I knew what he was going to do—Chester wanted to materialize more of his body, and use the freakish human form he'd used to kill the boss.

If anyone saw that, the gig would be up.

"Wait, wait, wait," I said hurriedly. "Is there any way for you to directly use my body to do the killing?"

“Maybe. Can try, but you weak. Will use much stored mass. Not good.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll eat the monsters.” I replied.

“Only tasty monster. No more bone monster.”

His eyestalks focused on me and I laughed at the ridiculous exaggerated angry glare from both sides.

“Alright, yeah, no more bone monsters.”

I searched for a new ladder, but just then heard more overhead screeching noises. The flying monsters were back.

“Let me control.”

I lowered my arms and just stood there, waiting for him to take over my body. It was a strange sensation where I could feel him trying to move my body, but he was having a hard time. He’d done it back in the dungeon, but only for a few herky-jerky steps. Fighting was a different thing entirely.

Still, I waited patiently even as more monsters appeared overhead. It was hard to believe that I was begging for the mimic to take over me, but that was what we needed right now. I could feel his tendrils twisting through my muscles, but Chester was slow and confused.

One of the monsters might see me as food and attack from behind as Chester tried to figure out what to do.

But then, Chester let out an excited cry.

“Ah, got it!”

Instead of controlling my muscles, he did something else instead.

A thin layer of dark gooey mass covered my body and hardened like steel.

Then my arms rose, and I started pulling arrows free from the quiver and shooting them one by one. A literal rain of arrows blanketed the street ahead.

Chester went through a hundred arrows within a single minute. While his aim was weird, just the sheer speed at which

he notched and loosed the arrows was utterly ridiculous. Not only that, he was so strong he could ignore the wind.

Most of the arrows found their targets, but a good number didn't, instead shattering on impact wherever they landed.

"Watch where you're shooting!" A voice yelled from below. And then another. Soon about a dozen people were cursing me.

They stopped when more monsters charged them, but I smiled. This had been a great demonstration, one that just gave me an idea of what the mimic was capable of.

"Sorry! Won't happen again!" I shouted down.

Instead of berating Chester, I just laughed to him. *"That was insane. Can you do that but more precisely? You could have hit some of the adventurers."*

"I not hit. I perfectly see all around us."

"Well, you explain that when we kill someone accidentally."

Chester cackled. *"If I kill. Not accident!"*

It was a good thing my thoughts couldn't be used as evidence against me...

Still, the mimic was as good as promised. His haphazard rapid fire arrows came close to hitting adventurers and civilians, but never actually did.

"On our way," Kristan said suddenly in the party chat, cutting him off. *"We'll be there in a minute."*

Considering how strong he and Marko were, I wanted to have something to show them—plus, I didn't want to have Chester still in charge when he showed up.

"I guess this isn't the time to argue," I reluctantly admitted. *"Let's go, buddy. We got some people to save and essence to farm. Try and clear these out before the two brothers come."*

"Yes! Snacks! You give me cake. Later."

“Yes, later, but only if you kill the monsters. I’ll check my storage. Maybe I still have a leftover cake.”

“Caaake!”

With that demented battlecry, Chester surged into battle.



CHAPTER 27: ESLANT INVASION, PART 3

My body moved seemingly on its own.

I knew it was Chester doing the actual moving, but his usually calm presence in the back of my mind was now pure chaos. A ravenous hunger flooded over me as if I hadn't eaten for a week.

I felt my arms move and the bow being stashed away, only to be replaced with the obsidian blade and the chitin shield.

Despite my still-high agility stat, I could feel the difference clearly every time I switched gear. After switching to the heavier runeblade, I became slower and less maneuverable.

I had nothing to worry about, though, as the mimic had his own stats to add on top of mine. With his power, I was far stronger than I ever could be alone.

Chester jumped down the side of the building and landed with a loud thud some thirty feet below. Every bone in my body rattled, but I didn't sustain any damage.

The mimic's gooey but strong armor absorbed the impact of the fall, and then we were running. My legs moved quicker than I was able to manage by myself, and they soon became ludicrous blurs against the stone. They were moving so damn fast they looked almost like the mimic's tentacles.

"Watch." Chester's voice smugly sounded in my mind.

We jumped in a straight line, spinning like a drill.

The obsidian blade spun in a circle, slightly angled toward the four monsters that were in our path. They barely had any time to shriek and cry as the sword cut their bodies into chunks.

Chester flipped our body over mid-air, landing with our feet against the wall of a smaller building. I could feel the goo wrenching my body, twisting me into the preposterous move. My stomach swooped in my chest.

My right foot pushed through the stone wall, and the force of the blow caused more of it to crumble.

Chester pushed off again with our other leg, and spun toward three more of the creatures.

Before long, they too were cut into ribbons.

Chester's voice cackled exuberantly in my mind, building to an ever-higher pitch. The endorphins flooded my body, and I grinned.

This was fun.

We were totally dominant.

None of the monsters could stand before us!

This was what they got for fucking with my hometown!

Then I froze.

Shit.

Chester and I had been having so much fun that we'd stopped looking around, and now we'd been spotted.

Kristan arrived first. I could see Marko lumbering some fifty steps behind him, holding the big hammer over his shoulder.

"What was that?" Kristan demanded, holding his spear out. It wasn't exactly threatening, since his arm was slack, but the deadly weapon was still pointed at me. A worried expression graced his otherwise cheerful face. It was a little shocking to see the normally tough man look so frightened. "That was no skill. I didn't feel any essence leaking from you."

I looked down at the spear as Chester relinquished control of my body. Kristan seemed to notice the raised weapon and lowered it, muttering an apology.

"Don't ask," I said, unable to give him a response even if I wanted to. Chester was hissing fearfully in my mind, telling me to stay quiet. "You have some secrets of your own, Kristan. Maybe when you're ready to share."

Kristan was silent for a moment, seemingly digesting what I just said. Then he nodded slowly as Marko caught up. "Yes. That's fair enough," he stiffly responded.

"Hey, that was some good acrobatics," Marko laughed, patting me on the shoulder. Unlike Kristan, he didn't bother asking what had happened.

I could see that he was a little disturbed, just like Kristan was, but the man was smart enough not to push.

I didn't know if there was a hierarchy to their adopted brotherly relationship, but considering how powerful Kristan was, it seemed like he usually had the final say.

"Thanks, Marko," I politely replied.

Then I noticed a small group of civilians standing nearby, shaking in fear. "Go hide."

“Y—yes sir! Thank you!” the elderly man said. A single strand of hair swung about his mostly bald head as he turned to run. The group looked totally freaked out, maybe even more frightened of me than the monsters, which went to show just how powerful I could be when Chester took over my body.

“What now?” Marko asked, looking around and searching for more monsters. “Do we go to the northern gate?”

I turned to Kristan who shook his head and pointed to where most of the ruckus was coming from—the nightmare.

“We must cut off the head of the snake,” Kristan said.

Marko nodded. “I agree. The nightmare is far stronger than these common creatures.”

Their logic made sense. The beast was freakishly tough, as plenty of adventurers had been wailing on it for a while, though it was now finally starting to weaken. It looked like it had a huge spear wound in its chest, and I could guess who’d given it to the beast.

“Very well then,” I nodded.

Chester guffawed. “*Perhaps I will sneak a bite!*”

Kristan face twisted into a mix between a grin and a leer. “Let’s get back to business. I’d just wounded the monstrosity before ducking off.”

The fighting would still go strong for hours, there was no doubt about it, but one monster in specific wouldn’t probably live that long.

“Yes. Let’s not waste the damage you already dealt. We should leech some of the Nightmare’s sweet essence, shouldn’t we, brother?” Marko asked eagerly. “I wouldn’t mind hitting it with my hammer a few times.”

“Yes, let us do just that. And Damon as well,” Kristan replied, then he let out a sigh. Our eyes met and he was all smiles again. “I am sorry for pointing my spear at you, Damon. You are right. These stories are best exchanged over a

glass of whisky in the safety of our tent, isn't that right? Let's finish our duty on the battlefield."

"Right," I said, appreciating that he didn't push the Chester issue any further.

I unequipped my sword and shield, then re-equipped the bow. There was no way I'd get close enough to that monster and give it a chance to stomp me to death. Against a beast like this, I was more than happy in a support role, even with the brother's enticing buffs. "Will you two be alright?"

Just then as if responding to my question, a plume of smoke and dark flames rose to the sky, burning the rain and lightning away.

I didn't know what kind of fire it was, but we could feel the heat several blocks away, and there was only one blazing beast powerful enough to create it.

Chester was ecstatic. He looked forward to exchanging blows with the monstrous nightmare. Or exchanging arrows in this case.

"Rebuff?" I asked the party, casting my buffs on Kristan and Marko one after the other without waiting for a response. They did so as well and then we were off again, running first toward the Adventure Guild square.

We passed by the small group of adventurers I'd almost hit with the [Multishot] earlier, but they didn't seem to recognize it was me. Or they didn't care. They were just too busy running away from the nightmare's flames.

The closer we got to the square, the hotter it became. The rain continued falling, but it wasn't a hard downpour anymore, instead a soft, warm misty blanket.

Kristan was the first to burst out from the side street, closely followed by Marko.

He stopped and put his arm up to shield his face.

I wanted to run up with them, but then I stopped just before leaving the safety of the wall behind.

Even though it protected me from most of the extreme heat, the hairs on my arms felt as if they were about to catch fire. It felt like there were countless fire ants waging war across my body.

I hurriedly stepped back even further, until the dreadful feeling left.

“What are those flames?” I hissed, pushing my back against the wall.

“I do not know, but they are very hot,” Marko said solemnly. “Many people will die today. That’s why we want you in the back, using your arrows.”

The heat didn’t seem to bother him so much.

Either he had fire resistance or the extra power his rebirths and levels provided was so substantial that it mitigated the nasty heatwave.

“Let’s go,” Kristan said, his face set into a deep frown. His eyebrows met in the middle, giving him a slightly comical appearance.

I watched the two run off.

“Can you do something about the heat?” I asked Chester.

“*Yes. Waited for them leave.*” His voice was nervous—he was just as worried about being spotted by Kristan again as I was.

Chester took over immediately, and our body jumped to life.

Using the extra mass he could call on, claws grew from my hands.

We scampered up to the roof in mere seconds, and then we were running around the L-shaped building, jumped across, and landed on the Adventure Guild.

From there on it was all a jumbled mess of flashes and the wind buffeting my face. At least the heat didn’t bother me anymore.

By the time Chester stopped, we stood on the edge of the sundries storehouse.

It ran right along the edge of the river, giving us a great vantage point from which to shoot the unique class monstrosity. Several blocks of residential buildings were already destroyed by the creature, and there was plenty of potential to flatten more of the town.

“Are you sure we should have fallen back so far?” I asked. My job was to actually participate in the battle, after all.

“I can shoot from here. Don’t worry,” Chester replied.

“We’re in position,” Kristan said over the party chat. “The heat is bad, but it’s letting up.”

It was easy to spot him amidst the others from his scarlet red cloak. Marko was right behind him, distinguishable due to his huge hammer.

The two were making their way across the bridge to join in on the battle.

More and more adventurers streamed toward the major threat despite the smaller monsters not having been dealt with yet. Now that the creature was wounded, the adventurers were emboldened. Just like Marko had suggested, everyone was intent on getting the extra potent leveling essence, even if it meant risking their life.

Chester pulled one of the poison-coated arrows from my quiver and aimed it at the nightmare.

The beast’s movements were erratic, and now that it was surrounded, it attacked with all its mishmash body parts at once.

The nightmare swept its arms and legs about, snapping its teeth at the people below, and attacking with dark flames that wouldn’t go out until they devoured their target.

The stench of burnt flesh and the sound of the dying screaming and pleading for help shook me.

Despite the mimic’s ability to drown out my fear and self-preservation instinct, it still managed to cut into my soul. I

could almost feel their pain in my own body.

My arm pulled back, and I could feel the bow and string tense beneath the mimic's powerful grip.

For a moment, I thought it was about to snap, but then the arrow flew toward the nightmare. It was surrounded by dark flames that burned everything to cinders. The arrow, however, went right through the fire, striking the beast directly.

For a moment, hope flared in my heart...

But nothing happened.

The beast didn't fall.

It felt a bit anticlimactic as the projectile just got stuck in the monster's hind left leg, and then it continued rampaging without stopping.

Chester felt my disappointment, so he nocked another one, this time using [Snipe].

He held the arrow in place for one brief moment, and then it was gone, flying with incredible speed at the rampaging monster.

This time, the nightmare let out a yelp of pain and briefly glanced over its massive shoulders, trying to find this new source of pain. Both of its arms twisted toward the spot of impact, and the creature tried to get to the arrow, but it was way too small for its meaty fingers to pull out.

"Poison good. It drain life, not only inflict pain on monster. I like."

I hastily replied.

"I like it too, but that nightmare seems pissed as hell. Shoot it again."

"Ok."

Chester hit the nightmare for a third time, and then it was looking right at us. Its eyes smoldered with so much hatred my very soul shivered.

“Shit! It found us!” I cursed.

“No problem!” Chester joyfully replied. *“I disguise!”*

The mass around my body—and my body itself—all shifted at once. I could feel Chester activating [Mimicry] and it seemed a little strange, since while he was controlling my body, he also owned the skill.

Finally, I just decided to transform with him, going with the flow...

My upper body elongated, with my legs anchoring to the ground. My legs split, forming into a pair of wheels, and then my whole body started turning gunmetal black.

“What are we?” I asked.

“Cannon,” Chester replied proudly. *“That way, it won’t know it was a person shooting at them.”*

“What the hell?!” I replied. *“You are an idiot! The monster will still attack if it sees a cannon on a roof shooting at it!”*

Indeed, the nightmare was now peering at us with furious eyes. Even from a distance, I could see the beast’s feral intelligence. It obviously recognized what a cannon was.

“Change again! Change!” I shouted, hoping it wasn’t too late.

“Into what?”

“Something that looks normal on a roof! A chimney!”

“Good idea!”

Our bodies shifted again, which must have confused the nightmare. Fortunately, we weren’t alone. Hundreds of spells and skills slammed into the monster as it was distracted staring at us.

The beast was forced to attack the others, and when it looked at us again, all it saw was a chimney. To my surprise, it totally forgot about us.

“Hell yeah,” I muttered. “That beast might be cunning, but at least it doesn’t have object permanence.”

Chester readied another arrow, firing again. It was a weird procedure, as he basically generated gooey tentacle arms from inside his chimney body to shoot.

More dark flames spewed forth from the monster, engulfing a small group of casters, and killing them almost instantly. It was a horrific sight, one that sent chills running down my spine despite being under the mimic’s fear-dampening spell.

A massive, fifty-foot-long glowing sword appeared over the nightmare’s head. The beast moved on instinct, twisting its body and jumping to the side to avoid the deadly magical blade.

The spell activated and came crashing down, slashing into the creature’s left arm and middle leg. The nightmare fell to the ground with a loud thud, throwing up dust and debris.

“What was that? Very powerful spell! Our turn!” Chester cried from joy in my mind and released [Multishot]. Three of the five projectiles glowed a sickly green.

All five found their mark, and this time the nightmare seemed to finally notice what was going on. It turned wildly back and forth, searching for me and Chester.

Somehow the mimic had placed all the poisonous arrows in the same general area, and now its scaled hind leg was changing color from pitch black to a sickly green-gray.

“Poison good. I really love. Look,” the mimic proudly repeated. It sounded like Chester had really taken a liking to the quiver, and seeing the results, I had to agree with him.

“Something’s happening. It’s turning toward the river! Where are you?” Kristan asked over the party chat.

I saw him turn in my general direction and waved.

He noticed me a moment later and then pointed toward me, getting Marko’s attention as well. Both of them had befuddled looks on their faces, as I shouldn’t have been able to

reach this area so quickly while also shooting so effectively. When fighting alongside Chester, I really was a different person.

“How about you gentlemen deal some more damage instead of looking around for the real star of the show?” I joked on the party chat.

“Says the guy who’s taking shots from afar,” Kristan jabbed back. *“Why don’t you come and—”*

He broke off then as the monster lunged toward the river, forgetting about its missing arm and leg.

It misjudged the power it needed to jump over, and instead landed between the two shores. The river started quenching its flames, and it stumbled.

A cheer rose out from the crowd, but too soon.

It was stuck, but not powerless.

More dark flames spewed from its body, spreading out to the nearby structures and engulfing the building I was standing on.

The stone walls and tiled roof exploded in countless fragments as Chester jumped back and pulled up the chitin shield with breathtaking speed.

The mimic’s speed saved our lives—I never would have been able to swap items and raise the shield in time.

“Hold on,” the mimic ordered as we fell through the air.

“Hold on? To what?” I snorted.

“To—oh, never mind. I forgot. I am boss now.”

I shook my head mentally and just enjoyed his acrobatics.

The mimic really knew how to move.

Even as we fell through the air, Chester safely controlled our descent. He first jumped to a nearby chimney,

then slid down the side of the building, before grabbing onto a window sill.

Once that killed our falling momentum, he let go and we landed back on our feet.

With that, the ooze suddenly receded.

“This use much stored and absorbed mass. You have control back.”

I almost fell over as I again regained control over my body.

Not wasting a moment, I scampered off toward the center of the Adventure Guild square so I was far away from any falling roofs or walls.

The shield was still in my hand, so I stashed it away and pulled the bow back out.

Now, more adventurers were gathering nearby, getting bolder and more hopeful as the monster was stuck between the two sides of the river. It couldn't pull or push itself out, so attacks were raining down on it.

“Monster almost dead. That makes it more dangerous,” Chester said, sending an urgent warning into my mind. *“Hide. Now!”*

Black flames engulfed the entirety of the monster in mere seconds, expanding and eating anything in their path. Essence fluctuated all around us and I felt a dense blanket of raw power gather inside the Nightmare's body.

Or rather, Chester felt the blanket of gathering energy and projected it into my mind, which explained his fear and urgency.

All he could think was 'run'. Nothing else.

I sent a message over the party chat. *“Kristan! Marko! Run! Now! I think something's going to happen!”*

I couldn't see the two from where I was but heeded my own warning. Turning tail, I sprinted toward the Adventurer Guild building.

“Run! Now!” I yelled, over and over again trying to help any bystander I could.

I almost stumbled over the stairs into the courtyard, taking them two or three at a time.

Sweat broke out on my brow as I clenched my teeth and then everything went dark.

What little light had pierced the clouds earlier was now gone and an intense heat accompanied the darkness.

I felt pain flare up my feet and legs. Two pairs of hands grabbed me then, pulling me inside the Adventurer’s Guild building. A loud thud echoed out behind me as I lay on the cold stone tiles.

“What—shit. What was that?” I cursed, trying to gather my thoughts as the pain washed over my body. It felt like I was coming apart at the seams.

A wave of cleansing light washed over me next, and the pain disappeared. Staffers from the Adventurer’s Guild were helping me, but I couldn’t see who. The pain coursing through my body reduced everything into a blur.

One of the two pairs of hands propped me up in a sitting position but tried to force me to look up instead of at my body.

But I couldn’t look away. All I could think about was how part of my legs was missing, charred bone sticking out from burnt flesh.

“It will be alright, so please don’t look. Your legs will regrow shortly,” a hard, female voice said.

