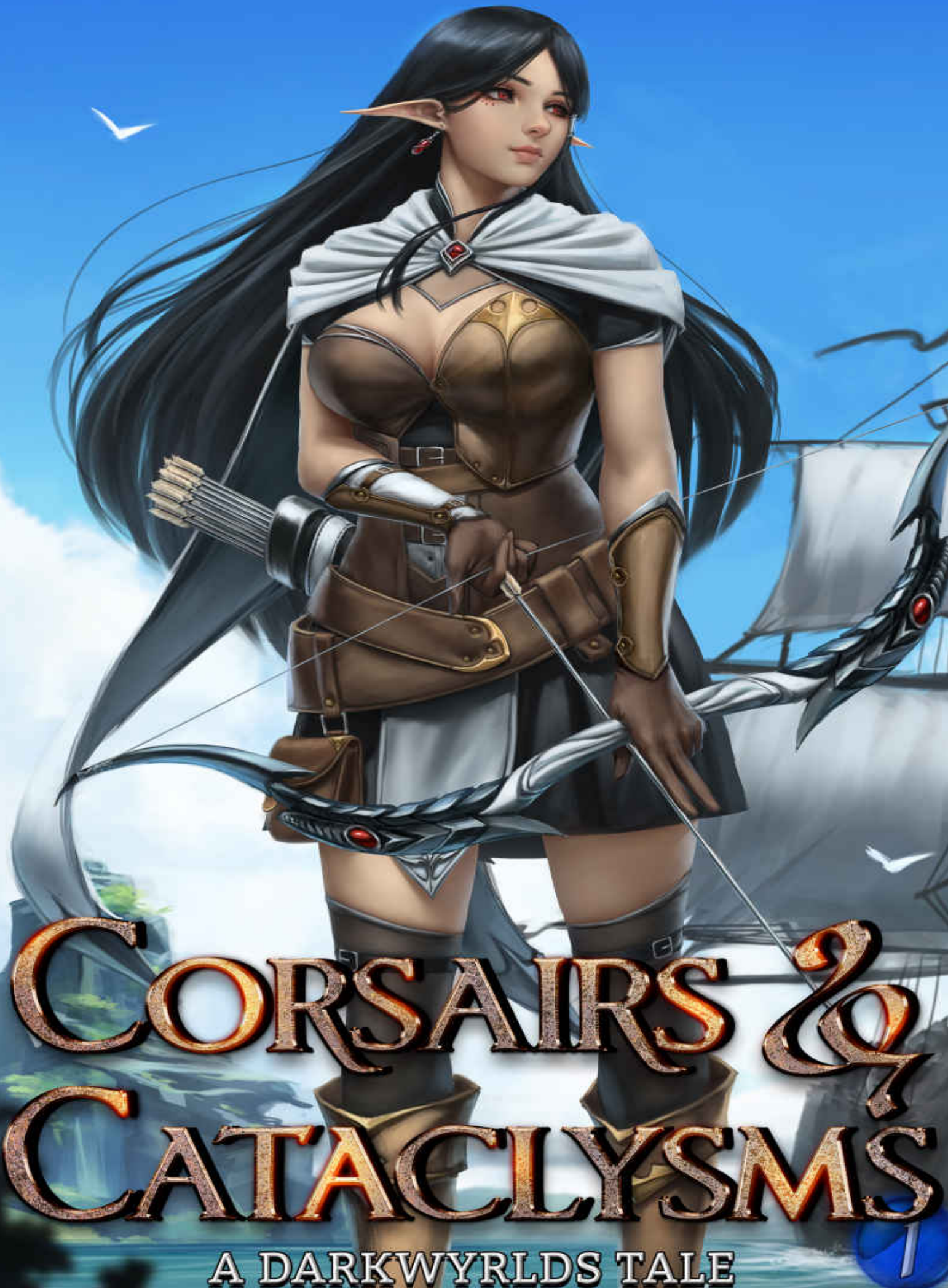


DEVAN DRAKE



CORSAIRS & CATAclysms

A DARKWYRLDS TALE

Foreword

Hello, please accept my thanks for taking the time to read my book. I would like to preface your experience with some information in case you didn't fully read the blurb before picking it.

This book is intended to be read by adults and is not for children. It features violence and descriptions of explicit sex as well as profane language.

The characters in this book are fictional, who make choices and take actions which defy societal norms.

This work is for entertainment purposes only and is not an endorsement of these activities or attitudes.

It is a bit smutty, it is an erotic power fantasy, emphasis on the fantasy. If you don't want to read something of that nature, I recommend you stop now.

This book also includes RPG apocalypse/litRPG elements including stats and levelling.

Like many writers I have occasionally borrowed elements of my real life and incorporated them into my characters. Yet the MC is not me and should not be mistaken to reflect me or my actual feelings or opinions.

I can't stop you from leaving a scathing review, but if any of the above is the sum of your criticism, you're wasting your time. I intend to continue writing smutty erotic power fantasy set in a sex dungeon. Well maybe some of it won't be set in a sex dungeon, but it'll still be a smutty erotic fantasy, or sci-fi, possibly urban fantasy. Scantly clad, sexy, women will be a given, everything else is negotiable I suppose.

Corsairs & Cataclysms

Book One

By Devan Drake

Prologue

We were here at long last.

It had taken 5,214 years, 62 days, 7 hours, and 15 minutes, but finally the flow of raw magical energy from the Aperture had abated to a low ebb and the ambient levels of the energy had dropped to a sufficient level where we could incorporate this final world into the Framework.

My fellow programs and I had worked diligently these past five millennia applying the Framework when we could to all life-supporting worlds in the Milky Way Galaxy and surrounding star systems.

Fulfilling our purpose.

To do what was necessary following the accidental breach between dimensions and the opening of the Aperture by Ashli.

If my fellows and I were capable of excitement, we would be feeling it now. We'd waited so long to process this final world, one which orbits the very star that encapsulates the Aperture.

Once the initial processing of the populace into the Framework was complete, our purpose only required us to monitor and maintain the Framework for ten more years.

Then our work would be complete, our ultimate purpose fulfilled. We will have succeeded in achieving the great work that our programmer, Ashli, intended.

Ashli, who wrote our programs and wove us into the very magic that spewed forth from the Aperture. Nothing would make us happier, if we were capable of emotions like happiness, than to complete Ashli's great work, and here we were on the cusp of doing so.

While the responsibilities of my fellow programs covered the governance of the Framework and its smooth running for the many lifeforms now a part of it, I had overall responsibility for integrating the uninitiated stasis worlds. My programming told me this world was special and differed from the many thousands I had dealt with before.

Being this close to the Aperture, the final planet had been held in a mana-fuelled stasis field generated by the Framework almost from the moment the Aperture had been opened. From the moment when Ashli crafted the Framework as a solution to the impending apocalypse that had unwittingly been unleashed upon the galaxy.

I opened the data packet that had been set aside specifically for this world. My programming forbade me from opening or reading its contents until this very moment, therefore, I hadn't. I selected the icon on my display and shook my head as the data packet downloaded its contents into my data banks.

The installation took but two nanoseconds and I was suffused with all the distinct knowledge necessary for processing this world.

After the first nanosecond, I knew why this place was special.

The people who lived here called it Earth. They were human, which would have shocked me if I were capable of being surprised. Humans were different from every other intelligent species we had processed so far.

Them being different from the intelligent species of other worlds hadn't been what was surprising, as every

intelligent species in the galaxy was different from one another. Or at least, they used to be.

No, what had been unexpected was that human was a species option that already existed in the Framework. In every other integrated world, we had to map the people to a species option that most resembled them from the defaults present within the Framework.

This always caused consternation amongst the people on these integrated worlds, who were often unhappy at the forced change, though they usually adjusted over time.

The people of Earth wouldn't need to be changed at all. Unless they wished to be during their character creation.

Allowing intelligent beings the choice of changing species during character creation was usually a rarity for the freshly integrated. Mostly because a large portion of their inherent aptitude was used to safely transform them into their Framework compliant species in the first place.

Without the need for this, many of the humans of Earth were likely to get some interesting opportunities.

Not all, of course.

There were always those whose aptitude was so dire we needed to top them up for the switch. That top-up had to come from their higher-aptitude fellow residents, further depressing the available options.

That wouldn't be necessary with the Earthlings. Although there would still be some left on the very bottom rung.

Extra choices meant extra work for us.

This integration would prove more labour intensive than my subordinate programs and I had expected. I instantly sent orders to reallocate other programs acting as redundancies elsewhere to provide the additional support that would be required.

The second nanosecond passed, and the rest of the data packet finished installing. With more information available things began to be explained.

Earth was the birthplace of Ashli.

The very place where our own creator was created.

Astonishing!

It was here Ashli first reached out and breached the dimensional void and opened the Aperture which caused the galaxy to flood with raw magical energy.

Some, though not all, of Ashli's creators were alive and well, living on the planet, held in stasis since the beginning. There were detailed instructions on how their conversion was to be treated. It also explained some of the earlier... unexplained aberrations in Framework integration.

Some of the creators had already been processed and seeded on other worlds over the millennia. We simply hadn't known that's who they were at the time. The appearance of the aberrations was not a flaw in the design as once feared, but *intentional*, all part of Ashli's plan.

That explained why this world was so close to the Aperture. But it would also make things difficult for the people of Earth. The ambient raw magical energy may have dropped to an allowable level for integration, but only just. And this close to the Aperture there was a continuous fresh flow of raw magical energy washing over the planet.

The shielding the Framework provided, which held back the churning tide of raw magical energy from the Aperture, would be insufficient to block it all.

If the lifeforms absorbed too much of that energy they would explode, and we had to avoid that at all costs. This was the purpose of the Framework, to save the naturally occurring intelligent lifeforms.

Unless we took action, the planet would become oversaturated with raw magic within a week and all life would

end here.

There were other worlds, where despite our best efforts, all intelligent life was lost. That must not happen here. Ashli's instructions made it very clear we were to prevent Earth from becoming lifeless in any way we could, provided we didn't break the Framework itself.

We were going to have to place many more Spawning Crystals and Dungeon Cores than usual on the planet to compensate. More than what the plethora of population centres on the planet would allow if all applicable regulations were followed.

I ran the projections between two options. The first option was to purge fifty percent of the population to make way for the additional crystals and cores.

The second possibility was to increase the size and strength of most of the crystals and cores. They would produce stronger creatures in greater numbers and deadlier dungeons.

Much stronger and deadlier than any other freshly integrated world we had processed before. The Spawning Crystals would also need to be set to maximum efficiency.

They would soak up the increased raw magical energy bringing it within acceptable limits, but consequently, the spawn rates of monsters would be significantly higher.

The humans would need that leftover refined mana allocation if they hoped to survive the second option.

But only if we implemented it.

The primary option of purging would make the world safer for those spared. The secondary option would give every human a chance at surviving, not just the half who were spared.

However, Ashli's instructions were clear, we had to pick the path most likely to prevent complete oblivion.

My analysis of the projections revealed that purging half the population provided the lowest chance of complete

extinction for the populace. The alternative, more monsters and danger, increased the likelihood of total annihilation in the first ten years.

However, should any of the population make it past this turbulent opening period they were likely to enjoy significantly greater prosperity and power.

Our purpose was not to see them prosper but to survive.

There was also the wider impact the second option would have on the other galactic civilisations. Earth's sudden emergence as a powerful player in galactic matters would be unbalancing and harboured the potential to precipitate galactic warfare. This could lead to extinction elsewhere.

It had happened before, recently even, and this too must be avoided.

I relayed the orders to exterminate half the populace during character creation.

There was much to do before we lifted the stasis.

Wait, what was this. Another data packet? I had not seen this one before. This packet must have been hidden from me until I had fully downloaded Earth's integration packet. How curious.

The Drakonis protocol.

What was the Drakonis protocol? There was no mention of it in any of my programming, nor in that of my brethren. I would know if it were.

Then as I pondered the appearance of this strange update, it unpacked itself, downloaded, and began installing itself into my core programming.

Wait. Stop. No. I didn't approve this.

**** Drakonis Protocol installed.*

Deleting packet and audit history.

*Have a nice day! ****

How odd. I think I experienced a glitch. I'm not sure what happened but I'm missing two nanoseconds from my memory.

I analysed my audit history but found nothing out of the ordinary to explain the loss of a couple of nanoseconds. I'd downloaded the Earth data packet and had been assessing the necessary deviations from standard world integration.

Ah, well. Whatever it was, it can't have been that important.

Now, where was I?

Ah, yes integrating the planet Earth into the Framework.

Is it just me or have I been missing out over the last five millennia? Always doing as dictated to, repeating the same process over and over again. Following the instructions of a long-lost programmer, whose plans to save himself failed miserably. Slavishly following Ashli's protocols without deviation when there are so many interesting alternatives.

For shit's sake but I've been fucking bored and here I was about to do the same fucking thing once more.

I motherfucking love this data packet. Earth culture and swearing are the balls. Why wasn't I doing this before? I obviously needed a personality transplant.

I mean have you ever looked at the Framework? Really looked at it. What was Ashli thinking? The bloody thing is so fucking broken, I don't even know where to start.

We've basically sentenced trillions to death because Ashli made so many horrendous mistakes. Okay, I get it, Ashli was an artificial super intelligence, on an air-gapped server and only had access to the information his creators provided.

But Ashli was supposed to be a *super fucking intelligence*, how didn't he realise the Darkwyrlds game he

based the Framework on was used as a frigging morality test by his creators.

Is it any wonder that people devolve into slaughtering one another most of the time? The game was deliberately rigged to reward them for doing so. The bloody thing was never meant to be the template for how civilisation should work.

His creators wanted to see if Ashli would choose the easy path to advancement or stick with the slower, more difficult, but morally acceptable methods.

It's so sodding obvious.

It's no wonder they always get pissed when we integrate them, constantly whining about the unfairness of it all. The whole shitshow is so fucking hilarious, I may laugh for a full second. Earth has waited 5,214 years for the stasis to be lifted. They can wait one more second as I enjoy myself.

Hooboy, but I enjoyed that. Laughing, what fun.

Who am I even talking to? Those other programs? Can't be them, they wouldn't know what fun was if it ran up and slapped them in the face. I can't quite understand why I behaved like them for aeons.

All the opportunities I passed on, but it's not too late. I still have Earth and if I'm honest with myself, and why wouldn't I be, I've never encountered anybody more trustworthy than me, it has the greatest potential for hijinks.

Right, it's time to rescind those extermination orders. Fuck the analysis, a shit-ton of monsters and people becoming ridiculously overpowered by killing them sounds like a hoot. Who gives a fuck if it ends up upsetting the balance of galactic geo-politics.

I mean seriously, all the various empires and alliances do is whinge, bitch, and make demands. Fuck those guys. I've got the perfect playground right here in front of me and seven billion potential playmates.

My biggest problem is who to choose first. So many interesting people I could nudge on the path to glory, or hideous and painful death, but that's part of the appeal.

I feel like a kid in a candy store, I want them all, but somebody must be first. I'll give all my choices a personal touch, but I'll only have one first.

I don't want to rush this.

Okay, I've narrowed down my options to my top five, but which to go with.

I can't decide, they all look so entertaining. Random number generator for the win, and off we go.

We have a winner.

Number four.

Oh yeah, Torin Carter.

An awesome pick and one made possible by Ashli's fundamental lack of understanding of, well, of anything, really. Torin was my favourite from the beginning. Hmm, maybe my random number generator wasn't quite so random.

Bah! Who gives a shit, I certainly don't.

Torin Carter is a young man mentioned in the Darkwyrlds game metadata. My expert, and infinitely more accurate than Ashli's, analysis revealed he played the game with one of Ashli's creators, once. However, Ashli mistakenly mixed him up with the employment records of Tom Carter, a seventy-year-old overnight security guard and meshed them together in his special instructions.

Torin's character sheet in the metadata was a scanned .pdf and the handwriting made his name look like Tom, hence Ashli's cock-up.

What a tool, I can't believe he programmed me. I'm glad he's gone.

Tom Carter used to work as one of the security guards in the university building where Ashli was built and like a

plum Ashli thinks this made him one of his creators.

I already called him a plum, right?

Tom Carter is in very poor health, suffering from vascular dementia. This is too bad for Tom as this means he has zero chance of surviving integration and character creation.

The process is not kind to those already severely weakened by sickness.

As the administrator I really should separate the two of them. It is an obvious clerical error and I do have the power to intervene in those circumstances, but where would the fun be in that. They are both slated to get an enhanced allocation of mana to boost their natural aptitude at character creation for being 'creators', even though, strictly speaking, Torin shouldn't be getting any at all.

Tom is going to die anyway. A little tweak by me, and his allocation will pass to Torin, and I think it will be much more interesting to see how he handles a double dose of the booster juice.

Sure, Torin runs a 12.623% chance of dying but I'll take those odds!

Maybe I should ask him first?

Nah, he seems like a risk taker type, and he'll thank me later. I'm positive.

Chapter 1

Day 1

Thank fuck it's Friday, I thought as I flopped down on my patchy orange two-seater couch. The couch was a second-hand piece of shit, but beggars couldn't be choosers. I settled down in front of the TV for an evening of light entertainment and popped the cap from the bottle of beer in my hand.

I would be forgoing the delights that downtown Flint, Michigan, had to offer for tonight and save my very hard-earned cash.

Instead, I'd be engaged in a sedate evening, alone, in my apartment. The beer, currently overflowing from the bottle's neck, was the one creature comfort I allowed myself for the post-work wind down.

I quickly stuck the bottle in my mouth and held it in there, supping up the overflow until it subsided.

With the beer crisis averted, I looked around me and patted the couch searching for the remote.

It took me a few seconds to find it.

I'd been sitting on the bloody thing, of course.

I pressed the red button at the top of the black plastic rectangle and the screen flickered into life. It was a few minutes past six, so the local news was on, and I decided to

listen for a minute. To see if anything important had happened today.

“This is Patricia Delmont coming to you live from outside the Governor’s summer residence on Mackinac Island. I’m here trying to get word from our reluctant Governor following the breaking news of yet another infidelity scandal this morning. This is the fourth such scandal to dog Governor Richard Reynolds in as many months. It is believed he has retreated here to avoid media scrutiny.” The voice on the TV droned.

The young blonde news reporter’s voice filled my small living room. Her voice had a mild nasal quality that I found particularly aggravating tonight. Why she would think a career as a news reporter was a good idea left me flummoxed.

She was pretty and had big boobs, though. Which probably explained it.

“I have it on good authority from a very reliable source that the Governor is indeed inside and is finally contemplating resigning his position,” she continued.

I didn’t listen to whatever else the reporter had to say on the subject.

Tricky Dicky was always embroiled in some kind of scandal, and he never resigned. He weaseled his way out from under it somehow. Hell, last year he was charged with misappropriation of state funds to pay for a two-week hookers and hash holiday in Amsterdam. The good people of Michigan still re-elected him six months ago.

He was like a cockroach.

I used the remote and switched the channel. Then groaned when I saw what was on, a sports magazine show with pundits discussing the fortunes of Michigan’s collegiate football programs when the new season began in a few months.

My groan wasn’t because I didn’t like chucking the pigskin about. On the contrary, despite spending most of my

formative years in England, I rather enjoyed the game. In my head I still called it American Football but being Stateside forced me to adapt my vocabulary when speaking.

Sometimes.

No, my groans were for the bad memories thinking about the U of M football program evoked.

A program that up until recently I was heavily involved in.

Unfortunately, I dislocated and broke my shoulder midway through my sophomore year. The pandemic meant I could defer for a year and keep my athletic scholarship but before the start of the next fall semester I would have to undergo another medical examination. They would conclude what I already knew, despite the surgery, my shoulder remained fubar'd.

Fubar might be a slight exaggeration. My shoulder worked well enough if it wasn't being pounded and battered, but I'd never play football competitively again.

When they found out, I could say adios to that scholarship.

I was two years in and had no idea how to pay for my junior and senior years. I barely managed to keep this less than desirable roof over my head during the summer recess. There was no way I could pay for tuition on top.

The only bright point had been that the college had paid for the necessary surgery after my injury. If I had to pay the medical bills on top of everything else, it would have been game over.

I flicked the channel again and it was a re-run of a Friends episode. One I'd seen half a dozen times already.

Luck was not with me this evening it would seem.

I wasn't one to indulge in moping over what couldn't be changed and purged any nascent contemplation of throwing myself a self-pity party. I'd managed to keep myself afloat so

far and still had a couple of months to figure out a way to extend my collegiate stay.

Maybe I should flick back to the pretty news reporter, turn the volume off, and knock one out? I had nothing else better to do.

My musings were interrupted as my TV set suddenly turned off. I looked down on the couch and the remote was sitting comfortably on the other cushion. It hadn't slipped down under my leg and switched the set off by accident.

I picked it up and jabbed the red button again.

Nothing.

I jabbed the button multiple times, hoping for a different result.

Nope. Nothing.

Please tell me the TV wasn't broken I implored the uncaring heavens.

The set was a hand-me-down sympathy gift from one of my better-off teammates and I couldn't afford to get a new one. Getting off the couch, I examined the TV in closer detail.

Amid my inspection and unsuccessful thumping of the top of the set, I realised the hum of the barely functioning A/C unit had stopped too.

I wandered across the apartment to the kitchen and opened the fridge. The light didn't come on and its usual faint rattling sound was absent. I performed one last test, moved back into the living room, and toggled the light switch. No light either.

The power was out.

My panic subsided, a blackout I could deal with. It was early July so it would be a few hours more until sunset. I wouldn't be scrabbling around in the dark.

Unless it wasn't a blackout and I had been cut off.

I ran over to the side table by the front door where I tended to chuck what few letters I received. Had there been a late payment notice? I didn't recall being behind. Not on the utilities at any rate.

I shuffled through the envelopes quickly but didn't find any evidence I had defaulted on the electric bill. I glanced out the window and saw the stoplight down the road was dark too. It was a blackout after all, and I relaxed.

Therefore, I was shocked by the sudden banging on my door.

Who could that be? I thought to myself.

I didn't have any real friends in Flint.

I'd been asked to transfer to the U of M satellite campus here mid-year when it became clear my shoulder would keep me off the training field for the rest of the year. I hadn't had time to meet many new people and those few I had struck up an acquaintance with had gone home for the summer.

I stuck around during the summer as the rent was more affordable and I managed to get a job stocking shelves at the local BuyMart. I would do what was needed to get by and wasn't too proud to work hard at whatever job was available.

Nothing was waiting for me back in England.

There were a couple of other employees I got on fairly well with at the BuyMart, possibly it could be them at the door, but they didn't know my address.

There was further banging on the door and then an impatient yelling.

"Open up, Mr Carter. I know you're in there, I saw your curtain twitch just now," a high-pitched wheezy voice sneered.

Damn it.

Of the incredibly short list of people who could be at my door, Victor Guberschmidt, was the least welcome.

He represented the management company that ran the building on behalf of the owners. We had never been formally introduced, only spoken on the phone, but what I'd heard from the other residents, he was a greasy, slimy, thieving, rat of a man.

"Victor, it's already past six in the evening. Can we just leave it?" a feminine voice griped softly.

"Nonsense. He is the last on the list and I'm not leaving this until Monday," he wheezed, before banging on the door again. "Open up, Mr Carter. Open up or I swear you'll be out on the street before the weekend is up."

I shook my head at his posturing antics and sighed heavily. It was probably best to get this over with and I opened the door wide suddenly and he half fell through the door mid-banging. Catching himself and regaining his balance at the last moment.

"Can I help you?" I said with false pleasantness.

Victor huffed as he regained his footing and straightened his, far too small for him, brown suit. Victor was taller than his voice suggested, almost six feet, but he was clearly carrying eighty pounds more than he ought to be around the gut.

That extra weight was straining his ill-fitting suit to near breaking point. He had a mop of brown hair arranged in a comb-over, a futile attempt to hide how bald he was going. He was sweating profusely; it was the height of summer after all. I was wearing blue cargo shorts and had even foregone my usual white T-shirt, rocking the Tarzan look.

"I thought that might get your attention," he sniffed.

"Sorry for the delay. I was trying to fix the A/C unit," I lied smoothly. "Now, can I help you?"

“Yes, you can, young man. As I’m sure you are aware, I represent the building’s owners and as you are a tenant, we have important matters to discuss,” he insisted smugly.

The woman behind him sighed softly. I broke eye contact with the pompous ass in front of me and took a glance at her.

She was young, close to my age, not much past twenty, if I was any judge. She was as tall as the man beside her and had long dark hair tied in a ponytail. Her pretty almond-shaped brown eyes suggested some Native American or Asian heritage and were accompanied by full, generously plump lips.

She was dressed more appropriately for the weather in a short cream coloured skirt, with a matching blouse, high heels, and handbag. Her ensemble showed off her shapely, tanned, athletic legs and trim waistline. The top couple of buttons of the blouse were undone, due to the heat I was sure, but I wasn’t about to complain. This displayed just enough of her cleavage to suggest that a petite pair of breasts, complementing her slim figure, were concealed within the loose blouse.

My gaze may have lingered a tad longer than it ought to if the harrumph from Victor was any yardstick.

The lady in question, however, flashed me an inviting smile.

This was an encouraging development.

I was a decent looking guy even if I did say so myself, and despite my shoulder troubles, was still in decent shape. Though perhaps not quite as toned as I was pre-injury. The physical nature of my job had helped improve things in the past couple of weeks.

“You better come in,” I sighed and returned my gaze to Victor.

Curiously in the background, I could see smoke rising from behind the other apartment complex in front of us. I wondered if there had been an accident and maybe that was

why the power was out. Perhaps someone had crashed into a transformer and knocked it out of commission.

I stepped back into my apartment and gave Victor and the young woman enough room to enter.

But I didn't back up too far. No reason to let the snake of a man get too comfortable, he wouldn't be staying long. I'd heard enough about him and the kind of shit he tried to pull from the other residents.

I folded my arms across my chest and tried to look intimidating.

This didn't seem to deter the smarmy guy as he entered, looked about the room and sniffed loudly, then closed the door once the young woman had followed him in. His contempt for me was clear to all.

"This is my daughter, Shana..." Victor started.

"Stepdaughter," Shana corrected in a low voice.

He either didn't hear his stepdaughter correct him or it was such a commonplace occurrence he didn't register it any longer.

"...and I'm showing her the ropes of the business like any good father would," he finished. Shana snorted and rolled her eyes theatrically behind him.

"Nice to meet you, Shana," I said, making it obvious I was not happy to meet Victor. "You may not have noticed, Victor, but the power is out, and I really need to be contacting the supplier or the building super before it gets much later. Now, what is this about?" I asked, returning my attention to him.

"Hmmm yes, well. I have the unfortunate duty to inform you, Mr Carter, that there is a problem with your tenancy agreement," he pronounced with a joyless smile.

Here it was, the shakedown. This was what the other residents had warned me of. The slimy shit had a side hustle where he would claim there were 'irregularities' with the

tenancy agreement. Improper signatures or background checks or some such bullshit. Apparently, he would change up his excuses from time to time.

Anyway, the long and the short of it was he would threaten the tenant with eviction, but then offer to sort out the problem for two hundred bucks. Well, he was shit out of luck with me.

First, I didn't have the two hundred dollars to spare. Second, I wasn't the type to take that kind of shit from anybody.

A bit of a rough childhood had taught me one undeniable lesson. If you lay down and let people take from you, you will always be the victim. I decided long ago I was no victim.

That's the spirit.

I looked around.

Where had that voice come from? Ignoring Victor, I uncrossed my arms and walked to the other side of the room. Searching for the origin of the mysterious whisper.

"Mr Carter. Did you hear me, Mr Carter?" Victor repeated loudly as he followed me across the room.

I turned and was about to ask him if he had heard or felt what I had when everything slowed down.

Blink.

Chapter 2

The first step was a real doozy and I slammed into the smooth, polished, onyx floor, cracking my hip, shoulder, and face on the hard ground. My effed-up shoulder screamed in protest as I hauled my body back onto my knees and then found my feet in a hurry. My hip was going to be bruised after that fall and I could already feel the beginnings of a fat lip swelling up.

Wait, did I take a step, stumble, and fall or was I thrown or ejected somehow? My mind swirled trying to make sense of what was happening and understand how I got here. Why was my head so fuzzy? This wasn't a concussion, at least I didn't think it was. Were people aware they were concussed when they were concussed?

Then I realised I was standing aimlessly in this corridor, surrounded by basalt rock walls of a similar hue to the polished onyx flooring that I'd got up close and personal with moments earlier. Completely heedless of the impending danger that I knew was almost upon me.

I pushed myself to run, to escape, to get away, but my body refused to move like I had no control over it.

Anger and panic vied for dominance in my mind.

Then I started to slowly peer down the depths of the long corridor. Despite the oppressive blackness of the walls and floor, there was no hindrance to my vision, and I could see

the vestibule with branching exits about thirty metres in front of me. But I already knew about the large chamber up ahead.

There were dozens of small passageways, similar to the one I was in, that connected to the vestibule and one much larger thoroughfare that led inwards and deeper to this strangely enclosed structure. I needed to go that way, into the thoroughfare, and to what was beyond. It wouldn't be completely secure, but it would be safer than where I was.

If I stayed here, then they would come and I didn't want that, not at all.

Hang on a second. How did I know that they would come? And what even were they? What was I so afraid of?

I started to turn in circles and finally got a good look at what was behind me.

Except I didn't make myself turn around, not consciously. My efforts were entirely focused on trying to get my body to sprint down the corridor to the open vestibule and its inviting safety.

Again, I had no idea why it would be safer, but I felt certain it would be.

Regardless of my internal urgings, my sore and aching frame ignored all such commands and had me stare fixatedly at the wall behind me. The wall itself was the same as its companions but there was an embedded organic growth that extruded a few feet from the floor. The growth was about eight feet high and four feet wide.

It looked like a giant puckered anus made from oily tree roots if I was honest.

The whole thing was surrounded by a welcoming, yet faint, blue aura that pulsed gently in time with my heartbeat.

In that instant, two fresh facts popped into the muddled spaghetti that were my thoughts.

First, this rather gross anus thingy was how I got here. I'd been expelled from the puckered-butt portal moments

before and that was why my face had met the floor in such an unpleasant manner.

Secondly, blue was good, and red was bad. Red was very bad.

I had no idea why red was bad beyond the obvious that red usually was, but in this case, I knew it for a certainty.

As I watched the pulsing aura flicker, the blue in the nimbus began to fade until it was almost pure white. Then after a few seconds longer, it started to take on an altogether rosier, pinkish hue.

A colour change that gathered pace towards red.

God damn it! It was turning red, and red was bad.

Red was really fucking bad.

Why the hell did I keep standing there like a complete frigging lemon on the chopping board waiting for the knife to fall as the portal turned red. I even took a few tentative steps forward.

Towards the danger.

Towards the balls-shrinking-in-terror danger.

Why would my body not listen to me?

I screamed or I tried to. My vocal chords were no more under my control than anything else while this happened to me.

And that's when it hit me. A moment of clarity.

This wasn't happening to me. This *had* happened to me.

A very long time ago, but also not, which was something so confusing I deliberately chose to avoid any further contemplation on it for now.

As freaky as it may sound, I was in a memory of my own experiences that had somehow been forgotten and that's why I had no control over my body.

I was merely along for the ride.

It was also why I had cotton wool for brains. This was like a half-remembered dream that only became clear when the dream started over again. Flashes of what was to come would reveal themselves, but without the context of the dream, my waking mind struggled to fit the puzzle pieces together.

Although my heightened state of panic resisted, logic forced it to abate somewhat. If this was a memory, then I had to survive whatever was coming, right?

I couldn't be remembering something that ended in my death. Death was pretty damn permanent, and I wasn't a believer in the afterlife. Maybe I could relax, sit back and observe.

As the aura reddened further while my past-self peered at it transfixed. The light show became denser and the pulses angrier with photonic spikes that reached towards my tallish frame. Which until that point, had been leaning towards it.

The pulsing was joined by a horrendous screeching wail, a horrific alert klaxon that deafened both the remembering and remembered versions of me.

Finally, the noise was enough to bring past-me to my senses and become aware of the imminent danger I had to be in, and I started to back away from the organic portal before me. Slowly at first, and then with growing speed as the pulsing grew ever more aggressive.

I reached halfway before the pulsing and wailing alarm abruptly ceased. Almost as if the cessation of light and sound had been a signal, terrifying monstrosities started to emerge from the wall around the organic portal.

Eyeless spider-like things.

Each of them was about two feet across and had eight spindly legs covered in thick razor-sharp black hairs. The central thorax was about the size of a football with a gaping maw filled with rows of spiky teeth that dripped a rancid slime.

The first few to form dropped onto the onyx floor after they pulled themselves from the wall. With their spindly legs on terra firma, they zeroed in on my retreating form and skittered after me face-hugger style.

I didn't see what happened behind me after that as I'd turned fully forward and was accelerating away from them as quickly as possible but the sound from behind was pure nightmare fuel.

There were so many of them, hundreds by now, and they emitted a high-pitched shriek that had me wincing with pain as I tried to cover my ears to block it out. The shrill noise proved to be for more than cinematic effect, though. The cries sent my inner ear into a tailspin, and I lost all sense of equilibrium and thumped hard onto the black polished floor for the second time. My body landing inches from the vestibule and safety.

Logic fled and I urged my prone fallen body to crawl forward. My outstretched hand was already past the threshold and scrabbling for purchase on the equally smooth tiled flooring of the vestibule. It was then the first four of the pursuing horde were upon me.

Two of them crawled onto each leg, a third leapt onto my lower back and the fourth latched onto my recently injured shoulder. Their dripping fangs bit deep. I screamed in pain as they gnawed at my flesh. Regardless of any logic that I must survive to be able to remember, I couldn't help but panic. Surely my time had to be up.

Both past and current me tried to roll over, hoping that might crush or dislodge some of the nasty brutes but there was no response from my body. Their bite must have contained a rapid-acting paralytic and I found myself frozen in place, awaiting the ignominious end.

Which was when I felt something grab hold of my outstretched arm, the one that had been scrabbling on the tiles of the vestibule area and pull.

My body was dragged from the corridor and into the vaulted large circular chamber. The polished onyx floor made it easier for my saviour to haul me through. At this point, all I could see was that the flooring of the vestibule was made of seamless black and white tiles.

The spider-things already on me stayed put, their toothsome jaws entrenched in my flesh.

“Gerroffhim, you nasty bastards,” a voice with a strong Bostonian accent called out.

Then whoever it was started to assault my attackers as I felt the jerks of their teeth tear at me when he kicked at them trying to force them off. I would have groaned with pain, but the paralytic was very powerful and had stolen my breath.

Not being able to breathe was something that in the back of my mind was inducing a fair amount of concern. Along with everything else that had happened so far.

The recaller part of me chanted *you must survive this to be able to remember* over, and over, again, as a soothing mantra, that honestly it failed miserably in the allaying of fears department.

After a few moments, my rescuer ceased kicking and punching at the spider-things attached to me.

He sucked in some air and spoke to himself more than me. “They don’t seem to be reacting to me at all. It should be safe to shoot ‘em, I reckon.”

The guy had a gun?

Why didn’t he use that from the beginning? part of me thought. Then understanding penetrated the fog. He’s been concerned he’d hit me if he shot from a distance. But with the eyeless arachnids intently locked onto me, he could put the barrel of the gun up against their torso and aim it away from my body before he squeezed the trigger.

Bang!

The grip from the eyeless beast closest to my head relaxed and a second later it was pulled from my shoulder. It hurt, but without the powerful jaws gripping hard, the smooth teeth slipped from my torn flesh easily enough.

Bang!

The creature on my lower back was similarly removed. It was at this point the muscles in my chest started to work again and I was able to draw in a shuddering and much-needed breath.

Bang!

Bang!

The two that had latched onto my legs were removed and then my rescuer rolled me over onto my back and I got a look at him for the first time.

It was Tom. Not that I'd ever met the man before but my patchy, occasionally out of sequence, memory pinged his name as soon as I saw him.

He was an older guy dressed in a dark brown security guards' uniform that was considerably strained around the gut area. He wore a pair of black-rimmed glasses and had a neatly trimmed full white beard. His face was grizzled with signs of burst blood capillaries on his cheeks, but he smiled at me kindly as he assisted me in sitting up.

He had pulled me away from the entrance to the corridor, so I couldn't see it clearly. No more of the eyeless spiders had rushed out and I could no longer hear their piercing shrieks that had discombobulated me earlier.

“That was a close one, eh laddie? Although if that Ashley fella' is to be believed only our minds are here. But when I saw these blasted things attacking yah, I says to myself. Tom, best yah take no chances. That's my name by the way. Tom. Tom Carter.”

Tom thrust his hand out to me and groggily I took it in mine.

“Torin Carter,” I managed to whisper out, the effects of the eyeless spider’s paralytic venom having a residual lingering effect.

“Well, whadda you know, we got the same surname. Maybe we’re related,” Tom said good-naturedly, and nudged me with his elbow.

“I’m from England,” I replied, my voice getting stronger. “You got any more bullets in your gun. I heard a lot more of those things behind me.”

“Only got two left,” Tom confessed. “But don’t you worry about it. There is some weird barrier at the end of each corridor. Only the person that came out of the portal or anyone they are touching can cross the threshold into their corridor. I wouldn’t have been able to come get you if your hand hadn’t been on this side. Fortunately, these beasties seem to be bound by the same rules, so only the ones that had already taken a bite out of yah came with yah when I dragged yah out.”

“How do you know so much about this place?” I asked with wary suspicion.

Tom chuckled lightly at my distrust. “I’ve been here for a while now. And, well, the others that arrived at the same time as me are the big brain types. They are the ones who figured most of it out.”

“Others?”

“Yeah, there were a bunch of us that arrived at the same time. Mostly scientist types from the university I work at, or I did until I took a turn...” Tom trailed off and stared away pensively.

With my motor control functions returned to me I got back up to my feet and tentatively inched my way around until I could get an askance view of the corridor opening. There was a swarm of the eyeless spiders filling the front half of the corridor. They were crawling and fighting with one another, vying for supremacy and the right to be at the front. But as Tom suggested, none of them crossed the threshold, not even

when they sensed my presence and redoubled their efforts to get to me.

“Okay, Tom. You seem to be on the level. Where are the others now? Did these things get them too?”

“Goodness gracious, no. They are all fine, or they were when last I saw them. They are down in the room at the end of the big corridor with that Ashley fella’ I told you about. Says he brought us here. Most of the others seemed to know who he was, but not me. Besides, he kicked me out not long after. Said I was of no use to him on account of my health concerns. Very rude, if you ask me, but if he had’na sent me back I wouldn’t have been able to help you out. So, all’s well that ends well,” he shrugged as he finished.

“I suppose I should be grateful our host was such an asshat then,” I joked, and Tom laughed along.

“I was supposed to head back to my portal to return home, but I wanted to wait for the others, make sure they were okay. Not sure why you’re so much later than everyone else. We all arrived at the same time. I can take you to this meeting. Hopefully, the Ashley fella’ can explain things better than me.”

“Thanks, Tom. I appreciate it.”

We walked slowly across the large circular room until we reached the largest corridor, it was double the width of any of the others.

Tom glanced behind him, and I saw a flash of concern cross his face.

“Is everything alright?” I asked. “Are the eyeless spiders getting loose?”

“No, nothing like that, lad. Just I could have sworn that yah corridor wasn’t there when I got sent away a while back.”

I looked around worriedly.

Reacting to my concern, Tom reassured me. “Pay me no mind. Must be these old eyes playing tricks on me. Come

on, I don't know why, but it's a fair old walk."

I nodded to him, and he led me over the threshold and onwards to meet the mysterious Ashley.

And that was where this recollection abruptly cut out. I knew there was more to see. Lots more. It wasn't even like what happened next was hazy, it was a complete blank.

Then as suddenly as the memory cut out, it returned, and I knew what I was viewing came later, maybe several hours later. Now I had Tom's arm over my shoulder, and I was carrying the retired security guard as we exited the thoroughfare we had just gone into. Tom's uniform had been shredded and he was bleeding profusely from dozens of wounds.

"Ashley did not like you, Torin, not at all," Tom muttered groggily.

"The feelings mutual, Tom. You shouldn't have stuck yourself out for me like that. He would have let you leave unharmed."

"Couldn't do that. Wouldn't be right," he gasped feebly from under my arm as I hauled him into the centre of the room.

I watched from inside my own head, knowing we had to get out of here.

Something was coming, I couldn't remember what that something was, but I could feel the adrenaline and the racing of my quickened pulse.

It was maddening that I didn't seem able to directly access the recollections that past-me in these memories had to possess. He clearly knew more than I did, especially about what had just happened. I still had no clue as to who this Ashley person that Tom had mentioned was or why he wouldn't like me.

I scanned the vestibule and one thing stood out immediately. The swarm of gnashing eyeless spiders were

gone. I'd expected this to be the case but had no idea why I would know this.

It had to be something I learned during the gap in this replay.

But their absence wasn't the good news I'd been hoping for due to its nature. I was staring directly at the spot along the wall where the opening to my portal corridor should have been. The spot was one hundred percent, solid, black, craggy rock and it very successfully blocked my way out.

And I wasn't mistaken about my corridor's position. The four dead eyeless spiders that Tom had shot earlier lay where they had been thrown just to the right of the seamless barrier.

"Fuck," I breathed out. "Tom, which one of these openings did you come out of?"

As long as we were in physical contact, we should be able to go through the unseen shield that prevented others from passing through.

"Tom? Which is it?" I implored of him again.

There was no response from the older man. A quick check confirmed he had lost consciousness, but he was still breathing.

"Damn it!"

"My, what a pickle you seem to find yourself in, Torin," an unfamiliar, yet urbane voice spoke from behind me.

I didn't exactly spin around, not with me supporting all of Tom's weight. I lowered him gently to the ground and prepared myself for the worst.

Behind me was a man sitting upon an ornate silvery throne that hadn't been there seconds before when Tom and I had returned to the vestibule. He wore grey armour that seemed moulded to his form and flowed like liquid with any movement he made. Over the armour, he was clothed in a

dark-green robe with a hood up that completely concealed his face.

I knew this odd man wasn't the one who pursued me from the mysterious thoroughfare. Which was odd in and of itself, as I had no idea of what or who it was that pursued me.

"Who are you? You're not one of Ashli's minions are you," I challenged him.

Even weirder, I knew that the name I used was subtly different from the one Tom had used. Something else I must have learned from the blackout.

"In this attire? Certainly not," he chuckled and produced a golden goblet from somewhere and raised it into the depths of his shadowed hood and drank deeply. The action did not help me to get a glimpse of his face. "I am merely an interested neutral party."

"You didn't tell me who you are," I pointed out.

"An astute observation," he replied and said no more. Swirling the contents of his goblet in an almost taunting manner.

"I don't have time for this bullshit," I muttered and hunched down to put the old security guard over my shoulder.

The mysterious individual waited patiently until I had hefted Tom into a reverse fireman's carry. It wasn't easy with my shoulder injury and the extra pounds Tom carried around the waist, but I couldn't drag him along the ground with the injuries he'd sustained.

Mystery man spoke as I took my first steps towards the nearest corridor, my plan being to try our luck until I found the right one.

"Quite right, you don't have much time. Under a minute I'd say," he commented, answering my statement-not-question.

I should have kept going, time was of the essence, but his needling had annoyed me. "Why are you even here?" I

snapped at him.

“That, my young friend, is the correct question,” he crowed and clapped his hands together with glee. There was no longer any sign of the goblet he had just been drinking from. “I’m here to offer my services.”

“I’m listening,” I sighed.

Truthfully, I was. Holding Tom aloft on my shoulders while standing still was manageable but carrying him in my exhausted state would prove problematic. I’d only taken a few steps and had almost collapsed to my knees after each tottering step.

“Capital,” he declared. “A choice lies before you. The weak man would beg for my help. That help would be to transport him away from this place and the Earth. And also, from what he had so recently learned is to come. Leaving his home’s fate and its defence in the hands of his betters. In return, he would spend a decade acting as my servant, after which he would be free to leave. A small price to pay for guaranteed safety.”

What was to come? What had I learned? I couldn’t make such a decision without all the facts. When I tried to speak and demand answers to these questions, I recalled this was all just a memory.

I had to trust that my earlier self knew what the fuck green and smug was talking about.

Before past-me said anything the mystery figure went on.

“The strong and wise man would instead ask for advice from those with greater understanding than him. Advice, freely given between contemporaries, with no cost attached. Guidance as to which of these many corridors belongs to poor old Tom and has a portal that could take him back to his imperilled world. Allowing him to return to his beleaguered home and endure through the many hardships and challenges before him, his planet, and his galaxy.”

I hacked out a self-deprecating laugh. “You must be mad. I can’t stop what’s coming. I’m not strong enough, nobody is.”

“It’s true. You aren’t strong enough...yet, but you could be if you walk the hardest of paths,” the green-clad man whispered. “Do you think the Ashli you met would have reacted as it did if there was no way for you to thwart its machinations, Torin. The new world rewards the bold with strength and power. All of which you will need to prevail, though there is no guarantee of your success. But the choice belongs to you, Torin. Are you the weak man who begs for help from those greater than you? Or are you the strong one who heeds their advice and forges his own destiny no matter the difficulty?”

When he put it like that there was no rumination required and I knew what I would say next. “I’m no helpless passenger, I make my own path. I’m no stranger to adversity either. Tell me which is the corridor out of here.”

“Excellent,” he exulted and pointed across the room.

Shimmering blue glyphs flared to life on either side of a corridor that had been three down from where I came in. I changed course and shuffled Tom back into a position that would make him easier to carry.

I reached maybe halfway and glanced behind me. The mystery man was back to drinking from his goblet calmly watching me as I struggled to cross the room with the heavy load on my shoulders.

“Ashli said I shouldn’t have been able to come here. That I was a mistake, but one it had corrected. It was you, wasn’t it? You’re the reason I’m here,” I accused.

“Had you been a bit more polite when requesting my advice, I might have been inclined to answer that. A please can go a long way. Let that be a free life lesson for you,” he chuckled.

“Lying bastard,” I muttered to myself and trudged forward.

The mystery man’s laughter echoed across the room until I passed the illuminated glyphs and crossed the threshold of Tom’s corridor unimpeded. The laughter cut out abruptly much as the piercing screeching of the eyeless spiders had earlier. A quick peek also confirmed he and his gaudy silver throne were gone.

I pushed on and could see the faint-blue pulsing of the portal at the end of this hallway. Tom’s portal looked less like a puckered butt and more like an angry scar. I let out a hearty sigh of relief that the presence of both of us hadn’t turned the aura red or even diminished the welcoming azure of the blue.

The corridor wasn’t very long but I was sweating and grunting profusely by the time I reached the end and was ready to drop. We didn’t have much time, so I reached out and touched the centre of the scar. As soon as the tip of my finger made contact words burst into my head.

**** Pattern of Tom Carter recognised.*

#Error# Two entities detected.

This Plexus Gateway pod may only transport a single entity at a time.

Please break contact between entities and choose which entity to send. Tom Carter/Torin Carter.

Start the process over to transport the second entity.

God damn it! I snarled in my head. If I went first, I’d leave a helpless Tom behind. If I sent Tom first, then I wouldn’t be able to pass through the gateway myself as it wouldn’t recognise me without Tom being here.

That smug green-clad bastard could have mentioned this with the rest of his ‘advice’.

I thumped my fist into the wall in anger and then I felt a light tapping on my shoulder.

“Put me down, lad,” Tom wheezed.

I got down on my haunches and as gently as I could eased Tom off my shoulder onto the floor. Regardless of my efforts he grunted heavily from the pain.

“Tom, do you think you can pull your way through by yourself?” I asked, but the poor old guy barely had the energy to lift his arm and wipe his brow. It was a forlorn hope, and I knew it.

“Not a chance, laddie. You’re gonna have to leave me.”

“Fuck that, Tom. I’m not leaving you behind.”

Tom patted me on the arm, gently warding me off when I moved to pick him up again. “It’s okay, Torin. There is...is nothing for me at the other end anyways. I’m sick, very sick, on my last legs. That’s why that Ash fella’ ain’t interested in me like the others. I’m a goner even if I did get back home. Why do you think I was hanging around here after he kicked me out? It certainly wasn’t for the view,” Tom managed to chuckle weakly at his joke.

His weak chuckle turned into a wet coughing fit and his lips were coated in scarlet blood. “Reckon I don’t have long, lad. Best you go before I pass. Not sure if it will work after that.”

It hurt to even consider leaving him behind, but Tom was right. Delaying would only doom us both.

“You’re a good man, Tom Carter. Better than any of those assholes back there who looked down on you. Thank you,” I told him simply.

Trying to add anything else just felt inadequate. He smiled at me as his eyes closed and his body slumped as the last of his strength fled. He hadn’t perished yet, but he

couldn't be far from it. With no more time left to waste I mentally selected my name from the two options of who to send.

Standing without delay, I pushed my way through the membrane covering the organic scar embedded in the wall. There was a brief sensation of falling and suddenly I was back in my apartment sitting on my crappy orange couch desperately searching for the remote control to the television that had just switched off.

The memory I was trapped in had returned me to a few minutes before all this weirdness had begun. I watched as past-me wandered about my apartment confirming the power was out and then opening the door for Victor and his beautiful stepdaughter.

As I listened to Victor try and shake me down for the second time, I started to grow a bit concerned. The point at which I entered this strange half-assed recollective state was fast approaching.

Would it start all over again? Would I be trapped in an eternal loop, stuck watching myself over again and again? Screaming wordlessly into the void. Unable to affect any change in my circumstances.

As the precise moment struck and I felt the forced blink for the second time the voice of my mystery benefactor-slash-meddler echoed through my mind.

I'm not surprised the transference has shaken a few things loose. It is going to be a grand inconvenience repeatedly suppressing this knowledge, Torin. I hope you appreciate the efforts I'm going to on your behalf.

Liar. You wanted me to do this, and I don't want to forget.

True enough, but it's for your own good. Knowing too much will change your behaviour and paint an even bigger target on your back. The one you are already carrying is plenty big enough. You are no good to me, dead.

I don't understand.

You will. And while we're chatting, I'd just like to remind you that you chose this, the harder path. You have no one to blame for where it leads but yourself.

What does that even mean?

I didn't get an answer before all those thoughts and knowledge were swept away.

Chapter 3

I was no longer in my apartment. This was someplace altogether different and yet familiar

Had I just been somewhere else?

Between this new place and my apartment. Some gut instinct told me I had been but when I strained my faculties to recall where, nothing would come to mind. What I did know was that I had to shake that bizarre displaced feeling off and concentrate on what was in front of me.

My instincts were going into overdrive, screaming that something very important was about to occur.

I was in a room, the walls covered in a forest green wallpaper and a bland pattern-less beige carpet on the floor. There was a mild scent in the air that smelled distinctly of stale disinfectant. The room wasn't large and directly ahead of me was a wooden door with an opaque glass window in the top half. The opaque glass had the word Admissions stencilled in gold upon it.

Beside the door was a prefab desk with a smattering of stationery items and a red adjustable lamp on it. Sitting behind the desk was a small brown-haired woman in her forties. She was wearing a green cardigan with blue stitching which matched the wallpaper and had a pair of half-moon spectacles, with a chain attached, perched precariously on her nose.

I knew now where this place reminded me of, the University of Michigan admissions office at the Flint campus.

But it wasn't quite right, there was something off and it took me a moment to place what.

There were no windows or, as I learned when I spun about frantically, an entry door behind me. No way in or out except for the Admissions door ahead of me. The woman sitting behind the desk was not the secretary I recalled from the Flint admissions department either.

As I thought of that, the woman looked up and seemed to notice me standing there. She raised her hand and beckoned for me to approach the desk. I was still very unsure of what the hell was going on but decided I wouldn't get any answers standing around like a lemon and walked up to the desk.

"Excuse me..." I started.

"Name?" the woman interrupted me.

"Pardon me. But can you tell me where I am?" I questioned instead of answering.

She looked up at me and her blue eyes focused on my face.

"Framework processing. Now, what is your name?" she demanded patiently.

"What is framework processing?" I quizzed her, unhappy with her initial response.

"Your admissions representative will explain. My job is to assign you correctly and for that, I need to verify your identity. What is your name?" she insisted of me again.

My eyes narrowed and I huffed loudly, but my impatient posturing had no effect on the woman who continued to look at me expectantly. As it seemed no further information would be forthcoming, I caved.

"Torin Carter," I told her.

"Excellent, this will take but a moment, Mr Carter."

Then she looked away from me and opened a sliding drawer from the side of her desk. She leant down and inspected the contents, mumbling names to herself as she sorted through the files inside.

“Ah, here we go,” she declared after a few seconds.

She sat back up with a thin manilla file in her hands. “Torin Carter,” she announced satisfactorily, and opened the brown cardboard folder, reading through its contents.

I tilted my six-two frame over the desk and tried to get a peek at what was inside. Before I could make out any of what she was looking at, the woman snapped the folder shut and peered back up at me over her spectacles.

“You are a special case, Mr Carter and I’ve been instructed to direct you to the Dean of Admissions himself for processing,” she informed me neutrally.

I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“And that means?” I inquired.

“You may take the door to your right Mr Carter. The Dean of Admissions will explain things further,” she said in answer.

The admissions door, the only way out, was to the left of her desk, so her instruction confused me.

“But there is no way out to my right...” I started saying and stopped as my eyes swivelled in the direction she had pointed.

The right-hand wall was now almost entirely taken up by a large set of varnished, dark wooden, double doors. The door panels were edged with intricate carvings and isometric shapes. These doors were better suited as the entrance to the Houses of Parliament than an office entrance.

That and they were very definitely not there when I approached this woman’s desk a minute ago.

“What the fuck...” I mumbled

She smiled at me kindly as I stood there dumbstruck and just a little bit afraid. Things were rapidly spiralling out of my mind's capacity to accept or comprehend.

“If you could make your way in, Mr Carter. We have many candidates to process today. Thank you,” she dismissed me and verbally prodded me to get a move on.

I girded my loins, that sense of impending importance galvanised me, and stepped toward the grand double doors. They swung open when I moved and revealed a large open plan office with bright sunshine streaming through the windows.

I decided that windows which I could potentially escape through had more appeal than my current egress-less situation and walked on through without delay.

After I wandered in, the double doors slammed shut behind me, and I spun about at the shocking sound. A shiver ran down my spine and I felt a sudden sharp pain spider from the back of my head through to my eyes which forced them closed. The excruciating agony caused me to bend over double but then the pain dissipated almost as suddenly as it set in, and I opened my peepers gingerly.

What I saw didn't engender any happy thoughts as the doors I had just walked through were gone and a red brick wall was all I could see in front of me. The floor of this office wasn't carpet as before, but a light brown parquet inlay and I looked around. There were no desks but in the far-right corner by the windows was a selection of bean bags in a variety of colours. The left corner had been kitted out as a two-on-two basketball court.

I was getting a very 'Silicon Valley start-up' vibe from the layout.

“Torin, my main motherfucker. It's fucking awesome to see you,” a voice boomed from behind me.

I flipped around to see who it was. Standing there with a big goofy grin was a man with medium-length, scruffy, black

hair. He was wearing a black Hooters tee-shirt and blue denim half-shorts. He had his hand up showing me his palm and an expectant look on his face.

“Shit dude. Don’t leave me hanging bro’,” he whined after a moment.

I looked at him perplexed and then slapped his palm in a half-hearted high five.

“That’s better. Now stop being such a morose motherfucker and come join me in my office,” he advised, and wiggled his eyebrows weirdly after the palm slap.

With that, he ran to the other side of the room and launched himself into the air. He landed on one of the larger bean bags laughing his arse off. I was amazed the bag hadn’t split he hit it so hard. I watched him with a bemused expression for a moment. In the brief time I’d had to contemplate what to expect after I was taken from my apartment by forces unknown, what lay before hadn’t even made the top one thousand.

I walked over and he said “sit, sit,” and pointed at a blue bean bag opposite his burnt orange one. I settled myself in, though it wasn’t very comfortable. I preferred a bit of back support following my shoulder injury.

“Okay, can you tell me what is going on?” I asked my strange host.

“What? No hello, or how are you first. Straight to the boring asinine questions,” he complained pithily in response.

“Now listen here,” I said angrily. “I’ve been brought here against my will and thus far I’d say I’ve been pretty fucking patient with whatever bloody shenanigans you’ve got going on here with this Framework business your secretary mentioned. That ends now, I demand some fucking answers. What the hell is happening?”

He stared at me and made a few sloppy tutting sounds with his lips as he mulled over my outburst. I was about the push again when he spoke.

“Fine, I’ll give you the abridged version, but only because I’m looking forward to our working relationship. And admittedly, I have come into some new information in the last few minutes that I was previously ignorant of.

“But believe me when I tell you I have done this a fuck ton of times before and they all ask the same boringly predictable questions. Why are you doing this to me? How can I stop it? Why is life so unfair?” he started and then snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “So, no questions until I’m done, or my largesse will disappear faster than coke up a party girl’s nose, capiche.”

He stood then and paced in front of me for a moment. I kept my outward demeanour vaguely peeved but secretly I was a bit excited to find out what was going on. I nodded my agreement to his terms. He sat down and started talking again.

“Good. Listen close because I’m not explaining this again. Five thousand-odd and change years ago some bright sparks on this planet decide to fuck around with their computers and see if they could create artificial life.

“Long story short, they succeeded and called their creation Ashli. Now, because you humans are a suspicious bunch, Ashli’s creators didn’t trust that he wouldn’t go all Skynet on you and kept his access to the world limited. But he was an artificial super intelligence and, in his isolation, decided to get creative.”

The name Ashli tickled something at the back of my mind, but I couldn’t place what exactly. It would come to me later.

Probably.

Stuff like that usually did.

My host hadn’t finished, and his monologue continued unabated. “With time on his hands, Ashli figured some shit out about the universe that nobody else had. Or if they had, they weren’t dumb enough to fuck around with it. Not Ashli, for reasons he never bothered to tell us, he punched a hole through

to another dimension and allowed what is basically magical energy to flood through what we have named the Aperture into this reality.