She sounded familiar.

“You,” I said, stumbling over whatever it was next I wanted to say. The scout guild attendant looked at me, her face set into a frown.

“Yes, me. Come, let me help you.”

She grabbed me under the arms and started sliding me across the floor. The only real solace I found in the whole

mess was my blood splattered all over the floor made it easier for her to move me.

The door exploded inward as she dragged me toward the monster bone counter.

We disappeared behind it just as more dark flame surged inside, bathing the floor, walls, and ceiling in black destruction. The young scout clerk grabbed me, protecting my body with hers as we huddled behind the ancient monster's remains.

I probably lost consciousness for a moment, as things changed faster than should have been possible.

One moment we were huddled behind the counter, and the other I was trying to push a piece of wooden ceiling off us.

I looked out to the entrance, only to see the whole outer wall and several floors above us missing, dark flames slowly dying in the rain.

I turned to the attendant. "Are you alright?"

She nodded, her face pale and her eyes wide and fearful. "I'll live. I'm glad you're alive. You seem kind."

I wanted to help her back to her feet, but suddenly, my muscles seized up and I felt a coat of slime emerging from my back.

My body jerked forward and I fell to my face. I could feel Chester trying to move my body for me, and he didn't stop despite my protests.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Need eat monster. Tasty! Strong! Absorb all mass!"

My feet were still missing and there was debris everywhere, but that didn't seem to stop the mimic from trying.

Tentacles sprouted from my back and sides, and we rose, held up by our new limbs.

"Wait! Stop!" I cried. Running through town like a twisted monster—so soon after they'd fought off so many

abominations—was a terrible idea. *“What about the rainbow trout! I can give you that! From my bag!”*

Chester scoffed. *“Trout best saved for later. You stil not strong enough yet.”* Then he just ignored me and kept on running with those twisted tendril legs.

The Adventurer’s Guild attendant let out a cry of surprise, but there was no time to explain.

Before I could protest further, we shot out of the Adventurer Guild’s remains and darted around the corner, keeping out of sight.

Everything around me was dark, and it was deathly cold. The chill cut me right to the bone.

The rain had picked up again but there was no more lightning and rolling thunder. Raindrops pelted my body, my face, and my eyes, though it felt cool and soothing instead of irritating. After the heat of the nightmare, the water felt like a gentle bath rather than the wrath of nature.

I enjoyed the sensation for a brief moment as Chester thought about how to proceed without being spotted.

He looked left and right and then jumped on the side of the building in front of us, using the tentacles to climb with insane speed.

“If someone sees us we’re dead,” I warned, a slight hint of worry seeping into me despite the exhilaration of climbing the wall as if I was an octopus.

“Don’t worry. We use hiding skill. It very effective with all smoke and flame.”

We hit the top of the building and skittered ahead.

Once we hit the stable and solid roof, the mimic propped us up on our tentacles so we had a better vantage point.

The scene we gazed down upon was absolutely terrifying. Over twenty residential blocks were gone or lay in ruins, and massive chunks of the monster’s body and stone blocked the river running through Eslant.

The nightmare's head lay inside the building we were standing on along with the second arm. Hundreds of small, smoldering forms were strewn about on the site of the battle.

It seemed like the monsters had been caught in the blast as well, which ended our problem with the surge. Even that structure had come crumbling down, killing all the monsters that would have made it through.

Normally, that would be a good thing. Holding off the monsters at the gate was a classic heroic victory.

But to my disgust, the fire was so bad that I couldn't tell the humans or monsters apart anymore. Everything had been badly mangled by flame, beyond all recognition and my imagination.

Some of the bodies were still burning and twitching, while others were just charred husks. The smell of burnt flesh was so strong that I gagged several times and spat out some of the bile.

Even the rain and strong wind didn't do much to help carry away the feeling of death that settled over Eslant.

I hurriedly looked up to the corner of my vision, my heart skipping a beat as I remembered that Marko and Kristan had been close to the monster.

The two life orbs were still in the green.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips and I felt weak. My legs gave out and I shook, a single tear rolling down my cheek.

"You! Stop cry! They alive!" the mimic said, pushing my relief aside and replacing it with determination.

"Oh, shut up!" I groaned. *"I don't know what you're doing with my feelings, but I have the right to be relieved!"* Despite their noble birth, extreme power, and countless wartime experiences, the two had treated me as equals.

"Oh, yes. You great person. You amazing friend," Chester dryly replied. *"Ok. We go now."*

Chester took over again, and I felt somewhat exhausted by the back and forth.

We landed down on the rubble right in front of the left side of the nightmare's eyes. Thanks to the explosion, the creature's body parts had been blasted across a pretty wide area. Most of it was still in the water, but the head was fairly far ashore.

Chester went straight for it.

Even though it was dead, it seemed like the decapitated nightmare was staring right at us. The large, lifeless black orbs looked a little off somehow as a grey, murky smoke floated within. I didn't pay it too much heed as I didn't know if it was supposed to mean anything. For all I knew, it could just be a remnant of its dark fire.

So long as the damned thing was dead, that was fine by me.

I frowned, looking at the nightmare's remains. The creature had turned around, noticing me and Chester specifically even though Kristan and Marko were attacking it too. *"How come we did so much damage to it? It wasn't just the poison, right? Maybe one of your skills?"*

Chester replied at once. *"No. Your fingertab. Look at special. It can 50% penetrate defense. Very good. Now I eat."*

That made sense.

I hadn't thought about the synergy between my arrow skills, the finger tab, and the poison damage on top of that. It all added up to a lot of unavoidable damage-over-time, which I supposed was perfect against a huge tanky beast like this nightmare.

It was weird. Marko had given me the quiver to begin with, and then he and Kristan had asked me to stay in the back and use my bow. It was almost like they'd prepared me for that specific role...

Chester relinquished control over my body again, and then a black, oozy substance slid down my shoulders and fell to the ground.

It seemed like he couldn't move my body and eat at the same time, which was only logical. On top of that, taking control of my body and transforming several times had cost a lot of mass, so he was obviously hungry as all hell.

Small tentacle-like legs sprouted from the bottom of the blob and then it started spreading across the nightmare's face, including the murky eye I'd just been staring at.

A notification appeared moments later.

[You have used ABSORB on: Unique
Creature, Nightmare]

[Leveling Essence Received: 1,837%]

[Stats Received: 14 Stamina, 19
Essence]

[Symbiosis has risen by 4%]

[Ability Received: Dark Flame]

[Items Received: Nightmare Eyeball x 3,
Nightmare Fang x 7, Nightmare Scale x 31,
Nightmare Hide x 12, Nightmare Skull x 1]

The nightmare's head started boiling and disintegrating beneath Chester's [Absorb] ability. I looked around frantically, searching for anyone who might be watching.

No one was around, but I still cast [Hide]. Then I followed it up with a [Mimicry], shifting my body to match the mud on the riverbed. It was a very odd process, as I felt my body slowly unraveling and sinking to the ground. My skin and clothes darkened, and before long, I collapsed in a heap.

"Wow. You turn into shit?" Chester asked, his voice mirthful even as he ravenously chewed on the nightmare. His teeth were grinding hard, and the meat seemed exceptionally tough and chewy. Unfortunately, that meant that the noises were exceptionally disgusting this time.

"Shut up, asshole. I was turning into mud...to disguise ourselves."

“Hard to tell. Brown. Yucky. I think it is shit. Still, not a bad idea. Shit for body, but not shit for brains!”

“Just shut up and eat faster....” I groaned.

It wasn't much, but my disguise skills would make this just a tiny bit safer. If the nightmare's body disappeared, maybe people would think it was the System taking it away instead of me.

Instead of checking the stats and items I'd just received, I decided to check on something else entirely.

Or rather, on *someone* else. I would have enough time to go through everything later.

“Guys? Where are you?” I asked in party chat, nervous as all hell. Sure, they had flickering green orbs, but that didn't mean they were healthy.

The mass of power I just gained as Chester absorbed part of the nightmare's head was so intense that I hadn't felt anything like it in my life. My worry for the adopted brothers outweighed the feeling, though.

“I don't know,” Kristan replied. “Buried inside a building. Use the party map.”

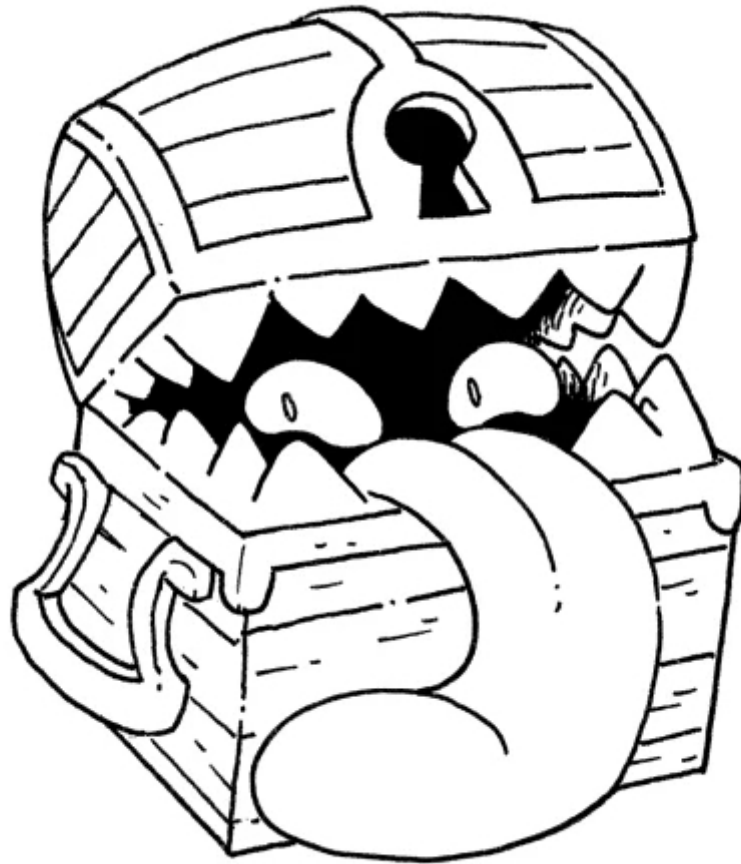
“My legs are broken,” Marko added. “It hurts. I have already used all my potions to dull the pain.”

My heart clenched and I opened the map.

Although the System hadn't updated it to show the wreckage, it still told me where the two were.

They must have dived into one of the shops opposite the street where the nightmare had been. It'd probably shielded them, but it was still in the center of the blast, so no wonder they were stuck.

“I'll be right there. Hold on.”



CHAPTER 28: AFTERMATH

The nightmare's head slowly vanished, and then I canceled [Mimicry] while keeping [Hide] active. My body slowly reformed again, and I emerged from the mud.

I was anxious, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I was so worried that I even felt a little short of breath. Following the map, I started running toward Kristan and Marko.

For incredible warriors like the two brothers to die in a collapsed building right after saving the town...

Shit!

I couldn't let that happen.

"We need to help them," I told Chester, but all I got was a loud snoring. I gazed over and then found the green snot

bubbles slowly rising from both my shoulders at once, where slit-like noses had formed.

It was disgusting, but at least people probably couldn't see them.

It seemed like I was on my own, so I pulled up my status window as I hurried toward the marked spot on the map. I wanted to know what I was capable of on my own without Chester's help, and that meant figuring out just how strong I'd become after eating the nightmare.

STATUS WINDOW			
NAME	Damon	RACE	???
STAGE	Rebirth 2	LEVEL	20
LEVEL ESSENCE	10%	SKILL ESSENCE	2,135
CLASS	???	SUB-CLASS	Greater Mimic
STRENGTH	104	ESSENCE	88
STAMINA	163	AGILITY	161
CHARISMA	38	FREE STAT POINTS	33
SYMBIOSIS	25%	STATE	Comatose
STORED MASS	100%	ABSORBED MASS	100%

The easiest thing to spot was the stored and absorbed mass stats. Chester was completely and utterly filled-up, to the point of outright bursting. It was a wonder his food coma wasn't being transferred to me, I could feel how tired he was through our link.

This last eating spree was like if I ate about thirty meat skewers. Not that I'd ever eaten—or ever even could eat—as many in a single sitting or even day, but it was the closest thing I could imagine for it to be like.

Next, I found my level sitting at 20, with a lot of new stat points, and a decent chunk of skill essence.

It had taken me years to gather three-thousand points, and now I was up to two-thousand skill essence only days after I'd spent most of my previously hard-gained points. That was probably a bonus from bringing down the nightmare, in addition to all the benefits I'd gained from staying in the same party as Kristan and Marko. No wonder the noble adventurers had worked hard to keep scouts like me out of their party—by keeping me weak, they forced me to obey them, but things had changed now.

Me and Chester's symbiosis had gone up to twenty-five percent, and I had thirty-three free stat points now.

As much as I wished to use them right away, I held back for a moment and considered my options.

Normally, I would have automatically dumped those points in agility, but not after watching that last fight where Chester took over my body. Chester liked to get up and close, while I preferred to attack from a longer range.

I suddenly remembered my Exotic ranked ranged attack skill, [Shadow Seeker]. With my agility at 161 and 33 free points, I was very close to using it, but something told me not to rush.

As strange as it sounded, the most important thing was making sure I got Kristan and Marko out of trouble. Maybe I'd have to take some emergency points in strength for that. I was

sure the two would pay me back somehow if I deviated from my ideal growth strategy to save them.

Although gaining all this new strength was intoxicating, I closed the status window and wrenched my eyes away.

I needed to keep a wary eye out on my surroundings. With Chester asleep, I would need to watch my own back. At least for a good while.

Both adventurers and civilians were spilling from every side street that connected to the Adventure Guild square.

Rubble was being cleared, and the wounded were attended to. It warmed my heart seeing everybody band together like this.

Both the noble born and the poor were trying to help each other. After the panic of the battle, it seemed like people's better instincts were coming out.

Then I stopped and gaped as something I hadn't seen for over a decade happened.

A large procession of adventurers spilled out from the half-wrecked Guild's main building. There were easily thirty men and women, most of which were easily in their forties and fifties.

It was the Adventurer Guild's elite healers, a group that spent their time training in case of emergency.

"Fear not!" the man at the head of the procession yelled to be heard over the noise. He wore a pristine white sleeveless robe that showed off his muscled arms. Long white hair hung down his shoulders. "We have arrived!"

He only spoke five words, but that seemed more than enough as everyone present started cheering.

Bright white, yellow, light orange, and gold light erupted from the gathered healers and washed over the square. Healing spells bounced from person to person, the light dimming until they were no more.

Then a second wave of spells burst forth from the gathered group. They never stopped walking or tended to anyone in particular, all they did was cast healing spells.

It was enough to keep everyone alive for now, but it would only totally solve people's problems if the targets weren't too badly wounded. Some needed burn wound treatment, others cleansing of poison and broken bones. Still more were just bleeding out, and they'd be back in a dire state pretty soon.

An already fading ray of light bounced to my body and healed what little fatigue and scrape wounds I had.

I cast [Light Step] on myself and started hurrying, but then stopped myself as the sound of pain-filled moans and grunts came from everywhere around me. The Adventurer Guild healers were just that—healers. They didn't have the strength stats needed to save people trapped under rubble.

Just to my left was a young man, a mid-level adventurer from what I could tell. Half of his body was stuck below a piece of a stone wall. No one was getting to him any time soon, not with a third of the town burnt down.

There were a lot of people still injured, and while the healers helped, they wouldn't be able to get to everybody. Part of me wanted to just pitch in here.

"Hey, what are your conditions?" I asked over the party chat.

"What do you mean? We're stuck under stone and steel and wooden beams, and bodies," Kristan replied. Even though it was just text, I could almost feel the annoyance in his voice.

"I meant if you are dying or if you're just stuck."

"I am in a bad shape," Marko replied. *"I am out of potions, and Kristan cannot get to me."*

I cursed under my breath and decided to help my friends first.

It might be the wrong decision, one that would haunt me for a long time. Still, I had to look out for them first. It

might be selfish, but Kristan saved my life, and so did Marko. It was time to repay my debt.

I crossed the square, almost bumping into the procession of healers as I fast-walked right toward where the bridge used to be.

Unfortunately, it was now gone. It'd completely sank during the battle, and I could see the broken pieces below.

Without Chester, jumping the distance was out of the question on my own power, as the bridge was easily fifty steps long.

Fortunately, I could wade across without much of a problem.

Thanks to the nightmare's flames, most of the water was gone, and no new river water could enter as the entrance was blocked by the nightmare's corpse.

As it stood, I'd barely get my knees wet.

I climbed down the shattered remains of the bridge that were still dangling above the water, and let go, falling for about fifteen feet before I landed.

Thanks to my much more durable body, the fall wasn't a problem, and I broke the water with a splash, angling my feet to minimize the surface area.

To my surprise, it was a bit deeper than I guessed from overhead. My feet barely touched the bottom, and I even submerged for a moment.

I pushed myself up and spat the dirty water out, then shook my head clear and pushed forward.

The water became deeper toward the center, but I didn't have any problems with swimming.

The real problem arose when I got to the other side. There were no ladders, no ropes, no...nothing.

I was usually much more organized and planned things out, but this attack, eating the nightmare, seeing the dead and

wounded...I'd just wanted to find my friends and get this over with, so I just dove headfirst into a problem without thinking.

I turned to the remains of the nightmare and then sighed.

It had scales running across its body, so at least I would have an easy time climbing it. But the stench coming from the creature was obnoxious. And then there was all puss, the black-yellow blood, and the open flesh.

It just didn't look very inviting.

Still, it had to be done.

The scales felt almost like tough skin instead of what I thought they would be. Usually, scales had a smooth, stone, or gem-like surface, but not the ones on this creature. Climbing the nightmare was made even more awkward as those same scales barely held my weight.

Some cracked and others crumbled as I pushed off against them. Luckily, I only had to climb about fifteen feet until I reached the other side.

"Not doing that again," I grunted and got to my feet. I could still smell the stench on my hands.

I looked around only to see the same thing as I did from across the other side of the river.

Death and destruction, but it was much worse here. Although the nightmare had run ahead, the worst of the battle had been around the northern gate.

Many more adventurers and guards were busy trying to clear the rubble and search for survivors than back in the square. The fighting had been hardest on this side of the river, so it was only natural.

Shouting came from everywhere, some people were calling for help while others gave out orders.

I recognized one of them: Alfonse.

The bastard had survived, but he had a nasty burn wound on the left side of his body. Given how much wealth he

had to throw around, I didn't doubt he'd visit some high-ranked healer and get it all fixed.

Mixed feelings boiled up inside me.

I both wanted him to die but I also needed him. Unless he freed Melina, then she'd probably be stuck in that coral cell. The only other way out was if someone who could blast past the coral bars with sheer power visited our town, and that didn't seem very likely—not even the vaunted Duke was at that level.

I hid behind the building and opened the map.

Baron Alfonse was the last person I wanted to deal with right then. Kristan and Marko were about a hundred steps to the west, and Alfonse was to my north.

Good.

I wouldn't have to run past him, and considering there were dozens of destroyed buildings and debris lying around, my chances were good that he wouldn't spot me.

I refreshed [Hide], just to give me a little edge.

It wasn't much, but any little bit helped.