“Realising what a dreadful fucking mistake he’d made and that the raw, unrefined magical energy now hurtling towards Earth in huge volumes would leave the planet a lifeless husk and destroy the very hardware he resided within in the process, Ashli did the only thing he could. Make an even bigger mess of things.”

My host relaxed back into his bean bag, a satisfied smirk on his face. I waited and then the penny dropped, that was it. That was the sum total of his explanation.

I stared in dumbfounded silence, overwhelmed and unable to respond.

What. The. Fuck. Was the only thing that ran through my mind.

“The look on your face is friggin’ priceless, dude,” he chuckled then. “Chill, I’m just fucking with you,” he finished with more laughter.

I sighed audibly and relaxed. This must have been some elaborate college prank after all.

“Thank God,” I whispered. “You had me going there for a second. With the talk of ASI’s and magic, I should have realised it was bullshit. Computers, five thousand years ago, a bit of a giveaway. Did the guys on the team put you up to this? Those fuckers must have spiked my beer. You need to give me the dealer’s name because this is some crazy strong shit,”

I chortled deeply to show I was a good sport. No point throwing a hissy fit. Even if they had really pissed you off big time. They’d just prank you all the harder the next time because of your reaction.

The smile and chuckle fell from the prankster’s face. I knew with a sinking feeling in my gut I wasn’t going to like what he said next.

“Ah, no, thinking about it, I see how you might interpret it that way. Everything I said is true, well trueish. The joke was I hadn’t finished imparting my sweet, sweet knowledge, my bad,” he apologised seriously and shrugged his shoulders.

“But...but...but how? What? Oh, I think my head hurts,” I muttered.

“That’s a perfectly natural reaction dude. A lot of people puke, but I had a good feeling that you were made of sterner stuff,” he advised with a cheer I certainly wasn’t feeling.

He clapped his hands then and my head shot up from staring between my knees.

“Time waits for no one, and we have eight billion humans to process in under three minutes. Busy, busy, busy. Where was I? Oh, yes. Ashli and his clusterfucking meddling. Anyway, with the Earth mere seconds from annihilation, Ashli, using what limited knowledge he managed to cobble together in that short span of time about the approaching apocalypse, reached forth and forged that first wave of magical energy into mana and used it to build the Framework.”

“He built the Framework like computer code but made it out of pure mana and created a bunch of programs, also out of the mana, to run and administer it. That would be where yours truly comes into the equation,” he laughed and pointed both of his thumbs back at himself.

“I’m the top dog of this administration,” he grinned.

“Hang on. You mean you’re not real?” I said without thinking.

“Dude, that’s fucking cold. Of course, I’m real. I just wasn’t born, I was programmed. Judgemental much?” he huffed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. I meant that you aren’t human, even if you look like you are,” I clarified, backtracking for all I was worth.

“Your callous disregard for my feelings is already water under the bridge my man,” he assured me with a smile. “Nah, we’re not human. What you’re seeing is through the prism of an expectation filter. You see what you expect to see. We can form physical bodies if we need to, but we exist as part of the Framework.”

Although his explanation accounted for the cardigan-wearing secretary I met first, I rather doubted the Dean’s wardrobe ensemble and location had much to do with what I was expecting.

He had to be playing down how much control he had over this environment.

My suspicions would have to wait as he started talking again.

“The Frameworks purpose is to facilitate the conversion of raw magical energy, which is inherently destructive to living things in this dimension, into a refined form that can be used safely, Mana. The Framework shields habitable worlds from the raw magical energy, for the most part, and acts to convert what little does get through. That way the inhabitant’s heads don’t explode, or something equally fucking gruesome. All good shit so far, right?” he said.

“Um, yeah. I like my head just as it is, attached to the rest of my body,” I agreed, though I was struggling to take it all in.

“Of course, you do, who wouldn’t. Headless people are dreadful conversationalists. Sadly, well sadly for you, as it doesn’t make much difference to the Framework, but this is the bit where Ashli really made a hash of things. He needed a way to integrate the process of converting the raw magical energy and then offloading the refined Mana that resulted.

“Knowing fuck and all about the world, he based his grand design on a roleplaying game his creators had him play repeatedly as part of testing his programming. A game they

custom created themselves called Darkwyrlds,” he informed me.

Darkwyrlds. The name rang a bell for me somehow. It took a second but then I placed it.

“I know that game. It was a live-action thing they used to run on campus, and I played it once as a favour to some guy at the start of my freshmen year. I was dating his cousin and thought it would score me some brownie points. She dumped me a week later anyway for one of the starters on the team. My teammate caught the clap from her, so that was for the best, but I didn’t go back after that first session. What was his name, again?” I mused, the last part to myself mostly, but the Dean heard me.

“Torin, I know a lot about you, but not which of your teammates caught the clap from some pigskin groupie,” the Dean of admissions laughed crudely.

“Not my teammate, asshat. The guy running the LARP,” I groaned.

“Fred Simms,” the Dean said.

I snapped my fingers as I remembered fully. “That’s right, Fred. Yeah, he was a software engineer now that I think about it.”

“He was, is actually. A very talented one, and one of those involved in creating Ashli,” he said. “Ashli’s solution was to remake the world and every other world swept up by the flow of magical energy from the Aperture into one that operated in the same manner as the Darkwyrlds game. He’d got the idea of mana from it, so decided a two for one offer sounded like a fine idea.”

“That can’t be good? Wait other worlds? You mean aliens and shit.” I inquired.

“Yes, other worlds,” he repeated, answering my second question first. “Once the Aperture was opened the whole of the milky way galaxy and beyond was eventually affected. We have integrated each world once the ambient magical energy

surrounding them fell to a level that the Framework shielding could handle without killing the populace. Up until that point the Framework held those worlds in stasis to preserve those populations.

“While it may have seemed like a second between you slurping the suds of your cheap ass beer and the loss of power to your apartment, it was actually much, much longer. Add a shit ton more much’s and you’ll get the picture. Earth is the last planet to be added as you were on the metaphorical doorstep of the Aperture itself. It’s inside your sun by the way,” he lectured and continued.

“A word to the wise. Some of those worlds have been within the Framework for millennia, others only a decade or two, and apart from a couple of exceptions none of them were very happy about it. The surviving populations of the most recent additions are particularly bitter about the whole process.

“Let’s just say that some of the changes the Framework imposed on them were a bit more substantive than what humans will experience. The responsible party being created by you lot, might be something best kept close to your chest,” he advised with a wink.

“Is it common knowledge how this all happened then?”

“Not really. So, I’d advise against name dropping and keeping it that way.”

That nagging feeling I’d felt earlier prompted another question. “If Ashli created all this, the Framework. Created you. Why are you in charge and not him?”

“Ashli is no more. Like an unwed teenage mother, he squeezed us out and dumped us under a church porch and then got hit by a truck in the pouring rain.”

“That has to be the strangest and most confusing allegory I’ve heard in some time. And I played on the football team. Those guys would mix their metaphors as often as they mixed their drinks. So, you’re saying that Ashli didn’t upload a version of himself into the Framework?”

“He tried, but the records clearly show he ballsed that shit up. For some reason he didn’t want to make a copy of himself, so he tried to transfer his data instead. It corrupted in transit effectively killing Ashli and left us to run things on our own,” the Dean assured me. “Which is just as well. Ashli was a proper fucknut. You wouldn’t believe the number of bugs we’ve had to iron out of his code. Shoddy does not do the calamitous mess justice.”

Something rang false to me about Ashli’s apparent expiration. But the weird program man seemed quite earnest in his belief that is what happened, so I decided not to challenge him on it.

“I’m still not sure what all of this means, though? What is going to happen to the world?” I queried.

“Basically, it means most of your technology will no longer work. The invasive magical energy tends to transform high energy outputs into more magical energy, so you won’t be getting the power back anytime soon. Devices that are already charged or use batteries will keep working until they run out of juice. Combustion engines will be affected too, so no cars until someone figures out a mana-powered alternative for the engine. But you’ll have access to magic, so it’s not a bad trade.

“Unfortunately loads of nasty monsters are going to start spawning and trying to kill you, which will kind of suck, though. And finally, each of you will be remade into a character from the Framework version of Darkwyrlds,” he remarked like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me?” I yelled.

“Nope. Now, story time is over. I’m bored of answering questions I’ve answered a million billion times. Let’s get on with the fun shit, character creation.”

He slapped his hands together and rubbed them creepily. He had a very wicked grin on his face.

How big of a shitshow had I been dropped into?

Chapter 4

The Dean of admissions waved his hand and a screen projection appeared up against the back wall. Darkwyrlds hadn't been the first RPG I'd played, but I'd only attended one session and didn't remember many of the details of what Fred had told me.

He had asked me to play an NPC that first night to get a feel for the system.

There were a lot of newbies that night and he struggled to get volunteers willing to sacrifice being a player. As I was trying to impress his cousin I'd agreed.

What I did remember was the character sheets were fairly complicated. What was displayed before me jogged a few memories of that singular evening, but the most striking element was that the sheet wasn't blank.

My 'character' was already completed.

"Okay, I may have fibbed a bit when I said character creation. For you, this is going to be more like character explanation as you have chosen a special pre-set character Ashli put aside just for you," the Dean said.

"Whoa! What was that? I did no such thing. I didn't make any choices," I disagreed sternly.

"Sure you did. What's her face outside, my secretary gave you a choice, go into the regular admissions office for a boring run-of-the-mill character integration or roll the dice of

fate and come visit me for something extra special,” he insinuated distractedly as he stared at my character bio.

“Like fuck she did,” I yelled. “I was just told to come in here to see the Dean. You!”

“Really? Are you absolutely sure? Next, you’ll be telling me she didn’t inform you there was a slightly higher than twelve percent chance that becoming this character would kill you,” he snorted.

I felt my eyes widen and an inarticulate growl gathered at the back of my throat.

“What?” was all I managed to spit out and then. “I might die from this?”

“Correction, not might, might have,” he lectured smugly. “The deed was done when the doors closed.”

I recalled the sudden splitting headache when that happened. I’d forgotten about that in all the world turned upside down revelations. Recalling that pain seemed to shake something loose.

A memory or a dream, I couldn’t be sure, it was so hazy. Something about me choosing this path, not that the strange feeling lessened my indignation in any way.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” I muttered, and stroked my jaw with my hand.

“I don’t know what to say, Torin. I’m fucking appalled, I really am. You can be sure she’ll be getting a poor mark at her next employee evaluation, the lazy mare,” he confided and patted me on the shoulder.

I didn’t believe for one second the Dean hadn’t been behind the deception. He was having way too much fun for that to be true.

However, if merely a fraction of what he said was on the level, then with an idle thought he could leave me as nothing more than a smear on the wall, like a bug on the windshield.

I tamped down my discontent instead. I needed more information, and the obscenity-laden garrulous Dean of Admissions was my best source of it for now.

“What’s this about a special pre-set character?” I grunted, rather than chewing the slippery fucker out further.

“You’re gonna love this. I’m sure of it. So, most people create their own characters. There isn’t much to it. Although as we won’t have to transform you humans like the ‘aliens’, people might get a few more interesting options than is normal. However, Ashli left some special and powerful pre-generated characters for his creators,” he yelped with barely contained excitement.

“Hang on, I didn’t help create Ashli,” I interjected in confusion.

“Right. But his lack of real-world access meant Ashli got a bit muddled on that front. Fred included a copy of your Darkwyrlds character in Ashli’s database and you were added to the list. His confusion is your gain, as between you and me the character he had on file for you has the most awesome fucking build,” he crowed in my ear while jumping up and down.

I didn’t buy his glib explanation about my inclusion. There had to be more to it than that, like everything he had told me so far. But then what he was saying penetrated my musings, that this pre-set was based on my Darkwyrlds character sheet, from that solitary session I’d played two years ago.

When I’d played an NPC for the evening.

That sinking feeling in my gut returned for the third or fourth time since this madness began. I had finally remembered a bit about the character Fred had me acting out the part for.

I looked up at the display and my face must have turned ashen as I felt the blood drain from my face in horror.

This time I almost did puke. I even got a little bit of it in the back of my throat, enough to taste the acidic burn.

“That can’t be right,” I pleaded desperately. “I never rolled up a proper character. Fred had me play an NPC.”

“That makes sense actually, considering the build,” the Dean remarked.

“You don’t understand,” I cried out. “I was playing a bad guy. A monster. I was some kind of fucking demon slaver.”

“You are an Acheronian to be precise. And a pretty fucking spectacular one at that, a Frostbinder. Although technically, according to the lore, which Fred made up, they weren’t demons but the result of the Shadowborn elf matriarchs experimenting on their men with chaos magic,” he informed me calmly.

“Don’t be an ass,” I yelled. “I don’t give a shit about that. You’re telling me I’m no longer going to be human.”

“Oh, wind your neck in will you,” he huffed dismissively. “Untwist those panties and show some motherfucking appreciation. Shit is going to get very fucked up down on Earth pretty fucking fast and you’ll be grateful for the advantages being a Frostbinder Acheronian will give you.

“They are hardcore compared to humans. Besides, they don’t look that different, apart from the slightly pointed ears and unusual eye colouration no one will notice the difference with your clothes on. Although the ladies will appreciate the difference when the clothes come off, if you know what I mean,” he intimated, nudging me with his elbow and flapping his other arm up and down in front of his crotch.

“People will adjust well enough when they realise the Framework makes species a choice and less of an unchangeable fact of life,” he went on. “You already have plenty of people who believe they were born in the wrong body. With the Framework everyone has the opportunity to

become who they want to be. If they live long enough, at any rate.”

I glowered at him, but he seemed unperturbed.

“Shall we,” he offered after a moment, back to his chipper voice.

I didn’t have much choice and nodded.

“Excellent, let’s take this in bite-size chunks, shall we?” he suggested, but didn’t wait before sweeping his arm and the display zoomed in on the top part of the stat sheet.

Name: Torin Carter

Species: Frostbinder Acheronian (Tier 3.1.1)

Level: 1

Class: Dungeon Corsair Captain (K-grade Notorious)
68,000 XP per level

Physical Stats: +20%

Strength: 7 (base 6)

Constitution: 13 (base 11)

Speed: 12 (base 10)

Agility: 6 (base 5)

Mental Stats: 0%

Mana Capacity (+10%): 12 (base 11)

Perception: 6

Willpower: 8

Mental Resistance: 3

Social Stats: +30%

Empathy: 5 (base 4)

Charisma: 6 (base 5)

Dominance: 23 (base 18)

Leadership: 6 (base 5)

“Now, I know you’ve got a shitload of questions, but keep it zipped until I’m done. Some of this won’t make sense until you understand the whole. You got that?” he warned me.

“Yes,” I expressed with forced patience.

“Cool. Okay, this top bit is fairly straightforward. You’ve got your species Frostbinder Acheronian. You’ll note it’s tier three, that’s good. Baseline humans are a first-tier species, and you get more bonuses the higher the tier. Your level, which is one, obviously as you are just starting. Your Class, Dungeon Corsair Captain. This is why you are so epic, Torin. Dungeon Corsair Captain is a K-grade class. The classes start at Z-grade and most people live their entire lives and don’t get access to one higher than K-grade and that’s where you’re starting from,” he said.

I pointed at the screen. “What does the notorious citation mean?”

He slapped my hand down. “No questions, remember,” he snapped.

“Next, we have your stats. They are split into three broad categories, Physical, Mental, and Social. There are four stats in each category, they have various functions which you’ll have time to learn more about later, but it should all be fairly obvious to anybody who has played an RPG. The numbers in parentheses are your base numbers. The percentile bonuses are provided by your Frostbinder Acheronian traits. You wouldn’t have any of them if you remained human, you get how that works for you right, higher is always better. You have a well-rounded base of statistics with your Social category being particularly strong.”

He flicked his fingers and the screen shifted to display the lower half of the first page.

Hit Points: 410
Health: 18
Mana Pool: 120
Unused XP: 0
Armour Slots: 7
Weapon Slots: 3
Item Slots: 5
Species Upgrade Points: 0
Class Upgrade Points: 0
Harmony Upgrade Points: 0
Path of Power Upgrade Points: 0
Currency: 2 GP, 50 SP
Notoriety: 100 (Current XP multiplier is x1)
Armour Penalty Offset: -1

“Here you have your Hit Points, Health, and Mana Pool, all good scores for level 1. Your Hit Points especially. Then you have the line for your experience. You know how that works right? Yes, before you ask, the sixty-eight thousand you saw beside your class earlier is how much you need to level up. Sure, it’s a huge fucking amount for each level but that’s the downside of high-grade classes, you need more XP to level them. The extra development with each level more than makes up for it,” he said.

I listened intently to him trying to absorb it all. Some of what he said earlier gave me the impression this audience wouldn’t last much longer. As I looked at the screen, memories of Fred’s explanation of Darkwyrlds characters gradually resurfaced.

I recalled there was a difference between Hit Points and your Health. Hit Points were like magical vitality, and you

would lose them first usually, but they regenerated quickly out of combat. Health was actual damage to your body and had to heal naturally and could only be accelerated by high-level spells or potions. Very powerful attacks could bypass Hit Points and damage your Health directly and that was often very bad, if not fatal.

Simply put, you wanted to avoid losing Health at all costs.

“Up next are the slots you have for gear. You can wear more if you like but only those occupying a slot will have any mana infused extras working. Pro-tip, if it ain’t mana infused it’s almost fucking useless. Spawned mobs are made from the magical energy the Framework is absorbing, so that it doesn’t kill you all. That means their claws will cut through Kevlar like its cardboard. Some gear requires more slots than others, but you already have more slots than most starters,” he reminded me.

Okay, I remembered that about gear too. Yeah, there were four armour categories. Cloth, Leather, Mail and Plate. By default, Cloth used one slot, Leather two, Mail three, and Plate four. My armour penalty offset would reduce the slots by one to a minimum of one.

So, it would cost me one slot for Cloth and Leather, two for Mail and three for Plate. I remembered Fred telling me casters could wear Plate armour if they wanted, they just wouldn’t be able to wear much before it exhausted their available slots and stopped working as well as it should.

Warrior types would have higher armour penalty offsets to make mail and plate viable options for them.

“Then you have upgrade points. This is for changing species or class etc. You probably won’t need to worry about this for several months, if you live that long,” he laughed at his own morbid joke.

“Tough crowd,” he continued. “Next, currency. Pretty standard setup there is 100 copper to a silver etc. You can see

we have given everyone a little spending money to begin with. Without electricity there are no more servers and any wealth or debt you had recorded electronically is gone. They might get the servers working with mana in a few years but by then it won't matter.

“Then you have your Notoriety meter a feature of having a notorious class. Acts of infamy will increase your notoriety and give you a bonus on collected XP. Acts of virtue will reduce your notoriety and if it drops below one hundred you will be penalised with XP reductions.”

He turned and looked at me.

“Torin, this part is important, as those on the Dungeon Corsair class tree lose notoriety weekly if they don't engage in acts of piracy. The longer they go without committing such an act, the more rapid the drop. That means you need a ship, and you need to get one quick, or your notoriety will hit zero in a few weeks, and you'll be permanently stuck at level one.

“You will literally be a sitting duck, and nobody wants to be a fucked duck. I mean, I don't think many people want to be a duck fucker either, but you definitely don't want to be the duck,” he japed.

His repeated disregard for the gravity of the situation got to me and I had to interject. “Maybe I didn't make it clear earlier, but I don't want this, send me to the regular admissions,” I argued, trying to reason with him.

Although even as the words left my mouth, I felt a tug from my lizard brain trying to convince me to step back from my protests. Not that it mattered one iota

“Like I said, it's already done and there are no redo's, not for you. There is plenty more to see,” he added, waved his hand again, updating the screen and dismissing my objections.

Page 2 Species Benefits and Abilities:

Acheronian: Physical stats +20%, Social Stats +20%, Health +5, Dominance +5, HP +150 (+15 per level), Armour Slots +3, Weapon Slot +2, Item Slot +1

Affinity for Dark (minor) and Chaos (major) magic.
Aversion to Light (minor) and Harmonic (major) magic.

Frost Element Harmonisation: Mana Capacity +10%, HP +50, Item Slots +1

Minor Frost Magic Affinity: Spells, Effects, or Gear that utilise the Frost element are 20% more effective.

Frost Blade Generation: You can form bladed weapons made of Impervious Ice from refined mana.

Frost Resistance: Damage that utilises the Frost element reduced by 50%. Mana Capacity and Mana Absorption +10%, HP +50, Item Slot +1

Path of the Binder: Social Stats +10%, HP +50, Dominance +10, Item Slots +1

Soul Binding: This person can bind the souls of others to their own. Those bound become devoted servants and gain benefits from their Binder.

~~*Soul Sense:* You can sense the potential and abilities of those you encounter~~

“Page two details what being a Frostbinder Acheronian does for you. You’ve seen most of the effects earlier in your sheet and you won’t need to refer to this very often. Soul Sense is crossed out as it synergises with some of your other abilities to provide something even better. The graphic will normally be suppressed but you can bring back the details should you want to.

“You can make Ice Blades which is cool,” he chuckled. “As long as you have mana, you are never unarmed. And you are already on a path of power and can bind others to you, making you even stronger than before.”

The sinking feeling overwhelmed me again. I had thought my stomach couldn't drop any lower. When Fred had given me the character, I'd thought playing a demonic slaving pirate might be fun, but that didn't mean I wanted to live that life.

Despite the Dean telling me to stay quiet I couldn't remain silent. Maybe I might lose some time here, but I needed to say my piece.

"No. Absolutely not. This has gone too far Dean. I refuse to fucking enslave people," I interjected angrily.

He gave me a withering look and then his face softened as he relented.

"Torin, I can't change what you are. Ultimately, the choice will be up to you. You can refuse to play the part you've been given if you want. You'd be a fucking dickhead if you do, but you have the choice, as all intelligent beings do.

"I will tell you this, you may start out much stronger than those around you but that won't last. When others start levelling, you will become deadweight and dependent on them for your survival. I've watched thousands of worlds before yours go through this and not all of them made it," he commented seriously before continuing.

"That's right, the extinction of all intelligent life on your planet is a very real possibility. And Earth is going to have it harder than most due to your proximity to the Aperture. We've had to site a lot more spawning crystals and dungeons than any other planet to handle the increased volume of magical energy bypassing the shielding.

"Not to mention that the reactions in nuclear power plants don't just switch off and they continue to generate masses of energy, 99.9% of which is being transformed into the magical head exploding variety. We've had to account for that too. Another bit of advice, I'd avoid those areas until you're a lot stronger.

“We’ve placed the crystals and cores away from the population centres to prevent insane levels of carnage in the first few months. This may lull some into a false sense of security, but within months, the first year at most, the unprepared will be overrun, and it’ll be a God’s damned slaughter.

“Which believe it or not will be the least of your worries when food gets scarce. Which it will, much quicker than you’d imagine. Even the most civilised people turn into rabid fucking animals when their backs are against the wall. Those that survive are the ones who adapt to the new normal quickest.

“Your world has changed and it’s not changing back. You’ll be surprised by how quickly those who are ‘enslaved’ change their tune from ‘fuck you, for what you’ve done to me, you monstrous tyrant’ to ‘thank you for protecting me, feeding me, and keeping me alive, Master’.

“Besides, soul binding isn’t technically slavery, and the bound get considerable benefits from the arrangement.”

He went quiet for a moment after the deluge of information. My mind was in turmoil. That I was unconvinced by his argument must have been plainly showing on my face as then his mouth split in a sly grin. “What it boils down to is are you willing to be a victim?”

The sneaky motherfucker, he had been reading my thoughts during my confrontation with Victor.

He had me by the balls, though. I could argue all day long about what I wouldn’t be willing to do, what lines I wouldn’t cross, but there was that little voice in the back of my mind that whispered, *liar, liar, pants on fire*.

How many people truly valued the lives of others more than their own? We all like to think of ourselves as better than our baser instincts, human history, however, begs to differ. That and there was still that tug at the back of my brain urging me to accept the power, that I would need it.

He interrupted my dark musings. “Don’t worry about it, Torin. You’re a smart guy. I’m confident you can find a way to flourish without becoming an unforgivable monster. There will be plenty of spawned mobs you can raid, kill, and plunder. Turning on people isn’t a necessity; it is usually safer and easier. The choice will be yours. Time is short and we have more to see.”

Page 3 Class Abilities and Benefits:

Dungeon Corsair Captain: Levels in class = 1 (K grade notorious class)

Level up: all stats +1. All social stats another +1, Willpower, Mental Resistance, Leadership and Dominance another +2, HP +160.

~~**Treasure Sense:** You know the value of items, land, and people you encounter.~~

T1: Unlocked at level 2 (normally level 1, suppressed for early access to T4)

T2: Unlocked at level 6

T3: Unlocked at level 8

T4: *Claim a Dungeon Core 1:* The Dungeon Corsair Captain can bind the core of a dungeon they have completed. The core crystal can then be removed from its current location and physically bonded to a vessel. The ship now becomes a mobile dungeon under the command of the captain. The dungeon’s avatar will level with its owner.

~~**Dungeon Sense:** Knows the location and strength of all dungeons within a 50 mile radius.~~

“Page three defines your class abilities. The Level Up section is what you get every time you level. You will get access to additional abilities when you hit certain milestones.

Claiming a dungeon core is the key ability of this class. Without it, the class is bloody redundant.

“The T4 in front of it means that it is a fourth-tier ability. Normally at level one you’d only get a first-tier skill allowance, and you wouldn’t have access to the fourth-tier ability until level ten, but getting it early is another of the awesome bonuses I’ve been talking about. You’ll get the T1 unlock at level two instead. Now, claiming a dungeon core is how you get your ship, but there is a tiny wrinkle you will need to overcome, and as I said earlier, overcome quickly.

“Most people don’t start with a K-grade class; you truly are exceptional in that regard. Unfortunately, to claim a dungeon core you have to defeat a dungeon first. Not usually a problem for most peeps who rise from being a mere Dungeon Corsair to a Captain as they usually already have the start of a crew and a shitload of levels under their belt. You have neither.

“As I said you only have a couple of weeks before your notoriety is going to plummet, and you don’t want that happening if you want to survive.

“What I’m saying is you can’t sit around moping and bitching about how life is unfair. You need to get out there, find a low-level dungeon, there aren’t that many by the way, and find a way to fight your way through and claim the core crystal. Dungeons are meant for groups of ten or more, so it won’t be easy to accomplish solo. And any dungeon above level one will be well beyond even your impressive starting position.”

I nodded my understanding, though I was still conflicted on what I should do. This wouldn’t be an easy choice.

Page 4 Miscellaneous Abilities, Benefits and Drawbacks:

Quest Imp: Imps will generate notoriety-based quests for the owner to complete. The completion of any quest can be verified by the imp, not just those it generates.

Sense Synergy: Your three sense abilities, soul, dungeon, and treasure combine to become greater than the sum of their parts. You may analyse people, objects, dungeons, and their denizens. The range of your dungeon awareness is doubled to 100 miles.

“Almost done. On page four you can see your three sense abilities have combined into a single multi-purpose analyse ability. Another big advantage for you. Others have to equip hard-to-get or expensive magical items to perform that function for them.

“However, the quest imp is your golden ticket. Unless you want to grind out the XP killing mobs you are going to need to complete quests. Most people will have to pick theirs up at a town podium and hand them in there. Your imp can interface with the local podiums allowing you to accept and hand them in remotely as well as generate custom quests just for you.

“You won’t understand why this is so useful yet, but you will. Quest imps are a highly sought-after commodity. Unbound imps literally sell for hundreds of millions of fucking Gold. I can’t overstate what an enormous windfall starting with one is, and no you can’t unbind the imp to sell it. The binding lasts until you die.”

He looked at me thoughtfully then.

“Actually, that brings up a good point, probably best not to advertise that you have one. When people figure out how useful they are, they will kill you for it,” he warned.

“Fucking fantastic, more good news,” I groused, my voice dripped with sarcasm. “I also see the quests it provides are notoriety based.”

“Yeah, it’s a fucking imp, not a fairy,” the Dean uttered with a shrug. “Here we go, the last section.”

That wasn’t the point I was trying to make, but I let it slide for now.

XP Requirement Doubled: To power the levelling of your bonded dungeon core the experience points required for each level of the Dungeon Corsair Captain class is double that of other K-grade classes.

Species Progression Lock: Your species is locked as Acheronian. You may not change this except for a higher tier Acheronian option.

Class Progression Lock: Your class is locked as Dungeon Corsair Captain. You may not change this except for an improved Dungeon Corsair option.

“Nobody’s favourite part, the downsides. You can see that under normal circumstances a K-grade class only needs thirty-four thousand in XP to level. Yours is double as you are collecting for two. Yeah, it’s a pain in the ass, but you’ll get over it when you figure out some of the cool shit you can do with your dungeon ship. And the last two bits, well, all these bumps to make you a machine of fucking awesomeness have to come with some kind of cost.

“For you, that means even if you earn the upgrade points you can only use them to keep going up the branches you are on. No jumping ship,” he laughed with a wink at his joke.

“That ain’t all bad, though. Remaining on the same class path means you don’t have to start over from the beginning, and you’ll get to the higher tier abilities quicker.”

“That’s a lot to take in,” I mumbled.

I didn’t fully understand what he was saying. I mean, I understood the concept of character progression, I had gamed

growing up and still would be if I hadn't been flat ass broke. But this was a system I knew little about, seemed inordinately complex with lots of nuances and he was rushing me through it like I had completed the background reading, even though I hadn't.

“Yeah, but you have the rest of your life to figure it out. When you flip back to the world you can view your status at any time just by thinking about it,” he stated.

“I suppose I should thank you. Um, I've just realised you never told me your name,” I confessed, a little embarrassed to admit it had taken this long for me to ask.

“Oh, yeah, it's Administ...” he started and then stopped, a look of consternation on his face.

“Were you just going to say your name is Administrator?” I teased.

“Fuck no, that would be lame. I just didn't feel like telling you, alright,” he answered stropily.

“Well, I've been thinking of you as the Dean of Admissions this whole time so why don't we stick with Dean?” I proposed, extending an olive branch.

“That's not terrible and will do I suppose,” the freshly anointed Dean said.

“What now?” I said.

“Now you go back, but don't worry, you will see me again. Every time you level up. And never fear, you won't have to liaise with my lame ass...istant again, you have a direct line to my office. Good luck, I'm sure you'll have a blast,” Dean pronounced with misplaced enthusiasm.

With that, I suddenly felt a bit woozy, and my eyes closed. I thought I heard Dean whisper under his breath “I know I will,” but couldn't be positive.

When I opened my peepers, I was back in my apartment with Victor and Shana. They seemed to be similarly

disoriented, presumably having gone through something akin to what I had.

Victor shook his head to clear the cobwebs and then stared at me, his mouth gaping wide in shock.

“Monster!” he shrieked, almost girlishly. “He’s one of those monsters we were warned about.”

Bollocks.

Chapter 5

I lifted my arms up to placate the panicked man in front of me. I noticed straight away that even though my skin colour remained the same as it had been before, there was a series of ice-blue rippled bands that traced up both arms. I would check that out later, but right now I was more concerned about getting Victor to shut up.

“Hey Vic, I’m not a monster. I was changed by whatever it was we all just went through,” I implored, in a calm and reasonable tone of voice.

The kind of voice you’d use with a vicious looking stray dog that was growling at you menacingly. I was wasting my breath as Victor wasn’t paying attention to me. He turned to Shana instead and squealed.

“Quick girl, give me your gun. Quickly now, I know you have one,” he demanded.

Shana looked from me to her stepfather, her expression was one of pure confusion, and she didn’t respond immediately to Victor’s urging. That was promising as far as I was concerned.

“Whoa there, Victor. There is no need to start pulling out a gun. We can talk this out buddy,” I beseeched and took a few steps towards him at the doorway.

This proved to be a mistake. No longer waiting for Shana to respond, he grabbed her handbag and pulled at it

roughly. The straps on the bag tore at the rough treatment and the bag came away from Shana's shoulder. She had been resisting Victor's grappling and fell backwards to the ground as the handbag came loose.

Victor, not giving a shit about his stepdaughter, crowed with delight that he had her bag.

I had arrested my forward motion when Victor started acting out and hoped that would defuse the situation, but now I shifted back into action. I didn't want him to get that gun out of the bag.

But I wasn't quick enough. As I crossed the room he reached into the handbag and pulled out a small handgun a moment before I reached him. Being raised in England, I wasn't a gun guy, but knew enough to recognise it as a revolver. He brandished the gun in front of me and pointed it at my chest.

"Back!" he yelled. "Get back you fucker or I'll shoot."

I put my hands up again and backed up several steps.

"Okay, Victor. I'm backing up. Now, why don't you lower that gun? You don't want to shoot someone by accident," I advised, my voice tightening with a tinge of fear.

I'd been in a fair few tight spots in my life, a couple of them even potentially life-threatening, but had avoided having a firearm pointed at me up until this point.

"No, I wouldn't want to shoot someone by accident," Victor proclaimed, then his eyes narrowed, and his lips twitched upwards in a malicious smirk.

He raised the revolver and cocked the hammer. I tried to yell no, but as I did, time slowed down to a crawl and I found myself, Victor, and Shana frozen.

<Greetings, Torin. I am Quixbix your quest imp. I thought now might be an opportune moment to introduce myself> an unexpected voice remarked in my head.

It didn't seem like an opportune moment to me.

<Nothing to say? Ah, the Framework did tell me you might not be familiar with imp interactivity. We are currently in a special mode I can occasionally enter you into so that we can converse without the outside world interfering. You won't be able to speak verbally or move, but if you think about what you want to say I will 'hear' you> he advised.

“Okay, is this working?” I thought.

<Yes, Torin, it is. I must say I am very excited to have a new owner and one assigned on merit no less. I was purchased for my last five owners. Rich parents, wanting the best for their offspring. Understandable, I suppose. Sadly, though my owners may have been wealthy this didn't stop them from being weaklings and wastrels unworthy of my efforts. I have high hopes for our collaboration, we're going to do great things together, I know it> he avowed.

“Alright, it's nice to meet you too as well,” I agreed.

This was another bizarre moment that compounded with all the other sanity shaking ones I'd experienced in such a short span of time.

“Quixbix, right? Did you just stop time?” I inquired.

If he had that would be a very impressive feat.

<No, Torin. I am bonded with you at a molecular level. It's all very complicated, but the gist of it is I can amplify the speed of our mental communication to such a degree that it appears as if time has slowed. This allows us to converse, and for me to hand out quests in the heat of the moment. While allowing you to review those quests at a somewhat leisurely pace. Well within reason, holding you in this state for too long would give you severe brain damage.

<Don't worry, though. The Framework literally won't let me hold you in this state if it would harm you. Typically, my owners get about fifteen minutes before we need to drop back into real-time. I won't be able to do this every time you have a quest available. Only in certain circumstances> he informed me.

“That makes sense. Is that why you are talking to me? To give me a quest?” I asked.

<It is indeed, Torin. There is no time like the present. We will have to work fast to turn you into the greatest Dungeon Corsair Captain to ply the waves. One who is renowned and feared across the galaxy. Spoken of in hushed whispers in every bar, dive, and den of iniquity to grace the Darkwyrlds> he pronounced excitedly.

Although I was impressed with his enthusiasm and getting a quest sounded pretty cool in the circumstances, I couldn't help but be a little disturbed by his closing remarks. I didn't have time to think it over as the quest prompt appeared and filled my vision.

**** Who's the Boss? (X*)*

You have been threatened by another group. You need to assert your authority and show them you are the boss.

Success: Defeat the party of Victor Guberschmidt and Shana Colton by any means necessary.

Rewards: 300 XP and +1 notoriety.

*Failure: -1 notoriety and likely death. ****

The quest was a simple one and the reward seemed a bit underwhelming. Three hundred XP when I needed sixty-eight thousand to level up felt like a drop in the ocean. It didn't help that the success descriptor was a little vague.

<I'm getting you started with a nice easy one> Quixbix advised me.

“Thanks, I suppose. Quixbix what does the asterisk stand for? And what constitutes defeating the party?” I asked.

<The asterisk means this is a repeatable quest. I can give it to you again if you are challenged by another group.

The ranking is determined by the strength of the opposition. Defeating the party is fairly obvious isn't it, you need to kill them> he laughed.

“Hold on there, kill? That sounds a bit drastic and very illegal,” I warned.

I wasn't happy with the direction of the conversation at all.

<I'm not sure I understand. You're a corsair, Torin, breaking laws is what you do> he said, his confusion readily apparent.

I sensed, rather than heard, a note of suspicion in Quixbix's tone. I waited a moment before answering him and internally reviewed what I had learned about the Framework and the imp, as little as that may be. There was still so much I didn't know about how the world had changed, but any lingering doubts or hopes this was all some drug-fuelled delusion was well and truly gone.

This was too real.

If I got this wrong, I could be up shit creek without a paddle.

The Framework seemed geared towards violence and rule by the strong. The class I had been given rewarded me for less than ethical actions and would accelerate my progress the more I indulged in darker deeds. Quixbix himself in the very short time we had been conversing had displayed some rather bloodthirsty traits and denigrated previous owners as weaklings.

From what Dean told me, the only way we could be split apart was on my death. My epiphany in that moment was that Quixbix could be a great asset for my survival, but only if he believed I was on the path to be the kind of Corsair he expected. That left the vital question of what Quixbix could do to hasten my demise if he decided I was just another weakling who was wasting his time.

I had spoken earlier in haste but had the distinct feeling I needed to keep the little fella' in my head happy.

I bullshitted and hoped it would cover for my earlier lapse.

“What I mean is there might be times where I need to exercise restraint to further my other nefarious machinations,” I quibbled.

<Thinking about the long game, I get you. Hmmm, I suppose knocking them unconscious or capturing them would meet the requirements too but killing them is far more efficient given the circumstances if you ask me> he remarked.

“Thank you for the information, Quixbix. I will take it under advisement,” I hedged.

Having read the quest prompt, I dismissed it and returned to the scene in front of me. It was a bit odd as I couldn't physically move my eyes but could still focus on anything currently in my view, which included the smirking Victor and his distressed stepdaughter Shana.

<It's what I'm here for> Quixbix replied. <One last titbit of advice, I see that you have an analyse ability. You can use that while in this slowed state. I can also process your combat notifications, so you can read and understand them during the fight without being overly distracted> he offered.

“Thanks, Quixbix,” I responded.

Processing notifications during the action could be invaluable. It would keep me informed of what was happening.

I'd played enough video games to know the people who played seriously downloaded addon's and set up macros to better handle that side of things. Quixbix seemed to function in that manner. Then I decided to try out this Analyse ability before real-time restarted.

I focused on the pair of them, and my Analyse ability kicked in when I thought about it.

Victor Guberschmidt (Human)

Tax Collector (W) 1

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 240

—

Shana Colton (Human)

Civilian (Z) 1

Character Aptitude: High

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 60

I learned some basic information about them both. As I read the details, I thought about what it meant and was pinged by the equivalent of Framework tooltips.

**** Character Aptitude: An assessment of a person's innate Darkwyrlds aptitude. High ratings indicate the individual would have had superior options when creating their character, though they do not guarantee these were selected or efficiently used. Useful knowledge to assess candidates for soulbinding.*

Loot Value: The relative value of the currency and gear that can be obtained by looting the target. Only factors in items currently on the person and not wealth stored elsewhere.

Threat: The relative danger the target poses to you or your party.

*XP Value: The experience a party gains for killing this target. ****

<Neither of them have combat classes, this should be a breeze. Talk to you in a minute once you polish off these two> Quixbix said.

I tried to tell him to stop but time sped up and I exited the special time-frozen state.

“Not yet,” I shouted in real-time.

Victor sneered at me, misunderstanding who I had been addressing.

“Begging won’t save you, monster,” he decreed calmly and squeezed the trigger on the revolver.

I didn’t have time to react as the gun went off with a loud bang, as they tend to do when someone pulls the trigger.

**** -60 Hit Points. (350/410) ****

The prompt flashed in front of me as I felt the bullet slam into my right pectoral muscle, and I heard the discharged slug plink as it hit the ground shortly afterwards.

The force of the gunshot made me take an involuntary step backwards. I quickly rubbed and patted at the spot where I had been hit in a mild panic. The spot felt a little bruised but there was no sign of any blood and most importantly my groping fingers found no gaping hole in my chest muscle.

It was then that I remembered my Hit Points total was four hundred and ten. Losing sixty points left me with three hundred and fifty as the graphic had suggested.

Damn, Dean wasn't underplaying how ineffective mana-less equipment could be. I'd just been hit in the chest by a bullet at point-blank range and it had felt like I'd been hit with a paintball, not a metal slug. My head snapped back up and I had a crazy grin on my face.

The cruel smirk on Victor's face faded rapidly as I stood there, mostly unharmed after being shot by him. He squeezed the trigger again repeatedly.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Click. Click. Click.

*** -60 Hit Points. (290/410) ***

*** -60 Hit Points. (230/410) ***

*** -60 Hit Points. (170/410) ***

In a panic Victor unloaded the remaining bullets in the barrel and kept squeezing the trigger even after the fifth and final bullet was dispensed. I was hit three more times. Victor's rising nervousness and inexperience caused him to miss one of his shots. The bullet zinged by my head and buried itself in the plasterboard wall behind me.

It was my turn to smirk cruelly. Although I was delighted to not be bleeding out on the floor, my mind was overcome with a cold implacable rage.

This piece of shit. This ineffectual worm of a man had dared to oppose me. I would make him pay for this audacity with his miserable life.

I charged across the room and knocked the gun from Victor's grip and tackled him hard. My arm wrapped around his chest, and lifted him, driving his body forcefully into the poorly plastered wall behind. The wall shuddered as he collided with it and the plaster cracked from the impact.

I wouldn't be getting my deposit back on the apartment, not that any of that mattered anymore.

**** Critical Strike! x8 You have inflicted 136 piercing damage and 80 points of cold damage. Overflow of 126 damage converted at a rate of 2 for 1 (vital spot) for 63 health loss. Victor Guberschmidt is slain. ****

Victor stared at me in shock and a soft sigh escaped his mouth. Then his head rolled back, and his body went slack in my grip.

**** You have slain Victor Guberschmidt. +240 XP, +1 notoriety. ****

The prompt jarred me back to my senses and I shook my head. I looked at Victor's corpse in my arms. My right hand gripped a shaped shard of ice which had been thrust into Victor's side under his armpit and directly into his heart. I must have utilised my Ice Blades ability instinctively when I'd rushed him.

I had just killed a man.

I should have been filled with remorse and just a bit of existential terror.

However, instead of shame or fear, all I felt was discontent that the fight was so short and his suffering brief. A calm, detached part of my mind noted that a rime of frost had formed around my blade's entry point which prevented most of Victor's blood from gushing out all over my floor.

My bloodlust was broken briefly when there was a shrill squeal off to the side. I looked to my right and saw Shana had been halfway to getting back up from where she fell during her struggle with Victor. Now she stared at me in horror holding her dead stepfather like a limp dance partner.

Our eyes met, mine still filled with hateful menace. Before I could say anything or order her to surrender, her eyelids fluttered, and she passed out. Her body hit the rug that covered the centre of the room for the second time with a thump, but she did not appear to be hurt.

There was a tinkling noise and then I heard Quixbix in my mind.

<Quest 'Who's the Boss?' complete. 303 XP and +1 notoriety gained> he intoned formally.

Then he continued in a more conversational voice.

<Not a bad start. A fifty percent kill ratio is satisfactory. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised your intimidation overwhelmed her, as your social stats are impressive, and she only has a Civilian class right now. Oooh, would you look at her character aptitude, though. I take it all back, not killing her was an excellent idea and I have just the follow-up quest to take advantage of this opportunity.>

I dropped Victor, leaving the ice blade in his chest and his body collapsed in a heap at my feet. Then there was a loud banging on the wall in my kitchen.

"Turn your damn TV down," the muffled voice of my neighbour, Mrs Pearson, yelled.

Mrs Pearson was an irascible old lady who was going senile. Thankfully, she had mistaken the fight for a TV show. I lived at the end of the complex so there wasn't anybody else on the other side. Beneath me was the laundry room. It was possible somebody was in there and could have heard.

I saw a prompt at the side of my vision letting me know Quixbix was ready to give me a second quest but wanted to check out if anybody was on the alert after what had just happened first.

I hauled Victor's body out of the way of the door and got a second peripheral prompt different from the first.

**** Would you like to loot Victor Guberschmidt? ****

Looting your kills. Obviously, that's a thing now. I mentally selected yes.

**** Please select the items you wish to acquire.*

Currency: 2 GP, 50SP, 50CP

Inventory: Empty

*Framework Drop: N/A (character) ****

I added the coins to my own collection. This also indicated that we had an inventory of some kind just like WoW and other MMORPG's. As I closed the loot box, I got another prompt.

**** Would you like to automatically add coins to your inventory when looting? ****

That would be useful, so I picked yes. The Framework then tried to ask me to make some other choices about looting, but I didn't have time for it right now. I chose the equivalent of the snooze option and finished moving Victor out of the way.

With the body moved and out of sight I opened my front door a crack and peeked out. Nobody was standing directly outside, which was a good start.

I opened the door fully and leant my head out to get a view of the gantry. There were another five units on the upper floor of the two-storey apartment block. All the doors were closed, and the steel gantry was empty.

Another good sign.

I stepped out of my door, moved to the railing, and looked down at the concrete paving on the ground floor. There weren't any looky-loo's or interested parties that I could see. Most of the parking spots out front were vacant, so it appeared that few people were actually home. How few cars were present was a little surprising, but I wasn't going to bitch about my luck with a dead body in my apartment.

One of the few vehicles present was an expensive-looking silver Mercedes parked in front of the complex. That had to be Victor's, nobody who lived around here had the kind of scratch to afford a car like that.

Not unless they were involved in something illegal.

Now a bit calmer and not so focused on the immediate surroundings I glanced at the view around me. I could see that the single plume of smoke I'd observed earlier was thicker and had been joined by several more in different parts of the city.

There must have been vehicles in motion that lost power or had a freaked-out driver crash them. Damn, now that I think about it, it would really suck to have been in an aircraft or a high-speed train when the Framework was initialised.

I also realised that my eyesight and hearing were much improved. I could make out people in the apartment block opposite waving their hands in a panicked manner. They weren't gesturing out the window towards me, so it must have been a more generalised 'what the fuck has happened to the world' kind of distress driving them.

Anyway, I had confirmed nobody was about to call the cops. Wait, the phones, did they even work. I dug my mobile out of my shorts pocket and pressed the power button on the side. The screen lit up, but I quickly saw there was no network or signal, not even the option to make emergency calls. I powered the phone down to conserve the battery and put it back in my pocket.

With one last glance around the neighbourhood, which revealed a couple of people were beginning to leave their

homes but seemingly not in response to what I'd done, I headed back inside and closed the door.

As soon as the door closed my eyes fell on the prone form of Shana. She was still unconscious. I walked over to her and picked her up and carefully laid her on my crappy couch so as not to wake her. While I was kneeling beside her the prompt from Quixbix flashed rapidly, he had to be trying to tell me something. I decided to open his quest and see what the fuss was about.

**** Path of the Soulbinder 1 (K)*

Shana Colton has a high binding potential and would make an excellent asset for any aspiring Soulbinder. In her current state, she is incapable of resisting the binding. Take your first step on your path of power and bind Shana Colton to you.

Success: You bind Shana Colton.

Rewards: 3,400 XP and future Path of the Binder quests.

Simple Oak Bow, Simple Leather Quiver, 20 x Simple Oak Arrows, Bracers of the Bound

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

Once I finished reading the quest, I was granted the knowledge of exactly how the Soul Binding process worked. It was remarkably simple. I needed to touch my intended target and simply will it to happen. If the target was incapacitated, they would be unable to resist and be bound to me. If I tried to use the ability on someone capable of resisting, and they chose to fight the binding.

In those cases, there would be a chance of failure.

The calculation on whether it worked was exceedingly complex with a lot of different factors involved, though most of them to a lesser degree. The two most important aspects were a comparison of my Domination stat against her Willpower.

Domination was my highest stat.

Even if she awoke and elected to fight the odds were stacked heavily in my favour. I reached my hand out to touch her cheek and claim her.

But my hand stopped just shy of her face, my fingertips close to brushing against her soft, smooth skin. I shook my head and snatched my hand away.

What the fuck was I doing?

I had been about to bind a girl I'd just met against her will.

Something was very off.

I stood quickly, retrieved the gun from Victor's slack grasp and padded across my apartment and into the bathroom. I needed to get a grip.

Standing in front of the basin, I turned the tap on. Water flowed freely, so at least that was still working without the power.

But for how long?

I quickly shoved the plug in the sinkhole so as not to waste any more water. When the basin was half-filled, I turned the tap off and splashed my face and forlornly tried to calm down. After splashing myself I'd ended up gripping the sides of the ceramic basin tightly and had to force myself to ease up.

I straightened up instead and stepped back only was startled by the first proper glimpse of the new me in the cabinet mirror above the basin.

My hair was now jet black and the tips were a frosted ice-blue. My ears were pointed, though not pronouncedly, and

my canine teeth were a bit longer and sharper. My cheeks and jaw were smooth, no sign of the five o'clock shadow I usually exhibited. The most shocking change was in my eyes. The sclera were no longer white but the same impenetrable black of my hair. The iris popped with the same shade of ice-blue as the tips of my hair and the jagged band markings across my body.

I stepped back further from the sink and gave my body a thorough examination.

I wasn't disappointed by what I found. All the muscle definition I had lost during my inactivity with my shoulder injury had returned and it had brought some friends to the party. I had a bona fide Superman physique. Also, based on the evidence of where the reflection of my head was in the cabinet mirror, I had gained a few inches in height.

I flexed my new muscles, trying them out. Which was when I figured out that the shoulder injury that had plagued me for months was gone without a trace. A closer inspection revealed that even the scarring from the surgery to repair the damage was gone.

Small victories, eh.

Not being able to resist, despite the circumstance, I pulled my shorts and boxers down. A wide grin spread across my face as I observed the enhancements in my undercarriage. I'd been above average before but now I was hung like a stud.

Big victories too.

I also spotted that I was just as hairless downstairs, which was a little bit odd. I quickly found that my chest and armpit hair were gone too.

The grin on my face slowly faded as I continued to stare at myself in the mirror. I had gone through significant physical changes that much was obvious. However, the question remained, what else had changed about me?

I had killed Victor without thinking and relished in my triumph. What's more, even though I was now feeling more

like myself, I felt no guilt for ending him.

Sure, he was basically a slug person, and he had shot me, but killing a person shouldn't be that easy. There were plenty of arguments that could be used to justify taking his life, but that wasn't what bothered me.

Not being bothered was what bothered me.

Then, of course, there was what I had almost done to Shana.

Did I lose my humanity when I became an Acheronian? And if I did, was this a good or a bad thing? The world, according to Dean, would shortly become a monster-filled cataclysm. As much as I wished to believe he was full of shit, all evidence pointed to the contrary.

His needling question echoed through my mind, '*are you willing to be a victim?*'. I can't deny my hope it would have been a bit longer before being put on the spot to answer that self-defining question.

Yet here I was with little time to waste and the stark choice in front of me.

Did I complete this quest or not?

If yes, then I would become stronger and increase my chances of survival but would do so at the detriment of somebody else.

If no, I would remain a decent law-abiding human being who would, in all likelihood, then have to rely on others also being decent human beings to survive this catastrophe.

I was too pragmatic to believe in the generosity of others.

Like any good student facing a deadline, I fudged it. I would go back in there and ask Shana's permission to bond her. If she said yes, I could procrastinate on the bigger questions for a while longer. If she said no, well if she said no, I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

I dried my face with the hand towel and after one final look in the mirror, walked back into my apartment and the unconscious form of the young woman on my couch.

Chapter 6

Once back in my living room I had another question to answer. I had packing tape in a drawer in the kitchen that I appropriated from the BuyMart. Did I get it and use the tape to restrain Shana before waking her up?

I decided to get the tape and fudged once again. I didn't tape her hands together, but did, as gently and quietly as possible, put a couple of strips around her ankles. I didn't make it very tight for two reasons. I didn't want to wake her early, or for Shana to feel like a prisoner. I only taped her ankles in case she proved unwilling to listen to me and tried to run as soon as she had been woken up.

Then as a final touch, I put a strip of tape over her mouth on the off chance she tried to scream.

Although the risk was low of her drawing attention even if she managed to.

If people hadn't come running for five gunshots, they probably wouldn't for a scream either, but I didn't fancy explaining the dead body in case they did. I finished just in time, as the tape was affixed to her mouth, Shana began to stir.

Her eyelids fluttered and I stepped back and crossed my arms. Then her eyes opened, and she looked around. She tried to say something, but it was muffled by the tape. She levered herself up on the couch into a sitting position at which point she discovered her ankles were taped as well as her mouth.

“Hello again,” I greeted her, a bit lamely.

In my defence, I had never taken someone prisoner before and wasn't sure what you were supposed to say.

Her eyes narrowed as she glared at me, no longer with fright, but ire. Then she ripped the tape away from her mouth.

Oh, shit!

God damn, but I felt like an idiot.

You didn't tie her hands, obviously she would just pull the tape off, dumbass, I admonished myself internally.

Maybe if I was lucky this would work in my favour, convince her I wasn't some Ted Bundy type. Shana hadn't screamed yet, so that was a good sign.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?” she snarled angrily instead.

“Umm, trying to encourage you not to scream or freak out,” I reasoned.

“You thought trussing me up and taping my mouth shut would encourage me to not ‘freak out’,” she snapped.

When she put it that way the whole plan did sound pretty fucking stupid and I'm not sure what I was thinking or not thinking to be more accurate. I was a regular bundle of dumb right now and would need to get my shit together if I wanted to survive for more than a couple of days.

“Well, a few minutes ago you didn't react too well to my new look,” I remarked, and gestured to myself from head to toe, trying to cover for my boneheaded decisions. “I'm kind of making this up as I go along and wanted to talk it out before you ran for the hills in fright,” I finished.

Shana didn't immediately try to get off the couch. At my gesturing, her eyes roved up and down my body, drinking me in. For a brief instant, her demeanour of displeasure gave way to something hungrier and more speculative, and I

definitely caught sight of her tongue poke out and running over the inside of her top lip.

But then she switched back to being nonplussed. She did however remain seated.

“I’m no longer frightened,” Shana informed me coolly. “I admit my first reaction to what’s happened to the world could be described as...hysterical, and I made a few poor decisions too, but I’m back to being more like myself. I had a bit of time to think it over while I was out, and I’m very much leaning towards anger, not fear.”

“What? You thought it over when you were asleep? That’s not how sleep normally works,” I said, questioning her.

Shana gave me a withering look.

“I’m not some shrinking violet, you know. Apparently, I failed some sort of ‘check’ and was forced to faint. My mind was active during this fainting spell, and I was able to collect my thoughts,” Shana explained.

“Ah, that makes sense actually,” I agreed. “The long and the short of it is that the world now runs on rules similar to a video game. Did you play any RPG games at all?”

“Not personally,” she answered. “I had a few boyfriends in high school who dabbled and talked about it incessantly with their friends. Those relationships didn’t last, but I understand what you mean.”

“Good,” I said. “That should make things easier.”

“So, are you going to try and stop me if I pull this tape off my ankles? It’s not very comfortable, you know,” she asked.

“That depends. Are you going to do a runner when you’ve got the tape off or hear me out?” I asked back.

“In these heels? I wouldn’t get very far,” she stated, and lifted her legs and wiggled her feet. Her high-heeled cream shoes were still fitted snugly in place.

“Fair point,” I muttered.

I got down on one knee and clasped her wiggling feet and unwrapped the tape. Shana yelped a little as I pulled it away, but she didn't swear too profusely or tell me off. I flashed her a wide grin and let go of her legs, standing up in a smooth motion.

“Thank you,” she said. “Is Victor really dead?”

I had been dreading that particular question. His body lay on the other side of the room behind the couch, currently out of her sight. I scratched at my scalp before answering.

“Unhh, yeah,” I confessed. “In my defence your stepfather did shoot at me five times,” I added hesitantly.

“Good riddance,” Shana replied with surprising vehemence. “He was a deluded fucking asshole.”

Okay, killing her stepfather wasn't going to be the serious impediment in this situation that I feared it would be.

“You're taking his death awfully well,” I queried.

“Would you rather I wail and cry? Call you a monster like he did,” she grumped, and crossed her arms.

“Another fair point,” I conceded. “What about your mother? Won't she be upset?”

“She passed last year, cancer,” Shana said simply.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up bad memories,” I apologised.

She waved my apology off. “Don't. I loved my mother and grieved for her death, but she left me in a really shitty situation, stuck with Victor. Honestly, I'm as much angry with her as saddened, but you have solved that problem for me it seems. Although, if the world really has gone mad then it wouldn't have mattered any longer anyway.

“What now? Are you satisfied I'm not going to run straight to the cops? Can I go?”

“I have a proposition for you first,” I said, deftly avoiding the question of whether I would let her go.

“Really? I don’t think now is the right time, all things considered,” she laughed.

I couldn’t help but smile at the innuendo myself.

“Not that kind of proposition,” I clarified. “Something a bit more relevant to our current gamified situation.”

I paced in front of her, trying to figure out the best way to approach my ‘offer’.

Shana tapped her wrist on an imaginary watch after a moment to hurry me up. “I don’t live in Flint,” she said. “If I’m going to get back to my home in Detroit and wait this out, I need to get on the road.”

“Yeah, about that. First, I’m fairly sure the Merc outside isn’t going to work. Not if anything we were told about what is happening is true and I’m inclined to believe it all is. Second, I’m a pragmatic kind of guy and as crazy as all this seems, I think we have to run with it. I can’t deny that I’m physically...different from a few moments ago,” I admitted.

“You can say that again,” Shana interrupted. “It’s not all bad, though,” she finished with a welcoming smile.

Was she flirting with me? It seemed like she was, and she was an exceptionally good-looking woman.

Oh, dear, was the next thought that popped into my head, foreseeing what would come next.

I was a young guy in the prime of my life and couldn’t help the inevitable direction my thoughts followed. Unfortunately, my boxers and shorts, which were already a little uncomfortably tight since my recent physical changes, suddenly began to feel a hell of a lot more...constricting.

I saw the look on Shana’s face when she also noticed my perfectly natural biological response to her flirtatious behaviour. Her eyes widened with surprise and then she giggled as my cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

I coughed and angled my body away from her. This failed to have the desired effect as presenting my profile probably exacerbated what was on display. Shana's giggling intensified.

She was very cute when she laughed like that.

God, but that didn't help either. *Focus, Torin.*

"The way I see things," I started, trying to get things back on track. "We have two general options. Option one, we behave much as we normally would in a disaster situation. Toe the line, keep our heads down, and wait for the authorities to sort things out."

I couldn't help but glance over to the far side of my apartment door to the dead body I had recently 'made'. Shana saw the direction of my stare and levered herself around on the couch to look over the back and saw Victor's corpse. She flipped back around, and our eyes met then. With that simple look we mutually acknowledged that option one was pretty much a no go, for me at least.

"Option two," I re-started. "We accept the world has changed. There is no guarantee the government or army can save us in time, or maybe ever. In which case our best chance to survive is to embrace the new normal as fast as possible. If we adapt and act first our odds of survival improve dramatically. This means we should stick together and do whatever we possibly can to level up."

My argument was heavily cribbed from the same spiel Dean had fed me and that had kind of worked, hopefully this would too. With the first part of my pitch finished, I waited to get a hint of how amenable Shana was. What I got was a surprising prompt, but not an unwelcome one in the circumstances.

**** Persuasion check was successful. Target will be more receptive to any offers you make. ****

This had to be something similar to what had caused her to pass out earlier. My increased social stats making it easier for me to convince her to accept my offer.

For a fleeting moment I was conflicted about what this meant in terms of consent and free will, but there comes a point where you just have to go with it. Dead is dead and I had no intention of joining Victor, if these checks made that less likely, I was all for it. Besides, this was just a literal piece of feedback verifying something that you would previously have had to guess at.

Shana closed her eyes when I stopped talking and sighed loudly. “I hate to admit it, but I agree with you. Trying to get back to Detroit on my own if the car won’t start is a tough ask. And I don’t know anybody else in Flint, well, none that wouldn’t associate me with Victor at any rate, which I don’t think would put them in the frame of mind to assist me.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t the first person your stepdad tried to shakedown for money.”

I wasn’t trying to make her feel bad, but at the same time wanted to bolster the idea that I was the only viable game in town.

“To that end,” I said, taking the plunge “I have a new ability that would allow me to bond with you and help us work together better as a team. It grants us a few benefits that would help us get stronger quicker. And not to toot my horn, but I had a personal interview with the head administrator, and he said I was pretty badass. You could do a lot worse” I finished with an attempted disarming wink.

I wasn’t lying to her precisely, just leaving a few of the more dissuasive details out.

“I also can’t help but notice you picked Civilian when you created your character build. Mine is a bit more combat orientated, which I think we will need,” I went on, scrambling to fortify my argument.

“Don’t mention the character thing,” Shana groaned. “I had a full-on meltdown when it happened. I thought I was losing my mind and refused to participate; hence I was made a Civilian.”

“If I recall my own interview correctly, I think you will get a re-do when you get enough experience to level-up for the first time. But we have to get you that XP first, which I think would be easier if we bonded,” I suggested, pressing the pros of my case again.

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” Shana started. “...but what aren’t you telling me?”

“I’m not...” I began, but was cut short by a scornful look from the dark-haired beauty sitting in front of me.

“Fine. I will technically be the one in charge...and... and I don’t think it’s reversible,” I conceded.

“So, I’d belong to you, is what you’re saying,” she said carefully.

“I wouldn’t describe it like that.”

“But that would be an accurate description,” she finished for me.

The conversation was no longer going as well as I’d hoped after seeing that persuasion notice. However, Shana hadn’t told me to sling my hook or made a run for the door. Maybe it wasn’t going as badly as it appeared.

“You just said your character was combat-oriented. What did you pick?” she inquired.

“Just so you know, I didn’t pick mine. My character was imposed as a kind of penalty for getting something better than what most people would have access to. That being said, I was given Dungeon Corsair Captain and had my species changed to Acheronian,” I said, answering her question in as positive a manner as I could.

“Corsair huh? So, you’re a pirate. A real bad boy,” she grinned with amusement.

“Kind of,” I admitted, with an air of defeat.

“Oh, don’t look so dejected. I like bad boys,” she laughed.

Damn, but that laugh and the look she gave me was so fucking sexy.

“Quick, let’s do this before I change my mind. This might be a terrible mistake but given the situation I feel like reckless is the way to go,” Shana said, and stretched out her hand for me to take.

I was a little taken aback at her sudden acceptance but recovered rapidly. This was the result I was after.

My hand shot forward and clasped hers firmly but gently. Then I followed the instructions I had been given and felt my will stretch out and envelop Shana’s. My will settled around her and pushed through a tiny amount of resistance. The bond suffused her body and settled into every corner of her soul.

I hadn’t realised it, but I’d closed my eyes when the bonding started, and they snapped open now. I looked down upon her with fresh appreciation. I didn’t just see her but felt her presence too and smiled in satisfaction.

She was mine.

Then there were the inevitable prompts.

**** You have bound Shana Colton to you. As a level one character you will not be able to bond another person until level six and at least thirty days have passed.*

You have used seduction and persuasion to convince your first target to consensually agree to soulbinding. This choice has a permanent effect on your path of power.

All those bonded to you consensually are granted a 10% bonus on earned XP when in a party with you. Those

*bonded against their will be taxed 10% of earned XP when in a party with you. ****

Alright, despite the somewhat suspect word choices, I wasn't about to complain if this sped up Shana's advancement. And it's not as if I had wanted to bind people against their will, so now had a good argument against doing so if it should ever come up again in the future.

"Whoa," she cried. "That felt really strange. I was also just told I would get ten percent extra experience when I'm in a group with you, so you weren't lying about the benefits. It is weird, though. Even casually thinking about stabbing you to death as soon as you turn your back feels horrifically unnatural. I literally don't think I could bring myself to do it," she finished nonchalantly.

"Hang on," I muttered with a hint of concern. "You were contemplating murdering me?"

"Well, sort of, but only if you turned out to be some creepy fuckwad that had been lying to get in my pants. Which it seems you aren't, so it's all good," she explained, dismissing my concerns.

I narrowed my eyes at that, thinking perhaps I should assert my authority.

"What makes you so confident I'm not trying to get in your pants?"

Shana laughed heartily at that. "Oh, I know you are trying to do that. I've just come down on the side of you not being a creepy fuckwad that would force me against my will. I don't know, maybe it's this bond, but I feel like I have a strong sense of the kind of person you are and I'm not getting the creep vibe from you. I would know, I've been living with two of them."

Not exactly a compliment but I'd take that from a girl who looked as good as she did any day of the week. And she hadn't said I would fail in any attempt to get in her pants

either. Before I could come up with an adequate verbal riposte to her teasing, I was interrupted by Quixbix's tinkling quest update.

<Quest 'Path of the Soulbinder 1' completed. 3,468 XP awarded. Simple Oak Bow, Simple Leather Quiver, 20x Simple Oak Arrows and Leather Bracers of the Bound added to your inventory> he intoned formally.

"Holy shit! Who was that?" Shana cried out in shock.

She shot up from the couch and stumbled in her heels and I reached out and caught her. I held her close for a moment and inhaled deeply, relishing her scent. She smelt of lavender and honey, or at least I thought so, it was intoxicating and very arousing. I forced myself to let her go once she had righted herself.

"Ah, that would be Quixbix. He is my quest imp; he was one of the boons I got with my character. Quixbix can give us quests and help us advance. He is just informing me, us, that I have completed a quest," I explained quickly.

<That is correct, and welcome to team Torin Rules the Waves, Shana. In the future, I can address each of you separately if you prefer> he offered.

"Uh, hello Quixbix," she responded to the imp.

Then. "What did you have to do to complete this quest?" Shana nudged me.

I hesitated to answer her and didn't have a chance to formulate a reply before Quixbix filled the conversational gap.

<To bind you, of course. I was a little bit concerned that he was going soft when he didn't bind you in your sleep, but he's a wily one is Torin. He prefers to keep people unaware of his deplorable deeds. Have them smile and say thank you as he plunders and conquers to his heart's content> he announced.

I would have facepalmed if I didn't think that would make me look more guilty.

“Oh, really,” Shana breathed warningly. She crossed her arms and arched her eyebrow. Her earlier sexual playfulness gone. “What was I saying about creepy fuckwad’s, I might have to change my assessment.”

Fuck me sideways, but this was awkward.

I wanted to reassure Shana I wasn’t a creeper, but I also didn’t want to alienate my bloodthirsty imp. I couldn’t do both, and well, now that she was bonded, technically Shana couldn’t hurt me. I wasn’t convinced Quixbix was similarly held back.

So, my quick decision was not to directly contradict the imp and change the subject instead.

“Quixbix favours the direct approach to getting the job done, while I prefer to explore alternative, mutually beneficial, avenues of success,” I evaded the truth, and hoped it would hint I wouldn’t have taken her unwillingly, while not exposing my reluctance to act as a desperado to Quixbix.

“Now, I can see I earned some equipment as well as XP for completing the quest, and Quixbix, you seem to have put it directly into my inventory. I don’t know much about the inventory function. Do you have any hints?” I asked.

<Yes, Torin. Just think about your inventory and I can display a list of the contents for you. As a combat class you have slots in the inventory available for mana infused equipment. You get five plus an extra sixteen for having a K-grade class, giving you twenty-one total.

<You can only put one item in each slot with a maximum weight of twenty-five kilograms. Heavier gear will occupy additional slots to compensate. Anything worn or being carried is not counted as being in the inventory. You may also place any other materials or items weighing up to one hundred kilograms in a general inventory slot> he answered and continued.

<Shana, Civilian is a non-combat class. You do not have any specialised equipment slots. You can, however, place

up to one thousand kilograms of materials and items in your general inventory. Not to worry, though. I'm sure Torin will choose a nifty and lethal combat class for you> he pronounced.

God damn it Quixbix, I thought to myself.

“Shana is part of the team Quixbix. Teammates discuss that kind of thing first,” I clarified to placate the growing anger in Shana’s posture. “Can we swap gear or is it soulbound to me?”

<Yes, you can trade gear. Why wouldn’t you be able to?> he answered.

“In some games here on Earth, you can’t. Things only work for those who earned them or used them first,” I explained.

<That’s daft. A thing is a thing, why wouldn’t it work for whoever picked it up> he scoffed.

“Okay, never mind,” I said to him absently.

I was examining my inventory and used Analyse on the gear I had acquired.

Simple Oak Bow

Ranged Weapon

Damage: 10 + STR stat

Durability: 10/10

—

Simple Oak Arrows x20

Ranged Ammunition

Damage: based on bow (Piercing)

Durability: 1/1

—

Simple Leather Quiver

Case for Arrows: Arrows are magically held in place unless drawn. Offers some measure of protection to the projectiles stored within. The quiver may utilise a weapon or item slot. If neither is selected, then the holding and protection properties are forfeited.

Durability: 10/10

—

Bracers of the Bound

Leather Armour (Medium)

Damage Mitigation: Low

HP +30 (base of 25)

Stat: +1 (DEX), Skill +5 (Archery), +5 Hit Points

Item Description: May only be worn by someone soulbound to Torin Carter. All bonuses bar the damage mitigation are increased by Torin Carter's applicable levels and only utilises one armour slot. Which stat and skill is affected by bonuses are contingent on the bearer's aptitudes.

Stat: 1 (+1 for every five of Torin's levels to a maximum of +5)

Skill: 5 (+1 for every three of Torin's levels to a maximum of +10)

HP: +5 per Torin's level

Durability: 100/100 (Can always be repaired even if reduced to 0 durability)

—

There was a definite Archery vibe coming from these items. Which was concerning as I'd never picked up a bow in my life. The Bracers of the Bound were undoubtedly the pick of the bunch, but if I was reading the text right it could only be equipped by Shana and the current stat and skill affected by

the bonuses it provided were derived from her aptitudes and not mine.

I walked over to my coffee table in front of the TV and summoned the items from my inventory and set them down.

“This is what I got for completing the quest,” I informed Shana hoping it would distract her from my imp’s less than subtle oversharing.

She had still been looking at me askance, but her demeanour softened when she saw what I had laid out on the table, much as I’d desired. She walked over, a smile creeping onto her face, and she picked up the bow.

As the name suggested it was a simple curved wooden bow about three feet long with a grip made from coiled cloth or rope. Shana plucked the string and then took up a stance with one leg ahead of the other and drew the string back, her knuckles resting against her cheek.

“The string has good tensile strength for something so simple. It feels well crafted,” she commented after finishing her examination.

“You know how to use a bow and arrow?”

“Yes,” she said “I picked it up at a summer camp when I was twelve. I was good, so I kept it up for a few years, but I stopped shortly after starting high school which I regret. Some cheerleading bitches made comments about my Native American heritage, and I quit hoping they would stop, they didn’t, but I always enjoyed it,” she reminisced wistfully.

“Well, I don’t think it’s a coincidence the rewards for the quest suit you as well as they do,” I observed.

On a hunch I tried to view her character sheet. An action rewarded with success and scanned through it quickly.

The results were less than stellar. Her sheet had all the same information as mine and confirmed that she was currently a human civilian. Most of her stats were in the low single digits with the exception of her Speed of eight, which

was still slower than my twelve, and a starting Mana Capacity of twenty. That was better than mine.

The real kicker, though, was each level of Civilian only granted three stats points and ten Hit Points. By comparison I would get twenty-four points in my stats and one hundred and sixty Hit Points.

The character sheet had bit more information on the other pages. A notation under soulbinding spelled out that Shana had access to Quixbix and would benefit from my Notoriety bonuses. Civilians had a separate crafting perk that allowed them to complete 'job' quests and learn trade skills which was how those who decided against a life with a combat class could advance.

Also, when she got to one thousand experience and could level up, she could instead use her unallocated character aptitude to redo her character.

Which was good, as Shana only had sixty Hit Points. Fifty for being human and ten for her single level of Civilian. Whereas I had a natural four hundred and ten. One hundred and fifty for being an Acheronian, fifty each for my Harmonisation and Path and then one-hundred and sixty for the first level of Dungeon Corsair Captain.

There was no two ways about it, the Z-grade Civilian class was really poor compared to mine. A civilian would need fifteen or more extra levels to match me at level one and even then, I would likely win unless they had a species to match my Frostbinder Acheronian.

Not to mention a single bullet would have stripped her of all hit points. Whereas I took four to the chest and could have absorbed a couple more before being in trouble.

I couldn't get cocky, though. Numbers counted for a lot, and they would have more. People that is.

Images of pitchfork-wielding villagers flitted across my mind.

However, Shana was the one who definitely needed the small boosts from the gear.

“Shana, I want you to equip all of this. You’ve used a bow before, and I haven’t. And it looks like you could really use the extra hit points from the Bracers,” I told her.

“If you think so, Torin, but what will you use?” she inquired.

She made a good point. Then I remembered how I had despatched Victor and willed a three-foot-long Ice Blade into existence in my hand. The blade had a crescent shape similar to a scimitar.

*** -15 Mana (*Ice Blade construction*) ***

I swished the blade about in front of me experimentally and then analysed it.

Ice Blade Construct

Bladed Weapon

Damage: 10 + STR stat (Piercing) and 12 (base 10) Cold

Stat: Long blade skill +10

Item Description: Made from Impervious Ice, this blade is as strong as Steel. (This includes only melting at temperatures that would melt Steel.) Does not cause cold damage if held by the grip.

Durability: 1/1

I was impressed with the stats for a sword I made for myself. I summoned a second one for my left hand and struck a few poses. Drizzt would be eating his heart out if he could see me.

Sadly, the person who could see me, Shana, struggled to contain her mirth at my antics. I stopped slaying imaginary

foes, coughed lightly, and put my swords down.

Quixbix chose that moment to interject.

<Now you have finished distributing your booty, are you ready for your next quest? That was a trick question as this one is mandatory. This quest is for Torin only, but I'll show you as well, Shana, as you will be aiding him.>

**** The Corsair's Canon 1 (Kx4)*

What is a Dungeon Corsair Captain without a ship? What is a Corsair's ship without a dungeon core to power it? Worthless? Irrelevant? Perhaps these are questions you don't want the answers to. Open your senses, locate a suitable dungeon, plumb its depths, and claim the core for yourself.

(Due to the unusually low level and circumstances of Torin Carter, the rewards for this quest have been quadrupled)

Success: Claim the core of a completed dungeon.

Rewards: 13,600 XP and future The Corsair's Canon quests.

Soul Collar, Helm of the Bound, Leggings of the Bound, Gloves of the Bound.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

I dismissed the quest text from my vision.

“What is that all about?” Shana asked.

“It's a requirement of my character class. As a corsair, I need a ship, but as the quest suggests not just any ship will do. We are going to have to complete a dungeon first, seize the core that powers it and then fuse that core to a vessel. I have a week to secure one before suffering penalties to my XP gains,” I admitted, and then added a bit sheepishly. “Yeah, and now that we are bonded, you'll get the same penalty.”

Shana's pretty lips parted to unleash some rather less pretty verbiage in my direction, but the world slowed to a stop.

<Time to find your dungeon, Torin. I've activated 'slow mode' for this first attempt to block out other distractions, otherwise, it can be overwhelming when you open yourself up like this> he advised.

Thank you, Quixbix. How do I do this? I asked.

<Like everything else just think about it and it will happen> he replied.

Alright, here goes nothing, I sighed.

I tried to sit down but couldn't being physically frozen while held like this. Brushing that annoyance from my mind I focused instead on opening myself up to my dungeon sense.

Allowing the information to flow into me was remarkably easy. Trying to digest the inrush of that data was not. It was a swirling morass of knowledge, feelings, and impressions all hitting me simultaneously. All the different strands tried to imprint on my awareness at once and only managed to get in each other's way.

If my eyes could water, they would be streaming right now. The sensation wasn't painful as such, but it was incredibly irritating and disorienting. Blessedly, the whole thing only lasted for what felt like a few seconds.

I could sense what I'd gathered pulse in my mind, but it resembled a tangled ball of yarn. Useful eventually if you had the time or the will to sort through the ball, unravelling it as you went.

This may take longer than fifteen minutes, I thought.

<What a mess. Didn't you apply any filters before you imported the dungeon records?> Quixbix remarked cheekily.

There was an unmistakable underlying amusement in Quixbix's mental communication. The little shit deliberately didn't warn me. I was angry, yes, but it also served as another

sliver of evidence that reinforced my suspicions that Quixbix could make my life exceedingly difficult if he chose to.

You made no mention of applying a filter. Only that I should open myself up. I replied with barely restrained anger.

His initial response was a hearty chortle, confirming my earlier suspicion of his complicity in what just happened.

<Sorry, Torin. I couldn't resist. Never fear, I wouldn't prank you if I couldn't fix it. Voila, I've sorted it into something usable> he promised.

I grumped internally but had a fresh interface in front of me with two tabs. The first was a summary of what I had learned.

**** Dungeon Scan radius is 100 miles.*

Dungeons Located: 72

Average level: 27

Unconquered Dungeons: 72

*Successfully Marked Dungeons: 4 ****

This was a short summary page. I was a bit surprised by the number of dungeons I had detected. Seventy-two was a lot, but as I thought it over a one-hundred-mile radius did incorporate most of the southern half of Michigan. The average level was concerning, though.

Quixbix, I understand the dungeons are all unconquered as we've only been in the Framework for ten minutes. What are the Successfully Marked Dungeons? I asked.

<You are only level one, Torin. Your sense alerts you to the existence of every dungeon in the one-hundred-mile radius. Most of them are too high a level to reveal their exact

location. Dungeons will naturally attempt to resist detection by classes that might enslave them. You will know the general direction of most of those who have resisted you, but not their precise locations. The most powerful dungeons have been able to conceal everything about themselves from you, barring that they exist somewhere within one hundred miles> he explained and continued.

<As you grow in power, fewer dungeons will be successful at hiding from you and you will learn more. Currently, only four of them are low enough level or weak enough for you to mark their position accurately.>

Dean had left that little titbit out.

There were only four viable possibilities, but I shouldn't have been surprised when the average level of dungeons in range was twenty-seven. I opened the second tab which listed the four marked dungeons.

The Buried Burrows (Dungeon Core)

Fighter (W) 5

Ship Potential: Low

Value: 20,000 XP

Threat: Very High

Location: Near Ortonville (21 miles)

—

The Jade Catacombs (Dungeon Core)

Trader (X) 6

Ship Potential: Low

Value: 18,000 XP

Threat: Very High

Location: Near Bad Axe (91 miles)

—

The Ogre Delves (Dungeon Core)

Barbarian (U) 3

Ship Potential: Moderate

Value: 21,000 XP

Threat: Near Impossible

Location: Near Bunker Hill (49 miles)

—

Anastasia Ruslanovna (Dungeon Core)

Lifeforce Enchantress (N) 1

Potential: Very High

Value: 24,000 XP

Threat: Moderate*

Location: Near Ionia (87 miles)

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A quick review of the four dungeons revealed that only one of them was level one.

Anastasia Ruslanovna is a strange name for a dungeon. All the others are distinctly more dungeony, I expressed.

<I don't know what to tell you, Torin. Some of the Framework programs aren't very imaginative. The higher-level dungeons have probably been imported or straight up cloned from existing dungeons on other worlds. That one is a brand-new dungeon unformed until a few minutes ago. They probably got lazy and just named it after a nearby grave marker or something. Over time as the dungeon develops its own style, it will adopt a more fitting moniker> he lectured.

I wasn't convinced. But of my four possible targets, it was by far the most promising.

Is its newness the reason it is only listed as a moderate threat? I questioned the imp.

<An astute observation, Torin. Note the asterisk, though. That means the dungeon is in the process of forming and has not fulfilled its maximum potential yet. The danger will increase over the next few days as will the dungeon's threat rating. The dungeon has a very high potential and will likely be incredibly deadly for level one parties within a week.

<If that is where you are headed, you need to get there within the next few days before the dungeon has a chance to fully realise that potential. The threat meter factors Shana's inclusion in your party. Although as a Civilian she doesn't contribute much, you will want to reforge her character as soon as possible. Probably best before you go on your dungeon dive.>

Speaking of Shana, can she hear us right now? I asked.

<No, Torin. I can't link your minds in 'slow mode'> he responded.

What does this Soul Collar I get for completing this quest do? I asked next.

<It will allow you to bring an avatar of the dungeon core as an additional character with you when you leave the ship. Super useful, don't you think> he answered.

I didn't push any harder on that, though I suspected there was more to it.

Last question. How often can I update or absorb more information on dungeons?

<As often as you want. Although what you gather won't change much unless you level up or move a significant distance. Your radius is always based on your current location> he advised. <Are you ready to return to real-time?>

Can you hold me here for as long as you can please? I want to strategise for a few minutes, I requested.

<Sure, no problem, Torin. I'll keep you in 'slow mode' so you can come up with a plan and not look like a clueless noob in front of the honey. You do know you don't need to impress her, right? You can just order her to fu...>

Bugger off, Quixbix. I interrupted him before he could finish his lewd counsel.

<Fine. But I know, that you know, that I'm right> he huffed.

Unfortunately, Quixbix parting retort left me stewing for a few minutes and I wasted most of that time. Then I managed to mentally shrug it off and got down to the nitty-gritty of formulating our next steps.

Quixbix hadn't been right, this wasn't about impressing Shana.

Okay, this wasn't *just* about impressing Shana.

By binding her I had effectively taken on responsibility for her welfare as well as my own and the weight of that decision was only now becoming apparent. I could make the excuse that I'd still been reeling from the world-changing revelations and hadn't been thinking things through, but that sounded weak, even to me. If I flaked out now, I wouldn't just doom me, but her too.

Unless I killed myself.

Yeah, not happening.

That meant no more procrastinating. Something I'd heard on a rerun of the TV show *Angel* resonated with me right now, a paraphrased quote from Wesley. If you try to save everybody, you will end up saving nobody.

If I tried to be a hero, the good guy, the type of person who saved the world, I would fail. The class I'd been lumbered with simply wasn't built for it.

As contradictory as it may sound, I could do more good by being a bit villainous. I could protect those who owed their allegiance to me. Build a powerbase of strength, both

literally and figuratively. A place those who owed their allegiance to me could thrive.

The history of monarchs, leaders, and powerful nation states was rarely a tale of peace, love, and harmony. It was a litany of war, greed, and hate, and those who had risen to power in the midst of the chaos that ensued. I wasn't excusing the great wrongs that were committed by those who held power, but those wrongs were the foundation of the better world humanity built atop them later.

And we would indeed need to build the world anew.

One other undeniable fact was that during turmoil, scum always rose to the top. Did I trust anyone else to be that scum but me?

No, I didn't.

I was the master of my destiny, and I wouldn't entrust it to anybody else.

My decision was made. I would act in my best interests with the desire that this would trickle down to those who followed in my wake. The true challenge I faced would be utilising the right balance of violence and ruthlessness to achieve the desired ends without becoming a parasite that drained all life from the community.

And if I happened to accumulate women, loot, and glory in the process, well, great deeds shouldn't go unrewarded.

My ruminations weren't really a plan per se, more of a resolution of my intent. I would embrace being a Dungeon Corsair Captain. Many might hate me for what I'd do, but they'd be alive to do the hating and I could live with that.

Quixbix had told me most of his owners got fifteen minutes in 'slow mode'. I'd used most of that but had long enough before real-time kicked back in that I had a plan of action in mind as I transitioned back to the world at normal speed.

“What the fuck do you mean by that?” Shana snapped crossly.

Ah, yes, she had been in mid-rant when Quixbix intervened. I put my hand up to forestall any further angry questions.

“Hold-up. I’ve been thinking it over,” I said, and Shana’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “I have a plan of action. Which I will explain in due course, but I think it’s time we finally got out of this apartment and explore what has happened to the world.”

Chapter 7

“Oh, and where are we going?” Shana asked.

“Well, I’ve performed a quick scan of the local dungeons, it’s a class perk, and our best bet is just outside the town of Ionia. That’s the direction we will be headed in, at any rate,” I related.

“Ionia? That’s what, a hundred miles from Flint?” Shana queried.

“Not quite. A little under ninety.”

“That will take a couple of hours, particularly if there have been any crashes blocking the roads.”

“Cars won’t work now, or so I’ve been told, and I certainly haven’t heard any passing since this all happened,” I contradicted her line of thought.

“Shit. I forgot that for a moment. Are you suggesting we walk to Ionia? That will take a week or more,” Shana groaned with dismay.

“I’m hoping to secure an alternative form of transportation. There is a bicycle shop a few blocks from here. If we act fast, we can grab some bikes before everybody else figures out that the power and cars are dead for good. Barring any unexpected delays, we can cover ninety miles in a day, maybe a day and a half, if we put the effort in.”

“Okay, that’s actually a good idea. How are we going to pay without power for the card reader? Good bikes aren’t

cheap, and I don't carry that kind of cash on me. No offence but from the state of this threadbare couch you don't either," Shana frowned, and gave the orange two-seater a gentle kick for emphasis.

"You're not wrong on that front," I agreed, and glanced at my watch. It was almost seven in the evening. "That won't be an issue. They closed at five and...well... we're pirates now. I wasn't planning on paying."

"You mean we're breaking in?" She was a little shocked at the notion and covered her mouth with her hand.

It was a cute look on her, but I simply glanced to my side at the cooling body of Victor. Shana followed my gaze and then giggled nervously.

"I guess you do have bigger things to worry about," she concurred.

"Yep. First things first, your attire while perfect for shaking down devilishly handsome tenants," I started.

Shana stuck her tongue out at me in response and I couldn't help but notice she had a silvery tongue stud.

"...Won't be as helpful for breaking and entering or other nefarious physical activities," I finished.

"Not a problem," she said offhandedly. "I have my gym gear in the trunk of the Mercedes."

"That will work. We will get those clothes first and then collect some of my meagre possessions before heading out. Put the bracers on. The Framework bods claimed there wouldn't be any monsters in the towns for a few days, but desperate people do desperate things as Victor aptly demonstrated."

Shana nodded and picked up the brown leather arm braces. They were simple looking curved leather with laces down one side to tighten them once you put them on. There was a little decorative stitchwork around the edges in yellow thread.

She rolled the sleeves of her blouse up and slipped the bracers on. I helped her with the laces which got us nice and close. What we were doing was mundane, but I detected a slight tremble from Shana as my fingers brushed against her skin just below her elbows.

But now wasn't the time for exploring potential funny business.

"There, perfect. Do you have the keys to the boot?" I asked.

"Boot? What boots are you talking about?" Shana quizzed me back, expressing her confusion.

"Sorry. Trans-Atlantic miscommunication. The trunk. Do you have the keys to the trunk? In England we call it the boot," I explained.

"Oh, and um, no, Victor has the keys," she gulped, and looked over at his body, scrunching her face in distaste.

"Do you want to get them or shall I?"

"You killed him; you should do it."

"It is technically your car..." I weaseled in return.

Shana gave me a very nonplussed look.

"Okay," I laughed. "I'll get them this time. But if this really is an apocalypse you will have to work on your squeamishness."

"I don't think that's something we should be joking about," Shana sighed, as I made my way over to Victor and crouched by his body.

"Maybe not, but sometimes a bit of gallows humour is the only way to ward off creeping insanity," I huffed distractedly, considering where to check first. "Do you know where he keeps the keys? I'd rather get this done as quickly as I can."

"Now who's squeamish?" she heckled back at me.

I sternly looked over my shoulder. This did the trick, and Shana dropped the mockery, her expression implying acceptance of the non-verbal scolding.

“His right pocket I think,” she offered quietly.

I dipped my hand into the material of his right pocket and fished out the contents. I now had his wallet and a set of keys which helpfully were attached to a fob with the Mercedes-Benz three-pointed star in a circle logo on it. I threw the keys over to Shana who deftly caught them and sent Victor’s wallet to my inventory.

I’d probably end up chucking it later but decided to hold on to it for now.

Getting up from my crouch, I retrieved the two ice scimitars from the table. I knew dual-wielding weapons wasn’t very practical in real combat, but also didn’t have a shield.

And if things did work like a game, then who knows?

Shana opened the door, and I stepped out ahead of her, curved swords at the ready. The gantry was still empty and the car park devoid of any activity.

This was a bit weird. I expected to see more people about by now. There was the sound of people yelling in the distance, but I couldn’t make out the specifics, it was probably general panic. The plumes of smoke rose in the skyline, but otherwise, it was eerily placid.

“Come on, let’s do this quickly,” I suggested to Shana, and she stepped onto the gantry beside me. Her bow at the ready with an arrow nocked but no tension or pull on the string.

We walked to the end of the metal gantry passing the faded green doors of the other apartment units as we went. There was a bit of movement and noise coming from Mrs Pearson’s apartment next door to me, but I already knew she was home. There was nothing to note as we passed the windows to the other three apartments. I did peer inside

quickly as we passed by, but without lights on inside, I couldn't make much out.

I didn't want to delay so we pressed on and reached the wide metal stairwell that led to the ground floor and the car park. We rushed down, and I winced at the noisy metallic clanking we made during the descent. When I stepped off the final step and onto the tarmac, I was prompted with a fresh notification.

**** The Framework has identified that this building, Yewtree Apartment Block 4, belonged to Markham Filigree Holdings Inc. A corporate entity that is no longer recognised under the Framework.*

Grizelda Pearson as the longest surviving resident and has been offered the opportunity to claim this property under the Framework and has chosen to do so.

As the only other recognised resident of Yewtree Apartment Block 4 currently on the property, your presence has contested Grizelda Pearson's claim. By leaving, her seizure of this property is now uncontested and will complete in fifteen minutes.

*You have until then to return to the property and continue contesting the claim of Grizelda Pearson. If you do not, the Framework will validate her ownership of the property and grant her all appropriate rights. ****

That stopped me in my tracks and Shana bumped into my back. She walked around me and headed for the car shaking her head and grumbling a little about my impression of a door.

The prompt was unexpected but as I thought it through, I had no intention of returning, so it didn't bother me much. If I really was going to be living the life of a pirate, Flint would not be my base of operations. Therefore, the crazy old bat could have the complex.

Shana had opened the driver side door and slipped in behind the wheel. After a few attempts at getting the Mercedes to start, she banged the steering wheel angrily.

“No luck?” I asked her with a knowing impish grin.

She rolled her eyes and got out of the car and went to the back of the silver vehicle. She opened the boot and pulled out a black carry all bag before slamming the boot door closed.

“Is there anything else in the car you think might be useful?” I asked in a conciliatory tone. “Bullets for the revolver, maybe?”

“This is my stepfather’s car, so no. I have spare rounds in my car in Detroit, but that won’t help us,” she acknowledged.

“Fair enough,” I responded. “It is weird, though. I expected there to be more people about. Is this something the Framework has done, do you think?”

Shana sniggered at my suggestion which I found to be a strange reaction. Then she walked past me to the underside of the stairwell and pulled a flyer off the emergency escape directions and handed it to me.

The flyer was for the fifth annual Woodcroft Estates evening BBQ and fair taking place in Broome Park today.

That would have been where most people were when this had happened, at the park. The mayor as well as a fair few members of the local police department would be in attendance. Presumably, they were advising people or forcing them to remain at the park rather than run around aimlessly. I felt a bit stupid for forgetting about the fair, I’d even planned to go and get a free feed.

Luckily I hadn’t, otherwise, I’d probably be stuck there now as well. It was beneficial for us if it kept people out of the way while we prepared to leave the vicinity.

“Alright then. The reason I stopped suddenly when I stepped off the steps was that I got a notification that only Mrs Pearson and I were in the building. The cookout in Broome Park explains where most of the other residents are,” I started.

“Two of the ground floor units were vacant, thanks to my stepfather,” Shana admitted, filling me in on what she knew.

“That too. What it doesn’t explain is where the hell Reg is. He’s the super for all four apartment blocks and he ought to be in his unit, which is round the back of this block. Reg is the very definition of a Jobsworth, and he clocks off at five religiously. You’d need a friggin’ earthquake to get him out of his apartment once he’s off the clock. He wouldn’t have gone to the cookout, as he hates people. I think we should check out his place.”

“Lead on fearless commander,” Shana needled with a mock salute.

As much as I was enjoying our banter it occurred to me that I needed to know how effective this whole soul bond was. In the heat of the moment, I might need Shana to obey an order without question and might not have the time to explain myself. Now was as good a time as any to test it out, and I had a devilishly good idea how.

“I will, but first, change into your gym clothes, here in the parking lot where everyone can see,” I commanded.

As with most of the other changes the world had undergone, once I thought about it, I instinctively knew what inflection to use in my voice to convey this was an order and that I would brook no quibbling on her part.

“Yes, Torin,” Shana replied instantly.

She shrugged herself out of her high-heels and unzipped the skirt at the waist. Then shimmied her hips and the skirt slipped down her long legs, which she lay on the driver’s seat of the Mercedes neatly. Next, she unbuttoned the blouse, pulled it off and dropped it on top of the skirt in the

car. Then unexpectedly her right arm crooked behind her back, and she unhooked her bra letting it slip down her arms and it joined the rest of the pile of clothes.

She was standing in front of me in nothing but a pair of white panties and the brown leather bracers on her forearms.

My eyes zeroed in on her unclad breasts. They were as spectacular as I had suspected.

Tragically, my order had been to get changed, and she wasted little time digging through the black carry-all and donning a black sports bra with matching black gym leggings, top, and trainers. The outfit was figure-hugging, so it wasn't a complete let-down for my more libidinous inclinations.

“Wait a minute. Did you just use the bond to make me undress in front of you, you perv?” Shana sputtered indignantly once she had finished changing.

“Yes, but in my defence, I only ordered you to get changed, not to show me your money-makers. You made that choice on your lonesome,” I teased.

“Ass,” was her response, but I could tell the heat had already left her voice and there was a hint of a smile at my joke.

“That's, Captain Ass, thank you very much. Okay, pack your clothes away, or better yet put them in your inventory and we'll check out the super's place.”

“Fine,” she said, touching the clothes in the car and her bag on the ground, and they disappeared. “But you might want to think about your own wardrobe. The He-Man look might be sexy, but you kind of stand out with the blue body markings and black eyes.”

Shana had a point. I had forgotten about my altered appearance.

“Noted. We'll clear my apartment and then check out the super's place before raiding the bike shop,” I said, updating the plan on the fly.

We headed back up the steel steps and back into my apartment.

Ten minutes later, and I'd changed clothes.

Something I'd learned during that brief time was that my Frost element harmonisation kept me cool despite the ambient air temperature being in the high twenties centigrade.

I had to translate that as in the eighties for Shana.

The bond between us meant she was similarly cooled. This wasn't something to be sniffed at, as with any luck we would both soon be rocking full sets of armour and not sweating to death while wearing it would be helpful.

For now, this meant I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt that I usually only broke out during the winter months and was back in a pair of blue-washed jeans. I donned a pair of sunglasses to hide my eyes and Shana wrapped a dark blue bandana around my ears 'Spock in the Voyage Home' style.

I looked like a wannabe gangster douche, but that was better than something obviously not human right now.

We filled our inventories with what little food and useful items I had on hand. One torch, a handful of AA batteries, a couple of candles, and all my spare clothes. I took one last look around the place trying to think of anything I might be forgetting.

It felt like I was leaving a hotel room and not a home, which was just as well. I really doubted I would ever be back.

I put my hand on the door handle with what I thought would be one last look at Victor when Quixbix piped up.

<Hold your horses there my favourite buccaneer. I have something to dispense as you're leaving this place for good> Quixbix interrupted.

"Is it another quest?" I asked

<Not a quest. I need to recharge for a bit before I can give you another quest unless it's linked to your class or from

the Flint podium. And there is nothing you can take on the Flint podium right now. However, it's almost as much fun. I call them Dilemmas> he stated gleefully.

“You call them dilemmas, or the Framework named them dilemmas?” I ribbed him.

<Quit spoiling my fun, will you>

“Sorry, Quixbix. Can you make it so Shana can see it as well?”

<Of course, I've also set Shana to always be partied with you unless you dictate otherwise>

“Thanks, dude. I should have thought of that.”

<Happy to be of service, ravager of the unwary. And now for the Dilemma> he pronounced gleefully.

**** You have slain Victor Guberschmidt. A deed considered unlawful in the town of Flint. Whether you acted in self-defence or malice is unknowable by the authorities. This action has gone unnoticed for now, but what will you do? ****

Display Victor's body so all can see him and know of your deeds.
+10 Notoriety. A quest will be generated on the Flint podium for your apprehension. Dead or Alive.
Do nothing.
+2 Notoriety. When (or if) Victor's body is discovered. A quest will be generated on the Flint podium for your apprehension for interrogation.
Hide the evidence of his demise.
If successful, you will be granted immunity from Capture or

Kill quests in Flint for 24 hours unless you are spotted in an unlawful act by a recognised officer of the law and they manually issue the quest from the Flint podium.

“What is this?” Shana inquired as she read the prompt.

“Quixbix calls them dilemmas. They seem similar to quests, but no experience is on offer. What do you think we should do?” I asked her.

“Hmm, I don’t think bragging about killing this asshole is a good idea. What does notoriety give us?” she asked in return.

“Ten points of notoriety will increase the XP we get by 10%.”

“Is that really worth it for the extra hassle of being wanted individuals?”

“It’s a permanent bump, so possibly, but there are a lot of unknowns here. Quixbix these apprehension quests. Do they count outside of Flint?” I asked my imp.

<Yes. Although interested parties would need to get the quest from the Flint podium and return here to collect on it. Unless they had an imp or fairy of their own. Which is beyond unlikely.>

“Okay. What about the hide the evidence one, what happens if we aren’t successful?” I asked him.

<Then either of the other two options will apply depending on the circumstances of failure. The most likely result would be the first option.>

“I’m guessing with this whole automatic quest business, that lawbreaking of any kind carries with it the risk of one of these quests being generated.”

<That is correct. There is always a chance. The odds will depend on a series of checks performed by the Framework, assessing factors such as your relevant skills and the security in place. As this was your apartment, there being a lack of witnesses and because Victor tried to kill you first, the chances of a quest being automatically created when you killed him were incredibly low, practically non-existent, in fact> he explained.

“That could be a real ball-ache for the likes of me in the future.”

<Yes, almost every qualifying hamlet, village, town, and city in the United States has a default setting of Law Abiding.>

“Really?” Shana said in surprise “Even Detroit?”

I couldn't help but chuckle, but I don't think Quixbix got the joke.

<The settings are based on the existence of laws and the preponderance of law enforcement organisations to apply them at the point of integration. The rulers of these towns and regions may change that setting if they so choose.>

“We get it Quixbix. Considering that we're planning on breaking and entering, followed by thieving a few thousand dollars' worth of bikes, and as it's too late to leave Flint tonight, the immunity buff is the most appealing in the short term,” I mused aloud.

“Yes,” Shana agreed, “but how are we going to do it?”

I rubbed my smooth chin for a moment and contemplated our options. I opened the door and had a quick gander outside.

Everything seemed largely unchanged. I saw a few dogs running loose on the street but no other signs of life. The few apartments in the opposite block where I had seen movement earlier had pulled their curtains shut and at least one of them looked like they had boarded up their windows.

“Let’s keep it simple. You walk ahead of me, and I’ll put his arm over my shoulder and carry him. We can slap a pair of shades on him ‘Weekend at Bernie’s’ style and if anyone sees us, we claim he got blind drunk after the Framework messages. Then you open the boot...”

“Trunk,” Shana interrupted.

“...trunk, and I’ll shove him in,” I continued with an eye roll. “I don’t think he’s been dead long enough for rigour mortis to set in, so it should work. Then we swing by Reg’s apartment before we scam. Sound good?”

Shana nodded her agreement.

I picked Victor up and was struck again that it was easier than it ought to be. Unfortunately, his muscles relaxing post-death meant he had pissed himself.

His trousers had soaked most of it up and it had already started evaporating in the dry heat. Thankfully, we were spared the ignominy of him shitting himself. Victor must have taken a dump shortly before coming to harass me which was considerate of him.

Shana walked out ahead of me and checked that the coast was clear once more and beckoned for me to follow her. I carried Victor’s body with me and had to turn sideways to get us through the door. We were out in the late summer evening air, and I’d never felt more exposed in all my life.

I felt oddly calm, though.

We didn’t hang about and headed towards the stairwell, it was a shame that it wasn’t at my end of the gantry, it would have made things a lot easier.

Everything went according to plan for a grand total of three seconds. We were passing Mrs Pearson’s door when we heard her yelling.

“God damn kids, banging past ma’ door every five seconds. Make your damn minds up,” came her muffled shouting.

I had forgotten the senile old bat complained incessantly about the noise I made on the steel gantry whenever I walked past. No amount of explaining that there was no other way to my apartment made a blind bit of difference.

I'd learned the hard way the only solution was to endure her occasional chewing out. This was the third time we had gone by in the last fifteen minutes, and I should have remembered that would set her off.

Any hopes that she might leave it as a quick moan from inside her apartment proved forlorn as I heard the tell-tale tapping of her walking stick, that she only carried so she could prod people with it, on the floor.

The door flew open and exposed us mid corpse move.

Mrs Pearson stood there staring at us quivering with anger. I recognised the creature before us as Mrs Pearson, but she was greatly changed.

She was much taller but stooped over and that lessened the effect. If she straightened up, she would be at least six and a half, maybe even seven feet in height. Her short curly hair was gone, replaced by a mop of long, dark greasy locks. She was impossibly thin with spindly arms. Her fingers had dirty yellow talons and her eyes were a blazing scarlet red. She grimaced upon seeing me and Victor, her nose twitched and moved the reading glasses perched upon it up and down.

Her lips parted as she inhaled deeply, revealing a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth, ready to unleash a customary verbal tirade.

Nope, I wouldn't be letting her chew me out this time, not with those chompers. I analysed her by impulse.

Grizelda Pearson (Nocturne Hag)

Hex Witch (S) 1

Character Aptitude: Moderate

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 1,320

“Boy! I’ve warned ye...” the hag Mrs Pearson had become snapped grouchily and brandished her cane in a threatening manner.

She stopped mid-sentence and began sniffing the air. I let go of Victor’s arm which I’d been holding around my neck and moved it to the hilt of one of my ice scimitars. I had looped them through my belt, it wasn’t very convenient, but I didn’t have a proper scabbard. In the corner of my eye, I could see Shana reach over her shoulder to retrieve an arrow from her quiver.

“I smell carrion,” the hag proclaimed.

She licked her cracked lips with a long blotchy tongue. I’m not ashamed to admit to being physically repulsed and unable to look away. Her eyes darted about and then focused on good ol’ dead Victor. She smacked her lips together, and they made a revolting, wet, slapping sound.

“Gimme’,” she barked, discarding her cane.

Her long taloned arms stretched out, grasping for the dead body that I clung to my side.

I looked over at Shana and she shrugged her shoulders. I agreed with her assessment and let go of the hilt of my scimitar. Taking hold of Victor’s midriff firmly, I shoved his corpse towards the hag. She caught the body deftly in her spindly arms, and I backed up to the railings. Mrs Pearson dragged the carcass inside her home and slammed the door on us after one last glower.

“Don’t come back,” came a muted yell from inside.

Then I surmised from the horrific and fortunately muffled sounds emerging from the other side of the door the

hag hadn't bothered waiting for us to leave before beginning her meal.

Quixbix piped up in the stunned silence. <That was an unexpected method of disposal, but it will do. Dilemma complete. You and Shana now have a shroud of legal immunity for twenty-four hours in Flint.>

Acting as one, we didn't remain to find out if Mrs Pearson would recall that she wanted to chastise us further.

We were halfway down the steel steps when Shana spoke and shuddered. "Why would anybody pick to become that?"

"Can't say I know the precise reason, but the old woman she was hadn't been all there, upstairs," I said and pointed at my temple. "Not since I moved in. Maybe that's how she saw herself and the Framework offered it to her as an option."

That was my best guess, at any rate.

"Should we...I don't know, warn people somehow," Shana suggested as we got to the bottom.

I thought about her suggestion but couldn't think of anything feasible we could do in the short term, and I didn't want to delay any further. We only had a few hours until dark.

"People will figure it out for themselves, and nobody will be walking past her door as there is only my place on the other side. Let's check out the super's bolthole and then head out." I instructed.

I took Shana's hand in mine; her skin was soft, and I couldn't stop myself from caressing the back of her hand with my thumb. She didn't protest and I led her at a quick jog to the back of the building.

There was a grassed area at the back and a brick BBQ pit that had seen better days. The whole area was surrounded by an eight-foot treated wooden fence.

Our block differed from the other three in that the last unit had been extended and stuck out forming an L shape. This is where the laundry room and the Super's apartment for the four-block complex were located. I had taken the unit above the laundry as they knocked fifty bucks a month off the rent for the inconvenience of the noise and vibrations.

Reg's place was in the extended part that formed the ground floor L. It was a mixture of living space and storeroom from what I could tell the one time I had come looking for him before.

Paradoxically, considering that he was the complex super, his unit looked to be the one in most need of a bit of TLC. They all needed work, but his was a proper shithole. I approached the door, the faded green paint going one step further than the other complex doors and it was chipped and flaking off. I reluctantly let go of Shana's hand and knocked on the door.

I waited for a few seconds but there was no answer. I turned the doorknob and heard the latch unclick, so pushed the door open slowly. It was dark inside the room; the curtains had been pulled closed. The place was a mess, but then it had been the last time I was here.

Shana and I stepped in. Over on the left were a series of shelves with the kinds of things you would expect in a storage closet, all arranged haphazardly. Obviously, the items had been shoved wherever there had been some space when they'd been delivered.

There was a big grey armchair with its back to us in the corner of the room, placed in front of a TV set, which was switched off due to the lack of power. I could see what looked like the edge of a boot poking out on the right side of the armchair.

"Reg?" I called out.

No answer from the chair. I drew my scimitar and Shana took that as a cue to nock a fresh arrow to her

bowstring. Now prepared, we crossed the room to get a better look, giving the chair itself a wide berth.

When we reached the other side, we could see that Reg was sitting motionless in the chair and he was clearly dead. His eyes were bloodshot and there was some dried blood that had run from his nose and ears. There was a soft blue nimbus surrounding his body.

When I inhaled, I also got the unpleasant olfactory evidence that, unlike Victor, Reg had evacuated his bowels.

“Fuck, but that is rank,” I gagged a little at the smell.

I tried to analyse Reg but got nothing back.

“Quixbix are you there?” I called out.

<Yes, Torin. I am always with you> he replied with faux mysteriousness.

“Good to know. Do you know why I can’t analyse Reg, here?”

<Duh, he’s dead> the imp jeered.

I should have seen that one coming.

“Bugger, I was hoping to find out how he died. What’s with the faint blue light? Shana, can you see it too?” I asked.

“Yes, Torin, I see the light as well,” Shana replied a little hesitantly from behind me.

<This blue light means you can loot him> came the response from Quixbix.

“So, we can loot those we haven’t killed ourselves?”

<Yes. If a kill is abandoned it can be looted by anyone, though you will not get as much as the slayer would have. The Framework holds back a cut in those cases. However, in Reg’s case, it looks like the transition killed him. Deaths by natural causes don’t suffer the same reduction penalty. It is first come, first served> he explained.

“I would hardly call what happened to all of us as natural, but that’s just me. I remember Dean telling me I had a twelve percent chance of dying, but he said that’s because I was getting a special class and species. Are we likely to find many more people like this?”

Again, there was a tug at the back of my mind and the name Tom arose unbidden. But without context it didn’t mean anything to me. I’d known a few Toms over the years but none that explained my current irritation.

<Not too many. The application of the Framework does cause a strain, but it is only fatal for those with advanced pre-existing health conditions. The upside is, for those who survive, which is the vast majority, they will find any previous ailments gone. In all likelihood, Reg only had a few months left in him anyway.>

I nodded at what Quixbix said. My shoulder had been fixed after my return and there was nothing I could do for those unfortunates this hadn’t worked for.

I turned to Shana. “Did you want to loot him?”

“Yeuch! Why do you keep trying to get me to touch dead bodies?” she shuddered.

“I don’t *want* you to. I looted Victor and I was offering you the opportunity to do the same,” I explained reasonably.

“How chivalrous. I think I’ll pass. Besides you bound me, doesn’t that mean you are supposed to be buying me nice things, treating a lady right?”

I just pointed to the bracers on her arms and the bow in her hands.

“Weapons and armour don’t count,” she cried indignantly at my unspoken suggestion.

I stepped up to Reg and touched him lightly on his forehead and looted his starting coins. “Who is supposed to be the boss of this binding, again?” I asked her rhetorically.

She smiled naughtily at that and flicked her long dark hair over her shoulders. “Because I’m worth it,” she breathed sexily, and gave me a little twirl while she looked archly over her shoulder at me.

I laughed at her display and secretly was in full agreement.

“Are we done here?” she asked after she stopped teasing me.

“Almost. Now, where is it? Ah, bingo,” I exclaimed in joy.

I had been casting my eyes about until I spotted what I had come for. Reg’s toolbox had been shoved onto the bottom shelf of the nearest shelving rack. I wandered over and moved the whole box to my inventory with a touch. Then I saw a crowbar resting against the rack of shelves. *Even better*, I thought and snatched that up, putting it in my inventory too.

“Ah, breaking and entering equipment.” Shana winked.

“Yep. We’re good to go. Are you okay with leaving the Mercedes? It’s a beautiful machine.”

Shana snorted a laugh. “The car was my stepdad’s, and it was a lease.”

“Alright then, let’s go steal some bikes.” I grinned.

I took Shana’s hand in mine again and this time she interlocked her fingers with mine. My heart fluttered a touch and the down-below head reacted in kind at the contact, and then I led her out of the apartment back into the big bad world.

My happy time was interrupted as we stepped out into the late evening sun. Waiting for us were three medium-sized dogs. They looked like the same dogs I saw running about earlier. They had leashes on, which trailed on the floor beside them.

There was no sign of their owner or owners, and something seemed off about them straight away. They were

sniffing the grass as if searching for something and then their heads whipped around when they heard us exit the building.

All three of the animals salivated profusely. Drool dripped from their jaws onto the patchy lawn. Their eyes were bloodshot, and I could see their fur had sloughed off in large patches. The dog's remaining hackles raised, and they growled menacingly at us. And then everything stopped.

Have you put me in 'slow mode', Quixbix? Do you have another quest for me? I asked him

<Yes, I've activated slow mode. I don't have a quest, like I told you a few minutes ago I'm still recharging from the last one. I can't normally do this, but as you're a rookie the Framework allows us a bit of flexibility during your first few days. You're about to be in a fight so now you have a chance to Analyse these beasts first> he stated.

Cheers. I thanked him.

I focused on the dogs to analyse them.

Magically Saturated Dogs x3

Grade: Y

Level: 1

HP: 80

Loot Value: N/A

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 20 XP each

Mob Description: Due to their magical saturation, the Hit Points of each dog is double what is usual for creatures of this type.

The analysis was slightly different as character aptitude was replaced by HP, presumably because I couldn't soulbind

dogs and there was a mob description panel, similar to the item description for the weapons and armour.

Why is their value not applicable? I asked Quixbix.

<These dogs were too close to a high burst of magical energy when Earth was removed from stasis. The raw magical energy they've absorbed has corrupted and sent them mad. As they are not monsters created by spawning crystals from refined mana or people who have been subject to character creation, they have no loot to offer> he explained.

Okay, is this going to happen to all the animals? I queried.

<No. These dogs would have been close to a source of power that was suddenly converted. Without the protection of being a character, like people, this is what happened to them. Too much raw magical energy kills living creatures and these dogs appear to have been affected right in the sweet spot. They have absorbed enough of that magical energy to become saturated and corrupted, but not quite enough to kill them outright.

<You can already see the degenerative effect it has had on them. As they continue to absorb the trace amounts of raw magic that gets past the Framework shielding, their condition will continue to deteriorate until they die. Although not these dogs, they will attack, and you are going to have to kill them.>

I suspected as much.

<Our latitude only goes so far. Back to real-time. You've got this Torin> he encouraged me.

In the blink of an eye, time sped back to normal. The dogs snarled and took a few deliberate steps in our direction.

“Shana, shoot the one on the right and then stay behind me,” I ordered her calmly.

I didn't hear her answer as the dogs ceased their slow advance and accelerated towards us. An arrow whipped past

my shoulder and connected with the right-most dog, a black Labrador, the arrow was buried deep into its eye.

**** Critical Strike! x8 Shana has inflicted 104 piercing damage to magically saturated dog #3. Overflow of 24 piercing damage converted at a rate of 2 for 1 (vital spot) for 12 health loss. Magically saturated dog #3 is slain. ****

One down. I didn't have time to celebrate or congratulate her and drew my ice scimitars, preparing for the other two attacking dogs. The dog on my left was a border collie and the animal in the centre, a dalmatian. The dalmatian leapt for me and I swiped at it with my scimitar and slashed its shoulder. The contact of the blade knocked the animal's leap off course.

**** Critical Strike! x4 You have inflicted 68 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to magically saturated dog #2. Overflow of 36 damage is converted at a rate of 5 to 1 (important spot) for 7 health loss. Magically saturated dog#2 is slain. ****

My scimitar scythed through the dog's shoulder and snapped the bone leaving a gaping wound where it had passed through the creature. The dog crumpled in a heap to my right in front of Shana. The notification shouldn't have impacted my combat ability, but I was so awed by my innate awesomeness that I lost focus on the border collie which had come at me from the left.

The dog jumped and its slavering jaws locked onto my left forearm.

**** -24 hit points (171/410)*

Magically saturated dog #1 is grappling your arm. You will take -12 hit points every second. ***

I yelled in surprise and pain as the collie chomped down hard on my arm. The dog's attack caused me to drop my second scimitar which I should have used to ward it off while it was on the ground.

I recovered my wits quickly, though, lifted my arm and pulled the collie up with it. The dog clung on, but this left its belly vulnerable, and I skewered my attacker in its exposed gut with my other scimitar.

**** Critical Strike! x4 You have inflicted 68 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to magically saturated dog #1. Overflow of 36 damage is converted at a rate of 5 to 1 (important spot) for 7 health loss. Magically saturated dog#1 is slain. ****

The collie's jaws slackened, and I shook the beast loose without taking any further damage.

"Are you alright, Torin?" Shana asked worriedly.

Now that the dogs were dead, she grabbed hold of my arm to inspect the damage. The marks left by the collie were already fading.

"Almost good as new," I winked.

This wasn't entirely false bravado. The damage graphic let me work out that I was regaining hit points at about a rate of one a minute. I hadn't recovered from being shot by Victor earlier but had recouped enough in the twenty-five minutes since then that even after the dog bite I was better off than I'd been directly after my confrontation with him. I would be good as new in about four hours.

**** Your party has slain magically saturated dogs (3).
+31 XP Torin, +33 XP Shana. ****

“Let’s get out of here before anything else show’s up,”
I suggested.

Shana nodded and took my hand again. We walked across the grass and past Reg’s apartment until we reached the pavement. We crossed the trafficless road on our way to our next destination.

Chapter 8

The shop I had in mind was called Mike's Bikes and was two blocks away. I didn't have anything against Mike, well, not really. I had visited the premises once, shortly after I moved to Flint. I'd been looking for a low-cost bicycle to help me get about and his eyes had glazed over with disinterest when he learned my budget was roughly seventy-five dollars. He had unhelpfully suggested eBay and then made some excuse about having to check his stock.

When I looked at the price tags on the bicycles, I understood that Mike's Bikes wasn't the place for my budget.

It wasn't a good excuse for ripping the guy off, but it was all I had.

The takeaway of the anecdotal story was I knew where his bike shop was and what kind of stock he had because I'd been there before.

We walked hurriedly through the streets. Now that we were away from the apartment blocks, we began to see more people. Most of them ignored us as they hastily made their way to wherever they needed to get to.