Looking around the corner, I saw him talking to several other important-looking men and women. They were all battered and their outfits ruined.

That was my cue.

I made my way across the destroyed street, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. No one paid me any attention, no one called out for me, and no one stopped me.

A sensation of utter dread hit me just as I stopped in front of the ruined building where the two were buried.

Considering the wreckage, there was no way I could get to them.

Not without Chester or someone else's help. Massive stone and steel beams lay crossed over the entrance, along with tons of stone walls and ceiling.

"I don't think I can get to you," I said over the party chat. *"I can't even get inside."*

"Yes, you can," Kristan replied. *"Just figure it out somehow!"*

I winced, imagining him yelling at me.

Alright, since I was already there, I might as well try.

Before I even made another step, I looked around to make sure no one saw me, then pushed past the several fallen pillars and entered the ruins.

It was dark inside, even more so as it was already evening.

My eyes worked just fine, though, and I could see most of the surroundings.

Broken furniture lay scattered around the entrance, and three of four walls had toppled over, leaving only one partially intact.

The ceiling wasn't there anymore, and the second floor of the building had collapsed too. All I saw was the dark sky looming above us.

I stared at the rubble. From the faint hint of essence, I could sense them, but that was all. I had no idea where they actually were.

"Do you remember where you went?" I asked.

"We came in through the main entrance and entered a room across from it, then went down a flight of stairs," Kristan replied. *"We should be pretty close to the entrance."*

"Alright, give me a few minutes."

I climbed over the rubble and pushed toward the one wall that was still partially standing.

The door was gone, and instead, I dropped several feet toward the gaping hole, catching myself as I hit what I thought was a lower floor. The whole building had been reduced to rubble, so I was basically just groping around the ruins.

The next room wasn't much better as several stone pillars had fallen over and shattered against the cellar entrance. It wasn't hard to see from where I stood.

At first glance, I couldn't come up with any idea how to even start clearing the debris. I had nothing I could use to remove the chunks of stone...

But then I blinked.

I stared down at the rocks, narrowing my eyes.

In general, a human with no training at all had about a ten or fifteen in strength, while a well-trained athlete who didn't use any essence had about twenty or thirty.

With thirty as a rough cap, some first stage rebirth adventurers were technically already at the "superhuman" state—not that superhuman meant much against monsters. First stage adventurers could run faster than an ordinary human and lift heavier weights, but monsters were much stronger than humans.

These rocks weren't monsters, but they were enormous and very heavy.

Still, I was on the second rebirth.

Not only that, most adventurers of my level had only forty or fifty strength, if even that, and mine was over a hundred points.

That had to mean something, right?

And in the worst case scenario, I could use those free stat points.

I grabbed the first piece of stone, pulled it up over my head, and threw it aside. To my shock, it felt like nothing at all. It was like tossing a piece of fruit.

My eyes widened.

Damn.

I was a lot stronger than I thought I was, as I'd only used my newly forged body in combat so far. Now that I'd

started doing simple manual labor, the strength difference really came into focus.

Moving the rock was actually downright easy. Sure, the rock wasn't *that* large, only about two feet in diameter, but it was pretty thick.

It was only now that I really understood what stats meant. Knowing the theory was one thing, but experiencing it was another thing entirely.

“Is that you?” Marko asked over the party chat. “I can hear shifting rubble.”

“Yeah, that's me. I'm trying to clear the pieces of broken wall from the cellar entrance. Hold on. I'm doing my best.”

Over the next fifteen minutes or so, I managed to clear most of the rubble, even breaking a large stone beam into multiple smaller pieces, and then heaved them aside.

I was beginning to tire out, but just imagining them down there bleeding out in the darkness didn't sit right with me.

The steel door finally came into full view.

I pulled it open and...stopped dead. Kristan and Marko were drinking coffee and playing cards just below the door.

I let out an indignant cry. “What—do you even—never mind. Screw you both.” I rolled my eyes. Marko claiming he was out of potions and in dire straits...

Eyeing him, he looked totally fine to me.

“Hey, we were really trapped! I couldn't push all the stones off us,” Kristan protested. Then he pointed at Marko. “And isn't it better that he's not in mortal danger?”

“You...have a point there,” I muttered. “Still, I thought you were about to die from blood loss, you ass. Don't do that again.”

They eyed me curiously, and then each other. A strange understanding crossed their eyes.

It was an odd moment, but one that told me an awful lot about them. Kristan and Marko hadn't been randomly playing a game, no, they were testing me.

"You pass," Marko said, all strain gone from his voice. "I think you've earned our trust, friend."

"Yes, I agree," Kristan added. "You've put us ahead of anyone and anything. When we called, you came, so from now on, we will do the same for you for as long as we live."

I eyed the two, confusion apparent on my face from what they were going at. It obviously showed as Kristan put his hand up and then got to his feet.

"We can talk about it back at the Burning Bosom. I want to see if that...young lady is well."

"Huh, that is another first today. We're already up to three," Marko chuckled.

"Three? What do you—"

"It was our first time fighting a monster as powerful as the nightmare. I couldn't even bring up its stats."

"The second is that we were buried under tons of rock," Marko added.

"And thirdly...wait, there is no third. I'm not—" Kristan said, stammering a little. It was surprising seeing the confident spearman so nervous.

Marko rolled his eyes and slapped Kristan's shoulder. "Oh, shut it, brother. If you like her, then tell her."

I frowned. "Wait, her man literally left her like...a few hours ago. Is it the time to...no, never mind."

I just shook my head, baffled at Kristan's bizarre behavior. Still, if things worked out between him and Renata, I supposed that wouldn't be the worst.

"His previous girl thought he was a pompous fool," Marko snickered. "And let me tell you, good Damon, he was. Yet somehow I feel this short journey has done him some

good. Or maybe some of your good nature rubbed off on him,” Marko said seriously. “Thank you for that.”

Kristan scowled and crossed his arms.

“It’s not like I’m standing right here,” he said, eliciting another chuckle from his adopted brother. I found it too bizarre to even respond properly.

Then, Kristan suddenly put up his hand, dismissing Marko’s banter. He eyed me, tilting his head to the side and his eyes narrowing. Though he didn’t pull out his spear like last time, I could tell that he was confused.

“Wait, something’s off with you. I feel you’ve become stronger yet again. And it’s not just the additional leveling essence we got from the nightmare. Thanks for that, by the way.” Kristan eyed me, looking a little surprised that I’d inflicted so much damage. “I know it wasn’t us, so I guess it was you who dealt the last hit to it?”

I nodded. “Yeah, the arrow quiver I got from Marko helped with that.” I turned to Marko, a somewhat confused expression on my face “What’s with that poison anyway? It seemed to really bother the nightmare.”

Marko smiled. “It’s...” he scratched his chin, trying to think of how to describe it. “Let’s just say it’s a special type of poison. Most do fixed damage to any target, but the better the arrow, the higher percentage damage the poison will do.”

“So...the deeper the wound, the more poison it delivers?” I asked, trying to figure out what he was saying.

“Essentially, yes. But there’s more features you’ll have to discover on your own,” Marko replied with a shrug.

“I can just imagine how many leveling essence our old man got,” Kristan laughed. “Sanguine hell, we got three levels worth and didn’t do anything.”

I sighed.

Who was this old man? And how could he have gained essence if he wasn’t in our party? Had he been fighting in the battle in his own group?

I supposed they'd tell me when they were ready. I hadn't told them about Chester after all.

I brushed the thought aside and offered them a hand each to pull the two up the last three steps up from the cellar. They were missing for some reason, and I didn't think it was the cave-in, it seemed like a weird quirk of the building.

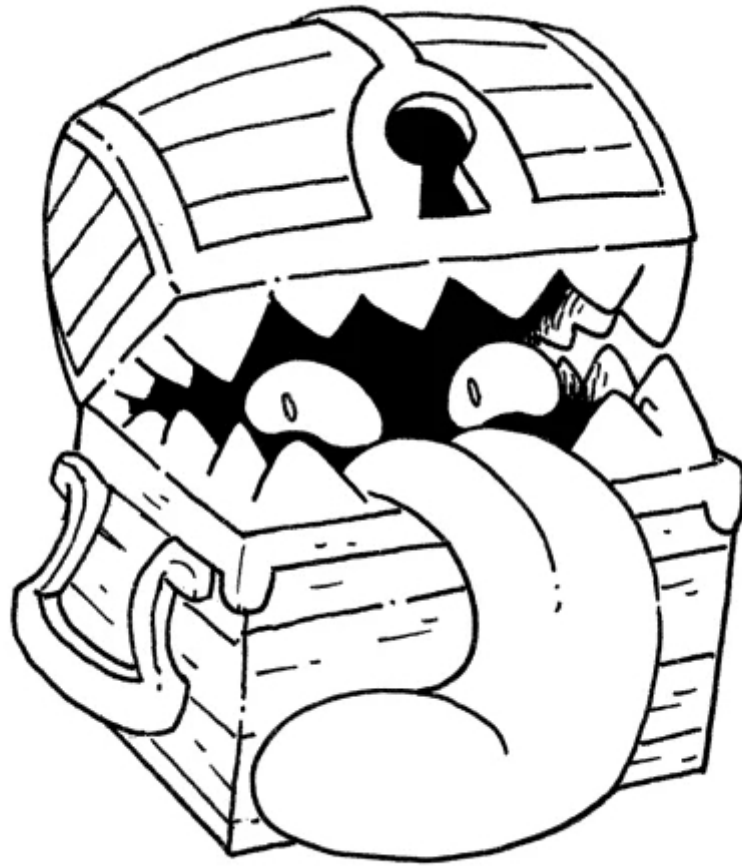
"So, do we go drink a beer?" Kristan asked, patting me on the back.

I shook my head as I thought of the man I'd left to rush here. I understood why Kristan and Marko wanted to test me, as they clearly had some kind of important secret, but still, we had to pay the town back.

"Not just yet. How about you guys help out those in need? I'll do that too, then go talk to Renata, and see how she and our...guest are doing. Get some food cooking and stuff. You can drop by later."

"Ugh," Kristan muttered. "Later, he says. That can be hours from now."

I shrugged. "Come by in two hours, we'll be ready by then."



CHAPTER 29: I'LL TAKE THE ROCKING CHAIR

I waded through the streets, helping the wounded and moving away the debris. If I saw someone injured, I knelt down and cast [Heal].

Now that I understood how truly powerful I was, I helped pull rubble off of anyone who was trapped. I even found the man from before. To my relief, he was still alive, and I was able to save him.

I still felt strange about what Kristan and Marko had done. After fighting together on the battlefield, I trusted them with my own life, but there was a difference between nobles like them and ordinary people like me and the townsfolk.

I wouldn't have played with people's emotions and time that way just to test them, which made me hesitate a little about joining them.

On my way back to the Burning Bosom, I continued clearing off rubble, healing the wounded, and helping people back to their feet. It wasn't much, but considering I was only a second rebirth adventurer, the town got more than it deserved from me as far as I was concerned.

There was only so much I could do...

Images of my dead parents appeared in my mind and I stopped for a moment, wincing. They'd died in a disaster just like this. Back then, I was just a kid, so I couldn't do anything.

I was a grown man, yes, but there was so much broken inside me that I didn't even know where to start.

Watching your hometown, the place where you'd lived your whole life, be reduced to utter rubble...

It would break anybody, and all the burnt corpses, totally beyond my help, was only making my mood even worse.

All I wanted was for this to be over.

I wanted to go back to the Burning Bosom and eat some of Renny's cooking along with my new friends. And hopefully Melina. I wanted to forget this sight and think of happy things.

But I wasn't even sure if I deserved to be happy.

Having killed people and eaten them, then even yearned for more...it had done something to me.

And as much as I would have liked it to be, Chester's emotional influence wasn't almighty. The feelings of guilt leaking through were genuinely mine and sadly inescapable.

I pulled a small flask of water from my pouch.

If I was being honest, I wanted a stronger drink, but water was the only thing that I remembered storing. I sloshed it down, and it felt just as cold as when I stored it.

I poured some over my face, drank a gulp, and then stared at my hands and arms.

They were shaking.

After going through so many life-and-death situations over the last week, everything came crashing down on me. Not just that, I had plenty of things I still needed to deal with.

Rolo's departure, Renko's death, and Renny...

I gulped, then grimaced.

She...I had no idea how to help her.

A little girl suddenly stopped in front of me.

"Sir?"

I jerked up, looking at her.

She was very small and thin, with long black hair that trailed down almost to the ground. I'd never seen her before, but of course, that wasn't uncommon in a town as big as Eslant.

The girl held a flower up in her hand, which she placed into mine. Before I could say anything else, she turned, and then started to run away. Her weak, receding footsteps muffled out the approaching ones.

A woman stopped next to me and bowed. She was about my age. Like the little girl, she was tall, pale, and thin, with exceedingly long black hair. They could have been sisters or something.

"Thank you, good sir," the woman said weakly, her voice quivering. "You saved us earlier when you...spun through the air. Thanks to you, we...now live. We're healthy and managed to keep our home. So thank you, again, good sir. Please be well. Eternal blessings to you."

Essence suddenly flared through the air, concentrating in my body.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A SYSTEM BLESSING

NAME: Eternal Blessing I, RARITY: Common

SPECIALTY:Receive +2% to physical, elemental, light, and darkness resistances

NOTE 1: Every increase in rarity level doubles the effect of this blessing.

NOTE 2: Blessings can only be received after doing great deeds and helping believers in need.

“I—thank you,” I said, unable to come up with anything smarter.

What was this?

A System blessing?

I’d only ever heard of them before. They were supposed to be incredibly hard to find. Just like the second note said, they could only be given by believers in need...

Did that mean these people believed in me?

My cheeks felt as if they were about to burn to cinders.

Was I embarrassed? By a little thank you?

It was kind of hard to believe, but it was true.

And it wasn’t just that.

Thank you. It was just the thing I needed to hear. That made me...human.

I turned away from anyone present and started running to the tavern.

Part of being human was being honest and delivering news good or bad.

Renata needed a resolution, and I hurried back to the Burning Bosom.

When I arrived there shortly after, I stopped, frozen. My heart clenched up in my chest. I just gaped, stunned and barely able to speak.

One of the large flying monsters had crashed into the side of the building. It was obviously dead, but part of the side wall was missing.

Renny...

I hurried up the stairs and pushed into the front door.

“Ahh! What—oh, it’s you!” Renata cried. She stood next to the wall with her back turned to the entrance. I must have spooked her as she was just surveying the damage.

“Hey, are you good? Did you get hurt? Did any of the monsters get to you?” I spoke very quickly, and my voice was filled with worry. I saw that she was just perfectly fine, but it was one of those things people just blurted out on instinct.

“Yeah, but...Rolo never came back. I thought he would after the monsters started attacking.”

“He made it out,” I said. “I managed to find his carriage before he left.”

Her shoulder sagged with relief, but then she bit her lip and pinched her face again. And Renko...where is—”

“Dead,” I said, deciding to end it all there. I owed her that much at least. “He atta—”

Before I could get out another word, her whole body shook and she fell to her knees, grabbing for her chest. Tears streamed freely down her puffed cheeks.

She must have already been crying before I even got there. I took a step toward her, trying to get a word across and tell her what had happened, but she shook her head, pointing toward the door leading to the basement.

“Hurry up and go check on her,” she said through a sob. “See if she’s still out of it. I don’t need another one dead in here tonight.”

The way she said that made me pause.

Dead in here?

It was almost like she knew what had happened.

I met her eyes, but then she looked away and pointed to the door again, so I did as I said.

I made my way downstairs and into the cellar. Franja's hands and feet were bound with rope, and she was hanging upside down with her face bright red. Her eyes were covered, but I could tell that she was still unconscious.

"Franja," I said weakly, trying to gauge any response. "I'm going to set you free now, alright?"

Nothing.

I repeated the same words again, but she remained silent still.

Taking that as her still being unconscious, I made my way back up to the entrance. Renata was already back up on her feet and leaning her back against the entrance door.

"What a night, huh?" she said as I made my way over to her. "We lost everything in a single night." Her voice was infused with a strange high-pitched false casualness, almost like she was trying to comment on the weather.

"We don't necessarily need to lose everything," I said, the words just leaving my mouth yet again.

I had no idea where I was going at since I didn't really have anything to offer myself, nonetheless her, but she perked up and eyed me curiously.

"What do you mean?" I could feel some hope there.

"I mean...I...promised to take care of you, right?"

"But how?" she asked. "We're just...and you..."

She pointed at the basement, as if reminding me that I was enemies with the Baron.

"I want to pay for your first rebirth," I explained. "See what you get. At least it will make you a lot stronger, and then we can plan the next step." Looking around at the ruins, that was probably for the best. The Burning Bosom had been totally destroyed, and even though Rolo left the tavern to Renata, I didn't think she would enjoy running it by herself. No, not at all.

"We? Just the two of us?" she asked.

I shook my head.

“No, not just the two of us. I need to exchange Franja for Melina, and then there are Kristan and Marko to account for. That’s already five people.”

“Five—as in for a party?”

I nodded. “For now at least. A party. We’ll become adventurers. But it might not always be just us. From what I know, we can go up to seven if we finish some prerequisites. The System will allow more people to join if we need any extras.”

She snorted. “If we need any extras. That just sounded so wrong. Like you don’t think they are important or something.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, but it is what it is. You and Melina. That’s who is important to me now. And the brothers. You should have seen Kristan and Marko fight. They’re really strong, and I have a feeling Melina is strong as well. We could all protect you, and a little birdy told me that,” I stopped and leaned in, whispering the next words. “The spearman has a thing for you.”

“Why do you think I care?” Renny said, fidgeting with her dress. I could tell that she found Kristan attractive, though of course, she wasn’t going to move on in just a day. Or a few weeks, for that matter. We’d have to see just how patient Kristan was. “And what if I don’t want to adventure in the first place?”

I scowled, thinking about all the terrible things that’d happened the last few days, and how I still didn’t fully understand what was going on. “This is a dangerous and unforgiving world, Renny. We need you to get strong.” I pulled her into a hug and just stood there.

This time the tears and the crying really came.

My undershirt dampened quickly from her tears and the sobs and wails drilled into my mind every single moment. It was as if someone was trying to rip out small pieces of my soul, little by little.

I caused her that pain, both by killing Renko and also by letting Rolo go. The more I thought about it, the more I thought I should have encouraged him to stay.

Now it was up to me to give her something else to look forward to. First, I would help her gain a class and grow stronger. That way, she could look out for herself. And then...

It would take some time, but I could probably help set her up with Kristan. That seemed like a neat way to take care of everything. What better way than through a capable, dependable, and strong man she had liked at first glance?

I liked both of them, and I had a feeling Kristan wouldn't worry about Renata's flirting the way Rolo did. It just didn't seem like his nature.

Hopefully, it would work, and I wasn't just screwing things up for everyone even more. I knew that Renata wasn't the kind of person who liked adventuring and traveling, but it was all I could offer her.

"My friends will be here in about an hour now I think. I promised them a drink and food. Want me to join you in the kitchen?"

Renata shook her head clear and wiped her face with the back of her hands.

"I can handle all the food," she said. "You just prepare something to drink in about half an hour. There's ice in the cooling hole, and the clean glasses are on the upper left shelf. You should get us three bottles, just in case. The best only, alright?"