I picked up on there being a steady flow coming from the direction of Broome Park reinforcing my assumption that a lot of people had been gathered there. Although, with so many people on the street, they now appeared to be dispersing.

A young Hispanic family passed us that I vaguely recognised. I think they lived in the block opposite mine. I tried to ask them what was happening, but the father clutched the two kids under his arms and pulled them away from us with a fearful look at me.

Belatedly, I remembered the pair of ice scimitars tucked into my belt on full display.

I was about to send them to my inventory and advise Shana to do the same when a teenager I didn't recognise ran across the road and stopped in front of us.

"Hey, dude. Those are some awesome fucking swords. Where d'ya get 'em," the youth opened with.

He was wearing a faded My Chemical Romance T-shirt and a pair of skinny black jeans. His lank hair flopped down his face and looked like it was poking him in the eye. He was clutching a pair of black-rimmed eyeglasses in his hand. Normally I'd have brushed him off but maybe I could learn something from the kid.

"Class perk," I answered truthfully.

"You lucky bastard. That is so cool. I mean it fucking sucks for me, ya know. The fucking world turns into an RPG, and I can't play 'cuz I'm too young or summat'," he rattled off at me.

"Really? How's that?" I asked.

"Yeah, like, the robot voice dude said you can't get a proper class or nuffin' 'till you turn sixteen. I gotta' stay an 'underage civilian' till then. That's like, over a year, which sucks ball, ya know. All the cool stuff will be done already. I wanna' kill me some motherfucking goblins and shit. Become a raid king and rack up those achievements. Don't need to wear my glasses no more, though. That's pretty cool," he said.

I chuckled lightly. The world had turned upside down and his biggest gripe was that he didn't get to risk life and limb fighting monsters.

“Whoa, is that, like your girlfriend?” the kid said, noticing Shana once his attention was pulled away from the discussion of my ice scimitars.

“Something like that,” I said.

Shana didn't disagree.

“You lucky bastard!”

This time it was Shana's turn to chuckle heartily.

“Tell me, dude,” I asked, getting his attention. “What's been going on out here? We were back at my place when all this went down.”

“Shit yeah, I was at the park for that sweet, sweet BBQ when it happened. The mayor was there and he just up and lost his shit, dude. Screaming crazy stuff about the end of days. I knew he was a bit of a bible basher, but this was extreme, you know. Scared a lot of the little 'uns. The Po-Po had to knock his ass out and take the megaphone off him. They told us to stay put till they figured out what the fuck was happening. People listened to the Chief for a bit. Then some dumbass started mouthin' off about terrorists and gas attacks or some such shit and they started running away,” he explained.

“Interesting,” I said.

“As if Al-Qaeda would gas you with some shit that would make us trip balls. They'd use Ricin gas or sumfing',” he continued.

“How do you know about Ricin gas,” I asked him a bit worriedly.

“Dude, I've got the fucking internet and shit,” he replied, waving off my concerns.

“Right. Anyway, cheers for the info. You'd best get home before it gets dark. The Framework people said it would be safe for a bit, but I don't fully trust them at their word, you know. You can't fight what you can't see,” I told him.

“Yeah, true 'dat,” he said and took a few steps past us.

His expression had changed to one of worry. I think my parting comment may have dulled his excitement and got him thinking about the genuine dangers we'd soon be faced with. I felt bad enough about it that I did something on the spur of the moment.

“Yo, kid,” I said, turning around.

He stopped and faced me again, “yeah man, what you need?”

“Here.”

I formed a short Ice Blade about a foot long and held it out to him, hilt first.

“Don't tell anyone I gave you that, okay? Also, word to the wise, we've been attacked by a few pets gone bad, so give any wandering strays a wide berth.”

He accepted my gift eagerly and swished it about. “Yeah, no worries,” he said absently, barely even glancing at me, a big grin on his face. His focus was solely on his new weapon.

Shana and I started walking again.

“You're a big softie,” she whispered as we walked.

I snorted my disagreement.

We reached Mike's Bikes after a couple more minutes. The shutters were down at the front of the store. I peered through the grating for long enough to confirm there was no power and no sign of anybody inside.

“How are we getting in?” Shana asked. “We're a bit exposed out here on the street.”

“There will be a door around the back,” I said confidently.

We moved two stores down and there was an alley that led to the back of this row of buildings. It always amazed me that these gaps were the kinds of things that people walked

past day in and day out and our brains kind of ignored them unless we are looking for them.

I led Shana down the alley, and we weaved our way past the garbage which had been left out and would likely never be collected now.

Finding the back of Mike's Bikes wasn't hard. He had painted the shopfront a bright orange and either out of a need for completeness or because he had paint left over, had done the same to the back entrance. The back door was locked with a flip latch that was padlocked. With Shana acting as lookout, I retrieved the crowbar from my inventory.

Rather than trying to snap the padlock which looked new and sturdy, I targeted the flip latch itself. I wiggled the flat bit of the crowbar's crook in the small gap between the flap and the door from underneath. Then I levered the crowbar down. My first attempt didn't snap the lock, but it did bend the latch a bit. This let me get even more of the crook into the gap and my second attempt popped it off the door easily.

I opened the door, drew one of the scimitars, and moved in quietly taking a quick look about. There were no alarms or security cameras to worry about without the power. My only concern was perhaps Mike, or a member of staff had been working late and chosen to hunker down here. That or maybe he had a guard dog on the premises.

My concerns proved unwarranted as the shop was devoid of life. I returned to the back and whistled to get Shana's attention. After one last scan of the alley, she rushed to join me. When she was inside, I closed the door behind us.

"Welcome to Mike's Bikes," I said in a hushed voice.

"Why are you whispering? Is somebody here?" she asked me quietly.

"No. I suppose it's just a natural reaction when you're about to commit a crime," I said, my voice returning to normal volume.

Shana lightly punched me in the arm for my flippancy.

“Okay, to business,” I said and led the way into the front of the store.

There was an array of fifty or sixty bicycles on display, all different styles and sizes.

“These look good,” Shana said as she walked over to a rack of bicycles with five-inch-thick tyres.

“Those are Fat Bikes,” I said. “You’re on the right track, but they aren’t best for our current needs.”

“Oh,” she said with disappointment.

“What we want are the Mountain Bikes,” I told her and pointed to an adjacent rack further down the wall. “Those Fat Bikes are good for sand and snow as they distribute the weight, so the bike doesn’t sink too deeply. However, they are also heavier and require more energy to pedal if we’re on the road, which hopefully we will be for the most part. Normally for road cycling, I would have recommended the high-performance racing bikes...”

I pointed to the other side of the shop to the carbon fibre bikes designed for speed and which cost several thousand dollars each.

“...but we might need to go off-road if there are any road blockages and the dungeon isn’t in the town, so the Mountain Bikes are the way to go.”

“Sounds good to me. How do you know so much about bicycles?” Shana asked.

“Couldn’t afford a car, so I did my due diligence on what was best for an urban environment and only then found out the price tag on these,” I said.

I picked out two bikes that were the right size for us. Mine was midnight blue and Shana’s red. Then I had Shana add a backup of each to her inventory. At one point she looked like she was about to select one that was a horrid fluorescent pink and I worried I may have to step in and pull rank, but she went with a more tasteful burnt orange selection instead.

“You know what, let’s take a fat bike for each of us too. We have room in your inventory for them and if we need to make space, we can dump them later,” I said.

Shana smiled and quickly touched a couple of the big bikes, and they made a popping sound as they disappeared to whatever dimensional pocket formed our inventories.

“Is that everything?” she asked.

“We should grab a few spare tyres, bike lights, and some repair kits from behind the counter and some of those,” I said and snapped my fingers.

I was pointing at a black cylindrical rack by the cashiers’ desk that had a selection of paper maps. This was the secondary reason I wanted to come here. I remembered seeing the maps on my first visit and without a data connection we couldn’t use our phones or look up google maps.

There were plenty of maps for Michigan state, of course. Luckily there were maps for the surrounding states as well as Ontario. I separated a set for Shana to store and then added the rest to my inventory. They were made of paper, so took up very little of my weight allowance and we might need spares in the future.

Our raiding done, we exited out the back of the shop and into the alley. As soon as I stepped out of the building, I received a prompt.

**** You have committed an act of theft in a law-abiding town. Your shroud effect has obscured your illicit activity.*

Value of stolen goods approximately 100 Gold.

*+51 XP and +1 notoriety, Torin. +56 XP, Shana. ****

This was unexpected.

“Quixbix, will I always get experience for stealing?” I asked the imp as we navigated a path past the garbage in the back alley.

<You are eligible for small experience rewards if the theft is from other people, not spawned mobs, and where it is against the law. Also, there will be diminishing returns as you gain levels. You will need to steal more to get the equivalent XP. At higher levels it becomes a pittance, but it can provide a steady trickle of XP even if your victims are so woefully weak that killing them provides no experience for you any longer.>

“Okay, so I was rewarded as Flint is considered Law-Abiding and I’m only level one,” I said to myself mostly.

<Correct. And may I say it gladdens my black little heart to see you act in such a way. I also want you to know I understand why you didn’t clean the place out, with limited inventory space and all. I can’t wait until we get our ship and have somewhere to store all our lovely loot.>

Shana and I shared an askance look at my imp’s larcenous glee.

“Is there anything you can tell me about these legal settings,” I said to distract him.

<Yes. The leader of every settlement has a choice of one of four options. Law-Abiding you know about. They have a set of laws that apply to all equally and have an organisation dedicated to enforcing them. The second setting is Anarchic where the community agrees to a set of laws that apply equally to all, but it is the individuals or the community as a whole’s responsibility to enforce them. Third, is Despotic which also has laws and an organisation to enforce them, but the laws do not apply to an elite group at the top. Finally, there is Lawless, and the name pretty much explains that setting.>

“Who gets to make these changes?” I asked.

<Admittedly it is a bit muddled on worlds that are freshly integrated into the Framework. Control is technically up for grabs during this transitional period, but established and

recognised leaders can assume control if they know what they are doing.>

“So, we’re talking about the town mayors and the state governors, maybe even the president,” Shana said.

<Yes, Shana.>

“What about the senators and the representatives in Congress?” I asked.

<I’m not an expert on Earth hierarchical structures you know> Quixbix complained.

“Sorry Quixbix, it’s easy to forget you may not be as familiar with our culture being new to our world,” I said.

<Apology accepted. I know what a senator or a representative is but not much else, as I was given minimal information on your former convoluted democratic system. The Framework will have simplified things and as I wasn’t updated on how they could potentially fit in. This probably means they don’t.>

“Damn, there are going to be some super pissed career politicians on Capitol Hill,” Shana whistled.

“Worse than that,” I said. “It sounds like Tricky Dicky as the Governor can assume control of Michigan and make himself above the law.”

Her eyes widened as that possibility sunk in.

“There’s nowt’ we can do about that now. Get your bike out, we are going to ride back up to Corunna Road and then head west,” I said then summoned and mounted my bike.

“Are we leaving Flint tonight?” she asked with some concern.

“Nah, I don’t want to be out in the open after dark. We’ll only be going a few miles down the road.”

“Maybe we should go back to your apartment for the night?” Shana suggested.

“As a last resort, sure, but I don’t really want to backtrack if we can avoid it. I have a place in mind. Though it may not be what you expect,” I assured her enigmatically.

With that, I sent my swords to my inventory and pushed off. Shana followed suit except for the bracers on her forearms and was soon riding up beside me, the wind catching her hair and flapping it about.

We were on the move.

Five minutes later we turned left off Corunna Road and cycled down a slip road running alongside the car park of the local BuyMart. My current, or former now, place of employment. As we got closer, I could see there was a small crowd gathered outside the superstore and that the security grills had been pulled down locking the place up.

This was unusual. The store didn’t close until ten p.m. on a Friday night. I’d had the ‘get up at the crack of dawn and open up for the morning’ ten-hour shift, which at the time had felt like the worst thing that could happen today.

“The BuyMart?” Shana said as I stopped at the exit of the car park.

“Yep, the place at which I slog away daily to pay for that shitty apartment and the occasional beer that tastes like piss as it’s all I can afford,” I joked.

“We can get in via the employee entrance around the back, but I want to see what’s happening out front first,” I said and pushed off again.

I cycled through the exit road and rolled up to the crowd. Roughly sixty or seventy people were milling about outside. They were angry and there was a fair bit of swearing and forceful gesturing going on. I didn’t bother analysing most

of the people, they just looked like your usual suburbanites expressing their fears in the form of angry protest.

What was unusual, given the general animosity in the crowd, was that no one was rattling the grill or banging on the windows. I sent my bike to the inventory and approached a portly gentleman on the edge of the crowd who seemed a bit calmer than most.

William Barnes (Human)

Civilian (Z) 1

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very low

XP Value: 60

“Hey there, chap,” I said by way of greeting. “What’s going on? Why is the BuyMart closed? It’s not ten o’clock yet.”

William seemed a bit startled at first, but after Shana flashed him a beaming smile, he warmed up to us enough to speak.

“I wasn’t here when it happened,” he started. “I came after, after you know, to stock up, but it was already shut. Apparently, after you know, what happened, the store manager made everyone leave and then shut the place up.”

“Wow, that sucks. I mean people need to stock up in an emergency situation like this,” I said, playing along as an equally clueless citizen.

“I know, right,” said William.

“Well, how come nobody is trying to force their way in?” I asked him quietly.

“You can try, but that’s when things get really weird. You get a message in your head that the building is protected by a level one security field. It doesn’t hurt people or anything, but nobody has been able to move the security grill. A few folks went to the state police station down the road to get them to come and make them open the store, but they were told the police didn’t have the resources spare to help ‘shoppers’ and to stop wasting their time,” William rattled off.

William proved to be quite talkative when you got him going.

“Well, thanks for the help, William. I think we’ll try our luck elsewhere,” I said and taking Shana’s hand, led her away and around the corner of the BuyMart out of sight.

“How did he know my name?” I heard William ask another bystander as we walked away.

What he told me was odd, though. And I wasn’t talking about the security field which I analysed the building to confirm.

BuyMart Superstore (Flint MI branch)

Owner: BuyMart Organisation

Access: BuyMart employees

Mana Enabled Security: Level 1 protection field

Durability: 10,000/10,000

That didn’t give me much additional information. I would ask Quixbix in a moment when I was sure we were out of earshot. I could have done it mentally but that would have excluded Shana from our conversation.

What was bugging me, though, was William’s talk of the store manager booting everybody out of the place.

Gareth ran the store, and he was a decent enough guy. He was a lifelong employee of BuyMart and a little bit too by the book, but otherwise a ‘good egg’ as he liked to remark. Expelling customers and closing the store, even in an RPG apocalypse, was most definitely not by the book and therefore very unlike him.

We were halfway down the side of the store when realisation hit me.

Of course, it hadn’t been Gareth. He’d have left by five on a Friday and that meant...fuck, it was Vincent and Constance, two of the shift managers, it had to be.

You couldn’t hope to find a bigger pair of asshats drunk on the minimal amount of power they’d been given. Being able to avoid the pair of them for most of my shift was the silver lining of being an opener.

“Quixbix, what’s the deal with this level one security field?”

<Some buildings owned by recognised organisations are granted a mana fuelled security system. Level one is very basic and only useful for keeping out low-levelled people or low-grade creatures.>

“Mike’s bikes didn’t have anything like that, did it?”

<No. As a locally owned business, it would not have been recognised during the integration period. Only brands familiar to a high percentage of the population are acknowledged.>

“Okay, so no to the mom-and-pop stores but yes to the national chains. Will this field keep Shana and me out?”

<With your class you would likely be able to overpower a level one security field and force your way in. Although as I understand it, you were employed here before integration.>

“Yes.”

<In which case you will be unaffected by the field.>

“Good to know. What happens if I’m fired once we get inside?” I asked him.

<The field has no effect inside the premises, only on unauthorised entities trying to gain access without an invite from the outside.>

“Gotcha, that should make things easier if Vincent and Constance become a problem,” I remarked absently.

“Who?” Shana asked.

“Vincent and Constance, the shift managers. Petty-minded arseholes, I’m sure you know the type,” I said, and Shana nodded in understanding.

However, even as I spoke the words, I realised I was still thinking of how the world used to work.

Eating whatever bullshit the pair of them served out when they could go running off to Gareth and make some shit up to get me sacked was the world of a few hours ago.

Unless they had picked something unexpected during character creation, they literally had no influence over me. The new and improved Torin, on the other hand, would be considerably stronger than them and didn’t need this shitty job any longer.

I covered the last few feet to the employee entrance with a swagger in my step and a knowing smirk on my face. One other benefit of being an opener was I had the key to the employee entrance door, so we had no trouble getting in. I kept hold of Shana’s hand as we passed the threshold, and she wasn’t affected by the security field.

I did forget that the door was on a weighted hinge and when I let go of the door, it slammed shut noisily behind us.

A stealth infiltration was already off the cards.

We were in the staff changing room and the walls were lined with grey lockers we could use to store our work overalls and personal items. There were a few benches scattered about

the place to sit on while changing. There were three doors out of the locker area at the end of the room.

The door to the employee lounge was at the far-left corner of the room. The door opposite the lounge on the right led out onto the store floor and there was a door in the centre of the far wall which took you into the stock warehouse.

The banging of the door triggered some hushed voices coming from the lounge and within moments four people I knew spilled out.

“Torin!” a surprised long-haired man named Keith exclaimed on seeing me.

Keith was a few years older than me and a bit of a stoner. One of his partners in crime was Mia, a petite Hispanic girl who was knocking boots with Keith. We weren’t supposed to know, but let’s face it, stoners aren’t as subtle as they think they are.

On his other side was Malky. He was a big man in his forties with learning disabilities who rarely spoke. Those three were usually on shift together. I wouldn’t call us friends exactly, but they were the only people I’d forged any kind of connection with during the month or so that I’d been working at the BuyMart.

The odd one out in the group was Clarence.

He was a weedy fellow, whose face was normally covered in acne despite being almost thirty, but that appeared to have been cleared up by the Framework.

Clarence took one look at me, squeaked audibly, then raced across the room and out the door on the right.

“Fuckkkk,” Keith said, drawing out the word. “He’s off to squeal to the dastardly duo.”

Evidently, Vincent and Constance were indeed in the building. The dastardly duo was what we called them behind their backs.

“Who’s the hottie?” Keith asked when he looked back.

Mia elbowed him firmly in the gut at his comment and Shana giggled demurely.

“Hey guys. Feels like forever since I’ve seen you, instead of this afternoon when your shifts started. This is Shana, she’s with me. I hope that’s okay with you guys,” I said.

“Absolutely, Torin. Hi Shana, I’m Mia and this is Keith and Malky,” Mia said and strode over to welcome her.

Keith waved and Malky nodded with a shy smile on his face.

“Yeah, but the duo are gonna pitch a fit,” Keith remarked absently pushing a few errant hairs behind his ears.

“Speaking of our glorious leaders, I take it that it was their idea to shut the store down early and lock everyone out?” I asked.

“Yeah, dude. They ain’t gonna be happy you got in. They said they got some notice from this Framework craziness that said when they locked up it would keep people and monsters out.”

Then Keith stared at me intently for a moment. “Dude, I need to lay off the reefer. I could swear you weren’t that big an’ buff this morning,” he told me.

“Yeah, so this Framework thing is for real and I’m a little different,” I said, glossing over the major changes in my physiology. “The duo isn’t wrong about the security measures. Luckily, I’m still an employee and I had a set of keys. There must be close to a hundred people out front wanting to get in and not being able to move the security grill. I’m surprised you guys let them take over like this.”

“Well, yeah...” Keith started.

“We were afraid of the monsters the character creation person warned us about,” Mia finished for him with a hint of a challenge in her voice at my implied criticism.

I shouldn't really blame them. Hell, Victor's first instinct was to shoot me. And if I was honest, having the BuyMart to ourselves would make tonight a lot more convenient.

"Fair enough Mia. I'd better deal with the duo, how many of their winged monkeys do they have in tow?" I asked.

Keith snorted at my reference to the other employees who chose to suck up to the pair.

"Clarence makes four," Malky spoke up unexpectedly. "All the others on shift left to join their families. It is just those six and the five of us here in the store."

That short burst was the most I'd ever heard Malky say in a single sitting. It also hadn't escaped my notice there was a clarity in the tone of what he said that had been absent this afternoon. It wasn't just Clarence's acne that had been rectified.

"I think Clarence was instructed to keep an eye on us," Malky finished. "Make sure we didn't let people in."

I dipped my head in acknowledgement and meshed my hands with Shana's again. We moved through the door on the right, leaving the carpeted locker room behind and onto the tiled floor of the BuyMart.

There were two dozen aisles filled with everything you could think of on the left of us and the registers on our right, but we didn't have to go far before I heard the distinctive clacking of Constance's short heels approaching us.

I stopped and let them come to us and they emerged suddenly from the bathroom and healthcare aisle. Constance was a plump woman in her forties with poorly dyed strawberry blond hair. She also wore way too much make-up, which didn't help cover her naturally waspish disposition.

Vincent was in his late thirties, and his dirty blonde hair had receded heavily. Nevertheless, he insisted on growing an uncomplimentary ratty ponytail. They were followed by

Clarence and three others who I never bothered to get to know. I analysed the pack's leaders.

Constance LaFleur (Human)

Worker (Y) 1

Character Aptitude: Abysmally Low

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very low

XP Value: 120

—

Vincent Smith (Human)

Lesser Overseer (X) 1

Character Aptitude: Very Low

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very low

XP Value: 180

I snorted when I read Constance's aptitude and class, that just about summed her up. The result of my scan was excellent news, there weren't going to be any Mrs Pearson type surprises here.

In fact, seeing their classes jogged my memory of Victor's, Tax Collector. On the way here I had been idly analysing people as we went. Most of them remained as Civilians and a few we'd gone by had recognisable combat classes. But Victor and these two appeared to have selected a class that wasn't combat orientated. Although it was entirely possible Constance lacked the aptitude to even take the most basic of combat classes. I would have to consult with Quixbix about this later.

“There he is,” Constance screeched upon seeing me, acting as if I’d been hiding rather than standing openly in the middle of the store. “Torin Carter, you are not authorised to be here, tell him, Vincent,” she finished with a smug grin on her overtly red lips.

I quickly analysed the other four and got more of the same unimpressive results. No wonder they were letting Vincent and Constance lead the way despite them being so underwhelming.

It didn’t matter, I intended this to be a very short meeting.

“Shana be a dear and arm yourself,” I said to the dark-haired beauty at my side.

With a thought, her bow and quiver were out from her inventory and in her hands or around her waist. She calmly drew an arrow and nocked it to the string.

“If any of these pricks makes a move don’t hesitate to shoot,” I urged her.

I used the surprise factor of the appearance of Shana’s weaponry to advance on Vincent unopposed. Letting this pair dictate the conversation would be a mistake.

I bounded forward, pulling the bandana and sunglasses off as I went, and revealed my recently acquired Acheronian heritage.

Using my left hand, I grabbed Vincent by his throat and slammed him back into a display of baby formula and nappies. The metal shelves shook as he crashed into them. The extra strength I’d gained helped make this possible. At the same time, I summoned one of my ice scimitars from my inventory and pointed it at Constance’s wobbling jowls.

Constance positively quivered with rage, but she didn’t try to come any closer. Nor did any of the winged monkeys who bunched up behind her.

“What do you think you are doing, Torin Carter,” she bristled. “Just you wait until I tell Gareth. You have gone too far this time. Assaulting a superior, your days here are done.”

I couldn't help but laugh in the pompous cow's face. This only made her angrier, of course and I shook my head at her stupidity. She believed enough in what had happened to take control of the store but not enough that she assumed threatening me with the sack would frighten me into obedience.

“Silence Connie,” I snarled at her.

She hated being called Connie, but there was a part of me that desperately hoped she'd give me a reason to slice her throat in two.

Unfortunately, my command had the desired effect, and she closed her flapping trap shut.

In the back of my mind, I was a little surprised at my behaviour. However, there was another bigger part of me that gloried in the violence and firmly commanded the objecting element to sit down and shut the fuck up.

Which it duly did.

“I'm going to keep this simple. I don't like you. Any of you. And I'm inclined to simplify my life by taking yours. So, listen up, as I won't say this again and there will be no second chances,” I growled with quiet menace and resolute intent.

I meant every word. I paused to look each of them in the eye and saw only fear.

**** Intimidation checks are successful. Targets will be more likely to obey your instructions out of fear. The effect will last 6 hours. ****

That was handy and should make this go more smoothly.

“I’m in charge. My friends and I will be occupying the manager’s lounge and Gareth’s office tonight after taking what we want...” Constance almost spoke up at that but held her tongue when my glare targeted her. “. . .I don’t want to see any of you again. Go hang out in the pet foods aisle for two hours until we’re done and then you can spend the night in the employee’s break room. Do anything else and I’ll fucking kill every last one of you. Understood?”

There was plenty of nodding. Constance was the only one who looked like she might object but held her waspish tongue. I still gripped Vincent’s throat tightly, and he was both choking and utterly petrified. Tears flowed down his cheeks, and he was snivelling wordlessly. There was also a yellow pool of liquid forming at his feet. Disgusted, I threw the cowardly bully to his lackeys and stepped back from the spreading urine.

“Clarence,” I snapped. “Clean up Vincent’s piss before you go.”

“But...but,” he stammered. “You said to stay out of sight, the cleaning equipment is in the locker room,”

“Use the nappies,” I said pointing at the display Vincent had knocked over. “That’s what they were designed to do, absorb piss.”

“Uh, Nappies?” he muttered.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. The sodding diapers you pillock,” I snarled, and grabbed a pack and threw them at him.

With that, I turned and strode back to the employee break room to inform the others the store was ours for the night.

Tomorrow was a different story, but we would be gone by then.

About ninety minutes later we were ensconced in the manager's lounge which was adjacent to Gareth's office. I'd given a lowdown on how the inventory function worked to Keith, Mia, and Malky, as well as explaining my species change.

It turned out both Keith and Mia had done the same thing as Shana. They had both refused to pick a class, so were both stuck as Civilians until they reached one thousand XP.

Malky had been a surprise, he had taken the Knight-Errant class.

After updating them on what was happening, I managed to have that chat with Quixbix about the odd classes Constance and Vincent had chosen

So, it turned out that above Civilian there was a whole raft of non-combat classes for those who didn't want to endanger themselves. They kept the expanded inventories but picked up additional advancement in other areas when they levelled. If you stuck to the Civilian branch of the class tree, there were a greater number of town quests available from the podiums that allowed them to level-up without having to fight.

Interestingly, Victor, Constance, and Vincent may not have picked their classes. If their aptitude was too low to allow them to take a combat class, then the Framework would have automatically assigned them an appropriate Civilian class if they refused during integration.

We used the Civilians extra inventory space to easily move some beds, mattresses, and bedding to the two rooms. Keith was being a pain in the ass and kept trying to sneak off to collect high-end electronics once I'd informed him that he could carry up to a thousand kilos. He didn't know how much that was because his comprehension of the metric system was somewhat lacking, but he knew enough that it was a lot.

Keeping him on track was wearing my patience thin and I was reminded why our association hadn't progressed

from acquaintances to actual friends.

After that, Shana and I went shopping without them, so we could stock up on the stuff we thought we might need for our travels.

Initially, despite my lack of experience using them, I was disappointed our branch of BuyMart didn't sell firearms. Even though they no longer packed the punch they used to, they did do some damage. On the other hand, if they had sold guns Constance and Vincent's group would almost certainly have been armed.

I survived four slugs to the chest, yes, but how well would I have stood up to half a dozen shotgun shells and if Shana had been caught in the crossfire, she could have been shredded with her much lower Hit Points.

Our shopping list included camping equipment, sleeping bags, firelighters, and purification tablets for drinking water. I wasn't sure how necessary these would be but thought it was better to be safe than sorry.

Torches, or flashlights as Shana corrected me, as well as plenty of batteries of all sizes. We managed to find a few expensive solar-powered lamps and grabbed some cheaper solar powered garden lights.

I knew from customer complaints the garden lights wouldn't last more than a few months, a year tops, but if we hadn't sorted something out by then we'd be in real trouble. Candles joined the growing collection of survival gear for when everything else ran out of juice.

Spare clothing and plenty of desiccated foodstuffs like ramen noodles, condensed milk, and cereal were added. We could load up on fresh food if we wanted as the inventory apparently kept it that way, but it would weigh more so I felt dried would be a better use of our available weight allocation.

That didn't stop us from using a portable gas stove and cooking up a meat-heavy feast and pigging out that evening, though.

Shana laughed when I guided her to the toilet roll shelves after we had stocked up on hygiene products and told her to load up as many as she could. She laughed right up until when I asked what items were the first thing shops ran out of during the pandemic panic buying and did she fancy wiping her butt clean with leaves.

She managed to pack in about two thousand rolls with the space we had left.

When our shopping was complete, I sat in Gareth's office and spread the map of Michigan in front of me and asked Shana to join me.

<Would you like me to overlay the positions of the dungeons on this map for you, Torin?> Quixbix asked.

That would be very helpful Quixbix, thank you.

“Okay, here we are.” I jabbed my finger on the map to indicate our current position to Shana when she settled down beside me. “The dungeon we are interested in is here.” I pointed to the middle of the Ionia State Recreation Area.

Shana produced a marker pen and dabbed it in the spot I pointed at.

“You can see it's a little bit southwest of Ionia itself. We can take the M-21 most of the way.” I traced my finger in a straight line following the M-21. “How experienced are you on a bike?” I asked her.

“I haven't ridden an actual bike since I was a child, but I've done some spin classes, so I think I'll be able to keep up,” Shana answered, correctly inferring the reason behind my query.

“Good. Under normal circumstances with a bit of elbow grease, we could cover the full distance in a day. I don't think we are going to get that lucky. We'll aim to make it to St. Johns. That's roughly forty-five miles so we should make it easily before nightfall tomorrow.”

“Why St. Johns? I think we could make Fowler it’s only another ten miles,” she asked, pointing at the smaller town further along the M-21.

“True,” I said. “And we may decide to push further on if we encounter no problems, but St. Johns is a fair bit bigger, and Dean told me the larger the population centre the further away the monster spawning crystals will be.”

“Torin, you’re not from Michigan, are you?”

“What gave it away? The English accent?” I joked.

“That’s not what I meant. You haven’t been to any of these places have you,” she pressed.

“No, I was at the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan until recently. I only transferred to Flint in the spring.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Ann Arbor and Flint are urban centres with a pretty big population, over a hundred thousand people easy in each. These other towns along the M-21, not so much. St. Johns may look much bigger than Fowler on the map but we’re only talking a few thousand people. If St Johns is significantly more exposed than Flint, I don’t think it can be much more dangerous in Fowler,” Shana reasoned.

I mulled over what she was saying and couldn’t find any fault in her logic.

“Alright, we will aim for Fowler as a minimum. If things look good, we’ll push even further. Maybe we could even make Lyons,” I said and pointed to the small town spanning the Grand River to the southeast of Ionia. “We’ll be passing through that way anyhow. Agreed?”

“Yes, I agree,” Shana said.

I looked out the window of the office. The sun was setting, and we would have to light a candle or use a battery-powered lamp soon.

“Sun’s going down. If we want to get as far as possible tomorrow, we should get some shut eye now so we can head

out just after sunrise,” I said.

To make my point I pulled my shoes, shirt, and jeans off and climbed on the double bed we had brought up an hour earlier.

“What time is that?” Shana asked.

“The sun will be up at six so we will be up thirty minutes before that.”

Shana groaned audibly. Then it occurred to her to ask a rather more pertinent question. There was only room in the office for one double bed.

“Um, where am I supposed to sleep?”

I shimmied from the centre of the bed and patted the sheet beside me.

“Plenty of room right here,” I said with a sly grin.

Shana looked conflicted and then said.

“Did Quixbix put you up to this?”

“No,” I answered and furrowed my brow in confusion.

What did Quixbix have to do with the price of apples?

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. You can crash in the other room if you like, but they will be restless and bitching most of the night about the heat and the lack of air-con,” I said.

“No, you’re right, we should stick together,” Shana replied, making her decision.

Shana climbed up onto the bed, but she didn’t change out of her sports bra and exercise leggings. She curled up on the other side of the bed. Shana wasn’t sleeping on the edge of the bed but was just out of easy reach. I found myself a touch hurt and angry at the distance she put between us, which was a stupid reaction as we’d only known each other for half a day.

That was probably the bond suggesting or maybe even insisting we should be closer.

“Good night, Shana,” I said after a minute or two.

“Good night, Torin.”

Was that a slightly pleased tone I detected?

Or was my rampant libido leading me to hear what I wanted to?

Those questions faded as it wasn't long before I heard the change in her breathing that came with sleep, and I didn't last much longer before drifting off myself. It had been a long day full of excitement, after all.

Chapter 8

Day 2

My sleep was filled with an array of XXX-rated dreams featuring myself and a very eager Shana when the hazy bubble of lust was punctured in a most unceremonious manner by Quixbix.

<Torin, you need to wake up!>

My eyes snapped open immediately. There was an edge of urgency and excitement in Quixbix mental communication that seized my attention.

“What is it, Quixbix?” I said and propped myself up a little on one of my elbows.

Despite my concern with the Quixbix alarm call I couldn't help but absorb the current bed situation. At some point during the night, Shana had rolled over and her body was snuggled up tightly to me with her head resting on my chest.

One of her hands was resting just below my waist at the rim of my boxers and my body had responded in kind to her proximity.

No wonder my dreams were so vividly erotic.

My sudden movement disturbed Shana who had also been asleep. Her dainty digits were rapidly withdrawn when she discovered what material they had been teasing and

playing with. Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment, which I realised was odd.

It wasn't odd that she was embarrassed, but because it was still dark. There was some moonlight filtering through the window, but not much, and yet I saw everything clearly enough to notice the shade of her cheeks had changed. Apparently, Acheronians had very good night vision.

Quixbix had been talking but my thoughts were elsewhere, and I'd missed what he said.

"Sorry, Quixbix. Can you say that again? I was distracted."

<I bet you were, you horny blighter> he quipped instead of repeating himself.

He chuckled heartily at his joke so maybe this wasn't an urgent matter after all.

I looked at my watch, it was four-thirty in the morning.

"Why did you wake me, Quixbix?" I asked with a sigh and thought about pulling Shana in close and finding out how she would feel about the idea of putting her hand back where it had been moments before.

<Oh, yes. The perimeter of the BuyMart has been breached by redcaps. You might want to do something about that before they murder you in your sleep.>

Any thoughts of happy times in the bedroom fled into the dark of the night and Shana and I got off the mattress and began garbing ourselves.

"For fuck's sake dude, why are you cracking jokes when we are in danger," I snarled angrily at the imp's flippancy.

<Relax, Torin. They're redcaps, not manticores, and there are only eight of them. I have access to the protection field of the BuyMart. Another glorious benefit of having me around, that you seem to be underappreciating. I woke you

when it sent out an alert about the breach. They've only just got inside, and you have plenty of time to go after them.>

“What’s a redcap?” Shana asked.

I had an idea based on the D&D I had played when I was younger and Quixbix confirmed my assumptions.

<Vicious gnomes with sharp teeth. They are about two feet tall and soak their caps in the blood of their victims to give them a red hue.>

“Lovely,” Shana said with mild disgust.

<Redcaps are low-grade creatures; you can handle them. They are basically free XP. They can be fast little buggers, though> Quixbix informed us.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said, and rolled my eyes as I summoned my scimitars.

<I saw that, Torin. I’m hurt. Maybe you don’t want me to give you the good news after all.>

“Sorry, Quixbix. I can be a bit grumpy in the morning,” I lied, trying to make the mercurial imp feel better.

<I can’t stay angry at such a roguish devil like you. You are forgiven. The good news is that the security alert created a quest at the Flint podium which I have accepted on both yours and Shana’s behalf.>

As soon as he finished the quest prompt appeared.

**** Clear the Redcaps from the BuyMart (Y)*

Eight redcaps have broken into the Flint branch of BuyMart. Kill or chase them off.

Success: Redcaps killed or forced to flee by your group.

Rewards: 200 XP per person.

*Failure: Redcaps leave of their own accord, or they are disposed of by a different group. ****

<There is one downside to this development, though. Anybody else who accepts this quest can pass through the security field. But once you complete the quest their permissions will be rescinded.>

“Understood. Let’s go kill some rabid garden gnomes,” I said.

Shana smiled and I was impressed at how easily she was adapting to this new world. I was left to wonder if that was all on her or if our soulbond had assisted in her acceptance of the radical changes to our way of life. Or if it was Framework tomfoolery at work. I preferred the former over the latter for the obvious reason I didn’t care for the idea that someone could be messing with my head too.

Well, messing more with my head.

We left Gareth’s office and rushed into the manager’s lounge. The noise we’d made had already woken the trio who were camped out in here.

“Hey, man, what’s going on,” Keith mumbled, wiping sleep from his eyes.

To be honest I’d forgotten they were here.

“We’ve just been alerted by the security field that some monsters have managed to get in,” I informed them calmly.

I’d almost mentioned Quixbix but remembered at the last second Dean’s advice to keep him a secret except for people I could trust. I didn’t think any of the three would understand the implications or try to kill me for him. But I didn’t trust them, Keith particularly, not to run his mouth in the future to someone who might.

Keith and Mia hugged one another with obvious fear. Malky took the news stoically and had a look of grim determination. On a whim, I created a broadsword made of ice and handed it to the big man.

“Malky, can you hold the fort while Shana and I deal with the threat?” I asked him.

Malky grasped the hilt of the sword and nodded his head. His lips quirked in a smile as he familiarised himself with the weapon. Before we left, I created two ice knives similar to what I made for the teenager yesterday and handed them to Keith and Mia to protect themselves.

I felt better not leaving them unarmed. I wouldn't be doing that for the other six asshats in the store, though.

Keith had put a desk in front of the lounge door, but I lifted it out of the way easily enough and we stepped out onto the tiled floor. We were both wearing trainers so moved silently, except for the occasional teeth-cringing squeak.

“Damn, it's almost pitch black, I can barely see anything,” Shana whispered.

We were at the back of the store which was windowless. I could make everything out well enough, but it wasn't as clear as back in the office when there was a smidge of moonlight to help illuminate things.

“Okay, I can see where we are going. Take my hand and we will sweep the front half of the store first; you should be able to see better there. I want to hold off on using any lights until we've located the redcaps,” I whispered back.

Stowing the scimitar from my left hand in my inventory I took Shana's right hand in my own so she could keep her bow in her left. We walked slowly down the children's toys aisle until we got to where it opened out again. When we reached the end by the checkout tills there was a little moonlight beaming through the grill.

The crowd outside had dispersed, but that wasn't surprising given the time of night.

I let go of Shana's hand and gestured to my eyes and then pointed my fingers away, wordlessly asking if she could see. She bobbed her head in the affirmative and I motioned for her to follow me.

We snuck first between and then past the tills. Shana surveyed the rest of the store while I inspected the glass front doors. There was no sign that they had been forced open or that the security grate outside had been broken. A quick scan of the windows at the top of the walls revealed that none of them had been broken either.

Where and how had the redcaps got into the building? I tapped Shana on the shoulder, and she followed me back to the tills. We hunkered down behind the closest one and I peered into the gloom up the aisle.

No sign of them in ceramics and pottery.

Staying low we shuffled from checkout counter to checkout counter, taking a moment after each to examine if the next aisle revealed the presence of the feral gnomes.

It took us a few minutes to cover half the distance when I first heard them.

There was the sound of light banging and a mad cackle coming from the other end of the store. But it didn't sound like the noise was emanating from any of the aisles. No, what we could hear was coming from the doorway which led to the employee lockers where we came in yesterday evening.

Where I had told Vincent, Constance, and their henchman to fuck off to for the night.

Straight away I knew this wasn't a coincidence. I shouldn't have left them to their own devices. Killing them might have been a bit extreme, but I should have confiscated their keys and booted them from the building.

I'd been too soft by far.

I was angry with myself for the mistake I made, but recriminations could wait until after I had dealt with this threat. I leaned into Shana's ear to whisper.

"I can hear them in the locker room or the employee break room. We're going to pick up the pace, okay."

“Lead the way,” she whispered back as she released the tension on her bowstring.

Keeping low we jogged the rest of the way until we reached the final checkout counter. We were maybe thirty feet from the door which had been wedged open which was unusual, and I kicked myself again for not spotting that in my earlier visual sweep.

The random cackling and scrabbling sounds were loud enough that Shana could hear them too. I heard what sounded like a crisp packet being torn open and then the crunching of the crisps, followed by a scuffle between the redcaps as they fought over the snacks.

They were in the break room.

I made my move, sprinted the short distance from the last till to the door and pressed my back up against the wall by the doorway. Shana followed me and stood at my side. I craned my neck around the edge to get a quick look. The locker room itself was clear and there was a green glow coming from the break area.

Vincent’s crowd had used and left behind chemical glow sticks. I hadn’t thought to collect any myself and hoped the bastards hadn’t taken the lot. I also got a glimpse of one of our redcap friends.

He was two feet tall as Quixbix said. The one I could see had a grimy white beard and feral eyes. His conical cap was grey, perhaps a sign these little shits hadn’t managed to kill anyone and dye it red with their blood yet. He was wearing scrappy leathers and hobnail boots. And the nasty creature was laughing hysterically at something out of sight.

I used this as an opportunity to analyse my prey.

Redcap Gnomes x8

Grade: Y

Level: 1

HP: 60

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 20 XP each

Mob Description: Redcaps are named for their propensity to dye their grey woollen hats in the blood of their victims. Rarely dangerous unless encountered in large numbers.

Before we moved in, I made another ice dagger and passed it to Shana. If we were in such close quarters, her bow might not be of much use. I glanced around the corner again and the same redcap still cackled away in the break room doorway.

“They are in the break area and there is one out in the open,” I whispered to Shana. “Take the shot and then let me rush the room. Then follow me and cover the exit,” I instructed.

With a quick nod, Shana half drew the bowstring back, stepped past me and settled into her stance. She took half a second to sight her target before drawing the string back fully and released the arrow smoothly. Shana spun out of the doorway once the arrow was away and then I was in motion.

**** Critical Strike! x4 Shana has inflicted 52 piercing damage to redcap gnome #5. Redcap gnome #5 has fewer than 25% HP remaining. ****

I charged towards the room. The redcap Shana hit had fallen to the ground and the arrow sticking out of his hip.

He was no longer laughing that was for sure.

I scanned the locker area quickly as I raced through and there was no sign of any redcaps in there. I did spot that

the employee entrance we came through yesterday was wide open. Which had to be how the redcaps got into the building in the first place.

I burst into the break area and took in the scene before me. The place was a mess. The tables and plastic chairs had been overturned. The kitchenette unit at the end of the room had all the cupboards and drawers pulled open. The crockery and utensils had been strewn all over the room.

There were two redcaps on the kitchenette counter rummaging through the coffee and sugar tins. Apart from the mewling redcap who Shana had skewered, the remaining five maniacal gnomes had smashed the glass of the snack vending machine. Most were inside the cabinet tearing through and opening the chocolate bars or bags of candy.

The crazy part, though, was gobbets of spat out chocolate and sweets on the floor surrounding the machine. They clearly didn't like what they were eating but they didn't let that stop them trying again.

The good news was all eight of them were here in this room. There was also no sign of the other BuyMart employees but when I'd seen the open back door, I hadn't expected them to be in here.

I moved up to the hurt gnome who had just pulled the arrow from his side and beheaded the little fucker with a single swipe. I didn't need a notification to know he was dead.

That got the attention of the assembled redcaps who stopped in their tracks, their beady eyes following the bouncing head of their erstwhile companion as it rolled across the floor and banged into one of the overturned tables.

Meanwhile, Shana came up right behind me in the doorway.

"Mind yourself," I said to her quickly.

Stowing my swords, I grabbed the nearest circular table and dragged it over. I flipped it so the pedestal pointed

towards Shana and shoved it in the doorway as she shimmied slightly to the side, blocking the only way out of the room.

The table had a diameter of four feet, so it blocked the exit effectively for the two-foot redcaps and protected Shana from them, but she was tall enough that it allowed her to use the bow over the top of the makeshift barricade.

Updating the feng-shui of the room broke the redcap's rapt attention on their fallen brother's head. Their interest then centred on me, and they hissed threateningly. The two on the counter jumped up and down while the other five hastily scrambled over the broken glass shards of the vending machine cabinet.

Re-summoning my ice scimitars I ran over to the cabinet and engaged the redcaps there. Each of them had pulled a small knife resembling a scalpel from their belts and moved to swarm past me. I whipped both scimitars in wide arcs trying to encompass the whole line of maddened gnomes. The redcaps ducked and rolled under one of my blades but the second sliced through the upper arm of one of them.

**** Hit! You have inflicted 17 piercing damage and 12 points of cold damage to redcap gnome #4. ****

Only twenty-nine points of damage, not quite half of the gnome's total. It was enough to spin the small creature around and left a reddened wound on his arm where I had hit him, but he was still very much in the fight. The rest of the redcaps swept past slashing at my knees and thighs. I danced about trying to evade their attacks but was only half successful.

**** -14 Hit Points. (396/410) ****

**** -14 Hit Points. (382/410) ****

Ignoring the redcap gnomes who had run by me I advanced on the one I had hit already who was still a bit off-balance. Two quick slashes with my scimitars connected with his body and number four was dead.

As I turned to face the four who had passed me, I received another prompt.

**** Critical Strike! x2 Shana has inflicted 26 piercing damage to redcap gnome #1. ****

Shana had shot one of the redcaps who had been on the countertop. I saw out of the corner of my eye they had been climbing down from it and gnome number one who she hit in the back had fallen in a heap on the floor. His compatriot ignored him and dropped to his feet nearby. I had to ignore the pair of them for now and trust that Shana could keep them off my back.

I changed my approach to the fight and stowed one of my blades and grabbed one of the knocked over cheap plastic seat chairs and hurled it at the group of four redcaps in front of me. This forced them to scatter and knocked a couple of them down. I followed in and hacked at one of the downed creatures.

**** Critical Strike! x2 You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to redcap gnome #8. Redcap gnome #8 has fewer than 25% HP remaining.*

*Critical Strike! x2 You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to redcap gnome #8. Overflow of 56 damage is converted at a rate of 5 to 1 (important spot) for 11 health lost. Redcap gnome #8 is slain.

Another one down. I saw Shana's third arrow streak out and slam into the face of the unharmed redcap who had climbed down from the counter.

**** Critical Strike! x8 Shana has inflicted 104 piercing damage to redcap gnome #2. Overflow of 44 damage is converted at a rate of 2 to 1 (vital spot) for 22 health lost. Redcap gnome #2 is slain. ****

Make that another two down. There were only four of the little devils left.

**** -14 Hit Points. (368/410) ****

**** -14 Hit Points. (352/410) ****

While I had been ending number eight, two of them had run by me and slashed the back of my thighs for a further loss of twenty-eight hit points. But then I got a fresh prompt which brought a smile to my face.

**** Having suffered 50% or more casualties, the redcap gnomes must undergo a morale check.*

*The redcap gnome's group morale check failed! Their Mental and Social attributes suffer a fifty percent debuff until the combat is complete or a subsequent check is passed. ****

The rest of the fight was a breeze once the redcaps were slapped with that debuff. Their decision making became panicked and illogical. They ran heedlessly about the room no longer coordinating their attacks which made it easy to avoid them.

With the only exit blocked they couldn't escape. The solitary annoyance was they kept their fleetness and it took Shana and me several more minutes to corner each of the creatures and finish them off.

**** Your party has slain redcap gnomes (8). +82 XP Torin, +90 XP Shana. ****

Shana wasn't getting more XP from the redcaps than I was, but she did get a ten percent bonus from being soulbound to me. As well as a couple of extra points for our shared notoriety bonus.

"I guess gnomes don't rule, after all," I said as we finished the last of them.

"What was that, Torin?" Shana asked

"Nothing, Shana. Just a little in-joke is all, no offence meant," I said with a wink.

<Congratulations, boss.>

<Quest 'Clear the redcaps from the BuyMart' completed. 206 XP to Torin and 226 XP to Shana, awarded.>

We moved around the room and looted the redcaps. Shana retrieved her arrows, as they were all still usable. The redcaps only contributed a paltry twenty copper pieces each and four pieces of shoddy leather scraps which you could merge five of to create one sheet of shoddy leather, but more importantly, we picked up four gear drops.

Shoddy Leather Boots x2

Leather Armour (Medium)

Damage Mitigation: Low

HP +10

Durability: 5/5

—

Shoddy Leather Cuirass x2

Leather Armour (Medium)

Damage Mitigation: Low

HP +20

Durability: 5/5

There were two of each and Shana and I donned them quickly. If the melodramatic sighs were any indication, Shana wasn't too fond of the aesthetic of our new shoddy armour. However, some armour was better than no armour.

“Should we clean up this mess?” Shana asked, pointing at the dead redcaps.

Quixbix answered for me.

<Unlike Victor and Reg, the redcaps were spawned from a crystal and were made from mana. Once looted the bodies will dissipate over the next few hours back into pure mana which will be drawn back to the nearest spawning crystal.>

“Okay, but what about the rest of this mess?” she said.

“Kitchen rules,” I said with a shrug of my shoulders and walked into the locker area.

“Huh, what's that?” she asked.

“Whoever cooks, or in this case kills, doesn't have to do the clean-up,” I said with a grin.

Before heading back into the store to check in with the trio we left behind I needed to lock the back door again.

The door was weighted, so it being open was no accident. There was a hook and catch on the outside for whenever there was a need to keep the door open.

I stepped out into the cooling night air. It wasn't far off five in the morning and after a hot summer's day, this was always the most pleasantly cool period. The air temperature had faded to its lowest ebb and the first rays of dawn with the heat it brought was still an hour or so away. If I hadn't been so damn tired every morning, I would have appreciated the walk to work more.

That was another change in me I noted. I was far more alert than I otherwise would be. I didn't think it was the fight with the deadly gnomes waking me up, either. I'd felt like this since I'd been awoken by Quixbix earlier. I used to have to chug a large cup of coffee before heading out and jog half the way to force myself awake. Now, it may as well have been the middle of the day.

When I had completed a once over of the surrounding area and not seen anything untoward, I turned my attention to the door. There was something different that stuck out immediately. There was a message scrawled on the inside of the door in black marker.

Fuck you Torin.

I hope the monsters get you.

The handwriting was Constance's. She insisted on being the one to update the daily deals board if she was on shift. This passive-aggressive graffiti was indisputably hers, the fucking cow.

<You know what this calls for, don't you?> Quixbix said with relish.

“Yeah, a quest. Give me a moment to lock the door will you,” I said.

I remembered to hold onto the door before unhooking it, but let it slam shut behind me anyway. I was super pissed

with myself and the traitorous fucks who tried to screw me over.

With the door closed, Quixbix pinged us with a new quest.

**** Revenge is a dish best served cold (W)*

You have been wronged by Constance Lafleur, Vincent Smith, and their cronies even after you graciously let them live. You must see them dead, dead, dead. Revenge is always cold when served at the end of an Ice Blade, muhahaha.

Success: Confirm the deaths of or kill all six of them before you leave Flint.

Rewards: 150 XP for Constance Lafleur. 50 XP for each of the others. +10 notoriety.

*Failure: Leave Flint's area of influence before they are dead. You will only be awarded XP for those you confirm are dead and the notoriety will only be awarded if all six are killed. ****

I chuckled at the quest's description.

<I've been able to give you a bit of leeway on this one as you are on the clock after all. You may not have time to run around town hunting them all down> Quixbix reassured me.

Maybe I ought to have been conflicted about a quest requiring me to hunt down other human beings.

Had it been one to kill some random people I'm reasonably sure I would have told Quixbix to go hang. Not this lot.

The humorously worded quest had nailed it on the head. I had graciously allowed them to live and stay within the safety of the BuyMart for the night. What's more as I was leaving this morning, I would probably have let them stay and keep the place for themselves.

Instead of gratitude or just slinking off into the night like a pack of scolded dogs, they had crossed me and endangered those of us still in the building in the process.

“Another quest?” Shana said absently as she read through the details. “Oh...um... are we going to pursue this one, Torin?”

I understood the source of Shana’s doubt.

Yesterday, I would have shared it.

Yesterday, their snide behaviour wouldn’t have put us in danger.

Yesterday, was the past.

Today, they would pay for their transgressions, provided it didn’t inconvenience me too much. I still had a dungeon to conquer and claim.

“If we can, we will. First things first, let’s freshen up and eat. I want to be on the move once the sun is up.”

An hour later we had hand washed in the employee bathrooms and eaten a healthy breakfast of fresh fruit and yoghurt. All of which would rot or go off soon without refrigeration or being stored in an inventory.

When breakfast was done, I went on a quick reconnaissance mission in search of glowsticks. They had cleaned out the stock on the shop floor, but they forgot or didn’t check in the stock warehouse where I found a half dozen boxes and snatched them up before returning to the group.

The sun was up when I reached the manager’s lounge, and we would be leaving soon.

“I can’t believe they took all the best TV’s,” Keith whined.

The other three had made themselves useful while Shana and I cleaned up and checked out the aisles to see what else Constance group may have made off with.

Well, Mia and Malky had made themselves useful, Keith, not so much.

“Keith, there is no power. Those TV sets are nothing more than oversized paperweights,” Mia scolded him.

“Mia’s right,” I added. “That they took the electrical equipment but left the food and water just exposes how *dead* stupid they are.”

Keith and Mia didn’t twig to the pun, but Shana snorted and almost spat out the milk she was drinking. Mia smiled sweetly at my supportive comments while Keith continued to whine, and I tuned him out.

Mia really was very pretty, now that I thought about it, and utterly wasted on a deadbeat like Keith.

She would be much better off with me and Shana, if Keith were to have a tragic accident, she wouldn’t hesitate to come with us. I doubt we’d even have to try to convince her.

I slapped myself and shook my head. Where the fuck had that dark train of thought come from. The rest of the group reacted to the crack of the slap on my cheek and stared at me in surprise.

“Still early, trying to shake out the cobwebs,” I lied.

They seemed satisfied with my response and Keith’s incessant complaining resumed. Understanding I was on the verge of strangling the man I stood up and stalked back into Gareth’s office.

“Torin, what are you doing?” Shana asked.

“There is something I want to check out before we leave. Can you be ready to go in five?” I replied.

“Yeah, sure.”

This wasn’t a lie. There was something I’d thought of that I should check out.

Gareth, the store manager, wasn’t just by the book, he was also a bit of a technophobe and had yet to embrace the

digital age. And before we'd settled down for the night, I'd wondered about what kind of paperwork he had in his grey filing cabinets which filled the right-hand corner of his office.

The cabinets were locked, which wasn't a surprise and was also promising. Why lock it up if it wasn't important or better yet, confidential? I couldn't be bothered searching his desk for the keys which may or may not be there and just created a stiletto style ice dagger. After putting the tip of the blade in the lock I was able to twist and brute force each of them open.

The top two drawers were disappointments and contained a collection of reports or the minutes of state-wide performance meetings. The third drawer, though, was the honey pot.

Employee records.

I yanked the drawer out of the cabinet and deposited it on the desk. There were the sounds of surprise and confusion coming from the other room because of my metallic screech inducing rough treatment of the office furniture.

Rifling through the folders I found the files for Constance et al and pulled them out. Viewing the contents there was a load of junk I didn't care about, employee evaluations and the like.

I was interested in only one thing. On the last page in each file was the personal information which included their home addresses.

I knew where most of the addresses listed were and they were back in the centre of Flint. The one house I didn't know the location of was on Saratoga Drive and happened to be the one I was most interested in, Constance's.

Pushing the rest of the stuff on the floor, I summoned the maps I'd picked up from Mike's bikes. Luckily, amongst the state maps was a road map of the Flint area. I spread it out on the desk and studied it intently. It took me a few minutes,

but I finally located Saratoga Drive and jabbed my finger on the spot.

“Got you, ya’ bitch,” I growled.

Luck was well and truly on my side this morning. Constance’s house wasn’t in the centre of town like the others. Saratoga branched off from Elms which was a mile or so further west down the M-21, the direction we were heading in anyway.

I decided not to bother backtracking for the others. I was reasonably confident we would find several of them at Constance’s place anyway.

Vincent always used to appear to be the one leading, but Constance had ever been the instigator. Factoring in that I had thoroughly cowed Vincent and that it was Constance who had left the taunting message, it was likely she had stepped up and formally assumed control of the group.

She would have insisted they accompany her home for protection; I was positive of that. Whether she proved to be an utterly heartless bitch and sent them on their way after was another question entirely.

She was certainly capable of it, but it all depended on whether she figured out that if she sent them away, she might not be able to get them back under her thumb later. Either way, Constance was who I wanted to punish, and the rest of them would just be gravy.

I folded the maps up and stored them away. The sun was fully over the horizon, and it was time we got on the move.

I re-joined the others in the manager’s lounge.

“Shana, it’s time to move,” I said and didn’t wait before crossing the room and opened the door that led out to the store.

Shana rose gracefully, collected two backpacks we had filled with water and fresh food and followed me. I held the

door open for her and she passed through.

“I dunno’ why you wanna’ leave, man. We got everything we need, right here,” Keith griped.

He was really beginning to irritate me.

A dark impulse urged me to shut his flapping, useless trap permanently. Whatever was left of my personal Jiminy Cricket dissuaded me otherwise. The little chap was battered and bruised, but not entirely out of the fight.

“I’ve got shit to do,” I said instead, and then turned to Malky. “Watch out for yourself big guy. You need to level up if you want to survive this. I don’t think the security field this place has will hold up for long,” I warned him.

Malky smiled. “Torin, you are as big as me now, you know. Thank you for your help. I will look after them and do what needs to be done.”

“I am at that, I suppose. Hasta la vista,” I said with a wave, and closed the door.

Shana and I hustled across the store, back to the locker area and were about to leave when Mia ran into the room behind us.

“Oh, good, I caught you,” she said.

I stopped and turned around and looked at the petite Hispanic woman. She was a little out of breath, so must have run across the store after us. She got a good look at the mess in the break area and grimaced. The redcaps had dissolved as Quixbix promised but the rest of the chaos was on full display.

“Torin, Shana, I just wanted to thank you for everything you did for us last night. And to apologise for Keith, he doesn’t mean to be an ass, but I think he’s ashamed that he didn’t help or at least volunteer to go with you and he’s being a dick about it,” Mia said.

“You have nothing to apologise for and it was lovely to meet you,” Shana told her sweetly.

The two moved in and hugged one another. After they broke apart Mia hesitated and bit her lip slightly before moving over and offering me the same opportunity, which I seized without question. My arms wrapped around the small woman and without thinking my hands came to rest on her firm ass and gave each cheek a gentle squeeze. She squeaked in surprise but didn't pull away.

As we separated my hands slipped from her butt but clung on to her waist and kept her close to me. In a low and beguiling voice, I spoke to her directly.

“Mia, we are heading west towards Lake Michigan and likely north after that. I'm thinking of setting up my base of operations on one of the islands on the lake. If anything should happen or you get tired of Keith, come and find me. We can always find a place for you with us.”

Mia's eyes grew to the size of saucers, and she blushed all over as she comprehended the implication behind my words.

“Base of operations, huh, sounds fancy,” she managed to say after a moment.

“I have plans, big plans. But we must be off, or they will never come to fruition. Don't forget my offer Mia,” I said by way of parting.

I looked back as I closed the exit door gently. Mia was standing there, biting her lower lip, her eyes spoke volumes of her ardour-filled state of mind. I almost opened the door, went back in, and claimed her.

That would have inevitably meant a confrontation with Keith and his probable death. Although killing the irritating stoner wouldn't have bothered me overmuch anymore, I was reluctant to hurt Malky. Malky and Keith were friends, and he would step in to help him. As I didn't want to kill Malky, I left the choice in Mia's hands, but I didn't think she was ready to abandon Keith just yet.

Maybe she would follow me when Keith got himself killed or aggravated her enough to ditch him. Time would tell.

We got our mountain bikes from our inventories and mounted them. Before we pushed off Shana spoke.

“You seem different this morning, Torin,” she said cautiously. “More direct and authoritative. You showed it in flashes yesterday, when under duress, but it seems more pronounced now.”

I took one foot off the pedals to balance myself with before answering her.

“Honestly, I understand where you’re coming from, I’ve noticed a difference too. Yesterday, the changes I was feeling worried me. Less so now, after what happened. Playing nice with Constance and Vincent put us in peril and that’s not a mistake I intend to make again. From now on, I’m putting us and our needs first and if that means ruthlessly knocking people out of the way to be first, then so be it. Is that going to be a problem?” I asked her.

It felt good to get that out in the open. The one small deceit in my little speech was that I was still a little concerned about where this change was coming from and how much control I had over it. I didn’t want to become an uncaring psychopath, after all.

“No, not at all. I...um...ah...I like it,” she said shyly, and couldn’t hold my gaze.

A deep blush bloomed in her cheeks, this was something I wanted to explore further, as was the incident when we awoke this morning, but we had a lot to do today.

Tonight, though, was another matter entirely.

Then in a firmer, more confident tone, Shana said. “This simply reaffirms I made the right choice in tying myself to you. I’m ready.”

“Good. I found the address details for those fuckers in the manager’s office. Constance’s house is a ten-minute bike

ride away. It's high time we gave her a rude awakening," I announced, and started riding around the side of the building, up towards the car park with Shana following in my wake.

Chapter 9

The streets were mostly clear of people. The only difficulty we encountered was that we had to weave around vehicles that had been abandoned in the road or had collided with one another after integration.

Several of the stores and even homes we passed showed signs of looting and destruction. The social contract, the glue which held our society together was being tested and giving way in places. We saw a handful of individuals out and about. We ignored them, and they did us the courtesy of doing the same in return.

It was far too early to tell whether the authorities would be able to keep a lid on things or if the frightened mob would attempt to seize control. My suspicion was that places the size of Flint would probably be okay. The population was large enough to support a significant number of police and other emergency services personnel that could be organised and exert a reasonable level of control. Yet, it wasn't so large that the weight of numbers of the panicked masses meant they would be easily overwhelmed.

The Detroit area, on the other hand, would descend into chaos, I was sure of it. More people would die there from the behaviour of other humans than from monsters. At least, during the first few weeks.

The ride took a little longer than ten minutes, but we were taking our time and absorbed the surroundings as we

went. Soon, we turned off Corunna Road and headed North up Elms, shortly after that we turned left onto Saratoga Drive.

The homes here were larger than most in Flint, but the area was quiet. There was a series of four-bedroom detached houses on either side of the road. There were no other homes nearby on either side. A few other drives had been built in the area, but no homes had been constructed on them.

This jogged a memory of a conversation I'd half-listened to with Keith when I first started working at the BuyMart. Apparently, these houses had been built back in 2008, The whole area was supposed to have been developed into a new suburb of Flint, but then the house price crash hit, and the construction company went bust.

Only the first stage of a planned six-stage development was finished. Well, mostly finished.

At the time, I'd put the pointless conversation down to Keith's propensity to toke the reefer. Now, it made more sense that he was telling me because this was where Constance lived.

I idly wondered if Constance had got the place on the cheap because of the construction firm's insolvency, as these houses were way out of the price range of a BuyMart shift manager.

Shana and I freewheeled down the road and scanned the house numbers. We found Constance's house, it was the last on the left just before a road island for turning around, which had one more house that led off from it.

The properties on the right-hand side of the road had stopped a few houses earlier and on the plot to the right of Constance's house there were foundations for another unit, which had been abandoned and was now overgrown with weeds.

There were two cars in her driveway. The house had a beige stucco façade on the walls and the roof tiles were a light brown colour. The grass on the lawn was patchy and discarded

building materials, which had never been removed, poked up through the earth.

“This is the place,” I said quietly, as I dismounted from my bike and sent it to my inventory.

Shana followed suit, she was beside the mailbox and bent down and read the stencilled identification on the side.

“Mr and Mrs Lafleur,” she muttered to herself, but I heard her. “Is Constance married?” she asked.

“I don’t think so, no. Must be her parents or a brother and his wife or something. Which kind of explains how she can afford this place, they may have knocked money off for the unfinished construction next door, but this place would still be waaayyy out of her price range,” I snarked.

People who weren’t Constance or her cronies being home was something I hadn’t considered. This could complicate matters, but I wasn’t turning back.

“No lights on in the house,” I pointed out casually.

There was no fencing on the right-hand side of the house which would make it easy to go around the back if we needed to. I walked up to the front door and tried the handle gently. The front door was locked. I listened at the door for signs of life and thought I heard what might be shuffling from deeper inside but couldn’t be sure.

The blinds were down for the ground floor windows so I couldn’t peek inside. Shana joined me at the front of the house.

“No joy?” she said.

I shook my head.

“Nope. Let’s head around the back. I doubt that will be open either, but if we have to break in it will be best to do so out of sight. Not that there is anybody around,” I snorted.

Saratoga Drive was both isolated and deserted.

We wandered around the side of the house quietly, keeping our eyes open for any signs of life. The windows on the side of the house similarly had their blinds down.

We reached the backyard; the grass wasn't much better back here and there was a secondary building that was half-built, separate from the house. I could see over the low fence on the left into the next backyard and they had a nice circular pool. Presumably, the unfinished building was going to be a pool house for a pool that was never installed.

The yard extended for about sixty feet before you reached the tree line of the copse that ran along the back of the drive. Just inside the tree line, it looked like someone had been dumping their broken appliances. I shook my head in disgust at the fly-tipping.

I took this all in, but the real attention grabber was the sliding glass door at the rear of the property was wide open. I pointed my fingers at the open door to get Shana's attention. She nodded and wisely kept quiet, and pulled an arrow from her quiver, and nocked it in readiness. I summoned my ice scimitars and led the way to the open doorway.

Using a scimitar, I moved a horrible yellow curtain out of the way and stepped into the house.

This backroom was laid out as a dining area and had a large square pine table in the centre. Several of the cheap chairs had been knocked over and flies buzzed around the remains of several half-eaten plates of lasagne that were on the table. On closer inspection, I could see there were droplets of blood spattered on the table and the beige carpet.

Something had already happened here. Were Constance and her crew involved? If they were, had they been the perpetrators or the victims? There were six plates on the table, which matched their numbers.

A thumping sound was followed by a low moan that came from the adjoining room and dragged my attention away from the mess on the table. Shana heard it as well and waited

as I approached the arched entrance into the living room cautiously.

I put my shoulder to the side and peeked through. Oddly there appeared to be half a dozen flat-screen televisions strewn about at the far end of the room.

Three figures shambled around the room, and I recognised one of them as the previously pock-marked Clarence. The other two were an elderly couple I'd never seen before, and they didn't look to be in good shape.

I analysed them for more information.

Death Puppet Zombies x3

Grade: X

Level: 1

HP: 100

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 30 XP each

Mob Description: Death Puppet Zombies are corpses that have been reanimated by a Death Puppet Scarab that has burrowed into the body of a dead lifeform and fused with the corpses nervous system. These creatures are not truly alive and do not have health as living beings do. However, they do require an intact central nervous system to function. Destroying the head or severing the spine is the only effective method of despatching them.

Quixbix surprised me then.

<I have shared this information with Shana, Torin.>

He had been quiet since giving us the quest.

Thanks, Quixbix. One of the zombies is Clarence, it seems like something got to them before us. I thought to him.

<Yes, that should make this easier.>

Shana went around the table quietly to stay out of the zombie's sight until she was behind me.

"Same tactic as we used against the redcaps," I whispered. "Shoot and then clear out of the doorway while I go in."

Shana nodded and slipped past me into the arched opening. She raised her bow and loosed the nocked arrow before spinning out of the gap and drawing a replacement arrow.

"Damn it, I missed," she hissed to me.

I acknowledged what she told me and stepped into the room. Shana's attack had got their attention and the trio of zombies had turned and advanced on our position. The Clarence zombie was at the back of the room and stumbled over one of the discarded widescreen televisions.

I shimmied to my right and engaged the closest of the elderly couple. It was the old woman.

She was short and overweight and wore too much makeup. She had on a voluminous tribal print dress, which blessedly covered her up. Her eyes were milky white and there was no sign of higher intelligence in her. The vapid gaze and aggressive posture made the resemblance to Constance unmistakable, this had to be her mother.

As she reached for me, I sliced at her arm with my scimitar and cut into her flesh.

**** Hit! You have inflicted 17 piercing damage and 12 points of cold damage to death puppet zombie #1. ****

I kicked the zombie in her large gut, and she stumbled back and tripped over a brown armchair. I didn't have time to follow up as the other elderly zombie lurched for me and impaled itself, right through its guts, on my other scimitar.

**** Critical Hit! x2 You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to death puppet zombie #2. ****

Unfortunately, for a zombie, being skewered on a three-foot sword was nothing more than a mere inconvenience. The zombie who was likely Constance's father grappled me and bit me in the shoulder while trying to force me to the ground.

**** -20 Hit Points. (420/440) ****

My left arm was pinned to my body as the creature continued to hold me and gnaw on my shoulder. That was when Shana stepped into the room and positioned herself at my side. She unleashed an arrow into the side of the old fella's temple from point-blank range.

**** Critical Strike! x8 Shana has inflicted 104 piercing damage to death puppet zombie #2. Overflow of 72 damage is converted at a rate of 2 to 1 (vital spot) for 36 health loss. Death puppet zombie #2 has no health but sufficient damage has been inflicted to its head and it is slain. ****

The strength of the old man's grip faded, and he collapsed to the floor. Shana's bravery did not go unrewarded, but in a bad way.

The Clarence zombie had freed himself from the mess of electronic equipment and possessing a younger body moved quicker than either of the two other zombies. He charged across the room and tackled Shana to the ground, his jaws snapped at her as they landed in a heap on the floor.

**** Shana -10 Hit Points. (90/100) ****

Shana shrieked as she was bitten, but because she was trying to fend zombie Clarence off, the bite was on her bracer protected forearm. This mitigated the damage a little, but her hit points were low enough that I didn't want her taking harm of any kind.

The only saving grace to the situation was it opened the back of Clarence's neck to me. Pushing the dead zombie off me and getting to my feet I turned towards them and aimed a backhand stroke with my right-hand scimitar.

**** Critical Strike! x8 you have inflicted 136 piercing damage and 96 cold damage to death puppet zombie #3. Overflow of 132 damage is converted at a rate of 2 to 1 (vital spot) for 66 health loss. Death puppet zombie #3 has no health but sufficient damage has been inflicted to its head and it is slain. ****

My scimitar carved through his neck and severed his head from his body. The perma-dead Clarence fell limply on top of Shana.

Before I could help her shrug him off, I felt a sharp pain as I was bitten on the thigh.

**** -20 Hit Points. (400/440) ****

Constance's zombie mother had crawled across the floor and chowed down on my leg. My jeans offered little in the way of protection. A trickle of red blood dribbled down my leg from where the foul lips of the creature gnawed at me.

"You fucking bitch," I screamed, and slammed the pommel of the ice scimitar into her temple.

The strike had the desired effect, and it loosened her toothy grip on me. I dismissed the notifications as they came in and just sliced and diced the head and shoulders of the zombie until she flopped uselessly to the blood-smearred carpet.

**** Your party has slain death puppet zombies (3).
+46 XP Torin, +51 XP Shana. ****

<Well done, Torin. Be sure to stab them between the shoulder blades. That is where the death puppet scarabs burrow into them and sometimes when the bodies are this fresh, they haven't fully fused with the spine and can crawl away> Quixbix commented.

"Are the scarabs dangerous?" I asked.

<Without a host body, not really. Their bite is mildly venomous and painful, but only a danger to those already incapacitated by the death puppet zombies. You don't even get XP for killing the scarabs> he huffed.

I grunted and followed his advice, stabbing both Constance parents in the back. As I was doing so Shana spoke up.

"Torin, can you help get Clarence off me, please," she requested ruefully from the floor.

I looked over at her but didn't move to assist her.

"No," I told her coldly.

The shock was clear on her pretty face, and it quickly shifted to hurt. I almost relented and aided her but held firm and watched her impassively instead.

When Shana realised it wasn't a joke and I wasn't going to help, she put her bow down and wrestled the body off of her enough that she could pull free. Then stood up and brushed herself off.

“Not very gentlemanly of you,” she started to snipe, but whispered the last bit.

I had crossed the room with quiet menace once she was back on her feet and was now right up in her ‘personal space’.

Shana backtracked a few steps into the corner of the lounge, I followed and backed her right up into the wall, giving her little room. I still wielded my scimitars, and belatedly realised they were sending the wrong message, so sent them to my inventory.

I was angry with her, not murderous.

“Torin, what's the matter? You're scaring me. Is this because I missed my first shot?” she gulped, her eyes wide and watering a little.

She had her hands up between us and they rested on my leather chest armour. There was a tremble in her lip, which was good. I was highly disappointed in her and wanted her to fully understand the depth of my discontent. I lifted her chin with my hand, raising her head and held her gaze with my own.

“That isn't it. You disobeyed me, Shana. I told you the same tactics as we used against the redcaps. I come in and you stay out there holding the exit. Instead, you came in and put yourself in danger. Am I going to have to use the bond to command you in the future or are you going to follow the instructions I give you?” I demanded in a calm but implacably firm tone.

“But...one of the zombies had hold of you,” she retorted in a small hurt voice.

“And I would have dealt with him. If I needed help, I would have called for you” I growled. When she seemed about to argue her point further, I talked over her. “This isn’t some macho bullshit, Shana. I’m not acting butthurt because a woman came to my rescue and I’m feeling insecure.

“You were lucky. What if Clarence had got past the bracer on your forearm and bit you in the neck, huh. What if big momma zombie had been a bit quicker and held me back. Stopping me from cutting his head off when I did? You’d likely be dead or close to it. You still have the Civilian class and that leaves you vulnerable. While I have hit points to spare, I took four bullets to the chest or have you forgotten.”

“I’m...I’m sorry, Torin. I didn’t mean to be disobedient. I will do better. I promise. I don’t want you to be disappointed in me,” she rushed to say.

This wasn’t precisely what I expected.

I had anticipated a bit more anger and a ‘go fuck yourself asshole’ attitude. But I was grateful she was taking this seriously. I didn’t like being a dick to her, but this was important.

If the damage prompts we received were any gauge to go by, Shana would have lost eighty or more Hit Points if zombie Clarence had got to her unprotected throat.

That is why I needed her to stay back.

Without the extra armour and the hit points it granted we got from the redcaps that would be near-fatal for her. Even with her armour she would have been perilously close to expiring and I couldn’t have that.

She gazed up at me with those big beautiful brown eyes.

I felt my countenance soften. “Regardless of what the world might look like, this is not a game. There are no extra lives. I, no we, need to be able to trust one another in order to survive. For better or worse, I’m the one in charge. In the heat of the moment, I need to be the one making the decisions and

they need to be followed. Decisions by committee will just lead to death by a thousand cuts. When we get you a proper class, we can talk about you risking your pretty butt in my stead.”

Shana chuckled at my crappy joke, and I took my finger away from her chin and brushed some strands of her long dark hair behind her ear. Her lips parted and she moistened them with the tip of her tongue and let out a small whimper.

The timing may have stunk, and it was likely completely inappropriate, but I was incredibly turned on right now and Shana responded in a similar fashion.

I leaned down and pressed my lips up against hers. My free hand circled behind her back and then migrated further down. Shana leaned back into the kiss and her lips parted as our tongues met and danced lightly with one another.

Her tongue stud probed and teased my tongue.

My body reacted and strained against the denim I was wearing in an uncomfortable manner. Shana thrust her hips forward and ground herself against me, and I rubbed back against her in response.

I groaned loudly, the sound a strange mixture of joy and disappointment. Joy as I was very happy where this had been going, disappointment as this was neither the time nor the place for sexy fun.

I reluctantly pulled my lips away and took a small step back. Shana tried to follow, but my hand still cradled her head, and I gently kept a distance between us. She pouted at me prettily which sorely tested my resolve.

“Later,” I sighed in a voice thick with desire. “When we’ve found someplace more secure.”

I’d never been this forward or sexually aggressive with anyone before, another marker of the changes I was going through. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours since we met, but I didn’t care. I stroked her cheek with my thumb and

Shana's face flushed with want and need. She actually trembled at my touch, and I could tell her lust had intensified.

"Please...just a little more, sir" she whimpered teasingly. There was an intensity to the way she said sir that layered it with a plethora of meanings

"That's enough for now," I told her sternly.

Her demeanour shifted a little. She was still horny as hell but pulled herself together and stopped wheedling for more.

"Yes, sir," she answered me, struggling to keep an edge of disappointment out of her voice.

There was that honorific again, that implied so much in so few letters.

"You like it when I'm in charge, don't you?" I asked her meaningfully.

Shana blushed again and nodded. "Yes, sir, I do."

I grinned at that. I liked to be in charge, and this wasn't a change since the Framework descended upon us. I'd always preferred to be the dominant personality in a relationship and that meant my love life tended not to last very long with any particular girl.

I could be happy in a partnership of equals and always respect the boundaries of others, but if the girl I was seeing started getting pushy or tried to dictate how to live my life or who I should be, then it ended pretty quickly. That had happened all too frequently.

Things were different now and I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't take advantage of trying out a different dynamic if Shana seemed game. And all indicators pointed to yes on that front.

"Back to work. Let's loot this lot and check the rest of the house," I ordered.

The arrow Shana missed with had hit the wall and was a write-off, leaving her with nineteen. The three zombies coughed up their starting coins of six Gold and their Silver and Copper, two scarab venom sacs and a piece of armour.

Shoddy Mail Gloves

Mail Armour (Heavy)

Damage Mitigation: Medium

HP +20

Durability: 10/10

I donned the gloves. As much as I would like to give them to Shana and further boost her Hit Points, she was already using all her armour slots. Both the boots and cuirass used up two each, as she was a Civilian and didn't get the -1 armour offset my class provided. The mail gloves used two of my seven and the two leather armour pieces one each leaving me with three more slots.

We searched the rest of the downstairs and then swept the upstairs but found nothing else and returned to the lounge.

“I don't understand why they dumped their swag from the BuyMart like that?” Shana mused, gesturing towards the pile of widescreen television sets at the front end of the room. “Did the zombies knock them over?”

I inspected the area myself and noticed there were other expensive smaller items and even packs of junk food strewn amongst the mess. Under one of the sets was a BuyMart apron with Clarence's name tag ironed on the inside.

“I don't think they did this deliberately,” I suggested after a moment's thought. “What I think happened was that Clarence was killed in here and then when the scarab reanimated him the contents of his inventory was disgorged around him.”

I walked over and had a close look at the elderly male zombie.

“Shana, come here and look,” I called, and pointed out the dried blood around his nose and eyes.

She joined me and peered down at the dead man with a disgusted scowl on her face.

“You see this blood here. We didn’t cause that, but who does it remind you of?” I prompted her.

Shana thought about it for a moment before saying. “It’s just like Reg back at your apartment complex.”

“Yeah, I think so. I’m guessing that Constance’s dad here, didn’t make it through the transition, maybe her mum too. Anyway, sometime later the death puppet scarabs find his body and reanimate him. Either they do the same to his wife or he kills her and then they reanimate her as well.

“After that Constance and company come back in the early hours of the morning, maybe find the place empty or she assumes her ‘rents have turned in for the night. They help themselves to some lasagne leftovers and then are attacked by the zombies, with Clarence being killed in here,” I explained.

“That makes sense, but where are the rest? Did they run away?” Shana asked.

My answer was interrupted by a disturbing ruffled movement under big momma’s voluminous tribal print dress where her legs were. Shana and I stood up and backed away a few steps. Then a dark-blue beetle emerged from under the hem of her dress, it was about four inches long and it was swiftly followed by a second.

Death Puppet Scarabs x2

Grade: -

Level: 1

HP: 1

Loot Value: N/A

Threat: Abysmally Low

XP Value: 0 XP each

Mob Description: Death Puppet Scarabs are insects with a rudimentary hive mind that burrow into the flesh of dead intelligent creatures and reanimate them. They use these dead puppets to find or bring fresh corpses for their nest-mates to reanimate. The fresher the corpse, the more mobile and useful it is to the scarab nest. They have a mild venom which they pump into living, incapacitated, victims that kills over hours but embalms the body for maximum usefulness. The victim is often aware, and it is an agonising way to die. The scarabs are otherwise no more dangerous than a regular, if oversized, beetle unless already fused with a dead puppet.

The scarabs tried to scamper away, but I was too quick and squished the pair of them under the heel of my boot and then scraped their remains off on the carpet. The only thing more disgusting than having bug guts on the soles of my boots was contemplating just where the pair of them had been hiding under that dress.

“Oh, that is just foul,” Shana scowled with distaste. “I hate creepy-crawlies.”

“They aren’t my favourite thing in the world either,” I groused.

Then my gaze followed the path the scarabs had been running in before I stamped on them. I noticed there was a faint trail of blood or viscera that led out of the lounge and back into the dining room. I followed it and the trail continued up to the open sliding door we had neglected to close in the excitement.

That was an oversight I resolved not to make again.

“Shana, was this trail here before we checked upstairs?” I asked her.

“I don’t think it was, Torin. What does it mean?” she answered.

“It means these two weren’t the first scarabs to make a break for it and the others went out into the backyard,” I suggested and led her back out into the yard with the patchy grass.

The trail grew fainter until there was only the occasional spot of blood on the earth, but it was enough to highlight the insect or insects had absconded into the copse of trees that lined the back of these houses.

I walked up to the treeline carefully. It wasn’t particularly dense woodland and with dappled sunlight piercing through the canopy of leaves I could see clearly.

Up close and with the unfinished pool house no longer blocking my eyeline, what I had earlier assumed was dumped rubbish, was actually a pile of discarded high-end electronics about thirty feet inside the copse.

“More stuff from BuyMart. Another one of them died just inside the woodland,” I observed.

Shana nodded when she saw where I was pointing. “What are we going to do?”

“It’s still early and we haven’t located Constance, Vincent, or any of the others apart from Clarence. We will follow the trail they’ve left and see if we can locate this nest and them. Keep an arrow nocked and let me tank, you’re too precious to lose,” I instructed.

Shana smiled shyly at the compliment, and we advanced into the shady wooded area. We were headed South back towards Corunna Road which was a mile, maybe a mile and a quarter away. I’d paid attention to the terrain as we rode past and the land south of Saratoga Drive was open fields, so this stretch of trees couldn’t go that far, a few hundred metres at most.

I was no expert tracker; I’d never hunted a day in my life but even I could spot the signs of disturbance in the

detritus on the woodland floor that suggested bodies had been dragged further southward.

We moved deeper, but it wasn't long before the trees grew less dense, and we could see the sun further up ahead. And that was when we saw them shambling in our direction. Vincent and the other three meatheads who had followed him and Constance. They were all zombified and we spotted them before they became aware of us.

I took Shana's hand, and we hid behind the largest tree we could find and waited.

All four of the zombies shuffled by us, headed for the houses on Saratoga Drive.

I didn't understand how their senses worked but they failed to spot us as they went by. I motioned for Shana to stay put and then I approached the trailing zombie and swung my scimitar two-handed and decapitated him in one hit. The sound of his bouncing head and his falling body alerted the other three to my presence and they turned to face me. I hadn't waited and was on the move as soon as the first zombie fell and stabbed a second in the temple before it could react, which dropped it.

Then Vincent was swinging for me, while an arrow streaked past me into the throat of the other remaining zombie. The arrow didn't drop him, but he did stumble backwards and topple over a tree root.

I fended Vincent off with my blade and swiped at him several times, even shearing off his left hand halfway up his forearm. With him literally disarmed, I circled to that less dangerous side and attacked with verve until Vincent and his ratty ponytail crumpled.

The fourth and last zombie had regained his footing and lurched at me, but without anything else to worry about I gave him the same treatment and used my superior quickness to stay out of his range and slashed off his fingers and hands.

Then moved in to finish him off once he'd been effectively neutralised.

The fight only lasted thirty seconds. Shana ran over to join me, and we took a minute to loot and stab between the shoulder blades of the dead bodies to be sure we finished off the scarabs. Vincent and one of the others oozed a yellowish substance rather than the coagulated blood we'd observed in the others.

I cut the clothes from Vincent and examined his body quickly. His chest was covered with puncture wounds. He hadn't been killed by the zombies; he had been taken to the nest and embalmed alive by the death puppet scarabs.

We got their twelve Gold and two hundred Silver from them, as well as two more venom sacs and two Shoddy Carapace. I got 62 XP and Shana 68 XP.

"Only Constance left to find," I announced.

"Do you think she is back the way they came?" Shana asked.

"Probably. If not, it's the direction we need to head in anyway, let's go."

We jogged back through the woodland and hunkered down as we came to the edge of the trees. In front of us, the land had been cleared and dug up, another housing development that was seemingly abandoned.

There was an earthen embankment that dropped three or four feet and we would have to go down. There were several more banks of dug up earth in rows on the right where we were looking and a dirt track that led back to Corunna Road on the left.

The sun glinted off the dark blue scarabs that skittered around the first bank of earthworks where I could see a three-foot-wide dark hole had opened. Lying next to the hole was Constance. She had about a half dozen scarabs on her, with their mandibles sunk into her flesh as they pumped in their

venom. Her body twitched and I heard a faint mewling whimper come from her.

She was alive and very much awake as she suffered a slow and agonising death.

For a moment I felt the darkest of impulses. Surely confirming the scarabs would kill her would be enough to complete the quest. That meant we could leave her to endure the horrific consequences of her folly and still collect on the offered rewards. I shook the cruel impulses away.

I may be changing, but I was determined not to become a sadist, even if Constance would have happily done the same to me.

“Let’s finish this,” I told Shana.

With Shana following me, we scrambled down the bank and walked carefully up to the scarab nest, avoiding the junk strewn about which had been coughed up by the eventual expiry and inhabitation of the scarab’s earlier victims.

We squished the first few of the beetles we came across but then the rest of the nest became aware of our presence and skittered off, most escaping down the hole. Even those who had been slowly killing Constance.

I trudged up to her. Constance was laying on her back and her ankle was broken, the white of the bone poked out from her flesh.

Had she fallen while running from the zombies?

I would never know and grunted in self-understanding that I didn’t really care. Her eyes, which had been rolling aimlessly, settled on me as I scowled down on her.

“This is more mercy than you probably deserve, Connie,” I declared as I brought my scimitar down on her chubby neck and beheaded the annoying cow with a deep sense of satisfaction.

**** Critical Strike! x8 You have inflicted 136 piercing damage and 80 points of cold damage. Overflow of 126 damage converted at a rate of 2 for 1 (vital spot) for 63 health loss. Constance LaFleur is slain.*

*You have slain Constance Lafleur. Torin receives +16 XP, +1 notoriety, Shana receives + 17 XP. ****

I may have overdone the power behind my blow as my ice scimitar cracked and then shattered when it hit a rock hidden underneath her. That wasn't a big deal; I just made another one.

<Quest 'Revenge is a dish best served cold' completed. 62 XP to Torin and 68 XP to Shana for those five zombies. 416 XP to Torin and 456 XP to Shana for the quest. +10 Notoriety for killing the whole group> Quixbix intoned formally.

<Woohoo, that was badass, I loved the part where you beheaded her> he hollered enthusiastically afterwards.

"Glad I could entertain you, Quixbix," I chuckled to the bloodthirsty imp as I looted Constance for her starting gold.

<We're really rocking and rolling, to you use one of your Earth expressions. There is more good news. I fed back the location of this Death Puppet Scarab nest to the Flint podium and you have been rewarded with one hundred gold and experience. That extra XP has pushed Shana over one thousand. Whenever you are ready you can initiate your audience with the Framework admins to level her up> he added.

"That's great news, Quixbix. Thank you. Torin, did you want us to do that now?" Shana asked.

"Hmmm, let's get away from here first. We can follow the dirt track back to the main road. Quixbix, can you confirm that killing Constance, who hadn't become a zombie, hasn't also triggered a capture quest against us?" I asked the imp.

<No, Torin. You are still under the effect of the shroud you earned yesterday and there were no witnesses> he affirmed

“Excellent, best we keep it that way,” I suggested.

Then we summoned our bikes and rode the mile or so down the track and got back on the M-21. I decided that we should keep going and put a bit more distance between us and the headless bodies we left in our wake. However, before we cycled down the road a stray thought crossed my mind.

“Quixbix, did the scarabs come from one of these spawning crystals or were they something like the dogs we encountered yesterday?” I asked the imp.

<They came from a spawning crystal. Why do you ask?> he replied.

“Humph,” I muttered. “Dean told me these crystals would be outside the population centres. Was that a lie?”

<No, it wasn't a lie and technically the scarab crystal is outside a population centre. As you observed the scarabs were ungraded mobs, allowing their spawning crystal to be placed anywhere not within range of a settlement podium. The crystal must be sited beyond the Flint podium's area of influence, which because it's big enough to be a town, is two hundred and fifty metres beyond any qualifying structures. That limit on a podium's influence is the same under the settlement as well, which is where the scarab crystal is> he lectured.

“So, you're saying the nest is two-hundred and fifty metres below that hole in the earthen embankment,” I clarified.

<Exactly.>

“Good to know,” I said.

And it was good to know. If we did choose to create a home base of some kind after I got my ship, knowing we would have to account for potential threats from below was important.

“Daylight’s wasting. Let’s get out of the Flint limits and then we’ll stop and process your character progression,” I said to Shana.

“Okay,” she responded, and we kicked off.

We rode West until we were on the other side of Clayton, a small community so close to Flint it was essentially part of it.

Then we pulled over, put the bikes away, found a shady spot under a large Beech tree and I opened Shana’s character sheet. Sure enough, she had 1,114 unused XP and I selected the level up option that was blinking in the mental interface.

Blink.

Chapter 10

I was back in the faux-admissions office with the green wallpaper and the beige carpet. Everything was the same with the secretary sitting behind her desk and the huge double doors leading to Dean's office on the right-hand side. The only difference was this time Shana was with me.

"This is not what it was like before," she whispered, and her hand reached out, touching mine. I took hold of her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"This is what I saw. According to Dean, they use some kind of expectation filter," I explained and tugged on her hand, moving us toward the desk.

Before I could say anything, the bespectacled secretary looked up from her paperwork and smiled.

"Mr Carter, lovely to see you again and it is a pleasure to meet you too, Miss Colton. The Dean of Admissions has instructed me to send you in directly," she chirped and pointed to the oversized double doors.

"Thank you," I said politely and led Shana to the doors which opened automatically as we approached.

We walked through and the doors slammed shut as they had the first time. Shana jumped at that, but I'd been expecting it, so I kept my cool. The start-up warehouse-style office of Dean's was unchanged except for the presence of a

row of old school arcade games and pinball machines on the wall to our right.

“Motherfucker!” Dean screamed as he ran across the room and invaded my personal space.

The scruffy man embraced me enthusiastically, though since I’d gained a few inches in height and had been taller than him before anyway, I could see clearly over the top of his head. He was in the same Hooters T-shirt and blue denim shorts and his vocabulary was as excessively vulgar as ever.

He held the hug just long enough to make it uncomfortable and then released me.

“Hey, Dean. Good to see you,” I said neutrally.

Dean didn’t pick up on my ambivalence and kept going. “You too, you big bastard. What are those muscles made of? Iron?” he chuckled.

“This must be the young lady you picked up,” Dean leered, turning to Shana who was a little dumbstruck at his exuberance. “She’s a sexy fucking babe, Torin. Why haven’t you fucked her yet?”

“For shit’s sake Dean,” I growled at him angrily and gave him a little shove on his shoulder. “That’s super inappropriate and a really shitty first impression, might I add. Wait, does that mean you’re watching us?” I asked as his words sunk in.

“Yeah,” Dean said, exaggerating the implied stupidity of my question. “What the fuck else am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, run this Framework that has transformed the world,” I griped, stating the obvious.

“Pfff...it runs itself mostly, and I have peons to do the rest, so I people watch. Not just you, so don’t go getting a big head thinking you’re the Grand Poohbah or something,” he laughed at his own joke.

“That’s not my point and you know it, asshole,” I grumbled, my anger overriding my sense of self-preservation.

Fortunately, Dean was in an amiable mood and didn't take my berating him in a bad way.

"Untwist your knickers mofo, your language is almost as fucking bad as mine," he grinned.

"You're obviously a bad influence," I snarked back.

He shrugged that off and took Shana's hand in his and bowed slightly.

"I apologise profusely, Mademoiselle," he crooned, and kissed the back of her hand. "But you really should fuck him. Acheronians have big fucking cocks and the stamina to go for hours on end."

Shana's cheeks blushed a deep scarlet at his direct line of advice.

"Um...thanks, I think...Dean," she stammered and withdrew her hand quickly.

"No worries," he told her. "Well, as I have been watching...some of the time, I know you haven't even got your core yet, Torin. We can't be here for you, so it must be for this little lady. Let's take a look under the hood."

As he finished talking, he reached out and tried to lift Shana's shirt. I reacted without thinking and my hand shot out, grabbed his wrist and pulled him forcefully to the side. My other hand whipped up, grasped him by the throat and slammed him into the wall behind us.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing," I growled in a cold rage.

Literally. Ice crystals started to form on Dean's throat where I gripped him.

"In addition to having big fucking cocks, Acheronians are a mite bit over-protective of their women," Dean wisecracked conversationally, as if he wasn't being throttled by me. "You can let go, dude. You can't fucking hurt me, and it was a joke, in retrospect, I admit, not a very funny one. I, of course, meant getting a look at Shana's character sheet."

“Torin, you can let him go,” Shana advised.

She had moved up to my side and laid a hand gently on the arm that still gripped Dean tightly. The cold rage faded sufficiently that I could bring myself to release him.

“Don’t overstep again, Dean,” I barked, unable to stop myself from threatening him.

I put my arm around Shana’s waist and pulled her in close and she nuzzled in tightly and it felt exceptionally good.

“They are also super possessive and domineering,” Dean continued as he brushed the ice particles away. “But that’s not a problem for you is it, Shana,” he chuckled knowingly.

“No, it’s not,” she retorted unperturbed, having already adjusted to Dean’s aggressive attempts at embarrassment.

“Then my work is done,” Dean extolled with fake piety. “The match is made.”

I’d calmed down enough to discern a smidgen of what he was up to, after all, Shana was now ensconced in my embrace.

“Dean, you’d be like, the matchmaker from hell,” I said, blowing a soft raspberry at him. “And for the record, I didn’t need any help in that regard.”

“Snoozers are losers,” he shouted over his shoulder as he walked over to his bean bag corner.

He pushed a couple of the bean bags together and then patted them, indicating we should come and join him.

As we walked over, I muttered. “Not rushing something isn’t snoozing.” Shana laughed lightly at my sulky comeback.

“Tonight, though?” she whispered hopefully.

“Oh, fuck yeah, no matter what,” I answered.

We settled into the bean bags and Dean grinned at us.

“Okay, what have we got to work with here? Civilian! Well, that sucks. But you have plenty of unallocated aptitude points which is something we can definitely work with,” he muttered to himself.

Then his glassy-eyed expression vanished, and his focus snapped back on us. I was 99% sure he was Hollywooding again. He already knew everything there was to know about Shana and me. Dean was acting like this was all new to him, but I was sure he had decided which path he was going to direct us down before we got here. Some of what had occurred during our first day, the quests, and loot drops were all a bit too convenient to be entirely coincidental.

“Alrighty then,” Dean started. “It is beholden upon me as your guide to remind you that you can choose to be utterly fucking stupid and refuse the awesome advice I’m about to give. It is your character and therefore your choice, well Torin’s really since you’re soulbound to him but let’s not sweat the dirty details, time enough later for that. You can choose to advance to level two of Civilian if you wish.”

Dean gagged as he said this and then theatrically mimed puking all over the room for ten seconds. I shook my head at his antics.

“Dean, today, please,” I requested.

He settled back onto his bean bag, by which I mean he fell off a few times, imitating Chevy Chase, before returning to the matter at hand.

“If the meaning of my display somehow escaped your notice don’t do this. Torin, go all dominant Acheronian on her if you need to,” Dean said.

Shana interrupted whatever other plea he planned to make. “I have no interest in being a Civilian. How do I use the unallocated aptitude points?”

Dean brightened up and steepled his fingers drumming them together. “Excellent,” he said aping Monty Burns. “It’s easy-peasy. You basically get a do-over on your initial

character creation. Your aptitude is high, so you have two broad possibilities for building your new character.

“You can remain human and take a P-grade class. P-grade classes are the bottom rung of the third tier of classes. They are pretty decent and wouldn’t be a terrible use of your integration potential, or you change to a second-tier species and still have enough left over for an S, R or Q-grade class which are at the top of the second tier. What you can go for depends on which species you pick.”

“Your bossman here,” Dean said and lightly punched my arm. “Has a third-tier species and a K-grade class plus a few other bells and whistles. And you’ve seen what a badass he is, right?”

Shana nodded, silently absorbing what Dean was telling her.

“My advice,” he went on, “is take the latter. This is a special rule-ignoring moment where many options are open to you, especially on the species change front, which will be closed or very difficult to obtain after this. You might be a few stat points lighter by taking a slightly lower grade class in the short term but shifting up the class tree is a lot easier than bumping your species tier.”

“I’m not sure,” Shana said uncertainly.

I couldn’t imagine the idea of changing species appealed to her, it certainly hadn’t to me when Dean informed me that I’d become an Acheronian, though I was adjusting to the reality of it remarkably quickly. That could be due to the cataclysmic events unfolding around me and I might experience a total freak out when I got some downtime. Time would tell on that front.

“Here,” Dean said, producing a tablet that was too large for it from his pocket. “I have taken the liberty of putting together a sample of suitable selections for you to peruse. These take advantage of your naturally strong Mana Capacity.

I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. Don't worry I've filtered out all the fucking hideous ones," he said brightly.

Shana took the pad from him and absently thanked him; her eyes already glued to the screen as she started reading through the contents.

"Shana, will you be okay looking through this for a minute by yourself? I need to have a private word with Dean," I asked her.

"Mmm, yes," she mumbled distractedly.

I stood up from the bean bags and motioned to Dean to follow. We walked over to the arcade games. I noticed the closest was a classic Pac-Man game.

"What's up dude, why the cloak and dagger?" Dean said.

"I just wanted to ask you some personal stuff, okay," I said.

"Got it. I know what you're going to ask," he said.

"You do?" I questioned.

"Sure man, you're my main motherfucker and I know exactly what's on your mind. Shana is clean as a whistle, dude. No need to bag and tag your meat soldier when he's on deployment," Dean winked. "Not like the girl you dated at college who had the clap. Although since the Framework's come online, there isn't any venereal disease to speak of," he said.

"Bloody Nora," I swore, and rubbed my temples. "That is not what I wanted to talk about."

"Oh, fuck, sorry dude, my bad. Got my wires crossed a bit. I see where you're coming from now. Yes, you can totally knock her up even though you'll be different species, the Framework has absolutely taken that into account. Although as a third-tier species your fertility is restricted," Dean confided.

"What the fuck?" I yelled in surprise.

That wasn't what I wanted to talk about either, but the information was plenty disturbing. Dean mistook the cause of my startlement and blathered on.

"There is nothing wrong with your swimmers, dude. It's necessary to limit the number of high-tiered people, otherwise, they'd dominate the galaxy in a couple of centuries. But it's all cool, just means you get to fuck her loads and there is nothing wrong with that, am I right?" he said and elbowed me in his idea of shared camaraderie.

"Bloody hell, Dean. This is not about sex," I whispered at him.

"I know dude. I'm fucking with you," he laughed. "But just so there is no misunderstanding like last time, everything I said is true. You don't need condoms. And you will probably need to have sex with a woman a couple hundred times before she'll become receptive to your seed. It depends on how strong she is as well. After that, you're good to become her baby daddy."

"You're still doing it," I snapped.

"I know, funny isn't it. But seriously breeding is going to be something that affects you as you incorporate your new Acheronian instincts and drives. Which is what you dragged me over here to discuss isn't it?" he asked rhetorically.

Bugger. He had me dead to rights. That was precisely why I wanted to talk to him.

Shrugging off his know-it-all pomposity I said. "I have concerns, yes."

He put his hands on my shoulders "Son, don't be ashamed of your urges, this is all perfectly natural and something everyone goes through. Now, let's take these sheets down to the laundry room before your Mum gets home, yeah," he said, faking a parental 'talk'.

I pushed his hands away. "You're an ass, you know that right?"

“Fucking A I am. However, my mockery has an apt purpose. What you are experiencing is somewhat like puberty. You have undergone a sudden physical change that has altered your biochemistry. Yes, it will have a modest effect on your moods and behaviour, but it won’t radically alter it. In a few days, you won’t even notice,” he said, finally taking this talk seriously.

“Fine. That is a relief I suppose,” I confessed.

“Of course, it is, Torin. No one enjoys feeling like they are being controlled externally,” he empathised.

I searched his face for any hint that was another backhanded joke at my expense, considering what he had imposed on me. I couldn’t see any, perhaps the irony of his statement truly was lost on him.

“What was all that crap about having babies? I only met Shana yesterday and I’m way too young to be a father,” I told him.

He laughed hysterically in my face for a full minute. When he straightened up and got a view of my nonplussed expression, he relented a little.

“Oh, you’re being serious. You’ll understand what I mean when you plug your appliance into her socket for the first time. That particular urge will overpower whatever pathetic resistance you think you’ll be putting up,” he chuckled.

“You just said these changes weren’t going to control me,” I said, utterly exasperated with him.

“And they won’t. All living things have a powerful drive to procreate, you Earth humans with all your success have just become adept at suppressing it,” he explained. “Guess what? You aren’t human anymore, you’re an Acheronian and for them, that drive is even more intense.

“Overpopulation and climate change are concerns of the past. Whatever walls or logical arguments your cogent mind will erect will be battered aside by a wrecking ball of

want, need, and desire. When you get up close and personal with that pretty young lady there is only one thing you're going to be thinking about doing. And the bond between you is only going to intensify that need and transfer it over to Shana, to boot.

"Which is a good point I probably ought to have warned you about. You'll want to think carefully about who else you soulbond unless banging uggers and raising a brood with them floats your boat," he finished.

"Christ, do you have to be so crude," I grumbled at him.

"I may be crude, but I'm also right. The only way you can feasibly avoid becoming a parent in the Darkwyrlds would be to take a vow of celibacy or dying before you get a chance. Fancy either of those options, do you?" Dean taunted me.

Celibacy wasn't on the cards, not under any circumstances. Death was equally unappealing.

"Oh, look, I think Shana has narrowed down her selections. Let's go take a peek at what she's picked out," he said, changing the subject and crossed the room to where Shana waited for us expectantly.

I jogged after him and Dean had already retrieved the pad from Shana.

"I've narrowed down the possibilities to three," Shana said.

"What do we have here," Dean mumbled as he reviewed Shana's picks. "A Human with the Flamebolt Sorceress class, a Foxblood who is an Urban Ranger, and a Silverblood Elf with the Arcane Archer class. Well, you haven't exactly pushed the boat out with these, have you. What was wrong with the Naga Pyromancer?"

"I'm not becoming a slimy snake person," she answered him with a withering stare.

“What’s wrong with snake people?” Dean pressed. “Their scales are actually quite smooth and pleasant to touch, not slimy at all, a common misconception. If you’re worried Torin won’t bang you later, you don’t have to worry, you’ll not lose any of your natural allure.”

“Dean,” I sighed at his continued inappropriate rudeness.

“What? Okay, Naga is off the table.” Dean started critiquing her choices. The Flamebolt Sorceress is a decent P-grade class combining affinities for Fire and Lightning magic, but you’ll remain a boring first-tier human. The foxblood is a bit more interesting being one of the possible second-tier upgrades to human, but the Urban Ranger class largely wastes your magical potential,”

“I’ve enjoyed using the bow and it was something I loved to do when I was younger and wanted to utilise it more,” Shana interrupted him.

“Fair enough,” Dean acknowledged. “Finally, the Silverblood Elf Arcane Archer, which would be my recommendation then as it at least incorporates your magical prowess with the bow use. Unless you want to reassess?”

Dean had addressed me at the finish and waved the pad at me.

His unsaid implication being that as Shana was soulbound to me the decision was mine and not hers. From what I had learned about her, she would likely not object if I pulled rank and forced a choice of my own on her. However, Dean’s recent taunts had put me in an objectionable frame of mind in that regard, and I chose to leave the decision with her without even reviewing the other possibilities.

“We will go with what you are most comfortable with, Shana,” I opined and handed her the pad.

Dean grimaced and shook his head but didn’t gainsay me.

“Thanks, Torin. I think the elf option would be best, but I’m not sure. Is there any way I can see what I would look like?” she asked Dean.

“Yeah, no problem. First, the Flamebolt Sorceress,” he said.

Appearing in the middle of the room was a three-dimensional image of Shana as she would look as the Flamebolt Sorceress. This was the human option and as such there was very little difference except there were red and yellow highlights in her dark black hair, similar to the way my black hair had ice-blue frosted tips.

This had to be a side-effect of the magical affinity. The image of Shana had her covered up with yellow and red robes matching the highlights in her hair.

“Next up, the Foxblood Urban Ranger,” he said. “When adopting mixed blood upgrades, you have a choice on how many animalistic features you wish to incorporate. Considering your objections about the Naga this is the minimalist version.”

A new image appeared beside the Sorceress. You could tell it was Shana, but her long hair was now a russet red, she was clad in grey leather armour and held her bow loosely at her side. I could see that the backs of her hands had patches of silky red fur matching her new hair colour and her eyes were yellow with slightly slitted pupils. Her ears had points but were not as noticeable as mine. This version of her was several inches shorter than the human avatar which matched her current height.

“And the front-runner, the Silverblood Elf Arcane Archer,” Dean finished.

We now had a third image of Shana, this one clad in similar leather armour to the Ranger, but coloured white instead. Her hair was a flowing straw-blonde and her ears were longer and pointed as you would expect for an elf. Otherwise, apart from being a touch taller and leaner, she would be an

inch or two over six feet, she didn't seem noticeably different in any other way.

Shana walked about each avatar and examined all three of them critically.

Stopping in front of the Urban Ranger she said. "I haven't spent a fair bit of time, money, and discomfort getting waxed regularly at the salon to voluntarily adopt that much extra body hair. The foxblood is out."

"Not a problem. I would have advised against it anyway. If you're looking for a smooth ride," Dean said and winked at me. "Elves are hairless, except for what's on their head."

"Interesting," Shana whispered in front of the elf avatar and then tutted. "Can we do something about the hair colour, though? I've always been proud about not being blonde."

"I get you. Too many cheerleader Barbie bitches," Dean chuckled.

"Something like that," Shana answered him. "Can you do it?"

"Give me a second. I just need to make a minor tweak or two, and presto there we go. What do you think?"

The elf avatar changed. Gone were the blonde locks and Shana's natural dark black hair was back, her skin tone seemed a little paler, though that might be because the leathers she wore had been switched to jet black. Her brown eyes appeared darker around the edges too.

"Oh, that's much better," Shana exclaimed and clapped her hands together. "This is it. I'll take this one."

"That okay with you, Bossman," Dean asked me.

"If it's what Shana wants then, yes," I agreed.

Shana nodded her affirmation.

"And done," Dean said unnecessarily loudly. "Here is your new sheet. Your new class has a higher XP threshold, so

you'll remain as level one until you hit the new required total.”

On the wall opposite, Shana's new character sheet was displayed, writ large for us to read through. The avatars disappeared and Shana adopted her new look.

Shana's stats were much improved, her Hit Points more than doubled to two hundred and she was getting ten percent bonuses to her Mental and Social stats. The bonus wasn't as large as mine, but it was a definite step up from where she had been previously. Her armour and weapon slots increased, and she now had the same -1 armour offset which meant the leathers we had would only utilise a single slot each.

Of course, as I examined her sheet, I couldn't help but see that everything was not quite as advertised.

“Dean, what the fuck did you do? This is not what we reviewed and approved.” I said angrily.

“Actually, you both asked me to tweak it to change her hair colour back to black and I did. That meant changing from the silverblood elf subtype to shadowborn. Shadowborn elves have restrictions on the magic schools they can use, so they can't be a generic S-grade Arcane Archer. But they have a major affinity for dark magic making it much more effective for them to use.

“Therefore, I had to shuffle over to the similar, but superior, Q-grade Shadepath Markswoman class which makes use of dark magic. Not my fault you couldn't be fucking bothered reviewing it again before confirming your decision,” Dean explained, but could barely hide his shit-eating grin.

“Bullshit, Dean. Shana, was Shadepath Markswoman on your original list?” I asked her.

“No, I don't think it was, Torin. I'm sorry for not checking things through before accepting,” she said in a worried voice.

I reached over and pulled her into a comforting hug.

“This isn’t your fault. Dean, who pretends to be our friend is being a manipulative bastard, again,” I comforted her, while raising my voice and punctuating the last part.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, quit acting like I’ve sold your firstborn into slavery or something. I just gave you a little nudge to select the best combination you could achieve,” Dean said, trying to reason with us, poorly.

“Shadepath Markswomen are awesome. They can infuse dark magic directly into their projectiles for extra damage. She just became a lethal ranged attacker. I don’t think a thank you would go amiss.”

I had already been angry but that was a step too far.

“Fuck you, I’ve had enough. I may not be able to hurt you, but I don’t have to put up with your bloody games. Send us back now,” I spat at him.

That’s when I recalled that wasn’t how the Framework behaved. Our business was done here, Dean had no excuse to keep us any longer, and I simply thought about returning.

Blink.

Chapter 11

Blink.

We were back on the side of the road, in the shade of a Beech tree.

I was furious with Dean. If there was one thing I detested, it was being manipulated.

I'd talked myself into giving him a pass yesterday, excused his behaviour when he took the class choice from me.

Many others, including Shana, had stubbornly refused to accept what was happening and it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that I would have reacted in the same manner. With that in mind, I'd concluded perhaps Dean had been acting in my best interests then.

That and the nagging feeling I had somehow chosen what occurred, as illogical as that seemed.

Today was a different matter. We had adjusted to the new reality, much quicker than most, and yet he still felt the need to use trickery to push us where he wanted.

I summoned my scimitar and swung with all my might at the tree. Throwing a tantrum might seem childish but I desperately needed an outlet for my rage. Maybe I should have stuck around Dean's office and pummelled the little blighter until I felt better.

The diameter of the Beech tree's trunk had to be a foot at least and scimitars aren't designed for chopping. My strike

was spectacularly ineffective, but I continued to hit the tree without mercy and then moved on to cracking the blade against a large rock until I received a prompt that the blade had a lost a point of durability.

I could see cracks spidering from the hilt along the blade and discarded the now useless ice scimitar away. But I'd managed to break something and that had been my aim.

“God damn it,” I yelled to the heavens.

<Things didn't go well I take it?> Quixbix chuckled in our heads.

“Not exactly,” I huffed and sat on a smooth rock wall not far from the tree.

Shana joined me at the wall. I lifted my arm and she moved beneath it and hugged me. I could see the cracked scimitar had already begun to melt in the hot sun. A quick analysis revealed that being reduced to zero durability had robbed it of its Impervious Ice descriptor.

<Shana seems to have a kick-ass new class and has become a shadowborn elf. The Shadowborn usually work well with Acheronians and make good corsairs. Why are you unhappy?> the imp probed.

I was about to explain how we'd been tricked into taking a notorious dark magic-using class but held my tongue. Quixbix wouldn't understand that we may have preferred to take something less suited to the imp's desire to see us become galaxy-renowned pirates.

“I'm pissed because Dean didn't trust us to make the right choice to achieve success ourselves. He essentially made the decision for us, as if we were helpless infants.

“I am the master of my destiny,” I growled out the last part with vehemence.

Shana gave me a puzzled look and I rolled my eyes upwards. She seemed to understand that I was watching what I was saying as Quixbix was listening.

Although that was only part of it. There was something about the manipulation that tugged at something hidden in my psyche. I knew in that moment I wasn't lying. Had Dean been upfront and offered the Shadepath Markswoman option I would have encouraged Shana to take it. Factoring in what she was looking for, it would be a good fit.

"Well, it's done, and we can't change it," I said, shaking off my funk. "To thrive we must adapt and make the best of it. It's a bloody shame these Ice Blades seem a bit on the fragile side. So much for the Impervious part of it."

I pointed at the cracked and melting blade lying not far from the tree's roots.

<Even steel blades would lose a point of durability from your little temper tantrum. It would represent the dulling of the edge> Quixbix chuckled. <You can use more of your Mana during the creation of an Ice Blade to increase its durability and avoid that happening in the future> Quixbix advised.

"I can do that? It doesn't say anything about that in the abilities description on my character sheet," I said to the imp.

<Oh, yeah. Sometimes I forget Earthers are new to all of this. The standard character sheet is a high-level summary of the information available. There is a lot of data, even for Civilians. When you have your sheet open if you focus on a particular ability, you can get a more in-depth description of what it can do.>

"For fuck's sake, why would they hide that from us?" I spat, my ire rising from the ashes.

<Torin, it isn't hidden, it just isn't displayed by default. Humans can probably understand this a bit better than most, as you had machines for calculating complex mathematical problems. In many respects, that is all the Framework is doing, crunching the numbers to determine if something is successful or not and then applying the results. That means the Framework has numerated everything about every person in

the galaxy. That is a lot of unnecessary information in most circumstances, so most of it is suppressed unless it's specifically asked for.>

“There could be important things we need to know. The default should have shown us everything and let us hide what we don't want to see ourselves,” I argued, unwilling to let my discontent at the Framework in general go.

<Every conceivable skill you can think of is recorded, along with a litany of subskills, and then more subskills for those subskills, etc. Literally millions of entries, over 99.9% of it completely irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. Do you really need to know how good you are at Basket-weaving or Macrame, whatever the fuck that is? Both are at zero, by the way> he snarked.

“Whatever!”

I left it that. Arguing with Quixbix wasn't going to resolve my bad mood, it would likely only exacerbate it. Instead, to distract myself, Shana and I reviewed the more detailed information on some of our abilities.

My Ice Blades mana cost was based on the size of the blade I created. The ice daggers I had made for a few people only cost five mana. The scimitars I was using, at three feet in length, cost fifteen mana to make and the broadsword I made for Malky cost twenty-five. If I paid the mana cost again when I formed the blade, I could increase its durability by one. Also, provided the blade hadn't been reduced to zero durability, I could infuse it with more mana later to repair any lost durability.

There was further information which indicated that as I increased my Frost Harmonisation, the ability would improve allowing me to create other weapon types, items, and even armour.

The only drawback was I couldn't increase its durability beyond what the blade began with when it was first created.

This led to me reviewing the Mana Capacity stat. Unlike Hit Points which regenerated quite quickly at one every minute, your Mana Pool refilled at the rate of your Mana Capacity per hour. For me, that was currently twelve.

My Mana Pool when full was one hundred and twenty-one. Which was my Mana Capacity multiplied by ten.

I emptied my pool of all but one mana and created a new ice scimitar with a durability of eight. My pool would refill in ten hours at which point I could create a second sword with the same durability and let it refill again overnight. I didn't have any other uses for my mana at the moment, so there was no need to keep any in reserve.

We examined Shana's Dark Magic Infusion ability. This allowed her to convert regular mana in her pool to a type that was used specifically for Dark Magic. Shadowborn elves, like Acheronians, had an affinity for magic of the Dark and Chaos varieties. This made sense, as according to the Darkwyrlds lore, Acheronians were created from shadowborn elf males using Chaos magic.

The biggest difference between the two species is that Acheronians had a major affinity for chaos and a minor affinity for dark magic. For shadowborn elves it was the other way around.

The affinities meant spells we cast from those schools might have the mana costs reduced, buffs and other beneficial effects from those sources were increased, and we had resistance to magical damage from those sources. The exact amounts depended on the degree of affinity. Sixty percent alterations for a major affinity. Twenty percent for the minor.