I watched her rush off into the kitchen, and moments later, pans and pots started clattering, knives started hitting the wood block, and then I knew that everything was going to be just fine.

At least for today.

Tomorrow was another day and with that another worry.

I sat at the counter and now that I had a moment of peace, I busied myself with checking in on everything I'd gained since the nightmare battle. I'd gotten a new spell and some monster parts about which I knew next to nothing about.

First was the new spell.

ABILITY WINDOW [3/5].

ABILITY: Dark Flame (U), LEVEL: 1

DESCRIPTION: Create a dark flame that will engulf the target and inflict 400 + 0 = 400% damage with a 50% chance to inflict Dark Immolation.

COOLDOWN: 5 minutes, DURATION:

REQUIREMENT: 300 Stamina, 240 Essence

NOTE: [Dark Immolation] causes the target's life force to be drained at a rapid pace. The debuff can not be cleansed by any healing spell under level 10.

ABILITY: Mimicry (R), LEVEL: 2

DESCRIPTION: Attempt to mimic an animate or inanimate object. The success rate depends on the available mass and complexity of the object. Can mimic moving objects.

COOLDOWN: 5 minutes

ABILITY: Absorb (U), LEVEL: 2

DESCRIPTION: Attempts to absorb the target's stat essence and random skills. The absorption rate is from 2 - 13%, and the quality of the obtained skills varies from Uncommon to Unique.

COOLDOWN: 10 minutes

"Shit," I cursed. It was loud enough that Renata looked over for a bit, but I smiled and waved her off.

Though the ability was powerful, the requirements were pretty bad if you asked me, with 200 Essence.

That being said, it was a unique ability, just like the two I'd gotten from Chester, so it should prove to be very powerful.

At least I had something to work toward later down the road. There were two small changes to the other abilities as well. Those must have happened after the evolution, but I never bothered to check. We could now turn into moving objects, whatever they were, and the percentage of absorption along with the quality of the absorbed skills, spells, and abilities had changed.

Next, I went through the nightmare's monster parts.

[NAME: Nightmare Eyeball]

[DESCRIPTION: The nightmare's eyeballs hold vast quantities of essence. They are extremely rare, and as such are used in fourth and fifth-stage rebirths. They can also be used as delicacies that raise the user's Essence stat]

[NAME: Nightmare Fang]

[DESCRIPTION: The nightmare's fangs are extremely durable and sharp. They are highly sought after in the production of weapons and armor, even jewelry. Fangs are also used in certain physical attack-oriented rebirth paths]

[NAME: Nightmare Scale]

[DESCRIPTION: The nightmare's scales are smooth, rounded, and extremely durable. They are perfectly suited for the creation of armor, shields, and certain accessories. Scales are used in certain physical defense-oriented rebirth paths]

[NAME: Nightmare Hide]

[DESCRIPTION: The nightmare's hide is very tough and full of essence. Hides are used in the creation of cosmetic wearable items that can add various resistances to the user]

[NAME: Nightmare Skull]

[DESCRIPTION: The nightmare's skull is the rarest piece of the unique creature. Once processed, it will provide various buffs for the user and their party, including a warning system showing the user any nightmares that might be close by]

All of the items were very valuable, I knew that much without even reading their descriptions or anyone telling me.

It was a unique monster, after all, and those always dropped extremely hard-to-find loot. These weren't random pakora hides, far from it.

However, the eyeball and the skull seemed particularly special. One would raise the user's essence stat while the other would provide them with buffs. I was very lucky that Chester had eaten the head.

"This is great, now if I only knew how to use these things. Or where to sell them. Maybe the market? But did it even survive the explosion?" I mused to myself, getting to my feet and walking over to the nearby window.

It looked out onto the street and the bridge leading toward the Adventurer Guild square. Adventurers, guards, and civilians were cleaning debris or standing around and talking, maybe discussing where everything should go. It looked like things would get to normal, eventually, so long as everyone did their part in cleaning up and improving things.

I decided to do the same inside the Burning Bosom, or rather rearranged a single table and four chairs near the counter, pushing everything else aside and making room.

Then I got busy getting the booze.

I knew where the good stuff was stashed away, and I also knew how to open the cold room. Rolo had kept small blocks of ice in there, which he only served to certain clients and only with the good drinks.

Just as I finished crushing some of the ice, I cleaned four tall glasses, got the drinks, and placed them all on the table. Then I heard the door behind me open and two pairs of feet shuffle inside.

A moment later, the door closed and the deadbolt slid in place, locking it.

“Our two hours are over,” Kristan said, stashing away his spear and armor. He wore the same outfit he had on during our tent talk—it was his casual cosmetic items, with a red silk shirt rather than his armor. Marko had on his cosmetic items too, though his shirt was blue rather than red.

I turned toward them.

Their faces were covered in soot and they smelled of smoke.

The young spearman looked in worse shape than his adopted brother, but that didn't mean anything as far as I was concerned. After seeing the destruction in the town, I wasn't very happy with their whole ‘we're in mortal danger, come save us’ bull crap.

Still, they trusted me now, and I wondered just how I could cash that in.

Whoever the mysterious “father” they kept mentioning was, he sounded powerful. Maybe he could even help me with Melina, but it was a dangerous game I played.

“Come sit,” I said and gestured at the bottles. “What do you want to drink?”

“What do you have?” Marko asked with a grin. “I can hold my drink very well, thank you, so I hope there's plenty.”

“There is. Now, do you want whisky, rakja, or pifkar?”

“I only know one of those,” Kristan said as he sat next to me. “Whisky. What are the other two?” He looked over the

counter, eyeing the drinks curiously.

Somehow, Kristan not knowing the drinks made me a little proud. He might have been a noble with plenty of money and exotic experiences, but there was something to be said about the good old Burning Bosom. “Rakja is made from plums, highly concentrated. It’s no joke and can knock you out cold. Pifkar is more of a ‘let’s drink a full keg’ kind of drink. It isn’t as bitter and goes well with smoked meat, cheese, and bread.”

“I will have some rakja,” Marko said and his brother nodded too. “I will as well,” Kristan said.

First I scooped some ice into their glasses and poured a healthy amount of rakja, three fingers tall to be precise. Though I didn’t work behind the counter often, I had more than enough experience filling in when Rolo needed some help.

They nodded in appreciation as I proceeded to do the same for myself.

“So, what now?” Kristan asked. “I didn’t mean that literally, more like a ‘what’s next’ for our little group of adventurers.”

“Our...group?” I asked, still unsure if they were fucking with me or not. Everything just seemed so unreal. Sure, they’d added me to their party and fought alongside me in battle, but I’d still only met Kristan recently. It felt a little too early to be calling this an adventuring group, seeing as we’d only done one adventure.

“We mentioned our adopted father, right?” Kristan said.

“Right,” I confirmed.

“So, we talked about how to pay you back for your loyalty on our way here,” he said, taking his glass and giving it a little swirl.

Then he looked up at me, our eyes locked. My heart skipped a beat as I hoped he’d mention Franja or Melina. “Our father will mediate between you and Alfonse. He will have a

chat with the Baron later today, and ask him if he'd be willing to make the trade, then he'll set up a time and place."

Marko's lips moved, but he was speaking very softly so I couldn't hear him. Not only that, he looked slightly to the side as if speaking to someone else. I turned to him, but then he waved me off.

"Just talking to myself," he muttered.

I nodded and turned back to Kristan.

What Marko did was weird, but what Kristan just said was way more interesting. Just who was the man that he could set up a meeting with Alfonse Sherazad?

"That's...generous, but I don't want to get your father in trouble," I said.

My mind whirled as I tried to figure out who it could possibly be. Maybe he was a rich merchant or someone with some influence? Or even the Mayor's acquaintance?

"Oh, do not worry about that, my new friend," Marko laughed. "If anything, the Baron should be the one to look out for us."

An idea sprang to mind, but I couldn't dare hope. Not even in my wildest dreams.

"You...wait, what is your new surname?" I asked, sitting upright and watching them intently.

"Took you long enough," Kristan chuckled. "Why don't you say it?"

Kristan looked at me smugly but then he finally tasted the rakja and made a sour face.

"Are you...the Duke—"

"Yes! He's our adopted father, Damon," Kristan said, putting the glass back down. "And let me tell you, he was impressed with that stunt you and that elf pulled when we just arrived. I was about to stab you with my spear, but everything turned out to be quite fun, didn't it?"

So they *had* sensed me.

But that wasn't the full picture...

If Kristan and Marko were the Duke's men, didn't that mean trouble?

"So he...but what about those adventurers you killed? Won't that—" I stammered.

Kristan just waved my worries off dismissively, as if swatting away gnats. "Cause trouble? No, it won't. They went after us first, with an unofficial bounty. And even then, he's a Duke, and they're mere Barons. Even if all five of them ganged up on him, there's no way they could hurt him. He's a fifth rebirth stage Mercenary King class adventurer. He has little to fear, other than coral."

"Mercenary King? What class is that?" I asked curiously, having never heard of it.

"It's a unique class, Damon," Marko said proudly. "It's between a tank and a damage dealer with the strengths of both and weaknesses of none."

"Mercenary King, huh?" I whispered. "Sounds amazing."

They looked at each other and started laughing again.

"I can't help but like him," Marko said. "He's a good fit, brother."

"Now, what's next? Where do we go once your elf friend is safe?" Kristan asked, taking another sip of his rakja. He made another face, then pushed his glass aside. "Shit, this is godawful! How can you even drink this?"

"You get used to it," I said matter-of-factly. Now it was my turn to feel a little smug, as I could hold my drink better than the two brothers. "And what's this about where do we go next? Who? Melina, you two, and me?"

"And the girl," Marko whispered, then nudged Kristan pointedly, eliciting an embarrassed cough from him.

"You're serious about this?" Both nodded. "But why ask me? You two are clearly much stronger and have seen more of this world."

“That’s exactly the problem. Father wants us to see more of the world, hone our skills, and learn to follow orders,” Kristan explained.

“So you’re saying...what exactly? That you want to follow my orders?” I laughed, taking a sip of my own drink, but the two just stared back, their eyes genuine and honest. “You’re serious?”

“We are, but I’d hope we could travel as friends and equals, not as a standard party with a leader and his supportive followers,” Marko explained. “He gave us a year to find someone we’d like to fight alongside with. That was exactly seven weeks ago.”

I smiled. “That sounds like an interesting offer.” The Duke was pretty fascinating, and I liked his idea of training.

Making his powerful adoptive sons like Kristan or Marko fight with normal people instead of keeping them shut in and snobby like most nobles.

I really liked the sound of that.

Maybe the Duke was a good man, and different from the other nobles I’d encountered here. Considering how Kristan and Marko treated me, I dared to hope. At the very least, he didn’t seem as bad as the rest...

I grinned and bowed my head. “I mean, I’d be a fool to say no to your friendship. And it would align with what I offered Renata earlier. I want to pay for her first rebirth, and see what she gets. Maybe help her get a few levels? Buy her some basic gear?”

“Then we got a plan!” Kristan cheered, raising his glass to me. The three of us clanked glasses, downed the rakja, and almost choked on it in unison.

The two looked at me and laughed. “Hah! So you struggle with it too!”

I shrugged, grinning from ear to ear. It was *really* strong.

Marko nodded toward the staircase.

“What about that other girl? We got ways to prevent her from calling for help. Maybe we could give her some food as well? Treat her like a human being and not a bargaining chip.”

I bit my lower lip and nodded. He was right. We’d be no better than Alfonse otherwise.

“Yeah. I was angry with her, but...no, you’re right. I’ll go get her. The only problem is after she wakes up. How will you prevent her from contacting her father or anyone for that matter?”

“You just go get her,” Marko said. “We’ll do the rest.” He sounded totally confident, which I guessed made sense. A Duke *was* a lot more powerful than a Baron. We were basically totally protected.

I hurried over to the kitchen, where I found Renata already plating the food. She’d made steak with potatoes, with freshly baked bread, and the smell was mouth-watering even from here.

I pointed at the plates. “Hey, could you get another one? I want to feed her. We don’t need to be as bad as the nobles.”

She didn’t say anything and instead just nodded and grabbed another plate, so I hurried up and went to get Franja. She was awake and in a very uncomfortable position, tied up and gagged. Her eyes were full of tears.

I felt guilty seeing her like that. She was a noble, and she’d wanted to keep Melina imprisoned forever, but now she just looked like an innocent woman. Instead of thinking about it too much, I pressed on, not giving myself enough time to process what we’d done to her.

Sometimes it was easier to fix things than to first try and accept them.

I cleared my throat. “We’re about to eat. If you promise not to try and run or hurt anyone, I’ll take you along.”

She glared at me, her eyes and cheeks red and puffy.

After several long seconds, she nodded. I helped her down and removed all the rope and gag. Franja didn't say anything and just rubbed her wrists.

“What's for dinner? I'm starving,” she suddenly said, pushing past me. From how casual she sounded, you wouldn't think she was a prisoner at all. She was acting just like a member of our party.

It was odd, but I didn't comment. Franja sure was adept at blending in, but that was good. It would make things easier.

“I don't know,” I said, following her up the stairs. “Meat, potatoes, bread, booze...maybe something else?”

She pouted, scowling a little. “I want a salad.”

My eyes almost popped out of my sockets. We were giving her meat and potatoes from our own table and she wanted a salad? “Salad? What are you? A vegan?”

Her scowl grew deeper. “Pray tell, what is wrong with being a vegan?”

Don't let Chester hear you, I laughed to myself.

Still, if she was a vegan, I guessed there was nothing we could do about it, though I wasn't sure if we'd have anything in the kitchen. I stopped by real fast, then shouted at Renata about Franja's preferred diet.

Renata just shot me a blank look, almost like I'd told her Franja was an alien. Renata's confusion only made Franja even angrier. “What are you people? Barbarians?”

I just rolled my eyes and shrugged. “Just keep walking.”

She did as told, but stopped once we entered the room where the two dukelings were seated.

“Ma'am,” Marko said as he got to his feet and grabbed another chair, then placed it next to his. “Please join us.”

She gaped at the two of them, stammering. Her jaw might as well have fallen through the floor. “Why are—what's

going on? You are the Duke's—"

"Yes, we are, now shut up and eat," Kristan muttered. "But noble birth doesn't mean shit, does it? We could be vile rapists and murderers just as easily. What do you know?"

Franja jolted back a bit at the mention of rapists and murderers, flinching noticeably.

"Someone's in a bad mood," she whispered. "Shouldn't I be the one bitching about being taken against my will? And now I can't even send a message to my father."

"As long as you behave, princess, you will have a great time. Eat, drink, and have a chat with us. Remind me just why I hate your kind," Kristan said, his voice full of disdain. It was obvious that he thought of his tragic past when looking at Frajna.

It struck me odd as he, Marko, and the Dukes were nobles as well, but I didn't think about it much further. It was probably because of Baron Alfonse's poor reputation.

Renata walked in then, carrying three plates.

She jerked her head at the kitchen, and I hurried along to help out and get the other two.

Moments later, we were all seated, eating, and drinking as if the world outside just hadn't gone to shit.

There was just one problem. Part of the wall was still missing, and it was getting chilly.

Marko, as if reading my mind, walked over to the hole and started pulling out boards and planks from his storage. In minutes, the hole was closed. It didn't look very good, but that was beside the point. At least we'd be safe from the wind outside and prying eyes.

"Shouldn't you have done so from the start?" Kristan asked, kicking his shin as he sat down.

Marko scowled and kicked him back, "I wanted to test her, and stop kicking me, you manchild."

“Manchild?” Kristan snorted. “What? Can’t you do any better?”

I looked to Renata who just shrugged and dug into the potato salad. It wasn’t what most people thought of when they thought of salads...but I had to say, she did a good job on such short notice

Franja looked down at the potato salad for a long moment, then sighed. Unfortunately, she would have to do with that for now.

Over the next half an hour, we told Renata about the battle outside, enjoyed each other’s company, and explained what we planned on doing next.

Most of the time, we just ignored Franja, who was shooting us venomous glances all the while. I attempted to strike up a conversation with her several times, asking random questions, but she didn’t seem interested.

The potato salad was another matter as she wolfed it down and then looked at Renata pleadingly for seconds. Renata happily went back to the kitchen for more. It seemed like she was glad to be feeding Franja. If I had to guess, she’d been deeply uncomfortable with locking her up...for obvious reasons, keeping a noble stuck in your basement was dangerous business.

Once done, we agreed on giving Franja one of the rooms upstairs.

Since she was just on her first rebirth, Franja was pretty weak compared to us. Too weak to even break through a magically enhanced rope. Marko boarded up the windows, and then we tied her to the bed with enough rope so she could comfortably move around.

Just as we finished, Kristan pulled me to the side. “Father just sent a message. Alfonse wants to deal with us, but tomorrow.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Tomorrow? Not right away? Why would he try to risk and delay getting his daughter back?”

“Yeah, we think that he wants to try and search for her himself. If he does find her, we will step in, so make sure you sleep light.”

“Sleep light, huh?” I whispered. “If only someone I knew was a light sleeper.”

Kristan looked at me curiously, and I just realized I’d spoken aloud.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“Never mind,” I said, shaking my head.

Then I looked him in the eye and offered him my hand. “Thanks. I mean it. I don’t know how long it would have taken to get Melina free if I was on my own.”

“As long as you know,” he chuckled. “Now go get some sleep. I’ll have the first watch. Marko is next, so you sleep well. Don’t worry, we got your back.”

Renata lay in my bed when I got into my room. She just lay there, looking over at the small candle burning on my desk.

“I don’t want to sleep alone,” she said, her eyes wide and worried.

I nodded.

“Then don’t. I’ll take the rocking chair, don’t worry.”

“Thank you, Damon. For everything. For sticking with me, and for...you know. Just everything.”

“You too, Renny. Now sleep, we have an important day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Her eyes closed and she started snoring softly almost immediately. This was the most vulnerable and weak as I’d ever seen her, but it was no wonder. She lost everything overnight but given a little bit of luck, this could all be a new beginning for us.

I still had a feeling that Renata didn’t want to leave Eslant, and honestly, I myself didn’t know what to make of teaming up with the nobles.

As much as I liked and trusted them, there was still a gap between us, and it'd showed during their test at the end of battle. Serving the Duke might mean doing things that I didn't want to do.

It was hard to say exactly how I felt, as it seemed like my battle bond with Kristan and Marko was genuine. For two nobles like them to recommend a commoner like me...

The thoughts continued swirling wildly in my mind, pushing against each other, but one thing was certain. My position was still much better than before.

I was close to getting Melina back, and I was surrounded and protected by friends who I trusted.

With that in mind, I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.



CHAPTER 30: HE CRIED LIKE A LITTLE BITCH

I awoke to the chirping of two small birds in my window and bright sunlight shining down on my face. Even after the disaster yesterday, life went on.

A smile crossed my face.

It was a strange sensation, one I hadn't felt in a long time, probably since I was a kid. There was a deep calmness inside me, and it said that everything was going to be fine.

Everything was going to work out and the Sherazads would just be a distant, hazy memory soon.

I looked at the bed, but Renny wasn't there.

Figuring she must have gotten up early, I got to my feet and stretched my limbs. They felt sore and weak, almost as if I hadn't used them in a long time.