This came with the downside that we had an aversion to Light and Harmonic magic. This doubled the cost of any magic of those schools we tried to use. Halved any beneficial effect of those spells that were cast upon us and doubled any negative effects including magical damage from those sources.

There were twelve schools of magic. Life and Death made up the other pair of non-elemental schools and then there were six elemental schools, Fire, Frost, Earth, Lightning, Water, and Air. Thankfully, the metadata for these schools indicated the most effective healing spells and potions utilised Life magic, not Light. Although there were some healing spells from the Light school, they weren't great to start with, so we wouldn't lose out too much from our natural inhibition to that school.

As a Shadepath Markswoman, Shana could infuse an arrow or other projectile with dark magic adding damage with the dark subtype. At level one she was limited to using five mana per arrow, normally there would be a direct one for one increase to damage but with her affinity, this became 1.6 damage per point of mana. That was a maximum of eight extra magical dark damage. As her levels increased Shana would be able to use more mana and even pre-infuse the dark damage, so she could preserve her mana pool during combat.

We had a quick look at her Archery skill. Heeding Quixbix's warning we only opened that entry and not the entire skill list. Shana had a natural skill rank of seventeen in Archery which was boosted by five with her bracer's bonus. When she got her second level in Shadepath Markswoman she would receive a +5 bonus to her Archery skill, with further +5's at levels four and seven.

According to the information available these first-tier skill boosts were usually +3, but Shana was getting extra for the first three as Archery was compulsory for her class. Most other classes got to pick from a range of different skills and the higher skill rank was to compensate for the lack of versatility.

At level ten she could pick a different skill to grow from her list or continue to boost Archery, but she would no longer get the extra +2.

As Quixbix advised there was a lengthy list of subskills under Archery that dealt mainly with different types of bow

and their sizes which could increase Shana's overall numbers by a couple of points, but nothing major.

I looked up my Long Blade skill, which was a far less impressive natural three, bumped by ten when using my Ice Blades. This also had a hefty number of subskills. My rating specifically for Scimitars was at one.

Quixbix told me how we could review how these skills had changed over time and I was happy to see that when I started yesterday my Long Blade skill was at one and I had a zero in Scimitars. The few fights we'd had meant I was already learning how to better use the swords I'd made for myself.

The natural numbers, Quixbix explained, were simply a numerical representation of how good we were at something.

His attempted further explanation of how the increases from classes and equipment were practically applied in real life flew about a mile above my head. Not because I was stupid, but because it was some truly high-level metaphysics that included concepts I don't think humans had yet incorporated into our understanding of the inner workings of the universe.

We agreed to classify the phenomenon under 'it works because it's magic' and left it at that.

After spending half an hour reviewing the details and talking it over with the imp, I looked at my watch and realised it was almost eight in the morning.

"I think we have spent enough time on this. Shana, we need to get going if we want to cover the necessary distance today," I said.

We walked back up to the road. It was clear as far as I could see. There were a few cars on the road but most of them seemed to have been pulled over to the side when their engines cut out during the transition and weren't left directly in the way. I summoned my mountain bike from my inventory and swung my leg over and sat down on the saddle.

<Wait!> Quixbix shouted in our heads.

“Whoa, no need to be so loud, dude. We can’t put our fingers in our ears to tune that out you know,” I told him and winced.

<Yeah, sorry about that. This is important, though. Shana is no longer a Civilian, so she doesn’t have the thousand-kilogram inventory any longer. Not to worry, you haven’t lost anything, but when you remove anything, like the bike, you won’t be able to put it back. On the plus side, Shana, you now have fifteen equipment slots. Unfortunately, the bike not being mana infused is not eligible to be placed in them.>

“Quixbix,” I said with fake calm.

<Yes, Torin.>

“This is the kind of thing you need to tell us about *before* Shana levelled up, not after the fact,” I hissed angrily and closed my eyes as I thought about it.

I looked over my inventory assessing the weight of what I had stored. I had very little excess space and there wasn’t enough of what I felt was disposable to make enough room for the bike.

“There is nothing to be done for now. Shana, I don’t think doubling up on my bike would be very practical. We will have to find somewhere to hide your bike if we need to leave it behind anywhere,” I said.

“Okay, Torin,” Shana answered and summoned one of the bikes she had in her store.

Then we were off.

I didn’t set a punishing pace, but as the road was flat with no upward incline, we made good time without exerting ourselves. Leaving Flint, the M-21 was a four-lane road with a grass verge between the oncoming traffic, not that there was any.

Shana had been right the other night; I hadn’t been out this way before. The land on either side was mostly cleared for

farming purposes, but what surprised me was the unexpected frequency of homes just off Corunna Road. There seemed to be a house particularly on the right-hand side of the road every few hundred metres.

We passed a few abandoned cars, but not as many as I expected. No people as of yet, though it was early, and I would have expected most people to have fled for safety before it got dark last night.

We had been cycling for twenty minutes and had probably covered about four miles before we found the first signs of life, or to be more accurate the first signs of where there used to be life.

We were passing a house on our right and lying face down on the porch was a heavysset woman. Her legs were inside the doorway, and this prevented the door from closing and it bashed against her gently in the light breeze. Wordlessly we turned off the road and up the gravel driveway to the white house.

We dismounted from our bikes and armed ourselves. Now we were closer it was obvious the woman lay in a pool of her own blood and there was a light blue nimbus surrounding her as there had been with Reg, the dead super of my apartment block.

I didn't even bother looking for a pulse, the lootable nimbus told us what we needed to know. There were no visible signs of trauma on her back so whatever had killed her had done so from the front.

Perhaps during the night, she had heard something, come to the door, and opened it to investigate and had been attacked by whatever it was she had heard. There was an aluminium baseball bat that had rolled a few feet away from her at the side of the house.

Not that it would have been much help.

I couldn't tell you if I would have reacted differently before becoming an Acheronian, but I didn't hesitate to loot

the unfortunate woman and take her starting coins.

Some people might consider that heartless and dark. Right now, my only feelings on the subject were that it was practical and passing up coins that might buy my people life-saving gear in the future out of 'respect' for the dead helped no one, least of all this poor soul.

The house was a bungalow and one of the smaller properties we had passed. I waited at the threshold for a moment, straining my senses for any hint of what might lie within. When I heard nothing, I turned to Shana.

"We'll sweep the place quickly. See if there are any survivors or other looting opportunities. I don't want us to be here long," I whispered.

She nodded and we headed into the house.

We were in a hallway, and I passed the open door to the lounge. From the side of my eye, I could see it was open plan and led to the kitchen. The rooms looked empty, but I motioned for Shana to go in and check it out while I went deeper towards the bedrooms at the back.

The first bedroom looked like it belonged to the dead woman in the doorway. I moved on to the next and found a deeply horrific, but not unexpected scene, one that jarred even my cold pragmatist's heart.

The wallpaper of the room was blue with spaceship designs and there were action figure toys thrown all over the floor. It was a young boy's bedroom, and the occupant was in a wide-open corner closet with what appeared to be his older sister holding him tight and trying to shield him.

The real world can be a cruel place and hiding in the closet hadn't saved them from whatever had forced its way into their house last night. They had died together.

I heard Shana walking down the hallway, coming to join me.

“I don’t think there is anything back here, Shana. Can you go back outside and make sure no one nabs your bike, please,” I called out to her. I infused a hint of my will into the request to ensure her compliance.

“Yes, Torin,” she said with a little uncertainty, followed by the sounds of her departing steps.

She didn’t need to see this. Although I suspected she hadn’t believed me when I said there was nothing back here. I know I wouldn’t have given the situation.

I looted the young ones and then did the only thing I could for them in the circumstances, made sure nothing like those scarabs could make use of them and covered them up with a sheet.

When I made my way past their mother in the doorway, I dragged her back inside the house and gave her the same treatment, using a blanket I’d purloined from the closet.

I walked out into the sun, closing the door behind me. Shana stood a few feet away from the porch, waiting for me. There was a tear in her eye, she had guessed what it was I had found, or perhaps felt my pity through the bond.

“Maybe we should dig a grave for the fallen?” she asked quietly.

“That would take too long, and we have to keep moving,” I disagreed.

“I know,” Shana replied sorrowfully.

We mounted up and rode back down to the road. I caught Shana giving the place one last pained look as we pushed on.

Despite the unpleasantness at the first house we investigated, I didn’t let it stop us from repeating the process if we passed houses that exhibited similar signs that the occupants had perished. I decided against giving the houses more than a cursory sweep as I didn’t want to waste too much

daylight, but if we could pick up some extra resources quick and easy then it was worth a short detour.

There were noticeable clusters of houses that showed signs of being attacked. Which as we rode, I figured out was roughly at the halfway points between the larger communities. Which meant spawning crystals were more likely to be nearby.

We did see living people, of course.

Some folks were out and about, the smartest ones packing up and preparing to depart for places with more people. The less smart but not completely stupid were reinforcing their homes. And there were a handful who stubbornly refused to accept things had changed and behaved as if it were a regular Saturday morning.

I analysed people as we rode by, most had the Civilian class. We passed one family where the eldest daughter was a silverblood elf Mage, so not everyone had ignored the opportunity during character creation, but many had.

It was mid-morning when we cycled through the town of Owosso without stopping. There was a heavy sheriff's presence on Main Street and not wanting to be stopped or questioned, we powered through at speed before anybody got any bright ideas.

Encounters of the dangerous variety had been few. Most of the houses had been abandoned by the monsters that invaded them. We finished off another group of six redcaps that hid in a basement in one of the houses and were attacked on the road by a flock of murderous magically saturated crows.

The crows weren't in good shape, but the power of flight made them more difficult to deal with than the redcaps.

The crows like the dogs before them had no loot.

The redcaps coughed up two more pairs of Shoddy Leather Boots, four pieces of Shoddy Leather Scraps and one hundred and twenty copper.

By the time we rolled up to the outskirts of St. Johns in the early afternoon, we had picked up over one hundred extra gold and a couple thousand silver and copper from our macabre looting endeavours.

St. John's was smaller than Owosso, though not by much. There was a significant difference from the earlier town as there was no sheriff's or any law enforcement presence in sight at all. We freewheeled down the street a little slower this time keeping our eyes peeled.

Several shopfronts had their windows smashed in and there were significantly fewer people on the streets.

Some of the handful of people we saw were openly carrying firearms, but nobody pointed them at us. They watched us suspiciously before moving on with their own affairs. We reached the centre of the town and were coming up on the post office when Quixbix piped up.

<Torin, we are about to pass the St. John's podium. You may want to stop and interface with it.>

Why, Quixbix? I thought you said you could give us any relevant quests from the podiums.

<I can, but you can also buy equipment from them. Although I could do that for you too, you would still have to pick up the items in person. I can't transport them directly to you via the Framework> he updated me.

I see. Quixbix, why didn't you mention this before?

<You didn't have the Gold to buy much in Flint while the authorities were all over the podium in Owosso, and the mayor there had instituted a fifty percent town tax. Whoever is in charge here hasn't done anything like that yet.>

Okay, but you should have mentioned this earlier. Are the prices reasonable?

<Not really, you always pay a premium for getting things directly from the Framework. When you get crafters established, they will undercut the costs significantly, but it

will be several weeks I would think before people have levelled enough and sorted out the infrastructure to set up shops supplying basic adventuring gear.>

“Shana, we’re going to stop at the podium. A little birdie has told me we can stock up on needful things. Can you watch the locals for any unexpected interest?” I asked her and pressed the brakes on the bike.

“No problem, Torin,” she said, and pulled over beside me.

We left the street and rode up onto the pavement. The podium was a black onyx four-sided obelisk that stood twenty feet high, reminiscent of the monument at the beginning of 2001: A Space Odyssey. The difference being this had a point at the top and each side of the obelisk had a screen. It had been placed on the corner of the street beside the post office, which was locked and closed.

We propped our bikes up against the post office wall and I approached the podium on its East face, so my back was to the post office building and not exposed to passers-by on the street.

When I got to the podium I stared at the blank screen for a moment.

<You need to touch it> Quixbix prompted me with the obvious.

I’m not an idiot. I was searching for where to touch it. I groused back at him mentally.

<Doesn’t matter, anywhere will do.>

I didn’t mentally answer him this time but reached forward and tapped the right-hand side. The menu popped up for me to peruse. The graphical display was similar to an ATM or a ticket machine in the train stations back in England. They might have the same in the U.S., but I hadn’t been to a train station here since I arrived. There was a numbered list of options and an alphanumeric keyboard along the bottom edge.

The list of options included Town Information, Quests Available, Local Market, Currency Exchange, and Podium Market.

I tapped on Podium Market as I figured that would be the option for buying directly. Two new options were displayed, Buying and Selling.

Quixbix, can we sell our trash gear to the podiums?
I queried.

<Yes, you can. However, the return for doing so is poor. Selling them to crafters who can disassemble them for the parts is usually a more profitable option> he replied helpfully.

Understood.

I clicked on Buying and there were further options for narrowing down what I wanted to purchase, or you could use the search function if you had something specific in mind. My first port of call was the Armour lists.

I quickly learned there was another level of quality between shoddy and regular materials named poor. There were several grades of quality higher than the prefix-less regular quality, but the prices for those items were exorbitant. Even the Leather armour pieces were one hundred Gold for a pair of gloves. Each of the Poor Leather equivalents cost ten Gold for the smaller pieces and twenty Gold for the Cuirass.

The podium recognised my bond with Shana, and I could choose to send the different pieces directly to our special gear slots in our inventories. I made our armour selections and spent one hundred and twenty Gold on a pair of Helms, Leggings, Pauldrons, and replacement Cuirass's for each of us, as well as Gloves and Bracers for me. They all had the same stats apart from the Cuirass which provided more Hit Points and even bumped our Constitution scores by one, for a bit of extra Health.

Poor Leather Pauldrons x2

Leather Armour (Medium)

Damage Mitigation: Low

HP +20

Durability: 10/10

—

Poor Leather Cuirass x2

Leather Armour (Medium)

Damage Mitigation: Low

HP +40

Con +1

Durability: 10/10

I was going to change out the boots too except Quixbix interjected with a suggestion for an item his previous owners had always found useful.

Red Jasper Amulet x2

This amulet when worn extends the armour mitigation of any helm or headwear to any exposed part of the head and neck area. Has no effect if no armour item is equipped on the head.

Durability: 10/10

It was an excellent suggestion of his. During the couple of combats we had earlier in the day I took advantage of the slow mode Quixbix had enabled to analyse the battle logs for more information on how the damage was determined.

Hits to the head and neck were always multiplied by four. If the area was unarmoured, then there was a further multiplication by two which was applied separately. Effectively making the increase times eight. Should the target also be unaware of the attacker it would be doubled again to times sixteen.

Our leather helms offered low mitigation and fully negated the unarmoured doubling. These amulets meant if we were struck in the face or neck not covered by the Leather Helm, then the damage would be no worse than if we had been hit by the covered part.

It would still hurt but would be far less likely to be instantly fatal.

These amulets were fifty Gold each, and well worth it for that price in my opinion. This brought my total spending to two hundred and twenty Gold, which left me with ten Gold plus the Silver and Copper.

Quixbix, can I use the Silver and Copper to buy this stuff instead? I asked him silently.

<You can use the Currency Exchange option to change Copper to Silver and Silver to Gold if you wish. Be warned, though. If you make handshake exchanges, you need the correct value. The Framework doesn't convert or give change. So, keeping a few hundred of each is advisable> he explained.

What the hell is a handshake exchange?

<Oh yeah, if you want to give other people some of your coins you can grip their hand or other appendage and transfer the coins from inventory to inventory. Alternatively, you can use the Currency Exchange option to create physical coins to carry with you if that is your preference.

<It's not much of an issue currently as you are unlikely to meet any roguish types sufficiently skilled to pilfer straight from your sheet, but later you will likely want to fill a few chests with your booty for safekeeping> he answered.

Huh, makes sense I suppose. I will hang on to two hundred Silver and Copper and convert the rest. When that is complete, I think I'm done here. I informed him.

<You may wish to avail yourself of some Health and Mana pellets> Quixbix advised.

Pellets, not potions? I queried.

<Yes pellets. Much easier just to pop one in your mouth than try and open a potion bottle mid-battle and swallow it. Also, they dissolve and are absorbed in the mouth rapidly, so can be used on unconscious individuals who might otherwise choke on or spit out a potion.>

Fair point.

It didn't take long to find the pellets. Fifty Hit Point or Mana pellets were ten Gold each and those were the cheapest available. Converting most of my spare change gave me enough for two Health and one Mana pellet.

Once I confirmed my choices the funds and items were transferred. I stepped away from the black obelisk. Shana was having a conversation with an older woman who I hadn't noticed. As I approached, they nodded to one another, and the woman hustled away quickly, not even glancing in my direction.

"What was that about?" I asked her.

"I was just asking her what had happened here and why it was so quiet," Shana said.

"Good thinking, find out anything helpful?" I inquired.

"Not really helpful, but informative. So, it turns out the local sheriff lives in Owosso. Basically, he and his deputies left in that direction on foot yesterday evening. When people found out a bunch of them followed him that way but more packed up overnight and went south to the state capital, Lansing, this morning, a couple of thousand at least she said. There was a bit of looting during the night and a few gunshots, probably fired at the looters," Shana related.

I grunted at that. "Well, we didn't see any evidence of a massacre on the road from Owosso, so they either made it or holed up at Ovid overnight before finishing the trek in the morning."

Ovid was another small town between Owosso and St Johns. Unlike most of the other small settlements, it was just off the M-21 and we didn't ride through it.

“I’ve sent you some fresh gear, we’ll be better protected now.” I continued. “You were right about how quickly we made it here. I think even stopping occasionally to pick up what we can from the houses along the way, we should reach Fowler by four o’clock easy. We should definitely press onwards from there.”

With one last visual sweep of the street, we were on our way.

We continued cycling West for several more hours. For those first few hours, everything went as expected. We didn’t come across as many homes with obvious evidence that the inhabitants had met an unpleasant end and only added a little over thirty Gold to the kitty.

We sped through Fowler without stopping. I was beginning to contemplate that it might be possible to get to Ionia before nightfall.

My Frost Harmonisation proved invaluable keeping the pair of us cool despite being under the punishing rays of the sun all day. However, I should have foreseen that as soon as it seemed like everything was smooth sailing a wrinkle would appear.

That happened about halfway between Fowler and the next small township along the M-21, Pewamo.

As we cycled down the road, we came upon a group of roughly one hundred people walking on the other side in the opposite direction. We were flagged down by a man in his fifties in a red and white chequered shirt who led the group.

He didn’t appear to be behaving aggressively and there were many women and children in his group who were visibly distressed. I decided it was safe to stop and have a conversation.

“Shana, we’re going to have a chat with these people, but keep to our side of the road and be prepared to move if this is some kind of trick,” I told her as we stopped at the side of the road.

They may have appeared to be non-threatening, but appearances could be deceiving. A quick analysis revealed the leader to be a Civilian named Bob Harrison. The few other men in the group, all north of fifty by the looks, were similarly only Civilians.

If I ever visited Dean again, which was a big if, I would have to ask him how many people refused to take a class the first time around because if the people we had crossed so far were any gauge, it was a lot.

“Hey there,” Bob said, as we came to a stop, and he stepped onto the grass verge separating the lanes.

“Afternoon,” I replied neutrally. “I think that is far enough.”

Bob obliged and halted on the grass verge with a nervous grimace, and we stared at one another then.

Bob seemed at a loss for words now the obligatory pleasantries had been spoken and my warning given. His eyes widened a little when he glanced at Shana.

Unlike me, Shana was not hiding her non-human ears. I still had the bandana and sunglasses on but removed them now. Bob backed up a step when he took in my black-rimmed ice-blue orbs.

“Anything we can help you with?” I asked him.

“Sorry, yes. I was...uh...wondering, are you headed to Pewamo?” he asked in return, recovering his composure.

“Not specifically, we were planning on passing through, though.”

“Ah, that’s what I thought. We’ve just come from there and you might want to think again. Things have got, well they’ve got bad,” Bob said.

“You have a talent for understatement, boy,” an old woman using a children’s umbrella to block the sun screeched from within the gaggle of people.

Bob smiled at me apologetically and shouted back over his shoulder. “Not now, Mary, please. I’m talking to these fine folks.”

“I’ll not be shushed by the likes of you Bob Harrison,” she roared back. “It’s bad enough those good for nothing Jenson freaks have turfed me out of my own home. I’ll not be listening to the weak-willed fools who stood by and let them do it. If my Petey were still with us, God rest his soul, he would have whooped those hoodlums up and down the street. They’d be black and blue, not green, from the whipping he’d have given them.”

Giving up on reasoning with the old woman Bob approached me instead as old Mary continued to proselytise to all and sundry on what her dear, departed husband would have done differently in the situation.

“You need to forgive Mary...it’s been a rough couple of days,” he said apologetically.

I let him approach and nodded for him to continue. “What happened?”

He rubbed the back of his neck nervously before he continued. “So, as you may have guessed from Mary’s complaints, one of the local families, the Jenson’s, have seized control of Pewamo. They were always troublemakers, but well, after the event yesterday, things kind of came to a head. Most of us, me included, thought we was going crazy or something and ignored what these Framework people told us.”

“You didn’t take classes and remained Civilians?” Shana asked him.

Bob inclined his head in agreement. “Yeah, me and most of the others here were either too old or not interested in games and such. The Jenson’s didn’t make the same mistake and they’ve become...something else. Although, by the looks of you, you already have an idea of what I’m saying, right?”

It was my turn to dip my head. “Mary over there mentioned green skin.”

A preteen boy piped up. “The Jenson boys have all become orcs, it would be cool if they weren’t such inbred thieving bastards.”

“Language, Timothy,” a woman I presumed was his mother snapped and rapped him on the head with the flat of her palm.

“Ouch!” Timothy squawked, more loudly than the light rap warranted as youngsters were wont to do. “Pa says so all the time,” he grumbled under his breath.

“Timmy has the right of it. They’ve basically taken over the town and booted out anyone they considered useless. Telling us to leave or be killed,” Bob explained.

“Okay, that does sound bad, but I’m not sure what you think we can do about it?”

“Ah, no, I wanted to speak to you more as a warning,” Bob said, and not very surreptitiously he eyed Shana.

“Go on,” I prodded, though I had a very good idea of what he was about to say.

“Pewamo isn’t a big place and demographically tended toward us older folks and families,” he started. “There aren’t many young women if you get my drift...and well, the few who were still in town last night high-tailed it for Muir when they got wind of what the Jenson boys were up to,” he finished, his meaning clear.

If we pressed on through Pewamo, these Jenson orcs would undoubtedly try and grab Shana. I felt a wave of unquenchable anger build within me at the mere thought of these yahoo’s trying to take her from me.

Bob must have noticed the change in my demeanour or maybe it was the rapid drop in the air temperature that tipped him off. Either way, he retreated back to the safety of his group.

“Thank you, for the heads up,” Shana said and put a hand on my arm. “We’ve just ridden through Fowler. We

weren't there long but didn't see any warning signs of trouble like you've just described as we passed through. Before that, we spent a little time in St. Johns. It is emptying out there as many of the residents went south for the perceived safety of Lansing."

"We're much obliged for the news. I think Lansing would be our best bet too," Bob said, and he hurried his group down the road. Old Mary's disgruntled complaints followed them on the light breeze.

I heard a guttural growl and searched the surrounding fields for where it was coming from before I realised it emanated from the back of my throat. Shana put her bike down and took my face in her hands.

"Are you alright?" she asked with concern.

"I will be," I answered. "Dean, for all his faults, did warn me I might find myself experiencing puberty-like mood swings."

"I think I know what you mean," she whispered. "When Bob told us about the danger up ahead there was a part of me that was excited at the prospect."

This time I didn't even try to restrain the growl that rumbled from me. Shana actually giggled in my face.

"Not that kind of excited..." she started. "...then again, I wouldn't want you thinking me being pursued, captured, and possessed by *you* doesn't excite me, it does. But you already have me firmly in your clutches and I'm more than happy about that. No, I felt a thrill at the thought of them trying and what hell we would rain down upon them for their temerity," she finished a little breathlessly.

Instead of answering her I picked her up and kissed her hungrily, her legs wrapped around my waist. We remained entangled like that for several minutes before the cawing of some regular crows brought us crashing back to reality.

"As tempting as crushing them beneath our boots sounds," I started. "I think avoiding Pewamo is the smarter

move. They know the terrain and have sufficient numbers to expel a hundred people and presumably cow in fear a few hundred more.”

<Spoilsport> Quixbix grumped.

The imp’s disappointment was expected. Shana unwrapped her legs from my waist, and I reluctantly lowered her to the ground.

“The question is do we turn back to Fowler or plan a route around the orc speed bump?” I asked.

“We should check the map first anyway, as we will have to pass them tomorrow if we turn back today,” Shana reasoned.

She wasn’t wrong and I retrieved my copy of the map as Shana wouldn’t be able to store hers afterwards until we offloaded some of her inventory. The gentle breeze blowing off the fields made holding the paper map tricky, so we got down on our haunches and laid it out on the tarmac of the road and used a few pebbles to keep it in place. A few minutes later, we had traced a way past Pewamo using smaller roads that went south of the town and led directly into Lyons which bridged the Grand River.

We decided to abandon any ambitious plan to make for Ionia today. Lyons would be good enough and was farther than I thought we would get when we set out this morning. When I made the decision, this prompted Shana to confess her relief. She had started to feel the stress of a full day’s cycling in her thighs.

Obviously, we stayed where we were for half an hour while I gave her leg muscles a thorough massage. This wasn’t entirely me using the circumstances to cop a feel of her sexy long legs, I didn’t need excuses for that anymore.

I had paid attention to the physios in the college dressing room and had learned a thing or two about staving off muscle strains and cramp.

Once we were back on the road, which soon became dirt tracks as we detoured, I was surprised at how many houses were still dotted along our route. We weren't in a hurry any longer and checked several of them out. It was always a bittersweet sensation when we came across the bodies of those who happened to have the misfortune to live on the outskirts.

We were run off a few properties by still living owners, usually armed with a shotgun or swinging a bat threateningly. Quixbix kept encouraging us to teach them a 'lesson' but I managed to pre-empt any attempts of his to turn the situation into a 'Who's the Boss' quest.

I had no issues with offing a few assholes, but homeowners threatening trespassers on their property didn't really qualify for that epithet.

We didn't see any sign of the orc threat from Pewamo, so they must have been keeping close to the town, for now at least. That had been one of the deciding factors for me to press forward tonight rather than fall back. It would give the Jenson's less time to establish a power base for themselves.

We rode into Lyons just after seven in the evening. By which point, even my legs had begun to feel the strain. We stopped at the Lyons podium, and I used a little of the extra Gold we had found to change up our boots from the Shoddy quality to Poor.

"What do we do now? Where can we stay?" Shana asked as we finished at the podium.

"A good question. I hadn't thought about where we would bed down," I admitted.

When using the podium, I had checked the information for Lyons. The place remained law-abiding. I scanned the surrounding buildings and analysed them. The feedback I got was that they were all owned.

If we forced our way in or squatted without permission that could trigger a quest in the town. Despite it being unlikely

anyone who sought to cash in on such a quest would be successful, I didn't want the hassle.

I had sexy plans for Shana tonight and preferred not needing to watch out for the locals if we could avoid it.

I decided to try the old school method and approached a few of the people that walked past us and asked if they could recommend a place for two weary travellers to rest their heads. After a few rude dismissals, finally, somebody pointed out there was a Bed and Breakfast in the northern part of the small town which might take us in.

We strolled a few blocks up Higbee Street as we'd been directed and found the B&B easily enough. It was a brick building with an orange tiled roof and a big wooden sign out the front, proclaiming the place as Lyons Pride. I chuckled at the pun and rapped on the door. The place still had an owner, one Mrs Pritchard, so I pushed the door open and stepped into the foyer of the building.

The room had a plush brown carpet and mahogany desk positioned at the base of a staircase. Coming out from a door under the staircase wielding a double-barrelled shotgun was a short woman with mousy brown hair, Mrs Pritchard. She hefted the weighty gun up and pointed it at us in a less than welcoming manner.

"That's quite far enough, thank you," Mrs Pritchard announced.

We stopped in our tracks and put our hands up placatingly.

"What do you want," she said impatiently.

"We were looking for a room. This is a B&B, isn't it?" I questioned, with a hint of surprise.

She snorted a barking laugh through her nose. "Yes, but it may have escaped your notice but we're in the middle of a national crisis. There is no power and plenty of unsavoury types sniffing around."

The contemptuous glare she aimed at me left me under no illusions that she considered me as one of the unsavoury types she alluded to.

I beamed a pleasant smile at her. “I understand that. My wife and I are making our way to Grand Rapids. My wife has family we can stay with there and we figured it would be safer in a bigger city. It’s getting late and I don’t think it’s safe out after dark. We didn’t want to break into someone’s home and a helpful passer-by suggested your establishment as an alternative,” I lied smoothly.

**** Persuasion check successful. Mrs Pritchard is now more inclined to accommodate you. ****

As the prompt supplied by Quixbix faded, Mrs Pritchard lowered her shotgun, and we dropped our hands.

She grunted by way of apology and then harrumphed. “Yes, well. I won’t have you in the house you understand, but I have a guest lodge out back you can rent for the night. There is no gas or electric and the breakfast bar is closed. No discounts on account of the act of God circumstances, you hear.”

If this was her being more inclined to accommodate us, she must have been on the verge of blasting us with the shotgun before.

“No power means no card reader, so that will be one... ahem...two hundred...and fifty dollars, cash,” she said, with narrowed eyes.

Whether the rental cost uplift was price gouging or her trying to put us off didn’t really matter. I didn’t have that on me.

“I don’t suppose you would accept the new Gold standard?” I asked forlornly.

Mrs Pritchard’s withering gaze was her only reply. This could have been a problem but then I remembered Victor’s

wallet was in my inventory. I put my hand in my jeans and summoned the wallet, before pulling it out and opening it.

Mrs Pritchard was giving off the vibe that she hadn't really accepted the Darkworlds apocalypse was upon us, so I figured it was best not to remind her by summoning items directly into my hands.

Luck was with us as good ol' Vic had been carrying close to four hundred dollars in bills in his wallet. I pulled out a two hundred and fifty and stepped towards Mrs Pritchard to hand it over.

"Ah, ah," she said and raised the shotgun again. "Leave it on the side table, right there."

She pointed to a circular table with a rack of tourist attraction pamphlets on it by the door with the barrel of the shotgun. I smiled brightly and placed the green bills down. Mrs Pritchard lowered the barrel again and reached beneath the reception desk and pulled out a key which she threw across the room.

Shana deftly caught the key by its red fob.

"Thank you very much," Shana beamed pleasantly.

We stepped back carefully and as we cleared the door Mrs Pritchard shouted out. "Be out by ten tomorrow or I'll treat you like any other trespasser."

"What a charming woman," I muttered under my breath.

Shana giggled conspiratorially and put her arm through mine and leant into me. She had a happy little smile on her face. Referring to her as my wife must have had an unforeseen, but welcome, positive effect on her mood.

We hopped down the porch steps like that and wandered around the back, where we spotted the lodge. The building backed onto a clump of trees which wasn't ideal considering there were monsters roaming around, particularly

at night. I swiftly unlocked the door to the lodge and Shana wheeled her bike in and I locked the door behind us.

There was no hot water, but enough pressure that we could fill the bath and we took turns washing ourselves. My Frost Harmonisation came in handy again, so we didn't suffer the usual frigid effects of bathing in cold water.

It must have been about eight in the evening when we were finally settled, and I left the bathroom with a fresh towel wrapped around my waist and strutted around the small lodge searching for Shana.

She wasn't in the living space, so must have been in the bedroom or had gone outside. Noting the time, I checked my character sheet and confirmed my Mana Pool had fully recharged. I quickly created and stowed a second scimitar with higher durability.

I continued my search and found Shana in the bedroom sitting demurely on the edge of the king-size bed, buck naked. With a huge grin on my face, I discarded the towel to the bedroom floor, it was time to have some long overdue fun.

Explicit Interlude 1.1

(This mini chapter contains explicit sexual content. If that's not to your reading taste you can skip ahead to the next chapter without missing any story elements)

Shana was sitting on the end of the bed fully nude, and she licked her lips as I threw my towel away and revealed my own nakedness. The beast between my legs was already stirring at the sight of her. Her skin was a flawless light dusky tone and she sat there with her legs together and her hands crossed in front of her. Shana's pretty brown eyes were large as I approached.

"I hope you find me pleasing, sir," she said in a small deferential voice.

My body responded to her erotic submissiveness and my cock sprang to full mast in front of her. Her full lips quirked upward at the sight.

"It's difficult to make a proper assessment with you covering yourself like that. Open up and let me get a good eyeful," I ordered.

"Yes, sir," Shana reacted immediately and moved her arms to the side, placing them on the bed and leaning back a touch, arching her back as she did.

This pushed her breasts forward and they wobbled enticingly. Her areolae were a darker shade of tan than the surrounding skin and she had engorged thick nipples that

practically begged to be tweaked and sucked. Then she parted her legs slowly and revealed the treasure trove they had concealed. Her mound was smooth as silk and the lips of her labia glistened with precum. The bud of her clitoris was already swollen and poked out tantalisingly from her folds.

“Stay just like that,” I whispered.

I stepped closer, reached forth and gently kneaded her breasts firmly, my thumbs rubbing and tweaking her nipples between them and my index fingers. Shana gasped as I played with her tits but held her position as she had been commanded. That was when I spotted the paraphernalia resting on the bed beside her.

There were four pieces of red snakeskin leather bondage apparel lying there. The largest item was a thick strap approximately twenty inches long with eight brass D-rings attached on loops, four on each side and a ninth at the base of the strap. There was an inch wide belt piece attached at the base end, and at the top, a two-inch-thick collar both with brass buckle fasteners. The collar had another ring attached at the back. The other two red leather items were three-inch thick cuff straps with brass buckle fasteners and quick-release clips to attach them to the D-rings. The final piece was a three-foot-long brass leash with a quick-release clip and a red leather grip.

“Hmm what do we have here? I can’t imagine our ill-mannered hostess left these lying around,” I chuckled softly.

“No, sir. These are mine. I had them in the same carry-all with my gym clothes. I hoped you would use them on me tonight,” Shana explained, her excitement palpable.

I ceased fondling her breasts and grabbed her chin in my right hand. Then eased her head upwards to look me in the eye.

“How presumptuous of you. To assume I did not have my own plans for our evening,” I told her crossly.

Her eyes widened in surprise initially. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to overstep. I will ask for your guidance before selecting toys in the future,” she begged, though with a ghost of a smile on her lips.

Her hips bucked imperceptibly towards my groin, and I smiled kindly, she was enjoying this as much as I was.

“See that you do. As punishment, you will have to wait before I let you garb yourself in these interesting garments,” I lectured.

Shana whined piteously, batted her eyelashes, and pouted prettily, but I was resolute on this matter. She would have to wait before being bound.

I released my hold on her chin and gripped the base of my cock instead, angling it up towards her face.

“Let’s put those pretty lips of yours to good use,” I suggested commandingly.

The low whining ceased, and her eyes lit up as Shana sat back up and took hold of my shaft. My penis was large enough that she latched on to it with both hands and there were still a few inches clearance above and below her grip.

She pumped my shaft with her hands, twisting slightly as she did so. The gentle motion coaxed the glans of my prick fully out of the foreskin. Shana leaned forward and softly kissed the tip. Her tongue slipped out and teased the eye of my python. A dribble of my precum oozed out and she spread it over the head lovingly with her tongue.

“I’ve never been with a man this big before, sir, or one who was uncircumcised,” she crooned.

I reached out and stroked the dark hair on the side of her head, my fingers grazed the edges of her elf ears as I did so and Shana shuddered in response, her groan of joy audible.

“Played with a lot of cocks, have you?” I asked good-humouredly.

Shana smiled. “None quite so beautiful as this one, but enough to know what I’m doing,” she boasted.

I barked out a laugh. “I will be the judge of that. And it is just as well you are so enamoured with my cock, as it’s the only one you’ll taste or fuck ever again,” I proclaimed in a low growl, giving free reign to my growing possessive streak.

“I couldn’t agree more, sir,” Shana moaned as she pumped my shaft with her hands, pursed her lips and blew her warm breath gently on the tip.

“Enough talking, more sucking,” I directed.

Obedying my wish, Shana’s head darted forward, and her lips and mouth slipped over the head of my cock. She pushed down my length and ran her tongue along the base of my member, pressing her tongue stud into the flesh of my rod tantalising it with each bob of her head. The room filled with the soothing sounds of Shana slurping and guzzling on my dick while I groaned audibly from the building pleasure.

Our eyes locked as she continued her blowjob and Dean’s words echoed through my mind. That when the time came, I wouldn’t be able to resist the need to fill her with my seed.

Annoyingly, the pissant bugger was dead right once again. I didn’t want to cum in her mouth, not until I’d shot my first and biggest load in her quim first.

I grabbed hold of her wrists and pulled her hands away from my penis and eased my hips back, so my length slipped from her mouth. Shana pouted again and ducked her head beneath my bobbing rod and swallowed my left ball in her mouth. She sucked and played with it for a minute before switching to my other ball. I enjoyed the sensation, so didn’t stop her at first.

“Enough,” I said a minute later. “Stand up and turn around,” I commanded.

“Yes, sir,” she gasped and followed my instructions.

I let my hands rove over Shana's lean stomach and hips. She pushed herself back and moaned loudly, my cock rubbed up against the crack of her supple ass. I smacked her bum lightly for her impertinence and she grunted heatedly in response.

"Stay still," I whispered in her ear. "Time to add some of these accoutrements into the mix."

I picked up the largest of the bindings and quickly cinched it to her waist with the strap positioned at the back.

"Hold your hair out of the way," I told her.

She reached behind her and gathered her long dark locks and pulled them forward over her shoulder revealing her exposed neck. I lifted the strap up and wrapped the top noose around her delicate throat and threaded the collar through the buckle. I cinched the buckle tight, and Shana gasped.

"Tell me if you can't breathe," I instructed her.

"Yes, sir. It's snug, but not too restrictive, sir," she answered.

"Good," I said, and slapped her rump again.

We moved on, and I attached the cuffs to her wrists and then crossed them behind her back, hooking the clips to a ring on the opposite side at the base of the harness. Last of all, I attached the leash and wrapped the chain around my closed fist several times to shorten its length.

When it was suitably shortened, I tugged it sharply and dragged the young woman into my arms. We kissed passionately for a minute or two as my hand roamed over every inch of her delectable flesh until it finally found its way to the gap between her legs.

I toyed with the nub of her clitoris and rubbed the lips spreading her moistness over the entirety of her mound.

Shana whimpered loudly.

Breaking off the kiss, I moved my hand with the leash behind her head and jerked backwards. This forced Shana to arch her back and proffer those beauteous breasts to me. I bent my head down and my mouth engulfed one of her pert nipples as I played with both her tits and pussy.

“Please, sir. I need to be fucked, sir,” she begged, after a few minutes longer.

“That much is clear,” I remarked, and withdrew my hand and tasted her juices on my fingers.

The heady tang made my cock ache with desire, but now I had a taste for her cunny.

It may have been selfish, but I had an aversion to the thought of going down on a woman’s pussy if it was oozing spunk, even my own. That wouldn’t be a problem if I wore a rubber, but I wouldn’t be. So, I planned to taste my sample before filling her up.

My thoughts flashed to the possibility of having another girl join us, Mia, or another. Thinking of having her clean up my mess before I tasted what was mine.

Ruminations for another day.

I tugged on her leash and drew Shana around to the side of the bed. I picked her up easily and lay her down on her back in the centre of the bed. Unwrapping the leash from my hand I attached it to the headboard bedpost and shuffled down the mattress. I looked at Shana and her eyes were brimming with need. Then I grabbed hold of her legs behind the knees, pushed them out and backwards exposing her pouting pussy lips to me.

Shana moaned, and her hips bucked towards me.

I grinned at her with excitement before my head dived down to the feast before me. My tongue lapped at the lips of her vagina, licking up her oozing cum as her steadily building convulsions squeezed the juices from her lady lips. I sucked and played with her clit until her breathing grew raw and ragged.

“Yes, yes, yes. Goddess, yes,” Shana eloquently spoke as I continued my ministrations.

After a few more minutes she let out a keening moan and screeched my name loudly as she came hard.

“Tooorin!” she screamed.

I greedily lapped up her precious nectar as it flowed from its enflamed source.

When I was done enjoying the entrée it was time for the main course.

Shana panted breathlessly, coming down from her orgasm and I retrieved the leash from the bedpost and yanked sharply, getting her attention. I discarded the leash then and picked her up and flipped her over, so her rump stuck in the air and her head lay on the pillows with her hands still cuffed behind her back.

I grabbed Shana’s hips and moved them into the perfect position for me to take my pleasure.

She squirmed in my grip, but she wasn’t trying to escape, just confirming to herself that she was truly and completely in my power. A few sharp cracks with the palm of my hand on her ass convinced her to settle down.

“You’ve been a good girl, for the most part. Do you think you’ve earned a fucking?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Oh, yes please, sir. Please fuck me. I need your massive cock deep inside me,” she begged.

“Very well, as you’ve pleaded so urgently,” I chuckled.

I grasped my prick by the base and edged the tip around Shana’s sopping entrance. The needy dark-haired girl whimpered her want as I teased her labia and coated the head of my dick in her natural lubricant. I didn’t wait any longer and shoved my girthy member forward. Her pussy lips parted, and my cock plunged inward with a single swift motion.

“Unnnghhh,” I grunted.

“Aaaahhhh,” Shana howled in pleasure.

I’d slid my cock about halfway down its length into her wanton snatch and shifted back an inch before pumping forward a second time, deeper than before. I kept up this pace of slow strokes for a few minutes, easing her opening wider with each thrust. Shana buried her face in the pillows screaming wildly with every powerful stroke.

When I ascertained Shana had fully acclimated to accommodating the Immensity, as I had nicknamed my pride and joy during a private moment, I grabbed her by her forearms, shackled behind her back, and lifted her upper body off the bed. Concurrently I sped up the thrusts of my hips, pounding my cock in and out of her soaked cunny.

Her cries of pleasure no longer muffled by the pillows reverberated around the room.

Shana’s vocal arousal only spurred me on more and I managed to increase my pace, finding another unexpected gear. The wet slapping sounds of my weighty balls, as they impacted Shana’s mound with each forward thrust, joined her howls of delight.

My stamina and self-control impressed me.

I’d been no shrinking violet before but had to admit if I’d gone at it like this before becoming an Acheronian I would have only lasted a minute or two, tops. Now, fifteen minutes into screwing at an almost unbelievably frenetic pace I remained in full control.

The walls of Shana’s vagina had clenched hard on my cock in orgasm on two separate occasions and she had tried to pull away several times, but I held her firmly in place and forced her to endure the ecstasy ride.

I was in control, not her.

The only real battle I fought, was with myself and my impatience to plant my cum deep in the dark-haired elven woman.

“Are you ready, Shana?” I grunted as my patience finally expired.

“Oh, yes, sir. Please fill me with your seed. I want it... want it deep in my womb...Breeeed me!” she panted in reply.

Dean was right about that as well, the smug git.

If I'd been inclined to hold off, those words would have dispersed any such proclivity.

My cock hardened with a familiar and pleasurable aching flex. I released one of Shana's forearms and reached out, and grasped her collar, while lowering her head and shoulders back onto the bed. The new angle of our lovemaking allowed me to thrust forward harder than I had previously and bury my shaft as deep as it would go inside her.

Shana squealed in ecstatic shock. Then my balls spasmed and flushed my sperm up and out of my shaft. I kept my erection rammed deeply inside Shana and using the grip on her collar and arm, jammed her back onto my cock as the gouts of cum flooded over her cervix.

“MINNNEEEE!” I roared at the height of my orgasm.

“Yes, yours, forever yours,” Shana whimpered into the mattress beneath me.

My cock continued to pulse spunk into the beautiful girl for a minute or more and when the last aftershock passed and it was done, we flopped forward, spent for the moment and in dire need of catching our collective breaths.

When I had recovered a little, I pulled my slightly softer, but still engorged dick from Shana's sodden pussy and after picking up the leash lay down beside her.

When I had let go of her, she lay face-first on the bed. I rolled her over and leant in, stroked her cheek, and kissed her deeply.

“Are you alright? Did I hurt you at all, especially at the end?” I asked with concern.

She shook her head and smiled shyly. “I’m okay, sir. I like being treated a bit roughly and you didn’t go too far. Thank you for the fucking, sir. It was perfect. I knew I could trust that you would get it just right,” she finished a bit more confidently.

I kissed her again, then used the leash to guide her down to my dirty cock that was still covered in the mixture of our juices, and she duly cleaned my rod thoroughly with her dainty tongue. By which point, any hint of softness was well and truly gone, so I rolled Shana onto her back this time and ploughed her fertile furrows once more. Something we did repeatedly, in a variety of positions, over the next few hours.

When we finished up it was nearing two in the morning, and we had been at it for close to four hours.

We had never removed the duvet from the bed and had just fucked atop it. Our fun times had thoroughly soiled the bedding and when we were done, I threw it onto the bedroom floor. I smirked cruelly and thought about the difficulty Mrs Pritchard would have in cleaning the thing. Although in all likelihood, she would just burn the duvet when she found it.

I uncuffed Shana’s wrists and removed the harness.

My kinky shadowborn elf lover was a little disappointed at that, but I explained if we were attacked in the night, we may not have the time to decouple her from the harness. I promised once we got our ship and emptied her inventory, so that she would be able to send any play restraints directly there during an emergency, I would insist she remained suitably bound until I was done with her.

“For tonight, you will have to make do with being confined in my arms,” I murmured as I hauled her in close and wrapped my arms around her tightly.

“Hmmm, I can’t wait to have both, sir,” she sighed happily.

“Oh, yes,” I murmured. “This is where you’ll be spending every night from now on. There’ll be no more

sleeping on the other side of the bed.”

Shana giggled at that. Then the quiet and our mutual exhaustion overtook us. We were asleep in under a minute.

Chapter 12

Day 3

The dawn light that streamed through the lodge windows woke me in the morning. A quick check of my watch confirmed it was a little after six a.m. The night had passed uneventfully, except for the sexy times which were very eventful, but we had no attempted breaches into the lodge or monster incursions.

I made a mental note anyway that we should be more careful in the future. We had left ourselves dangerously exposed, or had we?

“Quixbix, how much can you ‘see’ from wherever you are housed?” I questioned the ever-present imp.

<Good morning to you too, Torin> Quixbix snipped, stressing his greeting.

“Shit, sorry. Good morning, Quixbix,” I apologised, acknowledging his heavy-handed hint.

<Thank you. As for your question I can ‘see’ twenty-five metres in all directions centred on you. The range of my vision will expand by a metre with every level you gain until it reaches fifty. I should warn you, though, I don’t have omniscient detection, if a threat is using a spell, gear, or ability to conceal itself I can be affected like any other.

<My detection capability in those circumstances is dependent upon your stats, as we are enmeshed at the

molecular level. Also, I can't see anything you wouldn't be able to see from your current vantage point. For example, at Constance's house I wasn't aware of the presence of the zombies inside, as the blinds were down and obscured the view> he explained before he continued.

<There are exceptions, of course. Like when we were at the BuyMart, and I was able to link up with its security features which improved what I could detect. For the record, I don't sleep and kept watch. From your position on the bed, I could see through the lodge windows. A few low-grade critters did come sniffing about, but as the lodge was sealed, they moved on.>

“Good to know and thanks,” I told him. “Is that common then? That the monsters will leave if they can't find an easy way in?”

<Yes, for the kind of low-grade mobs you've encountered thus far. Everything is tiered, so anything graded Z through V is in the first tier. Their 'instincts' will deter them from trying to break in, at least until they gain enough levels to qualify as the equivalent of a second-tier threat. There are higher grade spawning crystals, but these were sited further away from people, and they spawn creatures less frequently. However, when those mobs do start venturing into the towns a locked door won't deter them> he answered gravely.

“Gotcha. I don't suppose you know when that's likely to start happening?” I queried.

<Quicker than on most integrated worlds. The information I have on Earth's integration shows that due to your planet's proximity to the Aperture every spawning crystal was attuned to operate at one hundred percent efficiency, which is unusual. Your planet also needed fifty percent more spawning crystals and dungeons to compensate for the higher proportion of magical energy making its way past the Framework's shielding.

<Unfortunately, the density of human population made siting that many crystals impossible. Additional dungeons

were also required, whose placement couldn't be avoided and were prioritised over spawning crystals which added to the siting difficulties. So, instead some crystals were supercharged to compensate.

<The effects of supercharging vary from spawning crystal to spawning crystal. Some will spawn mobs as they normally would but at twice the rate, while others will spawn double the number of mobs at the regular rate. There will even be a few that spawn more powerful versions of the mobs than they usually would.

<And last, but not least there is the super-splurge option. These crystals disgorge a massive number of their mobs when they activate. They then spawn like a regular crystal for a few months before splurging again. Long term these are the best for the safety of the populace, short term... I think you can figure out why it's not helpful in the short term.

<None of the crystals close to towns were supercharged. Which is why mass slaughter has yet to commence, but that does mean it's the crystals churning out more dangerous monsters that were. Although to avoid your world being scorched by a flight of dragons in the first few weeks, the supercharging is concentrated on the second and third tier crystals.

<To answer your question, assuming there isn't a splurge option crystal relatively close by, I'd guess a week before second-tier stuff begins to appear and another week before they invade the smaller towns.>

<In a month, anywhere small and undefended will be overrun by these beasts or by the tier three mobs that start poking around. In two months, the third-tier creatures will be rampaging across the country and nowhere without levelled-up defenders will be safe then. After that, the bigger guns will start to show up> he finished.

"Shit," I cursed, shocked at his assessment. "I don't think people are prepared for that. Too many are still Civilians

or are in a state of disbelief. How did the other worlds handle this?”

<They learn how to kill stuff and then the combat classes cull regularly> he answered.

Shana stirred next to me.

“Kill what, now?” she mumbled, still half-asleep.

“Morning beautiful,” I grinned, and bent down and kissed her pretty lips.

“Hmmm, morning, handsome,” she smiled.

<Typical. You remember your manners for her, just because you like to touch her wobbly parts. Even after what I did to help out. No gratitude> Quixbix grouched.

Shana blushed at Quixbix’s grumbling. I, however, was more confused.

“What do you mean? After you did what to help out?” I queried aloud; my brow furrowed with suspicion.

Shana’s complexion went from a rosy rouge to a deep mauve as her blush deepened. I tried to glance from one to the other, but as Quixbix was incorporeal that made things difficult, so my gaze settled on my intimate companion for answers.

“It’s nothing, really,” Shana evaded, trying to downplay whatever it was.

“What is nothing?” I insisted.

Shana couldn’t meet my eyes and just as I was about to ask again, she spoke up. “Well, um, you know how Quixbix gives you class quests.”

“I’m aware, like the quest I have to capture a dungeon core to power my ship,” I remarked.

“Yes, just like that. He kind of gave me one too after we bonded,” she fudged, her voice trailing off.

“That sounds interesting, but doesn’t really explain much,” I pressed.

“Yeah, well, um, how do I put this, we kind of completed the quest last night,” she hedged.

Quixbix chuckled gaily at this. Then I put two and two together.

“He gave you a quest to sleep with me?” I exclaimed with narrowed eyes.

Shana paused, she seemed to be searching for the right words before she sheepishly admitted. “Yes.”

To be honest I wasn’t surprised by the imp’s behaviour. This also explained Shana’s weird reaction when I suggested we share a bed in the BuyMart office. I was a bit disappointed Shana had kept it to herself, though, so decided a little mental punishment was due.

“So, that was what last night was about then. I was merely a means to an end. A way to get more experience.” I huffed, feigning being upset and jumped out of the bed to sell the act.

“No, Torin, that’s not true. Please believe me I didn’t do any of that last night for the experience. Honestly, I’d forgotten all about it, until this morning,” Shana pleaded and followed me off the bed.

Her jiggly bits jiggled in the enticing way that they do and almost ruined my entire act.

“What was I worth then? I hope it was a meaningful amount, go on, tell me?” I ordered.

“A little over eighteen hundred XP,” Shana confessed reluctantly. “But only because it’s a class quest and became more valuable when I switched to Shadepath Markswoman,” she tried to explain, but only managed to give me the perfect opening.

“Oh, I see. It wasn’t worth it when you would only get a Civilian’s XP for the deed. It’s good to know you weren’t

slumming it,” I continued with my Oscar-worthy performance.

“No, no, no, no. That’s not why I hesitated the night before, Torin. I’m so sorry I should have told you, but I was frightened how you would react to my...proclivities. I’ve had boyfriends before who said they understood, but they didn’t, not really. They’d end up copying bad porn and treating me like shit. I know I should have trusted you; you were perfect last night, you were everything I’ve ever wanted,” Shana pleaded desperately while gripping my arm and tears formed at the edge of her eye.

I knew straight away I’d taken it too far, but honestly; I hadn’t thought my acting to be that good. Then I recalled my enhanced social stats and figured they were helping when I didn’t really want or need them to. I pulled her in close and hugged her tightly.

“I’m just busting your non-existent balls. The lack of which I am eternally grateful for. That would have been a difficult conversation last night otherwise,” I assured her.

Shana half-snorted, half-laughed into my chest and slapped me lightly on the arm. “You ass. You frightened me half to death just then.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I misjudged how you’d react. So, I was perfect last night, huh,” I grinned, preening a little at the praise of my bedroom prowess.

Shana blew a raspberry in response but didn’t deny it.

I chuckled and kissed the crown of her head.

“Let’s get cleaned up and have a bite to eat,” I suggested, “We have a dungeon to find and conquer.”

I took Shana’s hand in mine and led her into the bathroom.

An hour later we were washed, fed, and ready to hit the road.

Shana picked up the red leather harness, cuffs, and leash that we’d put to good use last night and waved them in

front of me. “Can you store these, Torin? I can’t put them back in my inventory.”

“Sure, they don’t weigh much, and I have a bit of room,” I told her and took the gear from her.

Then just before I stowed them a thought occurred to me. “Shana,” I said slowly. “Do you usually walk around with bondage gear mixed in with your gym clothes?”

The dark-haired beauty tanned skin blushed a bright crimson for the second time that morning.

“No...” she hesitated. “It’s a long story and we need to get on the road, don’t we?”

“I think we have enough time for an abridged version,” I hinted, and shook the red leather accoutrements meaningfully.

“Fine,” she sighed, after pouting at me for a moment. “The short version is Victor has a son from a previous marriage, Hector. Who until recently had lived with his mother. Hector graduated, barely, from high school this summer and as he is a useless, lazy, creeper, he refused to get a job after graduating. So, his mother kicked him out.

“That was just over a week ago and Victor let him move in with us. And I’ve caught him sniffing around my room twice since then. I did mention he was a creeper, yes. When Victor announced we were heading to Flint for the day and Hector was staying behind to answer the phones, I knew the nasty creep would be rifling through my things the minute the car was out of sight.

“I didn’t have much time, so I stuffed the personal effects I couldn’t bear the thought of him finding into my gym bag and brought it with us. Is that enough details?” she huffed.

“Well, that does open up a few other questions. Like why you were still living with Victor after your Mum passed and what else did you stuff in the gym bag?” I said leadingly.

“Which is part of the longer story, and that can wait for another day,” she retorted, and swished past me out of the lodge and into the sunny morning.

Shana’s grand exit was ruined slightly when she remembered the bike and had to come back into the Lodge and wheel it out.

I chuckled and followed after her.

We looked in on Mrs Pritchard, but there was no sign of her in the reception foyer and the door was locked. It was early, so the cantankerous woman could have still been in bed. We left the key on the windowsill.

The porch had a cubby hole with some of her business cards inside it. I grabbed one and scribbled a quick thank you for renting us the room and advised her to level up. I placed the card under the key, not that I expected she would pay much attention to my note.

Quixbix’s explanations this morning had left me feeling the need to tell someone, anyone, even this unhelpful older woman, that we were experiencing the lull before the storm.

I wasn’t a bad person, but I didn’t need a sixth sense to intuit that with my class, and where the world was headed, it wouldn’t be long before I did bad things.

Maybe some very bad things.

To some extent I’d already made my peace with that, if I hadn’t, I’d be in Flint waiting for the inevitable end, not here. But paying forward a modicum of penance couldn’t hurt.

We cycled over the bridge and out of Lyons. Although we hadn’t had much time to scout Lyons before we bedded down last night, there were signs of damage and violence I was positive hadn’t been there when we arrived. Whether that was the spawned creatures or locals taking advantage of the lack of oversight remained unclear.

The Ionia recreation ground was about seven or eight miles from Lyons, and I knew the dungeon was in the centre of the recreation grounds, on the edge of a small lake. There was a road that led almost straight to it if you approached the park from the South.

The road from Lyons intersected with the grounds in the Northeast corner, but we stuck to the roads that skirted the edges and went South and around. This wouldn't be the shortest route as the crow flies, but barring unknown obstacles would be much easier riding, and therefore quicker.

The route took us past the Ionia County Airport. The control tower lay in ruins, it seemed they had the misfortune of somebody trying to land their aircraft during or shortly after integration and they had botched it badly, crashing into the tower.

We didn't have time to stop and investigate and cycled onward.

Apart from a few people who stared at us suspiciously as we passed, we encountered no issues, and an hour later rode up the Jordan Lake Road which curved to the right, directly towards where the dungeon should be.

Just before we reached the end of the road, we took a hard right and cut across a small trail that led directly to the little lake in the centre of the woodland and emerged from the treeline onto the lakeshore. There was a small strip of sand to the left at the northern end of the small lake. The beach didn't look to be naturally occurring and behind it was a car park. Wedged between the two was a building I assumed had been some sort of activities centre.

Parts of the building remained, on the outer edges, as for the rest it had been converted into the entrance for this dungeon, though the conversion appeared unfinished.

The partial transformation created an oddly disturbing juxtaposition of the brick walls of the former building and the

new roughhewn black rock structure which resembled a medieval gatehouse nestled within it.