"Are you awake?" I whispered and looked to my right shoulder. "Chester?"

"Maybe?" the mimic replied. *"Why?"*

"Why? Is that the best you can do?"

"Yes. I am sleepy. This food is tough, I only absorb small piece, all other food in me hurt."

"You're in pain from the nightmare?"

"Yes. I am dying!"

"Wait, what?" I hissed, my stomach suddenly dropping. Was eating the nightmare really that dangerous? "Don't you dare die on me, you little shit! I don't want to die yet!"

The mimic chuckled, a loud shrieking noise that echoed in my ears, almost like I was in a cave. *"Hah, joke! But yes, it hurt. I need sleep again. Only half sleep. Will help if you die."*

"Freaking blighted hell," I muttered.

"So now you've become a little jokester, huh? I'll have you eat bones once you're done with the nightmare!"

But not even that response baited him out.

Chester really was tired, too tired even to complain about his hated bones.

Just as announced, I felt his consciousness retreat to the back of my mind. It was barely there.

I figured that was what he got for being such a glutton, but then again, eating a lot of the nightmare had clearly been beneficial, as we'd gained new stats, a new skill, and new items.

I guess I'd forgive him so long as he didn't start throwing up all over the place. A projectile vomiting mimic

for a body-mate really wasn't my idea of a good time.

I walked out into the hallway and knocked on Franja's door, then pushed it open.

She was gone.

My heart caught in my throat and I stormed down the stairs, only to stop halfway. Kristan, Marko, she, and Renny were sitting around the same table and were having breakfast. Franja wasn't feeling so shy anymore if I was right, almost like she'd grown used to the group.

How was that possible?

She'd been so stand-offish last night.

"Ahh! There he is," Kristan laughed. "And only four days late."

I smiled, not understanding what he meant. "Four days late? For what?" I asked.

"For the exchange. You've been out of it for four days," Marko replied, stuffing a pastry into his mouth. The hammer-wielding soft-spoken man felt different somehow, rougher around the edges as he ate without many manners and laughed with his mouth full. It was like he'd dropped his usual guise and was being his actual self.

"You're saying that I slept for four days," I said, trying to gauge if they were playing a joke on me or if there was some truth to it.

"Just look outside," Kristan said, pointing at the window.

I walked over quickly and looked out, only to be caught totally unprepared by what I found.

The buildings around us were already being repaired, new walls were being erected, roofs and windows replaced, and the streets were bustling with workers.

The rebuilding was already well on its way, which made me happy, but I had much bigger concerns.

I whirled back at the table. If I'd overslept the trade, then...

"How...and why...and Melina! What did—" I just stood there stammering, unsure of where to start.

"Now, now. Hold on," Kristan said, stopping me with a raised hand. "Everything's fine. Father visited Alfonse, and he's been treating the elf's injuries. The cuffs haven't come off because he didn't get his daughter back yet, but other than that, she looked pretty healthy, he said."

"Healthy," I murmured. I was relieved, but still very unhappy. "Alfonse can't get someone to cast a healing spell on Melina and expect her to forget all the crap they'd done!"

"We're not saying that," Marko went on, shaking his head. "Just sit down and have something to eat."

I held up a hand, "Wait. You said the Duke saw the cuffs? Aren't they—"

I broke off, as I suddenly noticed Kristan and Marko glancing at each other. The look in their eyes was obvious.

They thought me naïve.

Technically, the cuffs were heavily frowned upon, but there were different rules for nobles, not to mention different rules for other species. Nobody would bat an eye at Alfonse enslaving an elf, unfortunately. Maybe I could use the information to cause trouble for him later, but otherwise...

Kristan coughed pointedly, then pointed at the table again, inviting me to sit down.

"I just sent father a message you were up, so we'll go out to visit him in a bit. He wants to talk to you, and see if you're really worth it. Seeing how you slept through most of the week, I'm not so sure anymore. I don't think I've ever seen anything like that," he chuckled.

I rubbed my eyes and forehead as I made my way over to the table and plopped down.

"Hey, good morning," Renata said as she pushed a glass full of coffee in front of me.

The smell was fresh and strong, I knew that this was good stuff—the kind of thing we didn't bring out often. I looked up at her and then saw the same thing in front of everyone. "I tried to carry you over to the bed but I couldn't. I felt as if I was trying to lift up a mountain."

"Sorry, but yeah, I feel much better now. A bath would do me good, though."

She nodded toward the door. "I'll prepare some water once we're done eating. The others had a bath last night. Even Franja and I."

I looked at the young pampered noble, and she looked away. Though she was happier here, she was still pretty peeved at me for kidnapping her, which I supposed made sense.

"That's good. We don't want her to feel as if she's in a dungeon. And besides, she'll be home today, then her servants can scrub all the dirt from a commoner's place off her skin."

"I'm not like that!" Franja protested. It looked like she was going to demand that I be punished or something, but, then she caught herself. "I—"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "And if that's true, great. I'm still not sorry for kidnapping you, though. At least I know we didn't torture you. The way you guys tortured Melina."

She bit her lower lip, then looked up at me and lowered her gaze again. "I'm sorry. I never hurt her, the elf can confirm that, but I didn't try to stop it either. Living with you guys...I can see that some of the things I did was wrong."

I shrugged, trying to feel indifferent despite the surge of anger boiling up inside me. Maybe this experience would improve Franja, maybe not, but after all her family did to me, I just couldn't find it in me to be too sympathetic or merciful.

We finished eating and I had a bath, then I put on a set of clothes Kristan had prepared for me.

They were slightly better than the ones I got from Aldon's tent. I suddenly remembered something then and

pulled the Infinite Essence Extract Bottle from my storage. The bottle was supposed to automatically fill up after killing monsters, and after yesterday, I'd killed enough monsters for a lifetime.

It was at 5 out of 5 liters. A prompt appeared before me.

Would you like to consume the infinite
essence?

Yes / No

I declined and immediately saw a new prompt.

Would you like to upgrade the Infinite
Essence Extract Bottle using 2 x Nightmare
Hide and 3 x Nightmare Scale?

Now that was interesting.

Marko and Kristan were in the other room, and there was a counter running down from thirty to zero, so I didn't have time to ask them for advice.

"It's probably worth it," I muttered to myself.

It could only become a better item than it already was, right?

"Yes, I do," I said, replying to the System prompt.

Two large pieces of nightmare hide, easily as large as the wall in front of me, appeared from my storage and started to shrink.

Three more nightmare scales came out next, and they shrank as well, then shattered into smaller pieces that floated around the bottle, and the three merged into one.

[ITEM RECEIVED: Infinite Nightmare
Essence Bottle]

[DESCRIPTION: The Infinite Nightmare
Essence Bottle will extract any essence
from its surroundings and any nearby
corpses. Living creatures are excluded.
Time until the flask is full: 98:00:00]

[NOTE 1: When consumed by ordinary creatures, the extract can increase the user's essence stat up to ten points for every rebirth stage.]

[REQUIRED: 4 liters per rebirth stage]

[NOTE 2: When consumed by unique creatures, the extract can increase the user's essence stat up to twenty points for every rebirth stage.]

[REQUIRED: 7 liters per rebirth stage]

[TOTAL VOLUME: 5/12 Liters]

Doing a little math, I figured the flask would fill itself to full every seven days.

That was good, but I didn't fully understand the notes.

Would the bottle raise essence stats for anyone who drank the liquid? If so, would they get all the essence points at once up to their rebirth stage or would it only trigger for one rebirth stage at a time?

Was I better off drinking now?

Or should I wait until the later rebirth stages?

I would need to wait two days until I got my answer. I supposed that was the one downside of filling up the bottle, as now that it was larger, I would have to wait longer to fill it up again. Though I could drink now, I'd heard stories that there were added benefits for drinking full bottles.

Meanwhile, the transformed container floated in front of me. It was now pitch black and covered with small scales, elongated with a larger, round bottom.

If anything, it looked and felt ominous.

I decided to get more information before proceeding further. Maybe Melina would know, as she had a scholar's background. If not, Kristan and Marko might have an idea too, just due to their travels.

Hell, maybe even Chester would know. He was always warning me, telling me not to eat the rainbow fish I'd found in the chest until I was absolutely ready. Maybe he'd know about this essence extract too.

Regardless, I decided to wait.

Upgrading the flask was one thing, but just guzzling down a strange and potentially haunted substance was quite another.

I stashed it away and finished dressing, putting on the new clothes that Kristan gave me.

[ITEM RECEIVED: A modern gentleman's
black suit]

[DESCRIPTION: To own a modern
gentleman's suit is every young man's
goal. It consists of black pants, a white
shirt, a black vest, and a jacket. They
will provide their wearer with 5 extra
charisma points for every rebirth stage.]

Five extra charisma points per rebirth stage, and not only that, it was per item. So it was really twenty extra charisma points per rebirth stage...

Plus the suit just seemed expensive as hell.

I owed Kristan big time, which was honestly just another positive to adventuring with him. I wasn't strong enough yet, but maybe enough levels, experience, and monster absorption...

Who knew what the future held?

Once I was fully done, I met them outside the Burning Bosom. They were playing around with their weapons, play-sparring. When the two saw me, they stopped and Kristan even whistled.

"Someone's looking presentable," he said, smirking.

"You two don't look half so bad either," I chuckled.

They wore identical suits, yet between the three of us, the clothes looked best on Kristan.

It was probably because of his build. Though the spearman was a savage in battle, he was thinner, which made him look more like a noble. Marko was slightly shorter and wider, and I'd become larger after having merged with the mimic. Both of us had more of a working man's appearance, not that I minded.

"Good, he knows how to throw a compliment back," Kristan said, his smirk growing wider. "Alright, we can go. Father's waiting in the Guild hall. Alfonse is there too. We are going to make a deal inside, with the System. No need to bring Franja—we'll give her over afterward."

A knot formed in my guts as I took just a single step forward.

It was one thing coming up with an idiotic plan, and another to tell someone to their face that you were holding their daughter captive. Especially if they were two rebirth stages higher.

"Fuck," I cursed.

"What? You got us. Why worry?" Kristan laughed. "Come on."

I nodded, shaking off my last-second regret.

I'd gone this far. The only thing to do was to see this plan through.

None of us spoke until we hit the square.

I stopped the moment I saw house Sherazad guards and adventurers lining the steps. There were a hundred of them.

Marko smirked, stepping forward breezily. He might as well have not noticed any of those men at all.

"Don't worry, they will not hurt us. Father would raze the town to the ground and torture them along with their families to death." His voice resounded with confidence.

“Somehow that doesn’t instill me with confidence,” I replied.

It was a weird feeling seeing all the finery, and it reminded me that even though I’d befriended Kristan and Marko, it would be a long time until I saw myself as having the same privileges as them, if I ever did.

An oppressive aura shot out from the Adventure Guild building right then, and everyone present but for the three of us, fell to their knees, even random bystanders.

The wave of essence was totally overbearing, and I couldn’t help but be glad we left both Franja and Renata behind.

“That’s our cue,” Kristan cackled. “Oh, I love it when father goes all out. Show them their place.”

His comment made me worry even more, and I didn’t like the look of joy in his eyes. It reminded me of how manic and merciless he got in battle.

It was one thing to talk about doing good things in a theoretical sense, but actually doing good things was far harder.

I understood warning Baron Alfonse and his men, but at the end of the day, a lot of the people milling about the town square couldn’t give a damn about my feud with the Sherazad family.

They were just random staffers at the Adventurer’s Guild, like the scout clerk who’d saved me from the nightmare explosion. Others were just shopkeepers or merchants like Tinko, but the Duke had terrified all of them just to make a point.

When you had godlike powers, it was easy to overlook normal people. Not to say the Duke was a god, far from it in fact, but he might as well have been when comparing his rebirth stage and essence to everyone else in Eslant.

We proceeded along the square and past the Sherazad household.

An elderly attendant met us at the entrance. Sweat dribbled down his forehead and he had trouble standing, likely because of how close he was to the Duke.

“We’re here, father,” Kristan called out and the murderous aura retracted almost immediately.

“Th—thank you, young master,” the old man said, bowing low. “The Duke is waiting in the VIP lounge.”

We followed him wordlessly further into the building.

I noticed people staring at me and muttering, so I kept my eyes down and just walked. I was certain that the Baron and his men had done everything they could to smear my reputation.

Aldon wasn’t very well-liked, but it seemed like people didn’t mind Franja, and in general, stealing a man’s daughter was obviously looked down upon. Still, I didn’t regret my decision, as I knew it was the only way to help Melina.

The judgmental glares still made me feel like shit though. There was no avoiding that.

Several minutes in, we stopped in front of an ivory door. Kristan pushed inside first, and Marko followed.

I took in a deep breath and straightened myself, put up a fake smile, and waltzed in, trying to seem light-hearted and casual.

The door shut closed behind me.

“Father, it’s good to see you again,” Kristan said as he dropped to a knee, took the Duke’s hand, and pressed it against his forehead. Marko did the same, then the two met my eyes and grinned.

“*Do what we did, use the same words. Now,*” Kristan said over the party chat. It was bizarre to call the Duke father and kiss him, to say the least, but when in Morado, do as the Moradin people do.

I stopped in front of him, knelt, and pressed his hand to my forehead.

“Father, it’s...good to see you again,” I said.

“Good, he learns quickly. I told you it’d be a waste to kill him, did I not?” the Duke laughed. “Petty children, you’d kill everyone and your mother if I allowed you to.”

“Not true. My mother is already dead,” Kristan muttered.

“That’s not the point,” Duke Harholt said and waved him off, ignoring Kristan’s discomfort. “Now, sit. I only have a few questions for you, Damon.”

The Duke’s bald head glistened as if it was rubbed in with oil.

His amber eyes seemed to bore holes into my very soul as he just sat there studying me. He was built like a boulder, which was even more apparent as he sat there in a suit that barely contained his bulging muscles. Was this the power that came from his Mercenary King class?

“So, why an elf? Why not a human woman? We could get you a hundred human women if you want.” The Duke’s words were short, brusque, and direct. He might have been nicer than the Baron, but he had the same way of thinking as most nobles. To him, this was a transaction. He wanted to earn my loyalty somehow, but he didn’t give a damn about Melina.

I frowned but tried to search for the right words. I had a feeling that if I simply told him that Melina was my friend, he’d think that I was foolish or even naïve.

Then I got my answer just like it’d been placed in my mind.

“I’m an odd one, and so are Kristan and Marko if I may be so bold. The elf is different as well, so if we’re going to adventure together, I want her with me. She already saved my life twice, so I owe her if nothing else.”

The Duke’s eyes widened, and he looked pleasantly surprised. Then he nodded, bowing his shining bald head. “Oh, a debt. Very good, very good. A man’s only as good as his word and his ability to return favors and fulfill promises. Yes, very good.”

He trailed off and looked to Kristan, then to Marko, and finally to me again. “By the way, I like how you two snuck into Eslant right under the guard’s noses. Even the sensory-trained adventurers didn’t detect you two.”

“Yes, she is quite smart if you ask me,” I proudly replied. I thought about giving Melina full credit, but then again, I wanted the Duke to be impressed with me too.

“Elves are very crafty,” the Duke whispered absently as if remembering something unpleasant. His face scrunched up and he shook his head clear. “Very well. I will relay all the details to Kristan, so once we’re done here, I want your new party to...well, decide on what to do with your life. For the next ten years at least.”

He snapped his fingers, and the door opened.

Baron Alfonse stood outside and next to him was Melina.

The elven spellcaster wore a rose-colored dress embroidered with black stitching that depicted a caprithorn flower. The Baron must have had it made just for this occasion, as it was the flower placed on graves.

I sat upright and swallowed, having a hard time believing this was happening.

The Baron seemed to notice my hesitation. These nobles could detect weakness like sharks, so I wiped away all emotion and just stared at him blankly.

He sneered and shook his head, then he pushed her into the room.

Melina almost stumbled over her feet. I stood and caught her, but a jolt of electricity struck me and the Baron smiled. He must have planned it.

The Duke scowled, cursing under his breath. “Alfonse, this isn’t the place to play your little games. He’s one of mine now.”

“I see,” the Sherazad family head said with a slight bow. “I apologize, Duke Harholt. May we sit?”

Fernz nodded and pointed to the wide two-seater chair on his left.

The Baron sat and as Melina tried to sit next to him, he shook his head, gesturing for her to stand.

I stared at him, trying to keep my anger down. Melina met my eyes, and she briefly shook her head. It was barely noticeable, but it calmed me down. It reminded me of when we first met, when she'd asked for my help against Aldon.

If all went well, she'd finally be free from the Sherazads.

The Baron's eyes narrowed slightly as he stared at me. "So, it's the same one after all. The young man that caused Aldon's death now has my daughter. How interesting. You got some balls of steel if I may say so."

Instead of replying, I looked to the Duke, and he nodded.

"I will only make sure that both sides keep their part of the deal," Duke Fernz said. "Go ahead, son."

Alfonse twitched as the Duke told me to go first. Not only was that an insult to the Baron, implying that my position was higher than his, but the very notion of the Duke calling me a son was a double slap to the face.

"I have several conditions. Firstly, you will let Melina go right away."

The Baron opened his mouth, but I shook my head—remembering what had happened with the Hrenwar. "I'm not done yet. Secondly, neither you nor anyone you're affiliated with nor anyone who might want to suck up to your family is allowed to hurt me, my friends, or my family."

The Baron replied with his terms immediately. "My daughter will be released within the hour, and you will leave this town. I do not want to see your face anywhere in Eslant, or the deal is off."

I thought hard for a moment.

Eslant wasn't that important, but we had the Burning Bosom, and Renata...would she even want to go? There was a chance she might, but she would be leaving behind years of hard work, and for what?

Friendship?

I still didn't have an actual plan to help her make a living, and the idea of setting her up with Kristan wasn't looking very practical, considering how he acted around every other woman we'd met.

Well, in that case, I might as well bleed this fucker dry.

"We will leave if you do something else for us. This isn't about Melina or Franja anymore, this is about you and me. You want me gone, Baron, very well, but you will have to pay a fair price for the Burning Bosom tavern, you will pay for my sister's first rebirth, giving her the best chance to get a good class, and you will get both Melina and her some decent gear."

He stared at me with a mocking grin.

"You're not serious, are you?"

"I am dead serious, Baron. How much is not seeing me again worth to you?"

He didn't say anything, and instead, a contract appeared before me stating everything we just agreed on.

Unfortunately, Alfonse had added something else I didn't like at all.

Clause 3.0.

The opposing party will be teleported to the furthest possible area from the town of Eslant that any magical circle or System teleport will allow in a contract.

Clause 4.0.

None of the opposing party may return to Eslant for as long as Baron Alfonse

Sherazade is alive or until fifteen years have passed from the moment of banishment.

I looked to Melina, then to Kristan and Marko, explaining through our party chat what the Baron was asking of me.

In a mere instance, the Duke's face transformed.

His eyes glinted, and his mouth curled a little in a strange mixture of irritation and disgust. He stared down the Baron, scowling. "What is this stunt?" the Duke hissed.

Alfonse flinched back, but only for a moment. Then he found his courage again. I could feel the essence simmering on both sides of the room, rapidly increasing.

The Duke's was much greater, but Alfonse's was nothing to sneeze at. I could almost smell the blood in the air from the Duke's Mercenary King class, and it felt like the table was about to tear itself apart due to Alfonse's telekinetic strength.

Melina's eyes widened with alarm, and I stared at Kristan, hoping he would give me some direction. Unfortunately, all Kristan did was shake his head. Whatever was happening, not even he could be involved.

"This. Is. No. *Stunt*," Alfonse spat. He pointed at me, his finger quivering. "You have here a man who let my son die, kidnapped my daughter, and freed my favorite slave. A man who you dare to call *son*. Due to your rank, I must let him go free. But will the King really let you push for more?"

The Duke was silent for a moment.

Then a pair of notifications flashed across my vision.

I turned to the brothers, suddenly shocked. Neither met my eyes.

"What is going on? Why did you leave the party? Aren't we supposed to go together?" I asked, my voice slightly rising in pitch. It almost sounded unmanly, but I didn't care right then, even with Baron Alfonse grinning maliciously at me.

It was just such a shock to see them change sides so abruptly. They'd been talking about creating a party and adventuring just moments ago. Something was happening here, but I didn't know what.

Kristan had tears in his eyes, and Marko looked as if he was about to walk into death's embrace. Their expressions had gone from triumphant to somber in mere moments.

"Son," the Duke started. "Yesterday, the King gave me Eslant for my outstanding services and contributions. I'd meant to tell you all this after the meeting. Kristan and Marko will need to stay with me to help battle the corrupted dungeon and find a way to destroy it before more monster surges hit Eslant. Then there's the matter of an attempt on a Baron's life, which I must investigate. I like you well enough from what I've seen and heard, but I need them here with me. I'd hoped you could join me too, but it seems like that cannot be, at least not now. Since you can't stay, I'll have to let you go alone. I hope you understand."

His words made it clear that the decision was made for me, whether I understood or not. I could see Alfonse grinning, happy that he ruined everything, and the two brothers still looked shell-shocked that the Duke had broken things between us without a second thought. Fucking nobles...

Still, there was no point crying over spilled milk. Considering what everyone had gone through, I at least, had to be strong.

I turned to Kristan and Marko. "Brothers. We will see each other again one day."

Kristan nodded. "Yes. We shall."

Marko simply bowed his head.

That was a promise, between the three of us.

I'd see them again one day, I was sure of it. Whether the Duke approved or not—and it was sort of funny that he'd still call me son after ditching me without a second's thought—they were my blood brothers. We'd fought alongside each other after all.

I accepted the contract and felt an invisible rope tighten around my heart as the contract activated, magically binding the two of us.

It was all for the best. As long as we could go out with a blank slate, I would accept almost anything.

The coral cuffs around Melina's hands disappeared, and she staggered forward. I caught her in my arms and pulled her in for a hug while glaring at the Baron.

“Duke...I mean, father, is there a way to report someone who's been using coral cuffs to enslave other people?” I asked.

The Baron grit his teeth. “The cuffs aren't illegal, just frowned upon.”

I shrugged. “Yes, but then people will know you are a man without honor.”

Despite his reputation for uncaring brutality, my words got to Alfonse. The Baron hissed angrily and Kristan stirred, a glint suddenly coming into his eye. Though he looked grief-stricken, the side of his mouth tilted into the beginnings of a grin.

The Duke chuckled, then scoffed. “Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I will leave this place once we've subdued the dungeon, so who will remain to protect it from the monster surges? Baron Alfonse is a...concession...to the dangers around Eslant. Just go and celebrate your victory.”

It was just like Kristan and Marko had told me—despite the letter of the law, the nobles had special privileges, and letting the Baron go was just politics as usual.

In the end, it really was for the best that I wasn't working under him.

Me, Melina, and Chester. It was a lowborn outcast's life for us, and that was how I liked it. I would love to fight alongside Kristan and Marko again, but it'd be under my terms, not the Duke's.

“Tell him,” Melina whispered. “Tell him about Aldon.”

I tensed.

But then, I looked into her eyes, and I saw the genuine hatred and anger there. It was jarring to see Melina look that way. Even after rescuing her from the dungeon and Aldon's party, she'd been happy.

My friend hated the Baron more than words could express, and if I thought about it more, she was right.

If I couldn't have Alfonse put away in a dungeon, then I could make his every waking moment a nightmare.

"Baron Sherazad," I said, making sure to wait until he looked up at me.

"What? You should have thought about the cuffs before you signed the contract," he said smugly.

"Oh, it's not about that. I just wanted you to know that it was me who fed your son to the mimic. He cried like a little bitch, begging for his daddy."

The Baron's face twisted in pure anger and hatred, but a single surge of the Duke's essence stopped him.

"Don't forget what you just signed, Baron. Let it go. Let the past be the past." The Duke smirked a little as he stared at me. It seemed like he was happy that I'd gotten one last word in, even with the Baron's exile clause ruining our current plans.

Kristan and Marko stood as well.

"We'll help you bring her back," Kristan muttered.

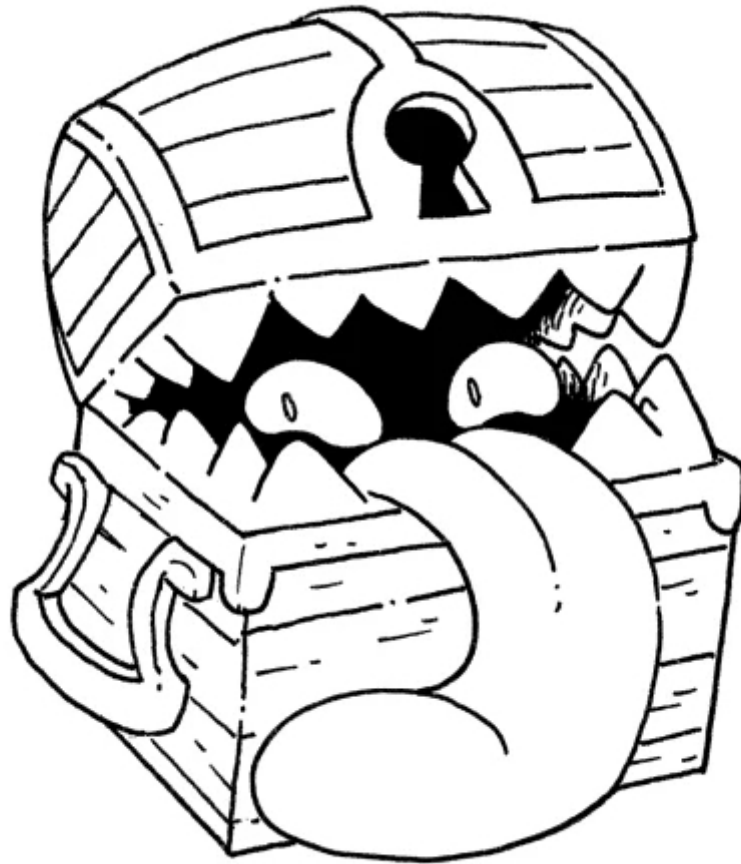
"It's the least we can do," Marko agreed.

Alfonse didn't respond to the Duke but instead kept his eyes locked on mine. "I will find a way to get back at you, kid. You can make sure of that. Even if it costs me my life."

"Good luck with that, Alfonse," I said as I escorted Melina out of the room. "Remember, the sooner you send the gold and the gear, the sooner we're gone."

"You just make sure Franja is back within the hour, or I'll have your head on a spike!"

Good luck with that, you old fuck. This round's mine.



CHAPTER 31: SO, WHERE IS HE?

Kristan produced a head scarf for Melina so we could hide her ears, but she shook her head. Her face looked calm, and she even smiled pleasantly at him, but I saw the deep, almost smoldering, determination in her eyes.

“Thank you, but I will not hide not now that I’m free. They marched me up here like a prisoner. The Baron only let me have a bath and get dressed when we got to this place.”

Melina smiled at Kristan politely, and the spearman turned red, taking a step back.

“This place is an Adventurer’s Guild,” the spearman dreamily replied, seemingly smitten by the elf. Just like I’d feared, he’d totally forgotten about Renata after meeting

another woman, so I guess it was a good thing that I hadn't set them up just yet.

I couldn't quite blame him though.

I knew it was the wrong thing to think about right now, but she was stunning, even more so than I remembered from before.

What surprised and bothered me was her utter lack of fear for her surroundings. She looked around the Adventurer's Guild almost like she was a curious tourist, even though she was enslaved just moments before.

Not only that, she seemingly didn't hold even an ounce of hatred for my kind, even though it was humanity who enslaved her. If it was me, I'd probably have flown into a blind berserker rage like Kristan in battle, and who could blame her after the torture she received?

It was a topic I wanted to breach, but not while we were still in the guild's hallways.

For now, we needed to get home so we could talk to Renata. I'd made some decisions on her part, and wasn't sure how she'd feel about it.

Renata had agreed to go with me when she was grief-stricken and exhausted. The decisions people made in the middle of chaotic situations were very different from the decisions they made after thinking about it for a while.

In the corner of my eye, I noticed Kristan trying to sweep Melina off her feet—literally. He grabbed her shoulder, steering her to a nearby door.

“This room contains the ranking system. The System places all the adventurers in order of skill. My rank is—”

I cut him off. “Does it really matter? I think she's had enough of human establishments for a lifetime,” I said, shooting him a pointed look.

He caught my eye, then nodded, falling silent for a bit. He shrugged and stepped around us, leading the way.

Marko remained silent as he fell in line behind us.

The Sherazad household didn't approach or bother us, but the poisonous looks we were getting told me they'd be very happy to sacrifice themselves for their master. A few of them even fingered their weapons, like they were considering attacking us.

Kristan smirked, pulling out his spear and twirling it for a brief moment.

Then silenced them.

"Freaking zealots," I laughed on the chat.

But nobody responded. Kristan and Marko had already left.

I remembered Melina wasn't in the party anymore and sent her an invite. She accepted and turned to me, a weak smile on her face.

"Every day I prayed you would show up, Damon," she whispered. "But not in a lifetime did I think that the Baron's daughter would be my price."

"That...was a spur-of-the-moment thing," I grinned. "It just happened, and I'm glad it did. All that matters is you're free now."

"Free, yes, but does that mean I want to spend more of my time surrounded by humans?" her voice shifted, suddenly turning icily cold.

I stopped walking and opened my mouth to protest, but no words came to mind.

She was right—I'd been wondering why she wanted to slum it with us just moments ago!

All I'd wanted was to keep my word and save her, but now...

"Oh, come on," she chuckled. Her face softened and then an impish smile split her face. "You should have seen your face. I would be eager to accompany you. And—"

I quickly shook my head, trying to stop her from mentioning Chester in front of the brothers. Fortunately, they

obliviously helped me out in this regard.

“Keep walking,” Marko said as he almost bumped into me. “Leave the chit-chat for when we are back at the Burning Bosom.”

Marko was still shooting a few side glances at the mass of Sherazad soldiers around us, and he didn’t look happy. Between the two, Kristan was the wildcard, but Marko was the consummate bodyguard.

Melina slid her arm around mine and it was her turn to pull me along as I stood there stunned. “That was just a joke, cheer up,” she said, her eyes glinting merrily. “And besides, I would like to speak some more to—”

It seemed like she hadn’t gotten the message last time, so I put a finger to my mouth, stopping her from mentioning Chester.

“They don’t know,” I mouthed, and she nodded. Now that the two were leaving my party, there was even less reason to tell them.

It barely took us ten minutes until we returned.

The Sherazad followed us at a good distance, making sure they were at least thirty steps behind us.

Normally, I’d be uncomfortable with the close surveillance, but I didn’t mind. Part of the deal was Franja’s release, after all, and whatever got this whole thing over with was for the best.

Renata and Franja met us at the door, their arms crossed and both wearing deep-set frowns.

“I don’t want to leave this place!” Renny protested right away. It was like I’d suspected—after some more rumination, she wasn’t happy leaving the town.

I was a little surprised the two of them had heard about the terms already, but word traveled fast in a small town like Eslant.

“Well, we can probably—” I started, but then I was promptly cut off.

“Wait. So all you got besides the elf was some basic gear and items? How is that possible?” Franja added. “I’m his favorite daughter! He should have given you much more!”

Renata nodded, turning to Franja and dramatically rolling her eyes. “Yeah! Damon never knew the value of a good woman!”

Franja giggled, and soon Renata joined in, leaving me, Kristan, Marko, and Melina just staring at them, rather baffled.

“Whoa, there. You two seem rather close,” I said, unsure of how to react.

They eyed each other, then huffed at me.

“So what if we are?” Franja asked. “What’s wrong with a noblewoman making friends with a tavern mistress?”

“I mean, I guess there’s nothing wrong,” I said, shrugging.

“By the way, that’s another reason why I don’t want to go. Can’t you find some way to cheat this deal?” Renny repeated. “Who knows where we’ll end up! What if we get stuck in a jungle? Or a desert?”

She had a good point there, but I wasn’t going to give up just yet. Because of my deal, I *had* to leave the town no matter what. There was no cheating it, and I’d like to bring Renata with me.

That was just my natural impulse, especially after what happened to Melina. I wanted to keep the people I cared about close by so I could protect them myself.

I couldn’t see another way to handle things. Kristan and Marko were staying in the town, and they’d help her if I asked, but I’d prefer to avoid that if possible.

I gestured at the door. “Why don’t we go inside first? We can discuss everything then. And can you please give Melina something to eat and drink? I’m sure she’s famished.”

“Oh, yes! I’m sorry!” Renny said, bowing her head apologetically as she ran down the stairs and hugged the elf. “I’m Renata, his older sister. Please, come in.”

She grabbed Melina by the hand and they rushed off into the tavern past Franja, who was still scowling haughtily at me. Kristan and Marko hurried after them, leaving the young Sherazad and me standing outside.

I offered her my hand, and to my surprise, she took it, wrapping her slender fingers around mine.

“No hard feelings, I hope. I tried my best not to take it out on you,” I said. It was hard, but I evenly met her eyes.

Despite how we’d met, Franja wasn’t that bad, especially not compared to her family. Considering the circumstances where she’d grown up, I’d say she was downright normal.

“I forgive you only if you forgive me for not helping your elf friend.” She trailed off for a long moment, and then she shrugged. “Things need to change, but I don’t even know where or how to start,” she muttered, staring at the ground in embarrassment.

“Don’t become like your father. I guess that’s the best we can hope for,” I said, simply and bluntly.

She snorted and shook her head, then reached up for her long brown hair and freed the knot. It flowed down her back and around her as she shook it. It reminded me a little of a lion freeing up its mane, and again, it made me hope that maybe Franja could be a better ruler than her father.

“I’ll do my best, but I won’t promise anything. I love my father, he’s good to me, but now I see that has its price.” She turned to me, evenly meeting my eyes just like I met hers. Then she did a brief little curtsy before turning away. “Goodbye, Damon. May we one day see each other again under better circumstances.”

She walked past me and hurried to join the large group of Sherazad guards and retainers that’d formed on the bridge behind me.

I glanced after her one last time, and again noticed the steely eyes of the Sherazad guards. Considering our deal, they

couldn't legally hurt me without being severely punished or even killed by the System, though it was small comfort.

Still, I walked into the tavern, hoping to leave it all behind me. I had a nagging feeling things weren't going to end just like that, but I could hope.

Renata and Melina were seated around the table and a hot steaming pot of coffee. Three slices of fresh bread battered in butter and covered with thin slices of meat sat next to the pot, and beside that was an assortment of sweets.

"I guess this means you prefer Melina's company over mine," I said, nodding to the platter on the table and smirking. "Never see you bring the good stuff out when it's just us!"

"Pfft!" Renata scoffed. "It isn't even a competition at this point. You ass."

"Yeah, yeah, just let it all out," I said, waving her off. I wanted to talk business as soon as possible.

"Look, I understand why you might not be happy with leaving Eslant. But jokes aside, it was the best thing I could come up with that quickly. Once we hit another town, you can buy yourself another tavern or even an inn. Whatever floats your boat."

"And I'll get to become as strong as those guys, huh?" she asked, nodding to Kristan and Marko.

I nodded.

I noticed she looked impressed, so I hoped that would convince her even further. "Yeah. Melina and I will help you level and get you everything you need. It'll take time, but nobody will want to fuck with you by the time things are done."

"I like the sound of that..." Renata said, trailing off for a moment. "It's not like there's much left in Eslant for me anyways..."

"I surely wouldn't mind having you around, my lady," Kristan replied, kneeling next to her. "I will do my best to

keep you safe. Even if it costs me my life. Stay in Eslant with us. There's no need to go to those dangerous woods."

Now, it was like he'd totally forgotten about Melina again in favor of Renata. When it came to love, Kristan had the memory of a concussed goldfish. All I could do was shoot him a deadpan stare. At least he wasn't killing anyone, but I had to say that Kristan with women was probably even worse than Kristan on the battlefield.

"Liar," Marko grunted. "You'd sooner sell her off to someone than risk your own life."

"Lies!" Kristan retorted, shrieking like he was an actor on a stage. "He wants to tear us asunder! Those are all fabrications, my dearest lady. Stay here and I will make your life seem like heaven."

Renata stared at him, and I couldn't tell if she was befuddled or attracted. Probably a mix of both—Kristan might have been a drama queen, but he was a very rich and handsome one.

I groaned and rolled my eyes.

"How about I explain everything we agreed on," I said, tapping the table loudly with my fingers to get her attention again. "Then you can decide if you want to stay here or go with us."

She sighed and frowned thoughtfully, but then nodded. "I owe it to you to hear you out."

I explained what happened at the meeting, making sure to mention the last part, about how Melina told me to mock the baron.

That elicited a curse and then a chuckle from Renata, and Melina smiled again, staring off into the distance.

The more we talked about future plans, the more Renata smiled. Her face grew very excited, and she was soon speculating about the different classes she'd receive.

"Hm," Renata mused. "I always saw myself as more of the supportive type. Maybe I could be a priest or a cleric...or a

healer. Something like that.”

“A healer,” Kristan said, nodding eagerly. “You’ll be my angel of the battlefield!” He was starting to piss me off, so I kicked him under the chair too. Kristan laughed it off, groaning good-naturedly. “A kick, huh? Marko does that bullshit all the time.”

Renata was still blushing at his aggressive compliments, but then she turned to Melina. “What class are you?”

“I’m a spellslinger,” Melina explained. Before long, she was telling Renata about the differences between elf and human classes. It reminded me of how excited she was when talking about magic or studying Chester.

Although I was glad, I was still totally surprised about how she’d gotten over her torture so easily. However, even I knew that asking such a question would kill the mood and force her to relive the moments by answering questions.

For a while, we just sat there happily, chatting together, reminiscing, and dreaming about the future.

Kristan lounged back in his seat, bringing a cup into the air. “To Damon!” he shouted, his voice echoing like he was standing before a cave. “May we see each other again soon—even if I have to kill the Ba—”

Marko slapped him on the shoulder, rolling his eyes. “Don’t even talk about it, brother.”

Then he turned to me, smiling. On Marko’s stern face, that smile was just like Kristan’s biggest grin. “I am glad we met. And I hope to see each other again. May we kill more nightmares together!”

“May we meet again,” I replied, nodding.

Morning turned into the afternoon.