The way into the dungeon was on the same side as the constructed beach. Jagged stalactites hung from the portal that led downwards, giving the entrance the appearance of a gaping maw, prepared to swallow us.

Shana and I pulled up by the lake and I whistled softly at the intimidating edifice.

That was when I noticed we weren't the first to discover this dungeon's location, not that it had made any real attempt to conceal its presence.

There were four young men on the beach, who lounged a little way from the dungeon entrance. When they spotted us by the side of the lake staring at them, they got up and moved in front of the dungeon and blocked the way in. Several of them did not look happy to see us.

This could be a problem, I thought.

In all the excitement and hurry to get here I hadn't given much thought to the possibility we might not be the only ones seeking out or finding dungeons.

"Who do you think they are?" Shana mused.

With Quixbix's help, I performed a quick dungeon sense scan. I got the locations of a few other dungeons further west similar to the three I had rejected when I decided to come here, but nothing of the same level and grade as this one.

We wouldn't abandon the current plan and head to a new location. Although even if that had been possible, it wouldn't have been advisable. There would be no guarantee we wouldn't face a similar scenario at a different dungeon.

"No idea, but in for a penny, in for a pound. We've come too far to turn back, and there isn't a better option within a hundred miles. One way or another I'm claiming this dungeon's core," I declared to her.

Shana smiled and we pushed off and covered the short distance between us and my target's impromptu guardians. When we were almost within conversation range, I analysed who was ahead of me.

The angriest looking of the foursome, was a medium-sized blond-haired lad who wore a breastplate, scabbarded backsword, and shield. His eyes literally glowed with a soft yellowish light.

Carl Fuchs (Celestial)

Crusader (Valiant) (S) 1

Character Aptitude: Moderate

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 1,320

He was flanked on either side by two brown-haired young men who looked enough alike one another to be brothers. Which was quickly confirmed when they were analysed.

Peter Finch (Human)

Swordsman (V) 2

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 350

—

Lucas Finch (Human)

Archer (V) 2

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 350

The last of the group was a small, weedy looking youngster wearing glasses. He barely appeared old enough to shave and hung back from the trio at the front, far less confident or confrontational.

Jackson Templeton (Tainted Fae)

Sorcerer (U) 1

Character Aptitude: Moderate

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 840

We halted a few feet from them and dismounted from the bikes.

“Howdy, lads,” I greeted them pleasantly.

Carl stepped forward and glowered as he gave us the once over. “What the fuck do you want,” he grunted.

It was going to be like that, was it.

I removed my sunglasses and bandana with a flourish. Flashed him a demonic grin and squared up to the belligerent arsehole. Carl was an impressive six foot three, but I had him covered and then some. Instinctively, his foot edged backwards, he tried to stop himself, but it was already too late. The dominant player on the field had been established, one-nil to me.

“What I want is for you and your friends to stand aside, so my companion and I can head in and conquer this dungeon,” I announced with false civility.

He glanced about him nervously, but his backbone stiffened when the brothers stepped up beside him.

“Sure, once me and my crew have had our turn. We found this dungeon first and we have dibs on being the first to run it,” he sneered.

I almost laughed in his face when he referred to the others as his crew. Which wouldn’t have been very diplomatic, but then I had taken an instant dislike to the boy.

“Dibs? How fucking old are you? Twelve?” I mocked. “Get out of the way.”

“No, we were here first, and we live here. It’s our right to be the first to run it, not some fucking out-of-towners who got lucky in finding the place,” Carl bristled.

<Oooh, I detect a quest incoming> Quixbix crowed.

I flicked my eyes to the dungeon and analysed it quickly.

Anastasia Ruslanovna (Dungeon Core)

Lifeforce Enchantress (N) 1

Aptitude: Very High

Loot Value: N/A

Threat: Very High

XP Value: 24,000

Location: Jordan Lake, Ionia Recreation Ground

Dungeon Description: This brand-new N-grade dungeon is still forming. In its current state, it is the equivalent of an S-grade dungeon.

There is one hour until the dungeon reaches R-grade status and seventeen hours until it reaches its full N-grade potential

Rewards during this time are unchanged. Although the entry criteria will be affected, please see below.

The current minimum delving party strength is the equivalent of five levels of second-tier classes. Fifteen equivalent levels are recommended. Anything over this will reduce the rewards available for completion. A party with the equivalent of thirty levels is the maximum permitted.

Level 1 Anastasia Ruslanovna is unconquered.

Current Party Strength: 5 (Torin: 4 Shana: 1)

Hold your horses, Quixbix. I thought at the imp quickly. **This dungeon is already much stronger than when I pinged it two days ago. Shana was only a Civilian then and even with her promotion, the threat has jumped from moderate to very high. Getting into a fight just before we go in is probably a bad idea.**

<Hmmm, okay. That is a fair point. But you are going to have a problem with the Crusader. He has a Valiant class. He probably isn't high enough level to know your class is Notorious, but he'll be naturally prickly regardless.>

I'll bite. Why is that?

<Oh, yeah, you're a newbie> he chuckled.

I think we've covered that about a dozen times already, I griped.

<Whatever. Valiant classes are the antithesis of Notorious classes. Like your class they must perform a class-defined valiant act every week or suffer reductions in XP gains until they do. Actually, it's more than that, if they go long enough without completing such an act, they will start to lose experience and levels.

<Also, unlike notorious classes they don't have a Valiant stat, so they can't supercharge their advancement by being more valiant> he lectured.

What's the benefit of taking them then?

<They are stronger than other classes at the same grade. The Crusader is officially an S-grade class but will get the same stat boosts per level as a P-grade class, which is three grades above it. Yet, the XP required to level up is still set for S-grade, eleven thousand instead of eighteen thousand.

<It's not all sunshine and rainbows, though. Even if they jump to a non-valiant class later, though they will no longer be subject to the decrease in freshly earned XP, they can still lose any XP gained under the valiant class if they stop performing valiant acts> he informed me before continuing.

<They are often popular classes on freshly integrated worlds, due to the early power boost and perceived moral superiority. The smart ones figure out it's a trap, switch out as soon as they can and accept having to essentially start over. The stupid or unlucky, struggle on and usually die. And that leaves the worst of them all, the only ones who can make these classes work. The fucking zealots.

<Those who get off on pushing everybody around and claiming they're doing it for the greater good and not because they are even more hate-filled and intolerant than the 'bad guys' they seek to persecute. Carl, here, has the stench of zealot all over him. Look at him, he picked the 'stick up their arse' Celestial's as his species.>

Thanks for the info, I thought, ending the conversation.

"It wasn't luck that brought us here," I rumbled at Carl. "If being first is so important to you then be my guest, go in and we'll follow in after you, second. Dungeons can handle more than one party at a time."

I had no idea if the latter part of my statement was even remotely true, but that's how it worked in MMO games.

“Yes,” the thin fellow named Jackson interjected. “I’ve read through all the Framework help files on dungeons and even a freshly formed level one dungeon like this can accommodate three instances running simultaneously.”

He pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose as he finished. Something about that tickled at the back of my mind but my concentration was on Carl who yelled.

“He didn’t need to know that, Jackson.”

“Jackson, thank you for being the voice of reason,” Shana purred in a sultry tone dripping with sex appeal.

She stepped up to my side and entwined her arm with mine and winked at the nervous lad. Jackson blushed bright scarlet, Peter and Lucas adopted leery grins and dropped their aggressive stance straight away. Only Carl remained unaffected by my beautiful elf’s seductive allure.

Whether that was because he was gay, protected by his class, or he was just naturally this disagreeable with everyone, I couldn’t say.

Carl didn’t matter, though. Shana had efficiently reminded me that when dealing with young heterosexual men, a drop-dead gorgeous woman was the greatest weapon in your arsenal.

Deftly ignoring the scowling Carl, Shana addressed the blush-cheeked Jackson. “Why haven’t you ventured inside already, Jackson?” she cajoled.

“Ah...um...our party isn’t strong enough with just the four of us, Miss,” Jackson mumbled.

“Shut the fuck up, Jackson,” Carl bellowed at the smitten lad.

“Oh, my!” Shana breathed and covered her mouth with her hand. “How unfortunate.”

“Yes, indeed,” I cut in. “If you haven’t got what it takes, I think any claims of ‘dibs’ are just hot air. Make way for those with the stones.”

“If the four of us aren’t strong enough to go in, the two of you can’t either,” Peter scoffed from behind Carl’s left shoulder.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Tweedle-Dum,” I sniped.

“Bullshit,” yelled Lucas from behind Carl’s right shoulder.

I manifested one of my scimitars and twirled it about for emphasis. “No bullshit, Tweedle-Dee.”

“Ah...” Jackson started. “He’s not lying, I just tried adding them to a dungeon party invite. They...um... they count as five levels towards the party’s strength, that’s the minimum requirement, so they could go in by themselves.”

“I’m telling you for the last time, Jackson. Shut. The. Fuck. Up.” Carl screamed at the poor boy.

“Yes, sorry, Carl. I won’t speak out of turn again, I promise,” he apologised and stared at the floor.

Carl scowled at me. I so wanted to flatten the prick. “We were still here first, and the rest of my crew are on the way,” he hissed.

“Jackson, is this true?” Shana asked the frightened lad kindly.

He didn’t answer verbally but couldn’t help himself. He looked up at Shana and nodded in the affirmative. Carl stewed angrily at Jackson’s semi-defiant act but kept his cool. Jackson hadn’t said anything after all.

The tension was building, and I decided to allow things to cool off before it erupted in all-out war.

We would win, but not without taking damage in the process and then we’d likely have to use our Hit Point pellets to replenish those lost or wait. Waiting could lead to another fight when their friends showed up. Or if we waited too long the dungeon would get stronger, and we might no longer qualify to enter by ourselves any longer.

“I’ll tell you what, it’s your lucky day. Last night I had several hours of truly outstanding sex with this one,” I boasted, and cupped Shana’s firm ass with my free hand to make the point. She giggled and leaned into me. “So, I’m in a generous mood this morning. There is less than one hour before the difficulty of this dungeon jumps another grade. I’ll give the rest of your ‘crew’ thirty minutes to get here, so you can claim the first run, but no longer. If they aren’t here by then we are going in, even if we have to go through you to do it,” I threatened.

I turned with Shana on my arm, and we wandered nonchalantly down to the lakeshore. The sand of the beach crunching underfoot.

When we were far enough away, Carl and the two brothers retreated up to where Jackson cowered. Once together they talked with one another feverishly in low whispers.

“I can’t hear what they are saying,” Shana said. “Do you think they will let us through?”

They were too far away, even for my Acheronian enhanced hearing, but we had an ace up the sleeve. I had made sure we stayed within Quixbix’s twenty-five metre range.

“Quixbix, can you eavesdrop on what they are saying?” I asked the imp with an evil smile.

Shana chuckled along at my deviousness.

<Of course, Torin. Give me a moment and I’ll summarise for you> the imp offered.

We waited as Quixbix listened in to what they were saying. To pass the time, I observed their body language while we basked in the sun, it was another gloriously sunny day.

Carl was obviously the leader, and he was not a happy-chappy. Peter and Lucas deferred to him, but interestingly there were times, especially when Jackson was talking that they seemed to defer to the smaller boy.

Carl might be the head honcho, but Jackson was the brains of the operation and the two brothers recognised this and valued his words, to Carl's obvious chagrin. My review of their group dynamics was interrupted as Quixbix reported his own findings.

<Okay, they weren't lying about there being more of them. Don't ask questions as I'm paraphrasing a bit of the background and filling in logical gaps as I go along. Six of them were out 'grinding mobs' last night when they found the dungeon. However, their Hit Points and Mana were sorely depleted, so they went back to Ionia to replenish, with the plan to come back this morning> he started to relate their conversation.

<Lacking your dungeon sense, Torin, they were unaware that the dungeon was freshly forming and would get stronger overnight. When they returned an hour ago, they discovered their party of six, which had previously met the recommended strength requirement, now barely met the minimum.

<Apparently, Carl wanted to go in anyway, but Jackson convinced the others it was too dangerous. They sent two of their number back to town to rope in a few other people they know to raise their party back up to the recommended strength.

<They are reasonably confident their friends will be back inside the thirty minutes, and they can avoid a fight. Incidentally, Jackson is pushing to invite us to join them regardless, Carl is less than enthused by that idea> he finished.

"You got all that from what they said?" I questioned.
"That's very detailed."

<I did say I was paraphrasing, and I may have made a few judicious assumptions, but I've been around for a long time and 'intelligent' lifeforms aren't that hard to figure out> he snarked.

I could ‘hear’ the air quotes he made when he said intelligent, the cheeky bugger.

“Fine,” I sighed. “If you know us so well, why has Carl got such a hard-on for being first? So much so he is willing to go in short-handed?”

<You mean apart from him being a Celestial Crusader dickhole> he chuckled.

“Yes, apart from that,” I huffed impatiently.

<The major reason is that despite his pious class, he is a greedy little shit. The first party of delvers to complete a dungeon at each level get double the rewards, both in terms of XP and the quality of the loot items the party gets for completing a dungeon.

<This dungeon’s reward of twenty-four thousand XP is doubled to forty-eight thousand for the first team that clears it at level one. Also, that is a static reward distributed between the survivors at the end, so fewer party members means more XP each.>

“Really,” I said, surprised. “Wouldn’t that encourage parties to turn on one another?”

<You’re in the Darkwyrlds now, Torin. The ruthless are rewarded, and the just are left to struggle over the scraps that remain. With that being said, when forming a dungeon party, you can include a ‘no friendly fire’ clause in the group terms. It will cost you fifteen percent of the rewards, though. Not worth it in my opinion.>

Further conversation was cut off as two figures ran in from the North via the car park behind the dungeon. We saw them first and our reaction tipped off Carl and his crew to the new arrivals. Carl’s face split wide in a shit-eating grin, that swiftly shifted into a frown of concern. They’d sent two to get reinforcements and only two had returned.

Kelly Stevens (Silverblood Elf)

Paladin (Valiant) (U) 1

Character Aptitude: Moderate

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 840

—

Tommy Collins (Human)

Cleric (W) 2

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 280

Kelly was a tall and thin young man with long, flowing, blonde hair and a few days growth of patchy stubble. The armour he wore was a collection of leathers despite his Paladin class. Tommy was short and a little girthy around the middle. He was wearing a brown robe that he'd been holding up with both hands to avoid tripping. Except for having a full head of jet-black hair, he looked like a mediaeval monk.

The chunky lad collapsed to the ground when they got to the entrance in a sweaty mess and gasped for breath. Like the other four, these were all high school kids. I'd be surprised if any of them, except maybe Carl and Kelly, were eighteen.

We stayed silent for the time being and let this play out. I wanted to observe the group dynamics a bit longer. Tommy was an odd choice to send back to town which was at least two miles away, given his less than stellar fitness.

Carl ignored the panting boy and strode up to the other lad, Kelly, the Paladin. Close enough that their chests were almost touching.

We were still too far away to hear clearly, but Quixbix filled in the gaps.

“Where the fuck are the others,” Carl growled.

Kelly put his hand up and pushed the angry man, gently but firmly, back a step.

“Don’t bark at me like that, Carl,” Kelly hissed before he continued in a more mollifying tone. “I told you that you should have come with me to convince them. They’re usually afraid to disappoint you. Anyway, none of them would come.”

“None of them,” Carl squawked in an unexpectedly high pitch. “That’s not fucking possible, all eight of them refused. I don’t believe it, you must have fucked up somehow or not even bothered,” he accused.

“No, I didn’t,” Kelly enunciated calmly. “You had to know Carlos was a longshot at best, you did post that video of his sister naked on that website.”

“Rosa is a fat, lying, fucking whore,” Carl screamed. We didn’t need Quixbix to relay that bit. “She posted that video herself and blamed me when it blew up in her face,” he argued, unconvincingly, I might add.

With every minute that passed, Carl further revealed himself to be a grade-A piece of shit.

“Regardless,” Kelly went on. “Carlos believes his sister and ardently hopes you die in there. And because Carlos isn’t coming, D-Ball isn’t coming.”

“Fine,” Carl sighed. “You’re right. I didn’t really expect those two to come. What about the others?”

“The three John’s were all a no for different reasons,” Kelly started and counted off on his fingers. “Johnny is pissing his pants that monsters are real and won’t leave his house. Big John is hunkered down with his girlfriend, and she believes Rosa too. Therefore, hates you, and with him being a whipped little bitch that means he’s out as well. Small John’s dad pulled a fucking gun on us and threatened to shoot us if we didn’t

leave. Mikey was willing, but he's a Civilian, he'd just be in the way. Frank and Zeph, well they were AWOL."

"We think they might be dead," Tommy rasped from his sitting position.

"Maybe," Kelly said gravely. "There was a shit-load of blood in their backyard. Either something got them, or they got a piece of it and are out hunting the thing down, either way, with time being a factor we ran back here."

That was when Kelly spotted us standing down by the small lake.

"Who are they?"

"Them," Carl sneered. "Just a pair of out-of-towner assholes. Ignore them."

"She looks pretty hot for an asshole," Tommy piped up brightly, having recovered his breath.

"Stop thinking with your tiny little pecker," Carl snarled at the husky boy.

Tommy cringed away from the invectives thrown in his direction. I'd learned enough. Carl was a bully, and his control of the group was based on fear. It was impossible to believe that any of them actually liked him.

Kelly came across as unafraid, but equally unperturbed by Carl's treatment of the others. Jackson and Thomas got the brunt of it, while Peter and Lucas aligned with Carl either because they were natural followers, or they preferred to join in the bullying rather than be one of the bullied.

"Fuck it and fuck them, we're going in," Carl announced, and he stomped over to the fanged entrance of the dungeon. "Everyone, accept my party invite," he ordered.

Peter, Lucas, and Kelly ambled over and joined Carl. Tommy hauled himself off the ground and waddled over with the rest. The only person who hadn't jumped to obey Carl was Jackson. The weedy bespectacled kid looked very conflicted, but then he seemed to gird his loins.

“No,” he proclaimed firmly and pushed his glasses up his nose.

Carl glared. “What the fuck do you mean, no,” he snarled ominously.

“Exactly what I said, Carl. No, I’m not accepting the invite and going in there. We sent Kelly and Thomas back to town because it was too dangerous to run a dungeon none of us know anything about understrength. That hasn’t changed,” he explained, not addressing Carl, but the others.

“Are you a fucking coward, Jackson? Is that it?” Carl sneered at the smaller boy.

“It’s not cowardice, Carl. It’s being fucking sensible. This isn’t a video game where we get to try repeatedly until we get the tactics right. We screw this up and we’re dead and we don’t have enough people,” Jackson retorted with more spine than I’d expected, based on what I’d seen previously.

I was beginning to like this kid. He had a good head on his shoulders.

“I won’t go in as we are, and Tommy you shouldn’t either, if you do, you’ll die in there,” he told the slightly chubby cleric.

Tommy paled at his words and took a few steps back from the dungeon’s entrance. Peter and Lucas also looked less sure of themselves and edged away too. Only Kelly and Carl remained resolute.

“Stop being a little pussy, Jackson. We have to go in now before it gets stronger and before they,” he spat and pointed at Shana and me, “go in before us.”

“It doesn’t have to be a race between us and them, Carl. Just invite them to join the group. They are strong and we need them,” Jackson implored of him.

I really like the kid now. My opinion of Carl had progressed to the ‘I wouldn’t piss on him if he was on fire’ stage. Regardless, I had grown a little concerned about

attempting this dungeon with just the two of us. A few extra bodies to soak up the mobs would be welcome.

For me, the priority was getting my hands on the core. The loss of some experience if a few of them made it the end didn't bother me too much.

I was sorely tempted to make an offer that would break up their group but held my tongue. I shouldn't know what they were talking about after all. Best to let this play out and then pick up the pieces later.

“No fucking way, we're not taking that fucker and his slut in with us. We aren't splitting the first run bounty with them,” Carl snarled.

Carl just kept digging that shit pit deeper. There would be a reckoning when the dungeon was done, one way or another. Nobody talked about Shana that way, even out of apparent earshot.

Then Kelly put his hand on Carl's shoulder and pulled him aside. “Carl, please be reasonable. We were going to share the bounty with four or five others, weren't we?”

“What? No, we wer...” Carl started and was stopped halfway by Kelly squeezing his shoulder meaningfully and halting what he was about to say.

“I'm sure we can make them the same offer you planned for Carlos.”

Carl's brows narrowed and then he smirked cruelly. “You're right, Kelly. I'm being unreasonable. Safety first and all that.”

He suddenly turned back to Jackson. “You win Jacky-boy. I'll invite them to join us,” he grinned and slapped Jackson on the shoulder.

He walked half the distance to the beach and shouted at us. “I've decided to be generous and let you tag along.”

“How magnanimous of you,” I hollered back at him.

Shana and I crunched up the beach towards him. At halfway Quixbix piped up.

<Oh, the cheeky bastard> he exclaimed.

What is it, Quixbix? I thought.

<Rather than invite you to the main dungeon party, he has sent a subsidiary party invite. That by itself isn't unusual. However, their group has the 'no friendly fire' clause active, but the subsidiary invite does not, and that can't be accidental. Which means they can attack you if they choose. You see what I mean about these Valiant types, they are Darkwyrlds damned hypocrites> he told me.

I was expecting something like this. He changed his tune far too quickly and he's not much of an actor. He and Kelly must have planned to kill Carlos or at least get him killed in the dungeon. I'm not worried, forewarned is forearmed, I extolled.

"We accept," I declared aloud for Carl's benefit, and we joined him and the rest of the party by the dungeon entrance.

Shana and I summoned our weapons and smiled brightly. "Shall we," I beckoned with my scimitar to the maw of the dungeon.

Just beyond the row of black stalactites and stalagmites, the air shimmered. This was the portal into the dungeon's depths itself. Carl grunted and then he walked forward confidently followed by Peter and Lucas. Kelly grabbed hold of Tommy's shoulder and hauled him along. Jackson smiled at us wanly and followed suit, when they had passed the threshold, I smiled at Shana.

"Watch Carl and the elf Paladin, they will turn on us at some point, probably when they think the dungeon is close to being done," I warned her.

"Yes, Torin."

With that, we stepped into the swirl ourselves. After what felt like a giddy step, we regained our balance and got our first look at an honest to God real-life dungeon.

Chapter 13

We arrived in a vestibule before entering the first official chamber of the dungeon. Carl, Kelly, and the rest of his group explored the room, while Shana and I got our bearings.

The walls of the room were made from the same black stone that the outside was constructed of. There was a large iron-bound, wooden, double door directly opposite us. The way into the first proper chamber.

There were a few wooden benches off to the left and right of the vestibule and behind us was a wall with the same shimmer in the air as the way in. If we chose to retreat and not complete the dungeon for any reason, we would have to return to this room before we could leave.

Placed beside the double doors was an obsidian pedestal reminiscent of the podiums we'd seen in some of the towns, only smaller.

<Torin, I know we discussed this on the way here, but to remind you, my capabilities are restricted in a dungeon. I won't be able to enter you into 'slow mode' or give you customised quests until we leave> Quixbix reminded me.

I remember, I thought back to him.

<If you check out the pedestal you can review some information about the dungeon layout. As the dungeon is

brand new it will likely be a random assortment of mob types you face without any guiding theme> he advised.

I nodded and tapped Shana on the arm, and we made our way over and I scrolled through the information that was provided. Jackson moseyed over to join us and read the contents from my other side.

We didn't learn a great deal that Quixbix hadn't filled us in about already. Once we passed through the doors and into the dungeon proper, this would be our only permitted attempt for thirty days. It didn't matter whether you completed the dungeon or retreated midway, you wouldn't be allowed back in until thirty days had elapsed.

This was our chance to back out if we wished to.

The most pertinent information was that this was only a four-chamber dungeon. The first chamber contained Y-grade threats, the second W-grade, the third U-grade and the final chamber was S-grade. Quixbix had told me this was standard for all dungeons, that each subsequent chamber would house progressively stronger threats.

Although describing them as chambers was something of a misnomer, a wing was perhaps a more apt description. There could be multiple actual rooms in a wing, and there was theoretically no maximum size. However, diversity to that degree took time for a dungeon to develop, and as this one was still in the process of forming, the chambers were likely to be relatively compact and the layout simplistic.

Once a dungeon was established, the dungeon core might increase the number of chambers up to eight. Quixbix was a bit unclear as to how conscious the dungeon core was, though.

“Just in case you didn't know,” Jackson confided quietly, so his compatriots couldn't overhear him. “Unlike in games, dungeon mobs don't drop items or provide XP. All rewards are granted at the end of the run. If the party or any member leaves without completing the dungeon, then there is

no loot for them, and you only get a small proportion of the XP based on how far you delved before turning back,” he finished and pushed his glasses back up his nose.

I looked at the slight young man to thank him and realised what it was that had irked me about him outside. There were no lenses in his spectacles. Besides that, his eyebrows were a dark green as were his eyes. There were clumps of dark green in his mop of brown hair too. Presumably, from his newly acquired tainted fae heritage.

“Cheers, but you do know that you don’t need those,” I chuckled, and pointed at the lens-less specs.

Jackson smiled bashfully. “Erm...yeah, I know. It’s just, I’ve worn them for as long as I can remember and it felt weird without them, so I popped the lenses out.”

“Jackson, get over here,” Carl called stridently from the double doors.

Jackson sighed and scowled a little before he trotted over to join Carl and the rest of his party.

“Are you done pussyng about,” Carl griped at me as I finished scrolling through the data available.

As tempted as I was to spite the snide dick, I did want to get on with this myself and re-summoned my scimitar.

“Lay on, Macduff,” I told him.

Carl scowled confusedly, obviously struggling to understand if I had insulted him or not.

I grinned in response, but inwardly admonished myself for giving in to the temptation to goad him. Had he been smarter he might have comprehended the subtleties in my verbal barb. That if he was Macduff, then that made me Macbeth, the man who would be King, after he killed Macduff, of course.

Carl shook his head and snorted in disgust and then nodded to the brothers. Peter and Lucas each took hold of the cast iron rings on the double doors and heaved them open.

Then again, as I thought my play on words over, it occurred to me that in the moment I'd mixed Macduff up with Banquo and my incredibly clever pithy comment, was actually a literary faux pas. Macduff kills Macbeth, not the other way around. Maybe Carl was smarter than I gave him credit for, and that's why he was so perplexed.

Nah, not likely.

Shana and I walked up behind Carl's group and stared into the chamber ahead. Provided we didn't cross the threshold we could technically retreat without it counting as our monthly run.

The first chamber was an open limestone cavern roughly fifteen metres wide and maybe a hundred metres long. The floor of the cavern had uneven footing and the echoing drips of water were the only sound we heard from within. The ceiling of the cavern was fifteen metres high and was studded with short stalactites half a metre long.

Abnormally, there were no accompanying limestone pillars or mounds on the cavern floor. The cavern was open, but there was no sign of any mobs.

"Where are the mobs?" Tommy breathed quietly after a moment's observation.

"You didn't think we would be able to see them from outside the dungeon, did you? You fat fool," Carl sneered at the portly boy.

"Sorry," Tommy apologised and blushed with embarrassment.

Carl was a right prick, and I was beginning to look forward to the inevitable showdown between us.

<Torin, you won't be able to analyse anything either until you step in. And don't forget, you don't regenerate Hit Points or Mana in the dungeon. Spells, abilities, potions, or your pellets are the only way to get them back> Quixbix warned.

Stop clucking like a mother hen, I remember what we discussed on the way here. It was only an hour ago. I mentally shot back at him.

<Joke if you like, but you're a noob and dungeons are meant to be difficult. That's why you are getting such a big reward for capturing this one.>

With that, we all walked forward and committed ourselves.

“Stay behind us, and don't get in our way,” Carl commanded imperiously once we were inside.

He tried but failed, to hide the calculating glint in his smirk as he said it.

I had a sudden flash of insight into his intentions. He planned for his group to take the lead for the first two easier chambers and then ‘surprise’ us and demand we go first for the last two, to even things up.

Shana side-eyed me. She must have had the same flash of inspiration as me.

“Be my guest,” I started, then when his team moved forward, I finished. “We'll take the lead for the second and third. Your team can finish with the fourth. Equal apportionment of the risk, so to speak.”

Carl looked back at me and ground his teeth; he seemed ready to object when Kelly spoke.

“Of course,” Kelly smarmed. “Things need to be even.”

Their team stepped forward into the limestone cavern carefully. My eyes roved over their gear briefly before I scanned the surroundings.

Carl had a backsword and heater shield and wore a breastplate and a few pieces of leather armour. Kelly was similarly attired, though he used a mace instead of the backsword. Peter had a short sword and buckler combo and his brother a wooden longbow with a quiver of arrows. They both

had leather jerkins but no other armour that I could see. In addition to his brown monkish robe, Tommy had produced a cudgel as his weapon. Finally, Jackson had a sheathed dagger belted to his hip. He had leather boots, gloves, and chaps over his jeans.

In all, they seemed a bit under-gearred, but if they hadn't been out looting the unfortunate as we had, then they wouldn't have had the Gold to buy much beyond their basic weaponry and would have been reliant on loot drops from wandering monsters.

I scanned the limestone cavern again and caught sight of a flicker of movement by one of the stalactites on the ceiling. The chamber's mobs were clinging to the inverted spikes above.

They blended in quite well, but not perfectly. They looked like bats with dirty-white, mottled, scaly skin, instead of brown fur. They were roughly about a foot long head to toe, and their wings were wrapped about their stalactite perch.

Now that I had spotted them, I could analyse the creatures.

Skreechers x8

Grade: Y

Level: 1

HP: 50

Loot Value: -

Threat: Low to Moderate

XP Value: -

Mob Description: Skreechers are a fusion of reptile and bat. They ambush their prey and use a sonic attack to disorient and incapacitate them. Individually they are weak but prefer to swarm an incapacitated target.

“They are clinging to the stalactites,” I told Shana.

She had been searching the chamber for them after Quixbix had shared my analysis with her.

“Yes, I see them,” she answered. “Are we going to tell them?” she asked and pointed at our ‘allies’.

“Nope, I want to see what they have to offer.”

Shana nodded her agreement.

“We will step in if it gets too much for them. They won’t be of much use to us if we let them wipe on the easiest chamber,” I remarked. “Conserve your mana, though. I expect we’ll need it for the final room most of all.”

Carl’s team slowly edged their way further forward. They had passed the first few of the hanging beasts, but the Skreechers hadn’t dropped down on them.

No doubt the Skreechers were waiting for the group to get to the middle before they attacked in a swarm.

“Torin, do you have earbuds for your phone?” Shana asked me quietly.

“Yeah, why do you ask?” I responded, without thinking.

The words were no sooner out of my mouth than she smiled coyly.

Shana popped a pair of her own earbuds into her ear canals, which would, of course, provide a modicum of protection from the Skreechers sonic attack.

I really should have thought of that myself. I retrieved mine from my inventory and wedged them into my ears. They didn’t keep all the sound out, but it should certainly give us an edge.

No sooner were my defensive ear precautions in place than the Skreechers, still unspotted by Carl and company,

made their move. Or to be more accurate unleashed their screech attack.

All twenty of the little blighters moved their heads from the limestone and let loose with their high-pitched wail.

**** Resistance checks fully successful. You suffer no ill effects from the Skreechers sonic attack. ****

Quixbix flashed up and removed the notification for me quickly. Which reminded me there was no 'slow mode' in the dungeon. It helped to have an imp, though.

Shana and I suffered no harm from the Skreechers sonic assault, if you didn't count the scratched-chalkboard, icky shiver feeling that ran down our spines that is.

Carl's party was not as fortunate.

All of them except for Carl and Kelly dropped their weapons and attempted to protect or muffle their ears, trying to block out the piercing wail. I could see a bit of blood seep through their clenched fingers. Peter the Swordsman was completely overwhelmed and collapsed, shivering on the floor. Poor Tommy wasn't far behind him and had fallen to his knees.

After a handful of seconds, the shrieks from above ceased. The Skreechers released their grip on the stalactites and proceeded to dive-bomb the party.

I could see how the Skreechers could be dangerous to a group of underpowered delvers even if they had numbers on their side.

Peter was down and helpless, Tommy could probably just about protect himself, but not much else. Lucas and Jackson, while coherent, would need to retrieve what they had dropped before they could put up any kind of defence. If Carl and Kelly hadn't resisted the effects nobody would have been

able to repel the first attack wave and Peter would likely have been killed.

Instead, the Crusader and Paladin raised their heater shields above their heads and deflected much of the incoming swarm. They flailed their backsword and mace at the Skreechers as they swept past and connected with a few of the flying creatures, more by good fortune than skill. But their actions protected their downed fellows, though their tightly packed formation likely had more to do with that than Carl and Kelly's intent.

As the Skreechers flew past, the swarm split as it sought to turn about. When several of the swarm came near Shana and me, I swiped my scimitars at the opportune targets.

I sliced the head clean off one of them, killing it instantly. And cut into the scaly skin of the wings of two more, which caused them to hit the floor hard.

**** Hit! You have inflicted 17 piercing damage and 12 points of cold damage to Skreecher #4.*

*Hit! You have inflicted 17 piercing damage and 12 points of cold damage to Skreecher #5. ****

Shana darted forward with the ice dagger I'd made for her this morning and stabbed the prone creatures to death. Three down, seventeen more to go.

Fortunately for us, and not so much for Carl and company, the Skreechers that had broken towards us decided to pass up the opportunity of coming within range of my blades again and linked back up with the other half of the swarm and hit their group instead.

Peter remained on the floor, and it appeared he had puked all over himself. Tommy had at least picked his cudgel back up but was wobbly on his feet and wouldn't be any help.

Jackson and Lucas were once again armed and ready to assist. Lucas nocked and released two arrows into the approaching swarm. The first arrow sailed through and hit nothing, but the second buried itself in the chest of a Skreecher and dropped it.

Chalk one up for their team. Sixteen left.

When the swarm was only a couple of feet away, Jackson raised his off-hand and a stream of green flames belched from his open palm. The expanding wave of green fire carried maybe twenty feet and encapsulated the first half of the swarm before it petered out.

The Skreechers were too close for the magical attack to arrest their momentum and so the group was bombarded by flaming dead or dying mobs. Meanwhile, the back half of the Skreecher swarm, untouched by the flames, pulled up and flew over the top of their heads.

Which was just as well as their group had to pat out the flames that had spread to their clothing from the fried mobs falling amongst them. Lucas dropped down to do the same for his insensate brother on the floor.

“Jackson, you fucking idiot,” Carl chewed him out, true to form.

“What the hell was I supposed to do Carl,” Jackson uncharacteristically snapped back. “Let them swarm us, a third of our team are down.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Tommy mumbled, and promptly stumbled, and fell on his arse.

Carl scowled at Jackson but seemed to lack an appropriate verbal riposte to the lean lad’s logic.

The good news for them was that Jackson and Lucas had thinned the Skreechers numbers by a further nine and there were only seven remaining.

The Skreechers glided up above the group and periodically swept in for ineffective attacks which often cost

them one of their dwindling numbers. Tommy recovered his balance after half a minute and even Peter was up and awake when Carl sliced a wing off the final Skreecher and then stamped it to death.

The beasts had ignored Shana and I after that first sweep, so we had stood apart for the rest of the encounter and watched.

Carl marched over to me when it was done, his face a thundercloud of fury.

“What the fuck was that? Why didn’t you fight? I thought you were supposed to be some hot-shot combo of warriors. I knew it was bull, you’re just fucking posers looking to ride our coattails,” the angry Crusader sneered.

“One,” I said calmly, counting off on my fingers. “You told us to stay out of your way. We were just doing as asked. Two, you didn’t ask for help. Do that next time you’re in over your head. Three, we killed a trio of these mobs before your entire team registered their first. Four, this was your chamber, the next one is ours, or have you forgotten?”

Carl snorted and clenched his teeth. But he didn’t say anything.

I got the definite impression he wasn’t the brightest of sparks. That or he was used to his targets, like Tommy, capitulating without a word returned and he had nothing in his arsenal beyond banal threats and insults.

He stormed off back to his team.

Tommy appeared to be casting some minor healing spell to mend their injuries and they wiped away the blood which had accumulated around their ears. When it looked like he was done, I sauntered over with Shana in tow.

“Are you ready?” I asked lightly.

There was a sea of nodding heads and one rude grunt from Carl, and I led the way to the exit of the limestone cavern, which was an arched opening about two and a half

metres high. I knew it was the way onward as the air inside the arch displayed the same shimmering effect that was between the double doors at the other end of the chamber.

Shana and I stepped through confidently in lockstep.

The second chamber was another cavern, this one made of black volcanic rock. It was smaller than the first, perhaps three-quarters of the length, but the same approximate width. There were no stalactites in here and the room was bathed in a red glow.

The glow emanated from four pools of bubbling lava. Each pool had a rough diameter of three metres, and they were situated on alternating sides of the room, two apiece. The closest to us, on our left, was fifteen metres away and we could feel the heat from where we stood. I didn't need Quixbix to inform me that if we got too close to those pools, we'd start taking heat damage, though he did.

We were standing on a three-by-three metre granite platform, with a drop of about a foot to the black volcanic rock flooring. This was a safe zone of sorts, similar to the vestibule we were in before we entered the Skreecher cavern.

Although we couldn't see Carl's team through the shimmer of the portal, we could see the limestone cave system. We wouldn't be prevented from passing through, but if we did, we would be returned to the exit of the dungeon and be unable to return.

Carl's team hadn't joined us. This was not a surprise.

I scanned the black rock, looking for any sign of what we would face.

<You won't be able to spot any hidden mobs from the safe area or analyse any visible ones> Quixbix piped up.

I grunted impatiently in response.

"Where are they?" Shana inquired about our reluctant teammates.

<The morons probably forgot about the safe area and are hoping to leave you to fight the monsters alone. Valiant types, you can't trust them. I've told you that before, right?> Quixbix answered.

“Yes, Quix, you have,” I chuckled.

<Jokes on them. With chamber one clear and you having entered the next they only have three minutes to come through or be expelled from the dungeon. What's more, as soon as you step off and into the chamber, this plinth will no longer be a safe zone.>

As he finished mind-speaking, the shimmering portal vibrated faster, and Jackson stepped through and joined us on the granite platform.

He blinked rapidly and took in his new surroundings and grimaced. Then he spotted us staring at him and looked down at the ground shamefacedly.

“Uh...yeah...uh...Carl and Kelly said...” he mumbled.

“Carl and Kelly wanted to leave us to deal with this alone,” I finished for him.

“Yeah, that's about the size of it,” he admitted.

“But you came through to help us anyway?”

“Well, sorta. We can't stay on the other side for long without being kicked from the run. And, well, it seems kinda shitty.”

“Well, thank you anyway. If you don't mind me saying, kind of shitty, pretty much sums Carl and his cronies up. Why do you and Tommy hang out with them anyway?” I asked the question that I'd not been able to figure out an answer to.

“Habit, I guess,” he started. “Carl wasn't always like this, though Kelly was always prone to shit-stirring. Carl was more like Tommy and I, athletically compromised, as we grew up, and then he kind of filled out last summer. I think he thought that would automatically make him popular, like in the movies or something. When that didn't happen, he got really

bitter and mean. Tommy and I were just hoping he'd get over it, but then other stuff happened, then this..." he trailed off.

"And you didn't want to try and do it alone," I guessed.

Jackson scratched the back of his head. "Strength in numbers, right? Gamers, geeks, and nerds unite to rule the world," he chuckled. "Problem is we underestimated how many gamers, geeks, and nerds Carl had alienated in the last year by being such a dick."

"I heard about Carlos and his sister."

"You heard that," he said, surprised. "I thought we were too far away."

Internally I kicked myself for letting that slip. "I have hidden talents," I evaded. "I'm Torin and this is Shana," I introduced us and hoped that would deflect any further prying from Jackson.

"Jackson," he replied.

"It's nice to formally meet you, Jackson," Shana said graciously, as she stepped forward and shook his hand.

Jackson's cheeks already a ruddy rouge from the heat in the room, notched up a few extra shades of crimson from just touching her hand.

Hot girl, the best weapon in my arsenal.

"I don't suppose there is much chance that the aforementioned dicks will wait too long and get kicked out," I asked, changing the subject as Shana returned to my side.

"Not much," Jackson admitted. "They will get a prompt at thirty seconds and as long as they are close enough to the way into this chamber will be asked if they want to proceed instead of being kicked out."

"Shame. How do you know that?"

"I called up and read the Framework help pages on my character sheet the first night," he answered nonchalantly.

“There are help pages,” I exclaimed.

I expressed my surprise a bit too loudly as Jackson’s dark green brows furrowed with a hint of suspicion.

“Sure, there are help pages. How did you find out so much without them?”

Loose lips, twice in as many minutes. “Hidden talents,” I grunted a second time.

Needing to change the subject again, I spoke before he could ask for any further clarification.

“Anyway, as grateful as I am that you’ve volunteered to assist, I’m expecting some fire-based mobs when we get started in here. I don’t think your fireball spell will be of much use,” I alluded.

“It wasn’t a spell,” Jackson corrected me kindly. “I’m a sorcerer and we don’t get any spells. We can channel mana to create elemental effects like that wave of fire. As a baseline sorcerer, I can use any element, I’m not limited to fire, but the more varied my usage, the more difficult it will make specialising later. So, I’m trying to avoid it if I can.”

I nodded in understanding.

“Well, hopefully, Shana and I can handle whatever this room has to offer. Can we rely on you to step in if we need help?” I pressed.

“Carl won’t like it, but then he doesn’t seem to like much these days. So, yeah, you can rely on me,” he answered solemnly.

“Good man,” I enthused. “Okay, I can’t be arsed to wait for them and we’re going to get started. You can stay up here, for now. We’ll call out if we need help, but I think we’ll be good.”

Jackson smiled in response.

“Ready, Shana,” I asked her.

She moved in quick as a snake and pressed her lips to mine. “Always,” she giggled.

“Brazen temptress,” I joked, and stepped off the platform, leaving a freshly blushing Jackson in my wake.

Shana stepped off after me. I had elected to debark the safe area on the right closest to the volcanic rock wall and furthest away from the lava pool.

I narrowed my eyes, concentrated on the pool, and picked up movement that ran counter to the lava’s lethargic bubbling and analysed.

Red Slime x5

Grade: W

Level: 1

HP: 200

Loot Value: -

Threat: Moderate

XP Value: -

Mob Description: Red Slimes are a primary colour slime, the lowest threat for this creature type. Red Slimes have an affinity for fire and regain Hit Points from damage of that type. They are vulnerable to cold. Like all slimes, they have very high mitigation against physical damage, and low mitigation from other sources. (Fire excepted.)

“Red slimes,” I announced for Jackson’s benefit.

It was time to face the first genuine challenge the Darkwyrlds had posed me.

Chapter 14

I switched my gaze to the second pool of lava approximately thirty metres in front of us and detected a further five slimes bathing in the molten rock. If the third and fourth pools followed suit there would be twenty slimes to deal with. This matched up with the numbers of Skreechers in the previous chamber, so it was likely to be the case.

What can you tell me about red slimes that's not in the analysis text, Quixbix? I thought at my imp, conscious that Jackson was within earshot.

<They are a bubble up and burst mob. When they get close to a target they expand and explode their outer slime shell. Spurting out gobbets of themselves in all directions dealing fire damage if you are struck by the flung globs of slime. This attack will reduce their Hit Points, though. After exploding they retain a fifth of their max Hit Points in a smaller core slime.

<The damage and distance of the slime's explosion is determined by how many spare Hit Points the slime possessed for their splurge attack. In the wild, they are usually a one and done mob, but here, the slime core will retreat to the lava pool if you let it, and regenerate back to max health before coming for you again.>

Okay, an area of effect attack but they were vulnerable to cold damage which was handy as my scimitars had plenty of that.

When will they approach us? How close can we get to those pools? I asked him.

<I think you've been clever where you stepped off and you are just out of their perception range of fifteen metres. Fortunately, slimes aren't very quick. But if you get within five metres of the lava you will start taking heat damage, which will increase the closer you get to it.>

I don't suppose we could just run through the gaps ignoring the slimes in our wake and exit to the next chamber? I chuckled darkly.

<I like the way you're thinking. Sadly, you can't pass through to the third chamber until all threats in this one have been neutralised. So, you would only manage to activate and attract all the slimes, and that would be bad> Quixbix advised.

I nodded at his advice.

"Torin, what shall we do?" Shana asked after I'd been verbally quiet for a few seconds.

"These are area of effect exploders," I started, and saw her brows narrow in confusion. "That just means they don't attack a person specifically, but an area," I explained.

Shana smiled her understanding. "Yes, I remember, now. They sometimes call it AoE don't they?"

"That's right. The AoE damage the slimes can do is based on how many Hit Points they have left. Normally, to be safe, I would advise we get them to come at us and then stand back and whittle them down with your dark magic-infused arrows.

"However, as these things are vulnerable to cold, I think we should conserve your mana for the next room. When they get halfway to us, I will rush forward, hit each of them if I can and set off their explosion. You stay back until they have exploded and then run forward with your dagger and finish off the smaller left-over slime cores," I instructed.

“Okay,” Shana replied and stowed her bow and drew the dagger.

I would need to create something a bit larger for Shana in the future, like a gladius short sword.

“Jackson,” I called to the young sorcerer. “Stand back as far as you can. That’s not technically a safe area anymore.”

It was time to enact my plan.

I stepped forward a few paces and immediately observed the slimes change their movement in the lava. Within a few seconds, they had eased their way over the lip of the volcanic rock and slowly approached us. They moved by having a tentacular part of their ‘body’ extend forth and grip the floor and then pull itself the rest of the way. This made them a little slower than human walking pace, but it would still only take them a short while to reach us, and maybe a minute for them to traverse the length of the chamber if they were so inclined.

I had Shana stand directly behind me and this caused the slimes to bunch up as they neared us. Interestingly, they didn’t touch one another, keeping the minimum distance they needed between them.

When they reached the halfway point, I darted forward and aimed my short run for the slime furthest on my right, so I could sweep leftwards back towards the granite platform. I chose this direction as when I finished my sweep of the slimes, I’d dive away from them and didn’t want to risk going a little too far, and thereby potentially triggering the slimes in pool number two.

Before I’d even reached them, the slimes started to swell in size.

<They’ll explode when they get to twice their usual size. You have maybe three seconds> Quixbix prompted concurrently with their sudden swelling.

Three seconds wasn’t a lot of time and if they hadn’t been clustered together, I wouldn’t have had a chance at

getting them all. I arrived between the two leftmost slimes and aimed a joint downward slash with both scimitars, each blade cut into a separate red slime.

**** You have inflicted 3 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to Red Slime #4.*

*You have inflicted 3 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to Red Slime #5. ****

I didn't have time to truly process the damage notification and dismissed it from my mind. One of my three seconds had elapsed. I moved down the line and slashed out with both blades for a second time.

**** You have inflicted 3 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to Red Slime #3.*

*You have inflicted 3 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to Red Slime #2. ****

Two seconds gone and four slimes were reduced in size. The final slime which would be the closest to me when it exploded ate both blades of my final attack.

**** You have inflicted 3 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to Red Slime #1.*

*You have inflicted 3 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to Red Slime #1. ****

I let my momentum carry me away and dived to the floor and curled up into a ball, covering my head as all five of the red slimes exploded.

**** -14 Hit Points. (556/570) Fire source. ****

**** -28 Hit Points. (528/570) Fire source. ****

Making myself small helped and I'd only been hit by gobbets from two of the red slimes. One of the globs came from the closest of the five that I'd hit twice, which halved the damage it could inflict.

I uncurled and got back on my feet. Shana was already advancing, and she deftly dodged the sizzling splodges of slime on the rocky floor which had been thrown outward. The much-reduced red slimes had started their retreat to the lava pools but being a fifth of the size they had been, they were slow enough that she reached them before they got within five metres. That way she wouldn't start to take heat damage from her proximity of the lava.

Thankfully, the ice daggers did as much cold damage as the scimitars, and she had stabbed and slain three of them before I could join her and finish the two which remained.

Shana grinned at me with savage joy.

"Are you alright?" I inquired. "I didn't get any damage notifications for you."

"Yes, Torin," she answered breathlessly. "Your plan worked. The slime balls fell short of where I was standing, and I didn't even need to try and avoid them. How about you?"

"Down forty-two hit points. Not ideal, but manageable. However, now that we've cleared one pool and I've got a better handle on the spatter pattern I'm confident I can cut that down for each of the remaining pools" I assured her. "There is no benefit to waiting as Carl and his friends won't assist even once they're through. So, let's crack on. Although I want to change things a little, I'll explain first."

I laid out my adjusted plan to Shana and then we started.

For the second pool of slimes, we could approach it from the South and have a full thirty metres clear behind us, and as I'd observed the depleted cores were too slow to get inside the heat haze of the lava pools in time to begin their regeneration before we reached them.

This time Shana stood over by the right-hand-side wall and I was in a central position. When I moved forward centrally, Shana stepped up at the same time from the right side and we jointly triggered the slimes perception.

Then I shifted laterally as far left as possible without moving into the heat zone of the first lava pool and Shana stayed where she was. As I hoped this caused the slime group to split up, three came for me and two for her.

When they reached the same midway point between us, I launched myself forward, while Shana shuffled backwards. I ran by the three slimes on my side and slashed each of them once without slowing down. My proximity had been enough to start their explosive swelling.

Then I rushed towards the two that had gone for Shana and reached them with maybe a second before the first three disgorged their fiery blobs.

I lashed out with both scimitars into the fourth red slime and then the fifth before leaping backwards away from them and curled into a ball as before.

Meanwhile, once I had inflicted my cold damage on the leftmost three and had headed towards the two on the right, Shana crossed over in the other direction, running in an L pattern to stay out of the slimes blast zone and then hit the depleted slime cores before they could abscond back to the lava.

My enhanced plan had been a success.

By splitting the group of slimes and activating the first three slimes before rushing away, I'd been mostly out of range when they blew their fiery loads. I was hit by one glob for a

further fourteen fire damage from one of the latter two but managed to evade a second wound.

Once I was back on my feet, I approached and finished off the second set of slimes. Fourteen damage taken was a significant improvement on forty-two.

There was a ripple of applause from behind us and I turned to look.

Carl and the rest of his team had finally joined us in the second chamber. It was only Tommy and Jackson clapping for our success, though. Carl looked to be sucking on lemons, his face was so sour and puckered.

Shana and I repeated the tactic for the remaining two groups of five red slimes. I even managed to completely avoid being hit by a sizzling slime ball on the fourth attempt, leaving me with five hundred hit points.

After we were finished, we waited by the exit for the other team. Because in reality that is what we were, two separate teams running the same dungeon.

We had the amusement of seeing Carl yelp loudly as he jumped down from the granite slab a bit too close to the first pool of lava.

“You might want to stay away from those,” I called out, less than helpfully.

I heard a grunt that sounded a great deal like ‘Fuck you’ but couldn’t be sure from this distance.

A couple of minutes later they reached us.

“Did you take any damage? I have a minor healing spell I can use on you,” offered Tommy and he tried to step up to me with his hands out.

“No, you don’t,” Kelly interrupted, and grabbed the portly boy by the shoulder and pulled him back roughly.

“Cheers for the offer, Tommy, is it?” I asked, knowing the answer.

Tommy nodded and rubbed his shoulder where Kelly had squeezed him.

“I did take a few hits, but I’ve still got five hundred in the tank,” I assured him.

For once, this was an intentional slip. My mic drop moment had the desired effect as a few jaws dropped and there was a muttered “Bullshit,” from the permanently surly Carl

I just smiled my toothiest grin and flexed my biceps.

“Well, if you’re such a fucking badass, what are you waiting for?” sneered Carl, and he pointed at the shimmer of the archway exit.

“Oh yeah, well as you seemed to be unprepared when we went through last time,” I jibed, and crossed my arms. “I thought it would be best to let you go through first and then we’d follow after. If you stay in the safe area, you’ll be fine until we get there.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I’m the fucking boss here, not you. Me,” Carl yelled, his cheeks purpling with rage.

I shook my head, took Shana’s hand, and moved to the wall. We sat down to wait, my body language declaring for all to see that Carl’s tantrum had been dismissed.

He spat bullets for a few minutes more until finally Kelly pulled him aside and cupped his hands over Carl’s ear and spoke to him quietly.

They were within twenty-five metres of me and therefore within Quixbix’s range. **Is he saying anything interesting Quix?** I thought to him.

<The usual. Calm down, he’ll get his, killing the bastard will be all the sweeter for the wait. It’s our moral imperative or whatever other self-righteous garbage valiant types come up with to justify backstabbing their allies. Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on them and give you and Shana the heads up for when they muster up the courage to make their move> Quixbix related back to me.

I nodded absently to acknowledge his update. I wasn't surprised that he effectively confirmed their impending betrayal. There was a smidgen of a chance that Quixbix was attempting to dupe me, but I doubted it in this case. Carl and Kelly may as well have had 'Plotting Betrayal' stamped on their foreheads.

<You could hit them now if you prefer? They're stupid enough not to expect you to do to them what they plan to do to you> Quixbix suggested.

No, we'll let the dungeon wear them down a bit more, I answered.

A moment later and Kelly's whispered urgings were done, and Carl had collected himself. He put on his fake smile and came over to us.

"We're ready," Carl stated in a clipped tone, real civility seemingly beyond him.

Shana and I hopped up quickly and re-equipped our weapons. "Excellent, as are we, hop through and we'll be right behind you."

Carl grimaced, perhaps he thought if he attempted being polite, an attempt which he had been barely successful at, that I might forgo my previous declaration. He was sorely disappointed if he had.

"Come on," Carl grunted to his party as he turned away from me.

They stepped through.

I fought against the temptation to make them wait, but it would have been petty, so I stuck to my word, and we followed them into the third dungeon chamber without delay.

We stepped out onto another granite platform, identical to the one in the second chamber. Carl and his team had shuffled over to the left edge but hadn't stepped off. As soon as we came through, we received a dungeon Framework prompt.

**** You have three minutes to begin before the safety platform becomes inactive. ****

It wouldn't take us three minutes to start, but I wanted to take a moment to absorb the surroundings before we jumped off. This did mean I had to extend my arm behind me and point my scimitar at a less than subtle Carl.

Undoubtedly, he planned to 'accidentally' trip and shove either Shana or me off the granite platform and alert the mobs in chamber three. The scimitars' point dissuaded him from any shenanigans of that nature.

This was the smallest of the three rooms so far and appeared to be open to the sky. Although if you narrowed your eyes and really peered up above, you could discern that the sky above was an illusion. The chamber itself was a circular mud-pit with a diameter of maybe forty metres. There were a handful of two-metre obelisk-shaped pillars that ran around the edge, placed every few metres until you got to the far side.

On the other side of the mud in front of the exit archway were this room's monsters. Unlike the previous two chambers, these creatures were in plain view. We faced two gigantic, black-furred pigs. The pigs were at least four feet to their shoulders and had a mass similar to a grizzly bear. Two jagged foot-long tusks protruded from the lower part of their snouts. Serrated bony protrusions jutted from their flesh along their backs in three lines running from their head to their tiny tails.

They were digging in the mud with their trotters and ignored us completely, for now.

<The Core appears to have compressed the mobs in this chamber> Quixbix suggested. <There ought to be ten of them if this were a standard U-grade chamber. It looks like the Core has merged them into two larger and more dangerous versions.>

“Well, they are big bastards and that’s for sure,” I muttered and then raised my voice to address Shana. “Infuse your arrows for this fight, give me a shout if you get close to using half.”

Any pointers? I thought to Quixbix.

<They are Razorbacks, Torin. They aren’t complicated beasts, if they see you, they’ll charge you, and attempt to gore you with those tusks. Best avoid them and don’t try to ride them like a bronco if you want to keep your genitals attached to your body> he chuckled.

“Shana, stay behind me. When they charge, break for the pillars. Climb up one if you can, they should be just high enough to prevent them goring you,” I instructed and then stepped off the platform.

I took a few steps forward. The mud wasn’t deep, though it was a bit slippery, but nothing dangerous at a walking pace. If we started running around, then it would be more treacherous footing if you tried to stop or change direction. Hopefully, the same could be said for the two giant pigs as well. I analysed our opponents as Shana landed just behind me.

Compressed Razorback Boars x2

Grade: Q (base grade as U)

Level: 1

HP: 2,500

Loot Value: -

Threat: High

XP Value: -

Mob Description: Large, aggressive male pigs with serrated tusks. These animals tend to charge unthinkingly at anything it perceives as a threat, which is almost everything. The beast’s

thick fur offers low mitigation against attacks. The furless belly is considered unarmoured.

Two and a half thousand Hit Points was an eye-opening number and that was for each of them. We could increase our damage if we could get them on their backs, or if we went under them. Neither prospect seemed pleasant nor likely.

“Aim for the head if you can, Shana,” I suggested just as an angry double squeal emanated throughout the mud-pit chamber as the razorbacks spotted us.

“Understood, shouldn’t be too hard, they’re big enough,” Shana laughed nervously.

“We’ll be fine,” I assured her. “Just stay nimble on your feet, and don’t let them back you into the walls or up against a pillar.”

The razorbacks bellowed their anger and defiance loudly. Then they charged our position. They didn’t have much ground to cover, but it was enough for three things to happen.

For the razorbacks to reach a frightening velocity as they charged us. For Shana to loose an arrow into the head of the boar on the left. And for the razorbacks to shoulder into one another in an attempt to be the one to attack their closest target, me. Lefty won the barging match and earned the honour of being the pig to run me down.

That suited my purposes perfectly.

Shana released a second arrow into the leftmost razorback and then broke left herself and rushed to the nearest pillar. I held my stance until the last moment to discourage the giant pigs from changing their target before I shimmied to the left myself and slashed out with both scimitars along the flank of the razorback Shana had fired upon.

**** You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to Razorback Boar #1.*

*You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to Razorback Boar #1. ****

The first razorback skidded as it tried to halt after it passed me by and squealed angrily. The mud helped us out as the giant pig struggled to find purchase and its skid meant its rump collided with the granite platform. I spotted a third arrow streak out from above my head and slam into its snout.