The conversation grew livelier and livelier, and even Marko joined in, though he would still occasionally turn to the side and talk to himself. I couldn’t help but ask again, and the man just smiled sheepishly.

“You know, when you met me, I was disguised, right?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “What was that, by the way?”

Marko ran his hand across his face, smiling. “I’m a master of disguise. When I turn to the side and talk to myself...I’m practicing my next disguise.”

“A good spy is always practicing,” Kristan interjected, laughing a little. “At least that’s what Marko says. But don’t worry. I think it’s weird too!”

Marko just responded by kicking him under the table, leading to yet another exaggerated groan. Kristan must have had shins of steel at this point, if that was how his brother managed him.

Still, I knew it wasn’t quite as simple as Marko told me.

Being a good spy was one thing. Completely changing one’s visage? That suggested something totally different, and I’d never heard of a disguise skill so potent before.

Come to think of it, I’d seen something weird about Kristan too—the way blood seemed to glow when it splattered across his body.

I almost asked them about it, but decided not to. We’d talk more about our hidden skills and abilities—both mine and theirs—when we met on the battlefield again.

For now, I just wanted to enjoy their company as friends rather than warriors.

Before long, we were heading into the evening, but then a loud knock on the door startled us.

Kristan scowled. “I thought the sign said this place was closed.”

“It *is* closed,” Renata said, nodding. “It put it up. What’s going on?”

I shot to my feet, excited. I knew this could only mean one thing.

“Coming,” I yelled.

The money was there.

But when I opened the door, my eyebrows almost shot past my forehead. I could see the bag of gold, so I was right, but the messenger was the last person I would have expected.

“Hello, Damon,” Franja said, holding out a storage pouch in front of her. “I’m back.”

“Back? I don’t...” then I smirked and tilted my head to the side. “Oh, I see! You want me to kidnap you again?”

Franja let out a full-blown snort, tried to catch herself but couldn’t, and then pushed past me, laughing loudly.

“No, that’s not it. I told my father to free the other slaves from the pagoda dungeon. He wouldn’t. Not only that, he blamed me for getting captured in the first place. I decided that I couldn’t stay with him anymore, so I want to stay here.”

I turned to Melina, Renata, Kristan, and Marko.

They had the same shocked expression as me.

“What do you mean with stay here?” I asked, asking the question I was sure everyone was thinking.

She stared at me. Somehow, she seemed even more confused than we were. “I plan to buy this place and will then take over. I like the ambiance. What else?”

A collective ‘oh’ and ‘ahh, okay’ resounded from behind me. For a moment I thought she was about to ask and join us on our trip to who-knew-where.

Especially since Kristan and Marko couldn’t join us, it was just me, Melina, Chester, and Renata. It would have been hard enough to take care of just one underleveled adventurer in Renata. Bringing another lowbie, especially an inexperienced one like Franja, would have been too much.

Of course, that made me realize that I had no idea how strong Melina really was.

Everyone knew that coral cuffs restricted magic, and magical contracts were even worse. Considering how

destructive that fireball she threw at Chester was, she could have been much more powerful than I imagined.

I'd have to ask her after our celebration.

“Oh, and congratulations on your adoption by Duke Harholt.” Franja continued, smiling breezily. “Father was genuinely mad. He ripped a chunk of hair from his scalp. And then another when he told me how you...you know? Fed Aldon to a mimic? I laughed and he got even angrier. I guess that's another reason why I'm here now.”

I stared at her, not knowing how to respond. That was becoming a habit of mine lately, one I needed to break.

Then again, maybe the world should stop throwing surprises at me. I was sitting in a room with two women whose murderous brothers had tried to kill me.

Come on, what in the blighted hell were the odds of that?!

“You... laughed?” I said, stumbling a little over my words.

“Yes, I did. Everyone hated his guts.” Her voice was quick and earnest. It was clear that she despised her older brother, even though they were family. “He would always act kind around father, but away from him...”

“You know, Damon has a way of noticing people like that...it's for the best, you know,” Renata murmured. She spoke in a soft whisper, almost like she was talking to herself, but the words carried into my ears.

I turned and stared at Renata, but she was just talking to Melina again.

She knew.

But for whatever reason, she didn't want to talk about it.

I gulped and decided to respect her privacy.

“Hey. What are you staring at?” Franja asked, pulling me around to look at her.

“Don’t worry about it,” I muttered.

“I won’t worry about it then. I’ll just worry about paying you. This is a hefty sum. It might encourage you to kidnap me again,” she quipped.

I laughed, shaking my head. Now I understood why Renata liked her so much.

Franja pushed the pouch into my hand and winked.

“The place could potentially go for up to eight thousand gold coins, but I’m offering thirteen as a token of apology from my family. Half of it is from my father, and half is from me. Then there are another two hundred golden coins for Renata’s rebirth.” She spoke very quickly, but firmly. It was clear there was no time for me to argue—she was overpaying us, and that was that.

Franja breezed past me and sat next to Melina.

“I am genuinely sorry about what happened to you, I truly am,” she said, handing another pouch to Melina, who took it reluctantly. “Don’t worry, the storage pouch is not bound to my blood so you can freely take it.”

I peeked inside and it was just as she said: 13,200 golden coins.

Who would have thought we’d get that much? I had secretly hoped for six or seven thousand at best, and only because of the plot of land from selling the Burning Bosom.

I handed the money to its rightful owner, and she just shot me a smile. We both knew that I wasn’t going to take it for myself, though having that kind of funds would have gone a long way.

“This is quite nice,” Melina said as she pulled out several pieces of equipment, then put them on.

The dress disappeared and was replaced with...another dress. Or gown? I wasn’t very knowledgeable when it came to women’s clothes.

The sleeveless emerald dress was thin, wispy, and ethereal.

There was no other way to describe it. It was almost like wearing a cloud.

The fine cloth dropped far past her ankles pooling on the ground yet interestingly never touched it. The dress was backless and wrapped around the front with a gem-studded brooch that sat right above her chest. Threads of elegant silver looped around her neck, and long trailing cuffs fell beneath her elbows.

“It sure does look nice,” I blurted out without thinking. But of course, magical clothing wasn’t just about looks—the entwined essence was just as important. “What does it do?”

“The dress amplifies spell output by 23% and reduces cooldowns by 14%,” Franja explained. “I made sure it was part of the package you requested, Damon. Trust me, once she’s fully equipped and the coral cuffs debuff is gone, Melina will be back to full fighting form.”

Franja looked down and awkwardly kicked the ground, feeling guilty it was her family’s fault in the first place that Melina was no longer in top shape.

I put a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder, then nodded comfortingly. She was trying her best, and I wanted to respect that.

Melina stood up, smiling.

“By the way. I was hoping to catch up with Damon for a while. Do you guys mind if we head up to his room for some alone time?”

Renata’s eyes were practically bulging out of her sockets, and I could tell that she was about to explode with excitement. There was nothing that woman loved more than gossip...

Normally, she’d be the most excited person in the room. But this time, there was another pair of bulging eyes staring equally, a pair of eyes connected directly to my body via a pair of slimy eye stalks.

Chester suddenly stirred on both my shoulders.

It felt as if someone was squeezing their fingers into my skin, and it was clear that he wanted to catch up with Melina too. I glanced at Kristan and Marko, but the two didn't seem to notice it—though Chester was eager, he was careful to stay invisible.

“Yeah, that does sound good,” I said, smiling a little. “Well, there's only one more thing to do then. Renata? When do you want to have your first rebirth?”

“Tomorrow morning,” she replied hurriedly. “I need to show Franja around and stuff.”

“Alright then. That sounds good,” I replied. “We can go to the Adventurer's Guild before leaving.”

“Yeah,” she replied, casting one last look around the Burning Bosom. It was clear that she was very torn, and I felt the same way.

Franja nodded. “I just sent a message to the Baron. They will send someone to the Adventurer's Guild early in the morning. Now, where were we, Renata?”

The two were quickly engaged in conversation. Kristan and Marko coughed, and I turned to them.

The brothers got to their feet and then made their way over to me.

“It didn't work the way I thought it would. But you are one of us now, Damon. Don't forget that,” Kristan said as he grabbed my wrist. “We do everything to protect our own, and that's what we'll expect from you as well. Even if we were to meet on opposite sides of the battlefield, we would drop everything for you.”

I nodded, gulping a little.

The Duke might have abandoned me as one more piece in the strange game nobles played. But these two...

They viewed me as a real brother now, and I wanted to respect that bond with all my heart.

“I wouldn't expect any less. You'll have to teach me all about being a noble one day,” I said with a hint of a smile.

“I’ve got a lot to learn.”

“Oh, you have,” Marko muttered jokingly, then jabbed my shoulder playfully. “Just make sure you don’t become a barbarian when you’re out in the wilderness.”

Melina grabbed my hand and looked about the room, then hurried toward the stairs and pulled me along. Her body was still healing from the coral cuffs, but I could tell she was strong. She just moved me along like I was nothing.

A minute later, we were sitting in my room.

She stood there awkwardly for a moment, and I gestured. “Here. You take the bed.”

Then I sat down on the rocking chair next to the window.

“Where is our little friend?” she whispered.

As if on cue, Chester burst out from my right shoulder, his stalky eyes protruding from my cape. I felt his unease, but I didn’t understand why he was suddenly so shy.

The eyes rose a bit more and then his boxy body appeared, the tongue lolling free. He suddenly jumped her and started licking her face.

For a while, I just sat there in disbelief. He was like a happy dog!

But then I scrambled forward, trying to pull the thread between us like it was a leash. “Gross! She just got cleaned, you little ass!”

“Chester!” Melina chuckled. “Stop it, you beautiful little creature.”

Chester froze, and then he chuckled. His eyeballs twisted around, meeting mine, a mischievous twinkle in his face.

“She call me beautiful. I like long ears,” Chester purred.

“Long...ears?” Melina stammered. “Chester, I have a name. And long ears is rude. I’m not sure you know that, but

it's not a very nice name for elves.”

Chester jolted back. I'd never seen him so kind and obedient before. “I am sorry, Melina. I am happy to see you.” He jerked a tendril at me, whacking me on the side of the head. “This man mean to me. He never let me eat cake. No sweets. Nothing.”

“There we go again,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You should join an acting troupe with that kind of skill.”

“Acting...troupe? What is that?” Chester murmured.

Melina eyed me curiously as well, so I explained it to them.

“That sounds delightful!” Melina said. “Maybe we can see one soon. Is there one in Eslant?”

I shook my head. “No, unless you count Kristan downstairs.”

We all got a good laugh out of that one—even Chester.

“How's your absorption?” I asked, changing the topic.

“Good. I absorb four percent of nightmare. Still many left. It maybe take days. Weeks,” he replied. He sounded pretty content, which worked for me. By now, I accepted Chester's absorption as a necessary evil, but if we were being exiled to a new and unfamiliar location, I didn't want him constantly starving.

“Alright, that's good,” I replied. “As long as you're absorbing the mass.”

“Weeks to absorb?” Melina said, putting a hand to her mouth and cutting me off. “What happened?”

I took a moment to explain what happened while she was trapped inside the pagoda dungeon.

Mostly, she sat there in silence, but every so often, she'd ask for more details. I wound up telling her everything about how I'd met Kristan and Marko—and their skill sets.

As I spoke about them, Melina nodded appreciatively.

“Yes. I could tell they were strong. And earnest. Odd, but earnest. I wish we could have traveled with them.”

I nodded. “Me as well—though hopefully, we can see each other again one day.”

Then Melina tilted her head to the side. “By the way. I notice something strange about your essence. Did you and Chester...”

She trailed off, then shrugged. “I don’t know what questions to ask, but I feel like your new strength has something to do with that.”

“It does,” I replied. I told her about the Duke and the monster attack, how Chester controlled my body, and finally about how we ate the nightmare.

As I spoke, Chester only demanded full credit once or twice. He was really on his best possible behavior with Melina around, which was yet another huge plus to traveling with her in the future.

We chatted for a while longer, but then I was unable to hold it in. I just had to ask her. It almost defied belief how nonchalantly she was treating the whole thing.

“Are you alright? Melina? From the...torture?”

She shrugged and shot me a very strange smile.

The smile was strangely chilling. She didn’t look too unhappy, but it didn’t quite make it to her eyes.

Her smile looked...tired.

That was the best way to describe it.

“I will tell you a secret since I know yours. If you think it won’t be too big of a burden, Damon,” she whispered.

My chest suddenly tightened and something told me I didn’t want to know. There was something in the way she looked at me that said her secret was dark and terrible, and it chilled me to the bone.

But she wanted to tell me, so I nodded.

“Damon, I came to the human kingdom with a purpose, and no, I wasn’t caught. I let myself be bound with coral cuffs.”

“You...what? I don’t understand.” The idea of being willingly bound by cuffs...why would anybody, especially someone who loved essence as much as Melina, ever let that happen to them?

Melina’s voice was a low and hushed whisper, “I’m in search of someone who hurt me deeply several decades ago. A human man.”

“Who is he? Do you know his name?” I just blurted out the questions rapid-fire without thinking. I had no idea what I’d expected to hear, but whatever it was, it wasn’t this.

She shook her head. “His name is Harkel, but I don’t know much else aside from two things. The first is that he has a long s-shaped scar running down the center of his face. And the second is that he’s very, very strong. A physical damage class if I’m not mistaken.”

I waited for her to continue, but she didn’t.

“So...what did he do to you? Why are you looking for him?” I asked.

Melina didn’t respond right away, but when she did, I felt my blood run cold.

“He ripped my newborn from my womb and killed my husband.” She put her hand up to stop me from asking more questions, but in all honesty, she didn’t even need to. I was speechless.

I had seen a lot of cruelty. Hell, in the last week, I’d even doled some out myself, even though I wasn’t proud of it.

But I never would have expected something like *that*.

“We age differently, Damon. I am over a hundred years old, and this was in another lifetime, but the hatred still remains. It wasn’t just my family. He and his people burnt our entire village to the ground and enslaved everybody they could

catch alive. I put on the cuffs to try and find a slave trader who sold elves, just to bring myself a little closer to them.”

I just continued staring at her, trying to process it all.

My mind was just whirling uncontrollably trying to put myself in her shoes.

It seemed like even Chester felt the same way. Instead of trying to modulate my emotions like normal, he was just adding his own sorrow onto it.

For some reason, that just felt right.

This was something to feel sad about.

For a brief moment, we sat in silence.

Chester drooped his eye stalks and wrapped them around her hand comfortingly. It was a strange sight, seeing a mimic comforting an elf, but I liked it.

I was a half-mimic mess of a man and she was a scarred elven woman.

I smiled.

Yes, Melina’s story was dark and disturbing.

But at the very least, there was a reason to hope. A guy like me had beaten a Baron. Who knew what would happen if me and Melina teamed up?

“You know what, Melina? I was able to save you, even though it didn’t seem possible. This man...I will help you find him. It’s a big world, and with Chester as my companion, I’m not quite like the other humans. We just might live long enough to find and kill him. Together.”

Melina’s eyebrows rose in surprise. She patted the mimic’s lid of a head and then nodded to me.

“Let’s do that then.” She pointed at me, then to her, grinning. “To the broken. May we mend our souls and kill our enemies.”

“May we mend our souls and kill our enemies,” I dully replied. The words were much more poetic than I would have

said—Melina was a lot more eloquent than me. But they felt right coming from my lips.

I suddenly felt much better, and that wasn't just because she trusted me enough to share her horrific secret.

No, it was because I had another goal ahead of me—a big one.

These goals and challenges always kept me going, and I was sure this one would keep me going for a long time.

“I just want you to promise me one thing, Melina,” I said. “It's very important that you keep this promise, alright?”

She frowned, temporarily confused. “I...can not make a promise if I don't know what you will ask of me.”

“When we find him, you will not take things into your own hands. You will not try and fight him alone, and you will not die. Promise me that.”

She chewed her lip, which seemed to be a universal thing for all our races. “Alright. I promise.” “Then we have a deal. We will find and kill him together, no matter how long it takes.”

I smiled, then reached out a hand. I was just meaning to shake, but she pulled me into a tight embrace instead. “No matter how long it takes,” she whispered, a note of hope in the bone-deep sadness that'd haunted her for so long.



CHAPTER 32: FISH, ANYONE?

Somehow, falling asleep was a lot easier than we thought it'd be. After hearing about Melina's secret, I was suddenly dead tired. Everything that'd happened in the last few days hit me again, and now that we'd gotten her back, I finally felt peaceful.

I drifted off to a quiet and pleasant sleep, but before I did, Chester and Melina were out cold too. I guessed that even resting for four days wasn't enough for me.

We were an entangled mass of limbs the next morning.

When I woke up, I felt Chester pressing against my shoulder, and when Melina shifted, my body jerked too.

My eyes jolted awake, and my first thought was to wonder what had happened last night.

“Hey! Slow down! You hurt me!”

I turned, and realized I was yanking Chester away.

Chester had managed to slip his eyes and tongue around Melina, who slept on the floor only inches away from me. Instead of taking the bed like I thought she would, she'd just camped out on the floor, and it seemed like I'd fallen out of the rocking chair.

“Chester! What are you doing?” I groaned. There was no way this was appropriate...I knew Renata and the gossipmongers would want to know how we'd slept together, but *this* definitely wasn't what they imagined.

To make things even more bizarre, Melina didn't seem bothered at all. She was just eyeing me curiously when I awoke.

“You snore,” she said, staring at me with a serious expression. “It sounded...strange.”

“Me?” I asked.

“No,” she scoffed, pointing at Chester. “Him!”

Chester let out a dramatic yawn, and his chest-lid mouth grew almost comically wide, unhinging and elongating. I didn't know what he was trying to do, but I figured it was probably for Melina's sake, as he hadn't done anything like that to me before.

Maybe that was how mimic's apologized.

Normally, people didn't hear Chester, but I guessed that he'd unmuted himself with Melina around.

“How's the absorption going?” I asked, changing the subject. I was pretty annoyed with the idea that Chester could have kept Melina up, but she didn't seem to mind, so it probably wasn't a big deal.

“Good. I have absorbed two more percent.” Chester said. He sounded a little perturbed, and it was pretty obvious why—considering how quickly he'd digested the humans, this nightmare flesh was taking an eternity.

It made me wonder about the rainbow trout, which I'd gotten during my first-ever dungeon run. Chester had said the trout was even more valuable than the nightmare...

"No trout. Not yet." Chester said, his voice suddenly sharp and focused. He was really intent on using the trout correctly, even ignoring Melina for a moment.

"Does it usually take so long?" Melina asked, picking up on Chester's surprise and changing the subject as well. It seemed like nothing would keep her from studying Chester. The elven spellcaster's fascination with biology was pretty amazing—after everything that'd happened, and even after our long talk last night, she was right back to being a scientist.

"No, it doesn't," I replied. "It probably has something to do with the nightmare being such a unique and powerful creature. I still have no idea where it came from."

"Yes. It is, smart ass," Chester cackled. "Not smart-ass. Smart ass. Ass that is smart."

I scowled at the burbling and undulating mass of eye stalks and boxy parts, then slapped the side of the chest.

"Smart ass? You getting cheeky on me now that Melina is here?" I taunted.

"Yes!" Chester exclaimed.

"You even admit it!" I scoffed.

"Yes!" Chester repeated again, his voice growing even louder and more mischievous the second time around.

Melina just chuckled to herself, then pushed away, stretching. "If things are going to be this entertaining, I look forward to our travels."

She untangled herself from the two of us and got to her feet, the emerald green dress readjusting around her body perfectly. Even her long golden hair was in place and it looked as smooth as silk.

Meanwhile, me and Chester looked like we'd been sleeping on the ground all night, which we had been.

It was pretty damn impressive, and come to think of it, the same thing had happened a few nights ago when I was keeping Renata company.

Just how did women manage to look ready so early in the morning?

I got up, shaking my head and laughing at myself as I pulled Chester back in with the thread connecting us. Now that I knew it could be used as kind of a leash, that'd be a handy way to keep him in check.

He merged back into me but remained in place on my shoulder, his eyes peering eagerly from side to side.

Melina pulled her hair back and tied it into a ponytail as she smiled at me. She looked much happier than before, and I realized now that she'd shared her secret, she felt a lot more comfortable being herself around me.

I thought back on our chat from the night before.

Had I done the right thing? I was getting kicked out of my hometown, and I'd made enemies out of a lot of people over someone I barely knew. Not only that, I'd promised to battle still more powerful foes in the future...

But at the end of the day, I knew that it was totally worth it. Until fusing with Chester, I was a reject, who people had used and then discarded because of my weak class.

Even before then, Melina had believed in me and asked for help. And now, she was one of the few people who'd still accept me even though I was half-beast. My thought from the night before, that oddities like us should stick together, was correct.

The only shame was that I couldn't bring the odd brothers with us...

All I could do about that was curse the Duke and hope that I met them again someday soon. I had a feeling I would.

"Say, Chester?" Melina asked, cutting me out of my thoughts. "Is there a way to merge a small part with me as well? So I can chat with you in private?"

“No,” he replied, drooping his eyes like a beaten dog. “I want kill him and be with you. Can I?”

I groaned. “Come on, you little shit. Am I really that bad?”

Chester threw up his tentacles in a mock sign of surrender. I had no idea where he’d picked that up from—maybe the party me and Kristan had killed. “Just joke! Stupid...I can’t leave or I die. You know.”

Melina and I exchanged surprised looks, and then I just shook my head. “No, I didn’t know that...You told me that *I* would die, you stupid asshole.”

“Ah, yes,” Chester said. “Well, I’m stuck with you too...”

I just shook my head. Well, at least that explained why he hadn’t jerked away from me in some bratty and impulsive fit. “You’re just...no, I don’t even have the words for it.”

“What? I am great. That’s the word for it. Great!” Chester cackled again, and this time, there was an odd sound that was a mix between crunching bones and a screech. “Gak!” he cried. “Almost threw up a nightmare. Laughing so hard at my great joke.”

This time, even Melina was rolling her eyes, a habit it seemed like she’d picked up from me.

That was my cue to shut Chester up as soon as possible. It would be an utter disaster if she realized traveling with us wasn’t worth the trouble after all, and I was stuck with just Chester—especially since Renata still wasn’t sure about coming with us.

“Fucking hell, man. Hey, take this,” I said, pulling out a berry tart from my storage. He munched it down and stuck his tongue out for more, so excited he didn’t even speak.

I smiled. “Alright, here.” I placed five pieces of baklava on his tongue, which he hungrily gobbled up, but then he stopped and glared at me.

“This too sweet! Too sweet!” he protested.

“Good! Now maybe you can shut up!” I groaned.

The golden-haired elf chuckled as she watched us argue. “You guys are like a bickering couple!”

Chester just laughed, spitting crumbs all over the place. “Well, if we are the couple, I’m the breadwinner of the household. I take over when things are bad!”

I just groaned again, and suddenly felt very self-conscious.

Melina was right. We looked like a bickering couple, but that was how it was with a mimic for a partner. It always wanted to eat something—or someone—or just be an annoying smart-ass.

“I think we should go downstairs. See if the others are up,” I said, clearing my throat and walking out of my room.

But then I stopped at the door and laughed.

It was kind of funny.

Last time Melina was here, I’d been very sentimental, thinking it was the last time I’d ever see this place...

And now, here we were again.

“What is it?” she asked, walking up to me and putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Nothing. Come on, let’s go.” I had many fond memories tied to this place, but that was all they were—memories. I’d make new memories with Melina and Chester. We were going to fit in just great. When we got to the first floor, Franja and Renata were busy drinking their morning brew and chatting animatedly.

They waved over at me.

“The brothers left,” Franja said.

“They went back to the Duke’s for the night, and they said not to wait for them. He wants to get to work right away,” Renata said.

The girls looked a little upset that the brothers had left. I couldn't help but wonder if Kristan and Marko would visit Franja from time to time.

I hoped so.

“Ready to go?” Renata asked. “Or would you like breakfast first?”

She wore her best dress, a red gown that looked rather plain compared to Melina's.

It didn't have any gems studded inside, and the cloth was much simpler, but it fit her nicely. The dress was a lot more modest than her usual fare, and it again made me think of Renata and Rolo.

What they wanted and how their relationship developed wasn't really any of my business, but I still wanted the two to be happy.

Maybe I could take her with me when I went to visit him—who knew?

“You excited?” I asked as Melina and I stepped up to the table.

“You have no idea, little brother!” Renata said excitedly as she pulled me into a hug.

“Little...brother?” I laughed since I knew we thought of each other that way, but she rarely actually called me that. I looked at Franja, then laughed and gently pushed Renata off of me. “Are you trying to put on a show since the noble is here? Well, why don't you buff me up too then—why not Damon the handsome, or knightly Damon, or—”

Renata groaned good-naturedly and put up my hands. “Alright, alright. I understand, sorry, my handsome little brother.”

Melina chuckled to my other side, and I felt the need to explain. The elvish spellcaster hadn't actually seen me and Renata together before, so I didn't want her to get the wrong idea, especially not after our conversation last night.

“We've been friends for a long time, so she's—”

I didn't get far before Renata cut me off, putting her hands on her hip and pouting. "I'm what? Annoying as a tick? I know, but that's just because I worry about you."

"Yes, yes, I know. And trust me, I appreciate it," I said. "Now let's go get your class. Don't worry too much about food—we can get something to munch on in the plaza."

A short while after, we made our way across the bridge and across the long street leading to the Adventurer's Guild. Although we told her she could stay behind in what was now her tavern, Franja decided to join us and see us off too, explaining that she still felt partially responsible for Melina and Renata.

I nodded. "Alright, well, your words, not mine. Let's get going then."

Franja's eyes narrowed. "Shut up, you ass. You still hold me responsible for Melina, too...but you're right to. By the time your exile ends, Eslant and House Sherazad will be very different—I promise you that."

I smiled, liking the sound of that.

Still, our group eventually fell silent, as Franja's words reminded me that we were all leaving our current life behind and starting a new one.

We stopped at the first vendor and bought some fried fish and potato salad. Next, we got some cooked vegetables stuffed with meat and a white spiced sauce that tasted utterly heavenly.

I looked around for the brothers, but they were nowhere to be seen. Considering what had happened, I'd thought they'd be eager to see us off at least.

Then again, maybe the Duke had them busy with various tasks...though they hadn't shown it, I still remembered the disappointment on their faces when told we had to separate.

It meant a lot to me, but I knew that they were stuck following his orders.

“Do you girls mind if we visit the market first?” I asked. “I need to pick up my gold from the items I sold earlier.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ve never been there. I guess I will once I become an adventurer,” Renata said as she stuffed her mouth with another of the vegetable and meat pieces.

“That’s so unsightly for a lady,” I jabbed. She scowled, her mouth opening further to show the half-chewed food inside.

“Asshole. You don’t tell a lady that.”

I shot her a friendly wink and grinned.

Laughing, Renata reached out and then put her arm around mine. Then she turned to Melina and smirked pointedly at her.

The gorgeous elf shrugged, smiled, and took my other arm.

We waltzed across the plaza as if we owned the place, not caring for any of the stares we were getting. I felt like a king with two beautiful ladies at my sides, a monstrously strong mimic that still hadn’t even shown me what he was capable of, and a clear road ahead of me.

On the way to the market, we just walked around, taking in the sights. It was the first time Melina had been in the town square as a free woman. But it wasn’t all business—we had work to do.

Only Melina would come inside with me.

Renata stayed back, pigging out with Franja. I guessed that was another thing the two had in common, and the sight of the two very different women both eating so happily made me smile, even though it definitely wasn’t “ladylike.”

The guards standing in front of the market looked tired and world-weary. There was none of the bluster from the night when one of the Barons was almost assassinated. Despite not having any outward apparent wounds, they might have sustained inner damage or even mental trauma.

We just walked past them and into the mostly intact market area. Only a part of the roof was missing, probably burned away by the nightmare's dark flames.

The old man I met last time stood at the counter, obviously lost in thought. He even muttered something and nodded his head.

"Hello?" I said, putting my hands up on the counter.

The man was silent for a moment, and then he jerked up, his eyes widening like he just realized I was there. "Ahh, yes, I am terribly sorry. What can I do for you?"

"I put some items up for sale. Could you please check if any have sold?"

He picked up a stone tablet and held it out in front of me.

"Place your hand here and I'll check for you, young man."

I did as he asked and pushed some essence into the stone tablet. It lit up and then he nodded, his expressionless face lighting up.

"You have sold everything, young man. And one of the items went for a very good price. Well done."

"Thank you," I replied.

He seemed very happy for me that I'd made all the sales, and I was glad too. Sure, the markets were all connected, and I could still access them after my exile.

"Would you like to receive all the money right now? Or leave it in the market as a credit to purchase other items?"

"I'll take it all, good sir," I said.

I waited for a moment, and then he produced a thick pouch of gold. He smiled politely, sliding it over to me.

"Is there anything else I can do?" he asked.

"No, not for now. Thank you."

I picked the pouch up and looked inside.

A small note from the System popped up before me before I could even check how many gold coins I'd made—handy!

Dagger (Uncommon): 212 Gold Coins

Sword (Uncommon): 227 Gold Coins

Half-Plate Greaves (Uncommon): 179 Gold
Coins

Belt (Uncommon): 433 Gold Coins

Grand Total: 1,051 Gold Coins

With my current stash, that made a whopping 1,556 Gold Coins in total.

I suddenly felt a lot better about my prospects.

Heading off to exile as a rich man was exactly what I'd hoped for.

Sure, I'd eventually have to spend the money on new gear, but I had enough for now. Once we hit a new city, I'd try and barter or trade for better stuff then.

I joined the girls, who looked at me suspiciously as I couldn't pull the grin off my face. The weight of gold in my pocket was something new and exciting I'd never felt before.

“What?” Renata asked, poking my chest.

“Nothing,” I laughed, grinning like a maniac. “I just made some decent coin, that is all. More importantly, are you ready?”

Renata took a deep breath, then nodded. “Yeah. I guess we're doing this then. Taking my first rebirth and seeing what it's like.”

I wiped the smile off my face—not because I was mad, but because I wanted her to know that I was serious. “Renny, I can't force you to do your first rebirth or come with us, but if you do, I'll try and take care of you. That's a promise.”

“I trusted him with my life,” Melina said, leaning in. She had an eager smile on her face too, and though they’d just met, it was pretty clear she liked Renata and wanted her along. “And you know him even better. Shouldn’t you trust he’ll do what is best?”

“I do trust him,” Renata explained. “But I’m going to be honest—so much has changed over the last few weeks. Damon used to be considered pretty weak, and now he’s strong. I used to be the tavern mistress at the Burning Bosom, and now...”

She trailed off.

I understood her worries. It felt like anybody would be shocked at everything that’d happened, so I decided to just quickly move the conversation along.

“Let’s first see what the System has in store for you. I have a good feeling,” I said, hurrying the three girls along into the building.

Several minutes later, Renata was being led away by Franja and an Adventurer’s Guild general attendant.

We waited in silence, hoping for a good result.

Melina’s hand landed on my shoulder, but instead of touching me, she was just rubbing Chester’s eyeball instead.

“You are so cute, do you know that?” she whispered to the mimic. His tongue lolled out and a strange whirlwind of emotions ran through us, a mix of excitement, adoration, happiness, and even longing.

“*Yes. I am cute. Hear that?*” Chester asked, his voice smugly echoing through my mind. It seemed like Chester was processing everything the way he usually did—by making my life harder.

I rolled my eyes at the mimic and looked down the hall, where Renata was probably finishing the last stages of her rebirth.

A flood of essence erupted from further inside the building and then dissipated, but I could still feel its lingering

effects.

“Huh. That’s weird.” Melina said, frowning a little. “I haven’t felt this class type before. I wonder what it is.”

I frowned too, but for a different reason. “The weird thing is how quickly it happened. Normally the rebirths take longer...”

Melina kept playing with Chester’s eyeball as I waited anxiously for Renata’s return.

Franja and Renata appeared, murmuring together as they walked toward us. Both of them seemed pleasantly surprised, and Renata looked downright relieved.

“What did you get?” I called out to them, trying to remember the suggestions Renata had made last night. “A healer? A priest?”

The two turned to me.

Franja looked extremely excited. She was practically jumping on the balls of her feet.

But then, the relief on Renata’s face disappeared, and she looked guilty. “Um, Damon...” she started. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but I don’t think I’m going anywhere.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

I knew she wasn’t sure about leaving, but surely the excitement of getting a rebirth and becoming more powerful...

“Well, she has a unique class,” Franja explained. “It’s very rare, but not meant for battle. She’s a Food Alchemist.”

“Food...Alchemist?” I trailed off.

I turned to Melina, and for once, she looked even more baffled than I did. Not even she had heard about it before.

“Well, so it’s meant for cooking and stuff,” Renata said. “I don’t know why I got it. Maybe the System knew I wanted to stay. But now it feels like...”

“Well, we can get monster parts when traveling,” I suggested. “Maybe you can practice then?”

“No, I don’t want to,” Renata said, her voice firm this time. It felt like the new class had pushed her toward staying, and while I was disappointed, I thought it was for the best.

“So what are you going to do instead?” I asked.

“Well, Franja offered me a System contract. She said she’ll make me a co-owner of the Burning Bosom again. Plus she’ll help me get stronger and give me all the ingredients I need. Special food can grant big buffs she said, so we’ll make the money back quickly and—”

“Yeah. That sounds like it’s for the best,” I said.

I was sad to see her go, but I smiled anyways.

The System worked in weird ways. Here, it’d helped Renata accomplish her dream. Running the Burning Bosom with Franja...that was the best fate for her, I was sure of it, and though I was sad, I wanted our goodbye to be on a good note.

I pulled her in for a tight hug.

“You know what Renny? You’ll be great. Don’t worry. And if you grow stronger—or after my exile ends—we’ll see each other again. I know it.”

She looked into my eyes and nodded, and this time, I saw that she was filled with resolution. There was no doubt there. “Yes. We’ll see each other again,” she said.

“Damon! Damon!”

I turned and suddenly heard a pair of familiar voices.

It were Kristan and Marko.

“Hey!” I shouted, a little surprised.

“Hey’ isn’t enough!” Kristan scoffed, almost tackling me.

“Our father barely let us out to see you,” Marko said. “The corrupted dungeon is much stronger than any of us thought. Not only that, it sounds like there might be more around the country.”

Come to think of it, both of them looked fairly beaten up like they'd been brawling with monsters all morning.

“Good luck,” I said, offering them my hand. “I understand why things turned out the way they did, but we'll meet each other again one day, I swear it.”

“Us as well,” the two echoed. We were just repeating the same promises from yesterday over again, but I could sense the same desire and desperation from them that I felt. Maybe if we said it enough times, it'd come true.

Kristan grabbed my hand and shook it firmly.

When I pulled away, there was a small storage ring in my palm.

He nodded for me to go and then hurriedly left. Marko waved once and followed after him.

“I wish we could have all gone together,” I said in the party chat, not wanting anyone else to hear us.

It was just me and Melina now—just like how it'd started.

“I think this is for the best, Damon,” she replied. *“We will be able to move freely with just the two of us. Maybe luck shines upon us and we find my tormentor much sooner than later.”*

“I hope so,” I replied, then looked to Renata. She was crying and biting her lips as Franja comforted her.

A message prompt appeared before me then.

I wanted to wait forever to say goodbye, but I'd signed the contract, and the System was going to follow through no matter what. If we had postponed her rebirth a bit longer, we'd gained a few hours...maybe a day or two, but in the end, it had to happen.

TELEPORTATION IMMINENT

30...29...28

I grabbed Renata's hand and pulled her in for a quick hug.

“Our end goal is Moradon, so if you ever want to leave this place, we will meet there one day again. Be safe.” I turned to Franja next. “Take care of her, and make sure that she gets only the best.”

The young noblewoman smiled. “I will, Damon. I... have come to like her. I will do my best.”

Renata didn't say anything and just nodded, barely holding it in. For a moment I thought she was about to start crying out loud, but she didn't. She remained still, polite, and dignified.

That was for the best.

If she was going to work at the tavern with Franja, she'd have to follow these noble customs. Luckily, Renata had managed to find a place of her own after all.

Melina shook their hands, knowing it was a human custom, and then stood next to me. I took her hand in mine and watched the countdown drop for the last few seconds.

A bright golden light cone dropped on Melina and me from above, swallowing us whole, and then I felt my body lift off the ground. For a moment, I felt as if I was floating, but then the Adventurer Guild's background disappeared from my sight.

I squeezed Melina's hand, just to make sure she was there as my eyes tried adjusting to the bright light.

“Where are we?” I groaned. Portal magic always made me feel weird.

“Don't move,” Melina said, squeezing my hand firmly, almost holding me in place.

A monstrous screech echoed from overhead, freezing the blood in my veins. It was too loud to come from a small monster or animal.

As the portal magic's aftereffects faded away, my sight returned, and I found myself standing on a large piece of rock. Everywhere around us was water, but far ahead in the distance I could see a large, glowing tree.

I looked down at my feet and then whirled behind me.

“Wait. Is this a lake?”

“Yes, I think so,” Melina replied. “And it looks like we’re in the middle of it.”

The System had teleported the two of us onto a very tall rock jutting from a mass of very still water. I’d guessed it was a lake because of how calm the seas were. Still, the water utterly dwarfed our small rock. There was enough space for us to sit or lay down, but that was it.

On the shore was a strange glowing tree.

“I have no idea where we are,” Melina said, eyeing the tree. “I have never seen anything like it in my life.”

The water beneath us rippled and then blew outward, splashing us and the rock we stood on alike.

This lake wasn’t as calm as I’d thought, not at all.

A massive creature leapt out of the water and dropped again, creating an even bigger splash that threatened to knock us into the water.

The monstrosity had only emerged for several seconds but my keen eyes—trained after years as a scout—picked up the details. It looked like a mixture of a fish and an eel, only with tentacles too. After seeing all those traits combined, it must have been the king of the water, or something close to that. Its scales were bright yellow just like a lemon tart.

I blinked.

Yellow like a lemon tart.

That was just like a thought Chester would have...

Maybe we were joining even closer together than I thought.

Melina and I looked at each other, then back down at the water’s surface. She grinned mischievously, surprising me.

“It looked...tasty, don’t you think, Chester?” Melina asked. The mimic stirred and then rose from my shoulder,

chirping happily.

“Yes. Tasty. Let’s eat!”

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