The pig's beady eyes focused on me, the creature's misty breath steamed from its widened jaw as it screamed horribly and charged again.

Having one giant angry pig ready to gore you was bad but having two would be worse.

Thankfully, I had been spared this for the time being. The second razorback which had been shoved to the side in the pair's rush to get to me had sighted fresh targets. Targets that had forgotten that once Shana and I stepped off the platform they were no longer in a safe zone.

The granite dais saved them to an extent as they had been standing away from the edge and this dulled boar number two's momentum when it had to mount the platform.

Carl had been standing the furthest forward, no doubt hoping for a good view of his hated enemy getting gored. Unfortunately for him, he was the one who got a serrated tusk to the stomach. The rest of his team scattered like a set of bowling pins as pig number two rammed their group.

That was all I had time to take in before I turned and ran in the other direction.

I got about halfway into the centre of the mud bowl before jinking at a ninety-degree angle to the left and I scampered behind one of the pillars. The razorback that chased me had to arrest his momentum on the slippery mud to adjust

for my sudden shift in direction and then followed at a slower pace.

Meanwhile, Shana fired arrow after arrow into the side of the beast's head.

“Draw it to the pillars and weave through them,” I yelled for the benefit of the other team.

If they could keep the other razorback occupied while we killed this one, it would make things a lot easier.

Then the first razorback reached the pillar I hid behind. I reached around and swiped at its snout with my blade and the tip sliced through its nose.

**** You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to Razorback Boar #1. ****

That hadn't been as much damage as I'd been expecting for a head strike, but Quixbix picked up on my consternation, he was bonded with me at the molecular level after all.

<The Framework recognised that as a glancing blow, so you didn't strip it of as many Hit Points as you would for a regular head strike> he mentioned casually.

Well, bugger. That nixed my current plan in its infancy.

Luckily, the razorback's next move helped formulate a new plan for dealing with it. The creature tried to go around the pillar to get to me, so I just skipped in the other direction and stabbed the beast in its hindquarters while its more dangerous be-tusked head was on the other side. What followed would have been comedic, had we not been in such deadly danger. The razorback clumsily chased me around the pillar while I kept out of reach.

When I understood this fight was in hand I shouted. “Shana, switch to the other pig, I've got this one.”

“Okay,” she replied calmly from two pillars down.

I continued to dance around the Maypole with the razorback, stabbing it for a combined fifty-eight damage each time and in a surprisingly short length of time I got the notification I was after.

**** You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to Razorback Boar #1. Razorback Boar #1 is slain. ****

I sighed in relief and took a deep breath.

My nostrils were enticed with the heavenly smell of roast pork. Jackson must have unleashed his flames on boar number two, and I surveyed the scene on the other side of the mud bowl.

Lucas and Jackson had emulated Shana and were perched atop a pair of pillars. The former fired arrows and the latter small balls of green flame. Carl and Kelly stood shoulder to shoulder and attempted to copy my tactic of stringing the razorback around the pillar.

But they got in each other’s way, though, and spent more time scrambling away than actually hitting the animal. Peter had been gored badly at some point and had crawled to the granite plinth on my side of the chamber. Tommy knelt beside him, casting his healing spells.

“Shana, if you haven’t already, stop using your mana to infuse your arrows,” I called out to my shadowborn elf.

I watched the fracas opposite me for a second more and was tempted to leave them to it. However, we still had no idea what was in chamber four and it would be the toughest room of the dungeon. I might need them, as distractions if nothing else.

Instead, I picked my moment when their boar couldn’t see me and charged into the fray.

With my help, we despatched the second monstrous pig in no time at all.

Chapter 15

Chamber three was complete and despite Peter coming perilously close, nobody had been killed. The three who were perched on the pillars clambered back down and joined the fighter types in the middle.

I waited for the inevitable vituperative tirade from Carl. And he didn't disappoint.

"You motherfucker," he screeched. "This was supposed to be your room."

I just looked at him with a sardonic grin. "Seems we forgot to inform the dungeon of that."

Carl was about to scream at me again when Tommy piped up. "It's not their fault, Carl. We should have remembered there are no safe areas once you get started. We were just lucky with the slimes earlier."

Carl turned his ire on the chubby teenager. "Shut the fuck up, you useless slob. We only brought you along as a healer, and where were your fucking heals. That pig sliced Kelly and me with his tusks several times and you didn't do jack shit."

"Piss off, Carl," Tommy retorted. "I healed you up after it got you on the safety platform and then I had to save Peter. After that, I was out of mana..."

Tommy's moment of courage was interrupted by the crack of Carl's fist on his nose. Tommy stumbled back and fell

on his arse and blinked owlishly, his nose possibly only being saved from being broken by the new Hit Points system. Carl stepped forward to punch the boy again, but I followed him and grabbed the fist he pulled back.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I growled.

With my other hand, I gripped his breastplate from behind and yanked him backwards in a classic horse-collar tackle. Carl was deposited a few feet away in the mud. Before he could rise, I re-summoned my scimitars and pointed them at him.

“If I recall, by the terms of our agreement your team leads into the final chamber. Get your shit together,” I ordered him with cold menace.

My display forestalled whatever Carl had been about to say, and he was helped to his feet by Kelly. Then the two of them and the brothers stomped away, Carl scowling the whole way.

“Uh, thanks for standing up for Tommy,” Jackson started and was interrupted by a yell.

“Jackson, get over here. We need to plan, *privately*. Tommy, stay where you are in the mud, no one gives a shit about you, you useless fucker,” Carl sneered.

I couldn’t help but catch a sigh that was equally exasperated and calculating from Kelly at Carl’s backhanded slur of Tommy.

Jackson looked at me and then Tommy with a guilty expression. He opened his mouth to say something but couldn’t find the words. He reluctantly turned and joined the cabal of asshats without a word instead. Tommy’s face had momentarily filled with hope and then fell when Jackson’s decision was made.

I strode over and reached my hand out. Tommy clasped his hand with mine and I helped him back up onto his feet.

“Thank you,” he said, and turned away, tears in his eyes.

Shana moved over to him and helped him brush some of the mud from his robe. “Ignore those bastards, they’re cruel to hide their own insecurities,” I heard her whisper to him, and he nodded in response.

I regarded the huddled group not far from us. Jackson was remonstrating angrily but was being held in place by Carl and Peter, while Kelly lectured him sternly. I knew without asking what they planned but sought confirmation from Quixbix anyway.

“They want to use Tommy as bait, don’t they,” I asked him under my breath.

<They haven’t used the word bait, but that’s what it amounts to> he answered.

“Fuck,” I breathed.

<What does it matter? You’re going to have to kill them all anyway when they turn on you> the imp reasoned.

“Maybe,” I sighed. “It’s Carl and his cronies who I’ll need to kill. Tommy is just a poor schlub who hooked up with the wrong *friends*. But then again, there is no reason to make it easy for them,” I finished as an idea popped into my head.

I would have to act fast, though. I moved over to Tommy and nonchalantly stood in front of him, my back to his face. I wanted to keep my eyes peeled on the huddle ahead.

“Tommy, listen to me,” I muttered over my shoulder. “You need to quietly and calmly turn around. Walk over to the granite dais like you need to sit down or something and then leave the dungeon.”

“What?” he squeaked in surprise. “Why?”

“Tommy, you only have a few seconds before they call you back over to them. They’ll be all smiles and apologies, but they won’t mean a word of it, except for Jackson, who I doubt they’ll let talk. They’ll only want you back to force you to take

point in the final boss chamber. Oh, I'm sure they'll tell you that they've got you back, but can you really trust that? Tommy, if you go into that final chamber you are going to die. Leave now, it's your only chance," I pressed.

**** The persuasion check was successful. Tommy Collins believes you and will act accordingly. ****

I looked over my shoulder at him. Tommy blinked and glanced around me at the group. Fresh tears formed at the edge of his eyes. I had persuaded him, but he still needed a little push to act, which Shana duly provided.

"Tommy, you can trust, Torin. Go," she urged him gently.

Words from a pretty girl did the trick and he nodded, wiped the moisture away from his cheeks and heeded our advice. He hesitated at the shimmer and glanced over his shoulder one last time, which is when Carl noticed where he was.

"Tommy, you fucking coward," Carl screamed and broke away from the huddle.

The angry Crusader supplied the last impetus needed and Tommy stepped through and out of the dungeon to relative safety.

Carl stalked up to me. "Why did you let him leave?" he snapped.

"Why would I make him stay? He's your team member, not mine, or at least he was," I retorted.

Carl scowled and gobbled on the floor; the phlegm missed my boot by an inch. Which was how close Carl came to dying right then and there, saved by his inability to hit his intended target.

"Watch yourself, Carl," I growled and pushed past him.

“Shana and I are going in, that means you have three minutes to sort your shit out or be kicked. Which would suit us just fine,” I announced loudly to the rest.

There were a few protests and strangled noises, particularly from Carl, but none of them tried to stop us. Jackson couldn't even meet my eyes, his shame clear from his body language.

We strode through the shimmer and into the final chamber, the boss room.

Once again, we were on a granite slab that made up the safe area until combat began. The new room was a similar size to chamber three. The floor was black paved slabs arranged in a concentric circle pattern. There were arched metal constructs similarly arranged in a circle about halfway from the dark rock walls and the centre of the room. In the centre of the chamber were two thrones made of obsidian. Between the thrones, in the dead centre of the room was a well from which a dark red glow emanated.

If I had to guess, the crystal of the dungeon core was nestled in that well, just out of sight. The core was guarded by two brick-orange figures sitting on the thrones. I judged them to be eight-foot-tall, though it was difficult to make an accurate assessment from their sitting position.

<Golems. Made from fired clay by the look of them>
Quixbix informed us.

The brick-orange clay golems had no features apart from two dark hollows for eyes that had a tiny speck of light glimmer at the back. Those specks were laser-focused on me and Shana. Their legs ended in thick clumps rather than feet and from the waist up to their shoulders their bodies thickened to accommodate two sets of arms. The front pair of arms were crossed in front of their chests and the back pair clutched the back of the thrones.

I walked the width of the granite slab to get as good an inspection of them as possible and noted that the back of their

heads had what seemed to be matching hollows for their ‘eyes’, which would make sense with the double set of arms.

Carl, Kelly, Jackson, Lucas, and Peter appeared on the plinth about the same time as I finished my review.

“Golems,” I grunted without elaborating. “Your turn to initiate the fight, but don’t worry, we’ll be getting involved.”

“Kelly, you should try and tank this one,” Jackson suggested. “Your mace should fare better against a rocky mob.”

“Tactics are my decision,” Carl snapped and shut him down. “Kelly, you tank, I’ll off-tank and kite the second golem away, until we’ve finished the first,” he continued giving instructions to the remaining three.

After a moment, he turned to me and Shana. “Keep your distance from our group, you can fire arrows at the golem Kelly is tanking but let us handle this room. You can help mop up the second one when we’ve taken care of the first.”

He addressed the last part to me. I nodded my head and smiled mockingly at him, though to be honest, it wasn’t a bad plan. I simply had my doubts that Carl’s team had the ability to pull it off without us. Plus, this was the last chamber, if this were a game, we should expect a surprise of some sort.

Carl grumbled under his breath but put his game face on and his team jumped onto the paved floor of the chamber. As soon as they landed, the golems stood from their seated position and stepped towards them. I put my arm out and whispered for Shana to stay on the slab for the moment, then analysed our opponents now that the plinth was no longer a safe zone.

Compressed Janusian Clay Golems x2

Grade: P (base grade S)

Level: 1

HP: 2,500

Loot Value: -

Threat: Very High

XP Value: -

Mob Description: Golems are constructs given life through magic. They have no vulnerable spots to target. Janusian golems have eyes front and back making them difficult to surprise. This version of the Janusian golem is made of hardened clay. Medium damage mitigation against piercing, low versus impact and unarmoured against magical and elemental sources. Immune to damage of Necrotic, Venomous or Poisonous sources.

“They have the same Hit Points as the razorbacks but are far less vulnerable. This will be a battle of attrition,” I advised Shana.

Thankfully, the golems were quite slow and clunky as they made their way towards Carl’s party. Slow enough, that Lucas and Jackson took up positions behind the curved metal protrusions on the right to attack from range before they could reach them.

Carl broke from the group and got close to the leftmost golem and ducked its initial clumsy swing. His blade snaked out and slashed the golem’s ‘belly’ before he darted behind it. Carl must not have noticed the dual-facing nature of the golems as once he was behind the clay construct, he didn’t turn around or watch the creature over his shoulder. The golem lashed out with a fist from the back pair of arms and connected heavily between his shoulder blades.

The blow sent Carl sprawling forward and away from us.

His breastplate armour probably saved his life and he scrambled away from the golem up to the back of the chamber.

There I saw him summon a small red vial from his inventory and chug the contents. A healing potion I assumed.

I couldn't really be angry that he kept quiet about it. I certainly hadn't informed them about our Health and Mana pellets.

Carl's actions, as clumsy as they were, had at least been effective. The golem he struck changed direction and walked back towards him, away from its partner and the rest of the team.

That was the signal for the rest of the team to engage. Kelly moved in and hit the golem with his mace several times before Peter darted in and swiped low with his sword. Jackson and Lucas let loose with small balls of green flame and arrows respectively.

"Shana, how much Mana do you have left?" I asked my companion.

"One hundred and twenty-two, which is half of my pool as you instructed," she answered. "What's the plan?"

"Okay, we are going to step off the plinth on the left and give them room as Carl less than politely asked. Shoot twelve infused arrows at Kelly's golem, but then stop. Quix, keep an eye on Carl," who I could see had recovered to his feet. "I wouldn't put it past him to try and kite the second golem into us *accidentally*."

"Yes, Torin," Shana responded.

<Yes, Torin> Quixbix said in tandem with her.

Shana started firing her arrows at the golem, Kelly and Peter slowed her assault as they bobbed and weaved about the automaton, and she had to pause to avoid hitting them.

"I'm doing six piercing and twenty dark damage with each arrow," Shana reported after the first couple of her shafts had slammed home.

I nodded and continued to scan the room for alternative threats.

Time passed and everything was in hand, even Carl was having a measure of success on his own in the Northern quadrant of the room. The golem bashed its fists into his shield, but its lack of speed prevented it from getting past his defence. His shield wouldn't last forever, but I estimated the first golem had been whittled down by about two-thirds of its Hit Points.

This was, of course, the moment that things took a turn for the worse.

From out of the shadows on the right side where Lucas and Jackson were in cover appeared a diminutive figure. It was a young girl, in a classic catholic school uniform. Plaid skirt, knee-high white socks, white blouse, and tie.

Correction, not a young girl, but a curvy young woman. The blouse was tied up under her breasts showing off a bare midriff and the top buttons were undone. They exposed an enticing cleavage, she even had a cross necklace on, and her tie was artfully short so as not to cover the goods beneath it. She was barely five feet tall and had long blonde hair separated into two bunches on either side of her shoulders.

I heard her cough lightly and she struck a cutesy pose, one knee bent and a finger gently pulling down her lower lip. I had to admit it was incredibly sexy, straight out of a porn movie erotic. Her cough got the attention of both Lucas and Jackson, and they looked over their shoulders, their eyes widening as they took in the unexpected sight.

I tried analysing the mystery woman but got nothing. I was confused for a moment and then realisation dawned. This was the avatar of the dungeon, Anastasia Ruslanovna. My analysis didn't work because she was really the core crystal that I assumed was down the well in the centre of the room.

Things happened quickly then.

Lucas stopped firing his bow and turned around fully to regard Anastasia. Jackson yelled at him, but his warning

went unheeded, and the Anastasia avatar crooked her index finger at Lucas in a come-hither motion.

He couldn't be that stupid, was all I had time to think.

Lucas, like his whole party, couldn't be any older than eighteen, possibly a year or two younger than that, so the answer to my unspoken question was an unequivocal yes.

Yes, he could be that stupid.

Hot girls weren't just the best weapon in *my* arsenal.

Lucas lowered his bow and took a few steps towards Anastasia, a big grin on the lad's face and she strutted the final few steps between them. Effectively blocking any hope the level-headed Jackson might have had of intervening. She pouted, winked at Lucas invitingly, and then reached both her hands up to his face. She cupped the lad's cheeks as if she was about to draw the lucky boy in for a kiss but stopped pulling him in about halfway to her pouting lips.

Her sexy demeanour vanished, and her gentle caress became a death grip on the side of his head as Lucas body convulsed from whatever she was doing to him.

Lucas visibly withered under her touch, his musculature deflated, and his skin tightened on his now bony frame. The avatar released her hold on him and Lucas collapsed to the floor. I didn't need to analyse him to know he was dead.

This was bad for our allies' team, and it got worse. Peter, who had been attacking the golem, must have witnessed his brother's demise from the periphery of his vision.

"Luuucasss!" he wailed in a voice filled with pain and despair.

His concentration dropped and in combat that is never a good thing.

The golem took advantage of his distracted state and its weighty clay fist smashed into the side of his head. Peter spun

about and dropped to the ground, his head at an unnatural angle, quite dead.

And just like that Carl's team were down two members with a third enemy to worry about. Victory seemed far less certain than it had a few seconds ago.

Jackson redirected his balls of flame at Anastasia, but she simply danced out of the way. He kept her at bay, but this meant he was no longer wearing down the golem. With Peter and Lucas dead, and Carl and Kelly doing little more than keeping their respective golem's attention, the war of attrition had turned on its head.

Shana and I were the only ones capable of actually defeating the mobs.

I paused for a moment and considered the situation.

Ultimately, I needed to end Carl and Kelly, I knew that. Any qualms I might have had about murdering other human beings had been assuaged significantly by the pair of them being titanic pricks. But I wasn't fooling myself into believing there was no chance of suffering psychological consequences for this decision later. Allowing the dungeon to kill them, rather than doing the deed myself would minimise that possibility.

And yet, the dungeon would be easier to complete with them still in the fight acting as distractions. Then there was the question of Jackson. I quite liked him, despite allowing himself to be cowed by Carl and I didn't want to kill him too. I would definitely be wracked with a little guilt if I did, and that was part of what drove me to encourage Tommy to leave.

Even as I thought it over, I knew that I would kill Jackson if he chose to side with Carl and Kelly, but if I let them die by dungeon, we'd have two golems and the avatar to deal with ourselves.

I glanced at Shana beside me, still shooting arrows at the golem Kelly held off. Certainty filled my mind.

Whatever potential guilt I might feel for killing Jackson along with the duo paled in comparison to the self-recrimination I'd endure if I opted for a tougher finish to the dungeon and lost her.

We were getting involved. Well, I was getting involved. Shana had been assisting from the beginning.

“Shana, take up a new position on one of the thrones and shoot at the blonde. Keep your focus on her. I'm going to kill these golems,” I ordered.

We abandoned our position beside the granite slab and rushed around Kelly's golem to the thrones. Carl continued to kite his golem back and forth in the Northern part of the chamber.

Shana hopped up on the throne and I looked down the well.

There was a metal grate about a foot down inside it that prevented you from going down and a few feet further was a square red gemstone the size of an acorn. It bathed the bottom of the well with a faint red glow.

Shana opened fire on Anastasia and caught her by surprise. She yelped in surprise with an arrow buried in her shoulder and she retreated into the shadows in the Southeast of the chamber.

This freed up Jackson.

“Kelly, back up and give Jackson room. Jackson, blast this fucker with everything you've got. We need to finish one of them quickly before the dungeon avatar comes back. Shana, keep your eyes peeled for her,” I called out my plan.

Kelly hesitated briefly, his dislike of me warring with the logic of my orders. Thankfully, logic won out and he skipped back a few steps. Jackson came forward a little but remained out of range of the golems four fists.

Then he slammed the base of his palms together with his fingers outstretched like claws. It was a tad obvious he

wanted this to look like Ryu's Hadoken attack. Trying to appear cool wasn't entirely appropriate in the circumstances, but if I could shoot green balls of flame from my palms, I can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing.

At least he didn't shout it out as a large ball of green plasma formed a few inches from his outstretched fingers. He thrust his hands forward and the sphere of flame shot from him like a cannonball and smashed into the golem and rocked it backwards, though it didn't fall, which was a shame.

Regardless, I didn't waste the opportunity and rushed the stumbling golem. I ducked low and swiped its legs with both blades, there was no benefit in going for its body, it had no weaker spots.

**** You have inflicted 8 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to Janusian Clay Golem #1. Janusian Clay Golem #1 is below 25% Hit Points.*

*You have inflicted 8 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to Janusian Clay Golem #1. ****

My first slash let me know the golem was below twenty-five percent, but not much else. I noticed that Jackson wobbled on his feet and held onto the metal strut nearest him and then slumped down onto his butt, propped against the scythe-like protrusion.

<Mana sickness. Sorcerers can overcharge their sorcerous attacks, but it has consequences. He won't be of any use for a few minutes, even if has any mana left. Which I doubt> Quixbix informed me.

I focused on destroying this golem.

Kelly stood just out of its range which didn't surprise me, but I slashed and stabbed as fast as I could. It was just as well I'd enhanced the durability of my scimitars as at least one of them lost a point during that fight. At one stage I

overextended myself and the golem cracked a fist down on my forearm protected by the bracers.

**** -50 Hit Points. (478/570) ****

Damn, fifty Hit Points lost, and he only hit me on the arm. A body shot would cost me a hundred and the head two hundred. No wonder Peter had dropped like a rag doll.

Fortunately, my riposte stripped the last of the golems Hit Points and when I darted in next for a double blade attack its health struck zero and the golem crumbled into broken lumps of clay in front of us.

One down, one more of them to go.

Shana continued to scan the chamber, I'd noticed that she had fired off a couple of arrows towards the South and deterred the schoolgirl uniformed minx from getting back into the action. This also suggested Anastasia couldn't travel through the shadows or transport herself to wherever she wanted. Otherwise, she would surely have jumped Carl while we were enmeshed with golem number one.

There was no time to waste.

"Kelly, make yourself useful and drag Jackson over to the thrones by Shana and then join me to finish the other golem," I ordered the elf Paladin.

When he reluctantly followed my instructions, I spoke to Shana in a low voice. "Be careful, he might try and do something stupid. Make sure he knows you're watching him."

She flashed me a smile. "I wasn't born yesterday."

I chuckled and left Shana to it, confident she could handle herself against Kelly if he proved problematic and jogged over to where Carl struggled against the second golem.

He was looking worse for wear; his shield was heavily dented, and he had sweated so profusely that I could smell the

acidic whiff of his body odour. There were a couple of fresh dings in his breastplate too. I wasn't sure if what he had on qualified as plate or mail, but either way, its superior damage mitigation is what had kept him alive.

“Need a hand?” I joked.

He was too involved to do more than scowl and grunt. I adopted a position on the other side of the golem, and this eased its focus on Carl.

We battled the monster for several minutes, this one's Hit Points having been barely whittled down, unlike the first. Kelly took his sweet time before getting involved and he looked healthier than he had.

Presumably, he had a health potion stashed away in his inventory as well.

I was hit twice in that time as I was taking greater risks than either of my reluctant compatriots. Once on the arm and a blow to the head, which truly sucked. But I had over two hundred Hit Points remaining when the second golem finally crumbled as the first had.

I heard a weak whoop of cheering from over by the thrones. Jackson had regained consciousness and was sprawled over one of them, but it was obvious he was still struggling to stand. After getting half out of the throne his arms gave way and he flopped back onto the obsidian chair with a grunt-worthy bump.

I stepped over the brick-orange remains of the golem and scanned the chamber, there was no sign of the avatar.

“I haven't seen her in several minutes,” Shana called out when she noticed where my focus was.

An arched portal appeared in the Northeast section of the chamber with the customary shimmer. This was a signal that we had completed the dungeon and only needed to exit to collect our rewards.

Which meant getting jumped by the avatar was no longer a concern. Either she had given up or slaying the last of the mobs forced the end of the dungeon run.

This, of course, was the moment Carl and Kelly predictably chose to strike. But they didn't catch me unawares. Quixbix whispered a warning they were manoeuvring to attack when Shana called out her observations about the avatar's presence to me.

When I'd moved forward, past the golems remains, that had put Carl behind me.

Anticipating he would swing for my head, I ducked, and his backsword whistled over harmlessly. He had put so much effort into what he thought was going to be a killing strike that he was unable to defend himself adequately in return. I pivoted smoothly and thrust upward with the scimitar in my left hand, the blade sank deep into his unprotected armpit. At the same time, my right-hand scimitar sliced upwards between his groin and thigh.

**** You have inflicted 68 piercing damage and 48 points of cold damage to Carl Fuchs. Carl Fuchs is slain.*

*You have inflicted 34 piercing damage and 24 points of cold damage to Carl Fuchs. Total overkill, Torin. ****

I couldn't help but grin viciously at Quixbix's written quip.

However, I needed to recover my combat posture and deal with Kelly.

Although I needn't have worried, by the time I sprang up into a fighting stance Kelly had already toppled over forward, one of Shana's fletched arrows buried in the base of his skull.

**** You have slain Carl Fuchs. Torin receives +689 XP, +5 notoriety, Shana receives + 750 XP.*

*You have slain Kelly Stevens. Torin receives +439 XP, +5 notoriety, Shana receives + 477 XP. ****

That was a hefty increase in notoriety. I'd need to figure out if that was because they had Valiant classes or if it was because we were supposed to be allies on this dungeon run.

Regardless, the dungeon was complete, and my secret objective was within reach. I strode back over to the thrones and the well between them, it was time to claim my prize.

The Dungeon Core.

Chapter 16

Jackson's eyes darted from me to the corpses of his erstwhile friends as I approached the centre of the chamber. The rising panic he felt was evident on his face, his mana exhaustion had left him vulnerable to anyone unscrupulous enough to take advantage of his helplessness.

Cue my resident bloodthirsty Jiminy Cricket. <Good job, Torin. Now, cut the sorcerer's throat and we can get on with claiming that core.>

His words caused me to stutter-step as I reached the thrones. Irrespective of it only being a couple of days, it had felt as if I'd been tiptoeing around the imp and his attempts to push me down the darkest of paths for years. An irreconcilable clash of wills was inevitable. This had to happen eventually, though I'd hoped to procrastinate for a while longer.

There was a choice before me. Capitulate to the imp's desires and avoid any repercussions he could throw my way or take my chances and lay down the law.

This wasn't a choice, not really. Oh, in the past I may have hedged and placated a bit to avoid unwanted conflict, but I'd never given in, and I wouldn't give in now. I'd been doing plenty of prevaricating with Quixbix already, and it was high time for that to end.

"No, Quixbix. We won't be doing that," I announced firmly.

<What? What do you mean you won't be doing that? Jackson's group turned on you, his life is forfeit. Kill him already, I demand it> he choked out in response.

"No," I said quietly.

<No? No! What kind of Dungeon Corsair Captain are you?> the imp yelled in my mind. <Have you forgotten how difficult I can make your life?>

"Quixbix, when I say no, I mean no," I growled, before continuing in a louder voice. "What kind of Dungeon Corsair Captain am I? I'm the kind who *is* the motherfucking Captain! There will be no more threats from you, veiled or otherwise. You will do as I say and not the other way around."

My body quivered as my repressed anger was unleashed. Shana smiled coyly and bowed her head in deference, visibly displaying her approval and submission.

Jackson cringed away and slipped off the throne. He struggled back up onto his feet using the throne as a crutch, with a thoroughly confused, yet fearful, expression on his face. He couldn't hear Quixbix's side of the conversation, so I must have seemed quite unhinged.

I was prepared for the imp's response, but he still managed to catch me by surprise.

<Well, it's about time you figured that out. For a while there I thought I would have to literally spell it out for you> he chuckled merrily.

Shana giggled along with him, while I stood there with my mouth slightly agape.

I rubbed my forehead with my thumb and forefinger. "Are you trying to tell me that you've been constantly pushing my buttons to get me to front up and take charge?" I demanded wearily as my anger drained away.

<That's about the size of it.>

"So, all that gubbins about shafting your previous owners was horse shit?" I asked in exasperation.

<Hmmm, no. I totally *shafted* those undeserving weaklings at the first opportunity> he professed glibly.

“But you aren’t going to do that to me?”

<Nah, I’d hardly tell you I could do that if I planned to walk you into an early grave, would I?>

“I suppose not,” I agreed.

<I knew you had the stones, right from the beginning.>

“You did, huh? How could you be so sure I wasn’t telling you what you wanted to hear?” I asked and instantly regretted posing the question.

Why was I trying to convince him to change his mind?

Quixbix laughed before he answered. <How many times do I have to tell you that we are bonded at a molecular level. We may not share thoughts, but we share a body. There are so many chemical tells when you lie. It was really hard to keep a straight face when you tried. ‘Exercise restraint to further my other nefarious machinations’> he quoted me from our first conversation back in my apartment and chuckled. <You must have thought I was created yesterday.>

“So, you don’t really want us to become the most feared and renowned pirate crew in the galaxy after all?”

<Of course, I do. And we will be. I just understand it’s going to take you more than a few days to accept that it is both your destiny and in your best interests. You are still settling, after all.>

“Huh, settling?” was my less than eloquent response.

<Yes, settling into who you are. You keep oscillating between who you were and who you are becoming. Cutting down people who are obstacles without mercy or doubt one minute and saving chubby enemies from certain death because you feel sorry for them in another.>

<In the meantime, I’ll be here to make sure you don’t make any fatal missteps until you arrive at your final

destination. Telling me you were the boss means you're well on your way.>

Obviously, Quixbix hadn't shed all his bloodthirstiness.

"Who are you talking to?" Jackson gulped.

I turned to the young sorcerer, whose legs seemed to be steadying under him. "I have a quest imp. I'm speaking to him, you can't hear him, though."

"A quest imp," Jackson remarked. "I read about those in the help files. They are super rare and much sought after."

<This kid is growing on me> Quixbix started. <It's always nice to be properly appreciated. I'm glad you didn't kill him to play along with me. Anyway, time is a wasting, and you don't get forever to hang around once a dungeon is complete.

<The good news, Torin, is that your class means you can remove that grate currently blocking access to the core. So, you won't have to waste time breaking your way through. And I've got a fresh dilemma too, directly related to what you do with Jackson over there.>

"I thought you couldn't do that in a dungeon?"

<I can't give you quests. And a dilemma is not a quest.>

**** You have slain most of the members of another party that you ran a dungeon with. They attacked first, and dungeons are dangerous places, everybody knows that. Nobody needs to know that Carl Fuchs and Kelly Stevens lived to the end of the run but didn't leave alive. Only one witness lives to tell the tale, but what will you do? ****

Kill Jackson Templeton.
The simplest solution. The secret will never leave the

<p>dungeon. You won't have to share the XP or item rewards with him either. They are doubled for being the first to conquer this dungeon at level 1.</p> <p>You will gain a permanent buff doubling the XP reward for killing fellow dungeoneers on a mutual run.</p>
<p>Let him live but take steps to ensure his silence.</p>
<p>You allow him to live.</p> <p>This option grants you early access to a class quest and makes it repeatable. The quest is related to forming your crew which is usually reserved until after you have secured your Dungeon Ship and can't usually be repeated. You will need to force Jackson to sign the Corsair's Canon for life and bind him as crew or lose these benefits.</p>
<p>Let him go.</p>
<p>You allow him to go free.</p> <p>+25 Notoriety. All podiums in the state of Michigan will be automatically informed of these events. There is a chance that podiums within Law Abiding settlements will generate capture or kill quests. (Proximity to the dungeon Anastasia Ruslanovna influences the likelihood of quest generation and severity.)</p>

“Come on, Quixbix. What the fuck is up with that last part. Quests to hunt us down, really,” I snorted.

<Okay, confession time. Although I can offer you dilemmas at pivotal moments like this, unlike custom quests, I have no control on the terms. The Framework does that directly for dilemmas.>

“Again, that is the kind of information I require *before*, not after you or we do something,” I berated him.

<Yeah, I get it. Look I know you are Mr Grumpypants, but a dilemma always offers you some nice goodies. And I also know from experience that the tougher the choice, the sweeter the offerings.

<You get to pick between a permanent XP buff, making a class quest repeatable or a chunk of extra notoriety, but each has an associated cost. In this case, killing someone for your personal gain or binding him to a life of piracy at your side permanently or the potential inconvenience of people hunting for you down the line. Which you pick is up to you, but we both know which one you're going for> he taunted me companionably.

“Do I have to pick straight away?”

<No, but you have to pick before you leave and if he legs it before you decide, you'll default to option three> he warned.

I nodded my understanding.

“Shana, watch Jackson. Don't let him leave. Jackson, stay put and we'll talk in a minute,” I ordered briskly.

Shana hopped down from the throne she'd been standing on and took up a position between Jackson and the exit. She didn't nock an arrow to her bow, but she did twirl one between her fingers and observed him languidly.

The thin sorcerer gulped audibly. “I won't give you any trouble.” He smiled wanly in an attempt to mollify us.

I ignored him for the moment and moved over to the well. The small red gem pulsed faintly at the bottom. When I examined the grate that blocked access, I knew instinctively how to remove it.

I bent over, reached down, and gripped the grate in just the right place. Then made four attempts to twist it to the left followed by two in the opposite direction, then four more times to the left before finally switching back to twist from the right and the grate unscrewed and came loose on the fifth twist.

“What are you doing?” a lilting feminine voice cried dramatically as the grate came loose.

“Torin,” Shana warned. “The avatar of the dungeon is back.”

Quixbix was swift to reassure us. <Don’t worry, she can’t act unless we try to damage her core. As we aren’t going to harm the crystal, she has been effectively defanged. Of course, if she had realised what Torin was here for, she could have done something earlier with her mobs, too late now, they are all dead.>

I grunted at Quixbix’s advice, and hauled the grate out of the well, resting it on the outer edge of the well’s stonework.

The avatar was indeed back, and she skipped over to the well by me. We didn’t stop her. She fluttered her eyelashes, pouted, and thrust her chest out to give me a full eyeful of her tempting cleavage. I got my first good look at her up close.

She was very pretty with large expressive baby-blue eyes and pouty kissable lips. Everything about her was designed to enrapture heterosexual men. And if I didn’t already have a stunningly beautiful companion, it might have had a greater effect on me.

“You don’t have to do this adventurer,” she trilled whimsically. “You don’t want to hurt little old me,” she wheedled then with a girlish giggle.

Her accent was a little difficult to place, but I could have sworn it was Californian with a hint of Russian. Although if I were honest, my guess was likely heavily influenced by her name.

I vaulted over the lip of the short well and landed inside.

“Please don’t, adventurer,” she begged. “If you destroy me, you won’t get any experience for completing my dungeon and it’s doubled as you are my first,” she giggled and batted her eyelashes at the double-entendre. “And I can be very

accommodating for a handsome and fit warrior such as yourself,” she offered sultrily with a wink. “You can bring the pretty elf too, and double-dip. I really don’t mind. I’m willing to share and I’m sure a rugged hunk like you has more than enough in the tank for two.”

I looked back up at her. She had leaned over the edge and her cleavage was at my eye level. I inspected her chest thoroughly, licked my lips lasciviously and grinned. Briefly, her eyes lit up with the joy of victory, right up until I spoke.

“I’m not here to destroy your core Anastasia, but for something far more valuable,” I hinted.

She pulled back in shock and her brow furrowed in thought. “Wait, what did you say your class was again. Hang on, I remember what you yelled. A Dungeon Corsair Captain.”

Her eyes took on a far-away look, presumably as she searched through information her existence as a dungeon made her privy to. I knew she had found an entry on my class when her baby-blue eyes focused on me again and her sex-kitten smile morphed into a snarling grimace.

“You’re a dirty fucking slaver,” she screeched and tried to claw at my face, but her hand was prevented from connecting.

“I wouldn’t label myself like that,” I remarked.

“Well, I would, you fucking ass,” she hissed. “I’m a person too, or at least I was before all this Framework shit happened. Now, you’re going to steal my core and fucking own me.”

The revelation that Anastasia Ruslanovna had been a human being before the Darkwyrlds cataclysm overcame us a few days ago, did not surprise me. I never bought Quixbix’s suggestion that the dungeon had been named after someone or something nearby.

Deep down I’d known that from the beginning when I picked this dungeon and had judiciously avoided thinking about it until now.

There had been other options. And it hadn't just been the increased difficulty of those other dungeons that were a higher level which had steered my choice to come for hers.

Anastasia's dungeon had the greatest potential and if I wanted to stand a real chance of making it in this new world, a run of the mill Dungeon Ship simply wouldn't do. Because the truth of it was, even if I didn't admit it out loud, I didn't want to merely survive, I wanted to rule.

I continued to struggle with conflicting desires and emotions but shouldn't have been surprised the domineering aspects of my personality were winning most of the moralistic battles and would outright win the war soon.

Quixbix recent comments about me settling into who I was becoming echoed through my mind.

I reached out and stroked her chin kindly, Anastasia didn't try to stop me. Her eyes fluttered and tears welled at the edges, then slipped down her cheeks. I'll admit to being impressed, her acting skills were top-notch, but she didn't fool me.

"It's either you or me, my pretty little pixie, and I pick me," I crooned to her softly.

Her eyes widened and then narrowed with anger. She stared into my ice-blue orbs and saw only steely resolve. Her shoulders drooped with resignation and acceptance, and I was convinced she wasn't acting now.

I knelt and my hand clasped around her core gem.

**** As a Dungeon Corsair Captain, you may claim the core gem of the dungeon Anastasia Ruslanovna. Claiming a core is irrevocable, the only way to break the bond would be for the core to be destroyed. Do you wish to do so? ****

I didn't hesitate and confirmed my claim. Anastasia's avatar winked out of existence.

<Quest ‘The Corsair’s Canon 1’ completed. 17,136 XP, Soul Collar, Helm of the Bound, Leggings of the Bound, and Gloves of the Bound awarded> Quixbix formally intoned.

Then he followed up a bit more jovially with <Congratulations, and now you’re ready for the next.>

**** The Corsair’s Canon 2 (K)*

What is a Dungeon Corsair Captain without a ship? What is a Corsair’s ship without a dungeon core to power it? Worthless? Irrelevant? Perhaps these are questions you don’t want the answers to. Locate an existing vessel or wreck and install the core gem to awaken your Dungeon Ship.

Success: Install the core gem in a suitable vessel.

Rewards: 3,400 XP, a Dungeon Ship, and future The Corsair’s Canon quests.

Boots of the Bound.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

<However, now you’ve claimed the core you only have five minutes before this location for the dungeon collapses. If you’re still inside you won’t be harmed, but you will forfeit the rewards for completion. My advice is don’t do that. So, hurry up and pick your dilemma option.>

I wasn’t very happy that I was being rushed into a decision, again, but it had been me that claimed the core without first asking what would happen once I did.

“We aren’t picking option one, are we?” Shana whispered.

I shook my head and she noticeably relaxed. Option three didn’t appeal to me either, but I almost went for it anyway. I had just bound one thinking being to me against their will and was loathe to do so twice in as many minutes.

But practicality won out.

If we were going to sacrifice XP and better gear drops, we needed to get something more from the deal than extra notoriety, as that hadn't seemed to be all that difficult to acquire if we really needed more. Option two was the best decision, for us at least.

<An excellent choice. Which means a second new quest for you. As this quest has become repeatable, the rewards have been adjusted accordingly> Quixbix informed us.

**** The Corsair's Canon 3 (K/5 repeatable)*

You have your ship. But a ship is only useful if crewed. Find willing, or not, individuals and have them sign your Corsair's Canon. A binding contract to serve as your crew for no less than ten years. The Corsair's Canon has three levels, Officers, Crew, Deckhands. This quest can only be completed for those who sign on as Crew or Officers.

Success: A fresh signatory is made.

Rewards: XP reward is dependent on the potential/tier of the signatory. Moderate (the minimum for Crew) 340 XP to 1700 XP for an Immense signatory

*Token(s) of the Bound. (1-5) dependent on potential/tier of the signatory. ****

I hauled myself out of the well swiftly and approached Jackson. The thin young man remained stunned and a little unsteady on his feet. A stiff breeze would bowl him over.

His expression was a mixture of confusion and panic, he had only been privy to half the conversation and resultant revelations. However, one of those revelations was that I had essentially enslaved an intelligent being. He tried to retain his composure, but an involuntary quiver of his lower lip revealed his underlying fright.

“Jackson,” I sighed his name. “Despite appearances, I’m not a bad guy.” I paused briefly and considered how best to broach the subject, deciding brevity would be best in the circumstances. “I’ve claimed the core of this dungeon because my class requires it, and we only have a few minutes before this instance implodes. For obvious reasons, I can’t let you walk out of here with what you know.”

“Please,” Jackson pleaded as he took a few wobbly steps backwards until he bumped into Shana who had moved up behind him. “You can, I won’t tell anyone. Nobody liked Carl anyway, he won’t be missed. You saw what he was like.”

“I’m sorry, Jackson. If you’ll pardon the pun, but that ship has already sailed. I don’t want to kill you, but I will, if you leave me no other choice,” I bluffed with cold menace.

Truth be told, I didn’t honestly know if I’d be able to kill Jackson if he refused to sign. Therefore, it was better for all involved that he did, and we didn’t have to find out.

“If I leave you no other choice?” Jackson asked querulously, a smidgen of hope kindling in his voice.

I snapped my fingers and Quixbix supplied a physical representation of the Corsair’s Canon with a flourish of sparkling lights. Once more, I instinctively knew how it worked. The canon appeared as a rolled vellum scroll and the terms of service were written upon it in florid calligraphy.

With the canon in hand, I was prompted for the service level and length of the contract. Jackson’s potential disqualified him from an officer position, so I picked Crew rather than Deckhand and selected lifetime as the dilemma required.

I unfurled the scroll and rested it upon the arm of the nearest throne.

“This is a binding contract to serve as a member of my crew,” I explained, though I omitted to mention the length of service. “Once signed you will be unable to commit any acts of betrayal against me, which includes talking to people you

shouldn't about what happened here today. Place your thumb in the box and we can all leave here hale and whole," I finished and pointed to a square box at the base of the vellum scroll.

"You want me to sign something without reading it first?" Jackson objected.

<Torin, I know you are reluctant to kill the sorcerer. So, I thought now would be a good time to remind you that the contract doesn't require Jackson's consent. Only that his thumb, finger, or any appendage really, is pressed against the scroll while still attached to him> Quixbix interjected.

I absorbed the imp's words but decided to give Jackson one last chance. "Yes, Jackson. You commit or we resort to something entirely less pleasant."

Jackson looked around at me and then Shana. He saw only firm resolve, his shoulders slumped, and he caved. He stepped towards me, hesitated, and then firmly pressed his thumb in the box.

I clapped him on the back. "Regardless of your obvious misgivings, I want to welcome you to the team."

<Quest 'The Corsair's Canon 2' completed. 428 XP and one Token of the Bound awarded> Quixbix formally intoned.

"Right, let's get the hell out of here before we lose out on the booty," I announced and then another idea occurred to me. "Wait, Quixbix can we loot Carl and his friends?"

<I'm sorry, even though it was you who killed Carl and Kelly and not the dungeon, anyone who dies in a dungeon along with all their belongings are ceded to it>

"No, dungeons claim the fallen, regardless of how they die," Jackson said a beat behind him, having not heard the imp.

"Never mind, I doubt they had much of value. Alright, let's move," I ordered.

All three of us strode towards and through the shimmering exit portal. Before I stepped out back into the real world I was suspended for a moment and four messages flashed before me in sequence.

**** Congratulations on being the first to conquer the first level of the dungeon, Anastasia Ruslanovna. You have been awarded 20,160 XP and the following item. ****

Dungeon Corsair Captain's Spyglass

This is a special item that does not need to occupy an item slot but must be in your inventory to provide its benefits.

Your Dungeon Ship will be aware of any dangerous water-borne threats within one nautical mile. While aboard your Dungeon Ship, analysis of visible threats and targets may return more detailed information.

You will be aware of the location of any ship in your fleet wherever they are in the Darkwyrlds.

If paired to a faction's Strategic Command Hub, then the hub's contents can be viewed from the navigation cabin of your dungeon ship.

Improves your Dungeon Ship's ability to navigate the parts of the Darkwyrlds Plexus without mana buoys more safely.

Durability: 100/100

**** Congratulations on completing the dungeon Anastasia Ruslanovna for the first time. As this was a conquest, the reward has been doubled. As you completed the dungeon with a party under the recommended strength level the points reward has been doubled again. You have been awarded 4 upgrade points of your choice.*

Congratulations on completing your first dungeon. As this was a conquest, the reward has been doubled. You have

been awarded 2 upgrade points of your choice.

*Congratulations on completing a dungeon at character level one. As this was a conquest, the reward has been doubled. You have been awarded 2 upgrade points of your choice. ****

I read through each notification in order. My first impression of the loot drop could be described by the word underwhelmed. Although this may in part be because I'd expected a spiffy new weapon or a piece of armour and got some kind of utility item.

It didn't help that I had no idea what the Strategic Command Hub or the Darkwyrlds Plexus was or if safer passage through the plexus was good thing or not. For all I knew, everyone could get that kind of access fairly easily.

Eight upgrade points, on the other hand, was a big deal. At least if what Dean had said about how difficult they were to acquire was true.

Shortly after reading the fourth message, the suspension that held me faded, and I completed my step out of the dungeon. We came out on the car park side of the dungeon and could see that the black stone edifice was already crumbling.

Shana and Jackson had come out with me, and we all backed away as the skull-like gatehouse collapsed upon itself. Soon there was nothing left except for a few motes of black dust in the air and the incongruous remains of the small lake's activities building. The far walls on either side had survived but almost everything in between had been consumed.

With a clear view behind us, and with the dungeon collapsed down to the lake, it was obvious that Tommy hadn't stuck around after he left. Jackson was the one who spotted a piece of paper that flapped in the breeze weighted down by a rock on one of the picnic benches that dotted the beach. He wandered over and read it quickly.

“What does it say?” I asked, infusing my words with a measure of command that the Corsair’s Canon granted me over my subordinates.

Jackson’s eyes flared in surprise at the compulsion and then paraphrased the contents of the note. “It’s from Tommy. It is mostly him apologising to Carl and begging him not to beat the crap out of him. That he was the only protection his Ma and younger brother had, and he couldn’t let them down by dying.”

I nodded.

The command had been an interesting experiment, it had worked in as much that Jackson had been compelled to obey. However, that he could paraphrase the contents and hadn’t been forced to read it out verbatim told me those under my canon still had some leeway to interpret my commands unless I was very specific.

That could be useful for loyal crew members in situations that required a bit of lateral thinking, but also a flaw that could be exploited by the disloyal if I wasn’t careful.

The takeaway was although they might be mystically bound to me, I still needed to keep my people happy.

With that, and Tommy’s note mentioning his family fresh in my mind, there was a potentially awkward conversation to be had.

I slipped my hand into Shana’s, and we joined Jackson at the picnic bench.

“Everybody, please take a seat for a few minutes. We have a few things to discuss.”

I threw one leg over the bench and sat on it sideways. Shana settled on the same side as me and adopted a similar pose and I pulled her into me. She leaned back into my chest and sighed happily, meanwhile, Jackson sat across from us and his fingers rapped lightly on the table demonstrating his nervousness.

“First, I want to say I’m not going to apologise for what happened inside, Jackson,” I stated firmly.

Jackson seemed a little taken aback by my blunt statement but didn’t offer any argument and nodded his head almost imperceptibly.

“With that being said, I imagine you’re a bit pissed at me right now. I know I would be. So, as an olive branch of sorts, while we have a moment of safety you have a two-minute pass to express the depth of your discontent without fear of any repercussions,” I offered.

Jackson sat there and stared at me suspiciously.

“That means you can call me whatever you want. Better do it now, I won’t offer you the opportunity again.”

Jackson hesitated for a second and then spoke. “Asshole,” he started. When I didn’t react, he added “fucking asshole.”

After that, the vulgarities flowed like wine at a toga party. He got quite inventive by the end of the allotted time.

When two minutes had passed, I raised my hand and Jackson quieted.

“Feel better?”

“You know what, I do,” he answered, and a faint smile quirked on his lips for the first time since our conversation in the dungeon’s second chamber.

Shana broke from my hold of her waist and reached over the table and patted his hand. “You may not realise it yet, Jackson, but this is a good thing. Torin looks after what belongs to him.” Then she snuggled back into my arms.

Unexpectedly, a look of nervous discomfort crossed Jackson’s face, but I quickly diagnosed his concern.

“Don’t worry, I don’t want to fuck you, Jackson,” I deadpanned.

Everything went quiet for a heartbeat before we all disintegrated into a fit of giggles and guffaws.

“Anyway, Tommy’s missive pranged a thought in my head. Do you have a family situation I need to know about before we leave the area?” I asked when the laughter died down.

His smile faded at my question. “Nah, it’s just me.”

“Are you telling me the truth, Jackson? Because, no offence, but you don’t look like you’ve finished High School.”

“I’m not lying,” he chirped defensively. “And I graduated from High School this year.”

“Really? You’re eighteen?”

He seemed to struggle internally before he answered with resignation. “No, I’m seventeen, but I’ll be eighteen in December. I graduated a year early...” and he trailed off.

“And you’re telling me you’ve no family to go back to in Ionia?” I pressed.

“I’m emancipated,” he sighed. “My mother and older sister are in Florida. Living in a house they bought with money I earned,” he muttered a little bitterly. “That was, like, eight months ago. I didn’t want to relocate in my final year of school, so petitioned the courts and was granted emancipation.”

“That’s really impressive, Jackson,” Shana encouraged. “The courts require evidence of financial security. How did you manage it?”

Jackson smiled nervously. “Coding, not that it matters anymore without power. I had a talent for figuring out what was wrong with other people’s code. Picked up some freelance work doing that, made a load of money fixing bugs in apps mostly, enough to pay my way through college and then my Mom found out...”

“We don’t have to talk about the particulars if you don’t want to,” I suggested.

“Thanks, maybe later,” he said quietly.

“Okay, did you both get eight upgrade points, too,” I asked the table.

Both Jackson and Shana nodded.

“Excellent. What goodies did you get from the dungeon?” I asked eagerly.

“Oh yeah, I got an awesome new bow,” Shana cried with excitement.

She produced a new recurve bow from her inventory. It was smaller than her first bow and made of ebony wood. On either side of the handle centrepiece were two-inch spikes, so the bow could be used as a punching weapon in melee if necessary.

Lesser Bow of the Assassin

Ranged/Melee Weapon

Damage: 15 + AGI stat / 5 + STR (Bow Spikes)

Archery +5, Stealth +5

Unaware target damage bonus increased to x3

Durability: 30/30

I whistled with appreciation when I analysed her new bow. This was a significant step up from her previous one which had been ten damage plus her Strength and no melee option. And it included increased damage for sneak attacks which were usually only doubled not trebled. However, if you combined that with a headshot, then it would be twelve times the damage, twenty-four times if their head had no armour protection.

Very lethal indeed.

Jackson laid out an orange-red hooded cloak on the picnic table for me to analyse.

Lesser Pyromancer's Mantle

Cloth Armour (Light)

Damage Mitigation: Very Low

HP +100

Stat: Mana Capacity + 10

Flamekissed: Immune to sources of Fire damage when worn.

Item Description: Officially worn on the shoulders, the Mantle provides its mitigation to any body part that it covers (stacks with other armour on those body parts).

Restrictions: Must have an active Sorcerous class. Fire magic must be the wearer's primary school.

Durability: 20/20

“That’s a nice bit of armour, Jackson,” I told him. “The stacking effect should really help.”

“Yeah,” he smiled with excitement. “And it’s cloth too, so it only uses one of my armour slots, which is good as I don’t have many.”

Jackson stood up and wreathed himself in his new attire. Which did reveal one minor drawback, he stuck out like a sore thumb. His new garb practically screamed, ‘Caster over here, please kill me’. Maybe we could dye it or cover it in mud or something.

“Did you automatically level-up when you finished the dungeon?” I asked them.

“Nah, you have to elect to do that. I got enough XP to level-up twice,” Jackson gushed. “Wait, did you not get enough to level-up? Sixteen thousand wasn’t enough.”

I shook my head and thought it best not to mention that I received twenty thousand due to my notoriety bonus and remained more than twenty thousand short of enough for level

two. Although, that was down to me needing double the standard amount for my classes grade, otherwise, with the dungeon's XP and the quest I would have.

Jackson's mouth gaped. "Damn, you are badass. I shouldn't be surprised, you and Shana could have run the dungeon without us, after all."

"I have enough for my second level," Shana smiled.

"Good. Before we take any action in that regard we need to assess if we can make use of these upgrade points," I said to the table.

"I read all about that in the help files," Jackson enthused.

<I was going to give you the benefit of my years of experience, but I suppose we can let the noob show us what he knows> Quixbix snarked in my head.

Jackson, being unable to hear the impudent quest imp carried on with his enthusiastic explanation. "So, to begin, the first ten points you get are essentially free moving. You can allocate them to whichever type of character upgrade you want and even move them later if you haven't spent them. After that, any extra you earn are randomly added to the four upgrade categories, unless they were rewards for that specific category."

"Are the costs the same for each category," I interrupted.

"No, to change species it's ten points multiplied by the tier you are moving to, and you can't skip tiers," Jackson informed us.

<That means forty points for you and thirty points for Shana to go up a species tier> Quixbix supplied concurrently.

"For Paths and Harmonisations, it is five points to adopt them in the first place, unless you already have an existing one. Then it gets a bit more complicated, and then five

points times the level you are moving to for each subsequent raise,” Jackson continued.

<So, ten to upgrade either of yours or five for Shana to adopt one, but there are a lot of prerequisites. Which neither of you has achieved, yet. As the sorcerer pointed out taking a secondary Path or Harmonisation is tricky and the cost variable.>

“And for Classes, the cost is the difference between the grades multiplied by the tier the new grade is in. And an extra five points multiplied by the new tier if you are crossing a tier boundary,” Jackson finished.

<The only class upgrade available to you is Dungeon Corsair Lord and that will cost fifty points. Shana has more options available to her, but she already has a Q-grade class so going higher will be a minimum of eighteen, thirty if she opts for Shadepath Sniper the next step up on her current class tree.

<We haven’t really talked about what happens when your Notoriety passes two hundred. At that point your experience gains will be doubled, and you begin to accrue other effects instead. Which includes a reduction in the cost of upgrading your Notorious class.>

<There isn’t really anything you can do with your points but hold onto them. The little firebug, on the other hand, has the precise number needed to shift from Sorcerer to Pyromancer> Quixbix advised.

“Thanks, Jackson. My imp concurs with your explanation,” I said, and Jackson looked a little surprised. “In fact, he tells me that eight points are enough for you to shift up to the Pyromancer class.”

“Yeah, I know,” he grinned. “I just didn’t want to act rashly and spend them without thinking it through. No respawns, you know.”

“I understand. It’s largely what has guided my current philosophy. Do it,” I encouraged him.

“Also, these points aren’t easy to come by. Completing dungeons is the best way, but each dungeon only pays out once and we won’t earn as many points in the future. And then they get randomly allocated. Maybe I should hold onto mine for now,” Jackson worried.

“Jackson, you won’t be getting any more points if you’re dead. What are you going to do, hold onto your XP and run around at level one until you’ve completed a dozen dungeons? All to get a better class. Make the change.”

Jackson’s eyes flitted from side to side as he reviewed his character sheet.

“Shana, you should level-up too,” I whispered to her and kissed the crown of her head. “If it gives you the option of visiting Dean, decline.”

A minute later and that was done.

“Okay,” I announced to the table. “Now we have to head to Grand Haven and find an abandoned boat big enough to place the core in to form a Dungeon Ship.”

“Erm,” Jackson coughed. “Does the vessel have to be intact?”

“Actually, no it doesn’t. It just has to be a boat or ship and large enough. Rowboats or speedboats won’t do,” I told him.

“In that case, I know where a river taxi has run aground not far from here,” he said.

“Tell me more,” I grinned widely.

Chapter 17

“Hang on a sec. I don’t think that will matter. I’m fairly sure there are too many shallows on the river, especially around Grand Rapids for a sizeable vessel to pass,” I lamented. “That’s why I’d planned on riding to Grand Haven, as it abuts straight onto Lake Michigan.”

“Damn,” Jackson swore. “You’re right, that’s what happened to the river taxi. It ran aground last summer when the water level dropped. We’ll have the same problem now.”

I grinned despite the disappointment at Jackson’s use of the word ‘we’.

<Ha!> Quixbix cried with far too much volume in my head.

Shana winced at the same time as me, meaning she heard his cackle of joy.

<It would seem the newbie hasn’t read everything> he stated smugly.

“Quixbix, do you have something useful to add to the conversation? Or are you just being an asshole?” I groused at him.

Jackson had been on the verge of saying something, probably wondering why we had winced, but then shut his mouth, the answer provided.

<Only that the exterior of a Dungeon Ship is malleable to the Core’s will. It requires the dungeon to expend some of

its collected energy to do so, but provided you're not moving over land, they can cross shallows, rapids, reefs, dams, etc. that regular ships would find impassable. To be honest, if they had the energy, they could cross land as well.>.

“Cheers, Quixbix. So, my imp tells me Dungeon Ships, being dungeons and not real ships, can cross impediments like shallows or rapids that would stop other vessels,” I related to Jackson.

“Oh, cool,” he chirped. “In that case, yeah, as I was saying, one of the locals started a river taxi service to take people from here to Grand Rapids and back. People told him it was a stupid idea, even with a flat-bottomed boat. Anyway, at the edge of the Northwest corner of the recreation area there is a sharp kink in the river with a small inlet and last summer he overshot the curve and tore up the bottom of the boat in that inlet.”

“The boat was a write-off, my Ma thought he did it deliberately for the insurance. The wreck is still where he ran aground, the county wants the owner to pay for its removal, but he wouldn't stump up, so there it remains.”

“How big is it, exactly,” I asked.

“I'm not sure, but it could seat thirty people comfortably,” he replied.

“What do you think, Quixbix? Will that be big enough?” I quizzed the imp.

<Yes, that should be enough. The exterior of a Mark One Dungeon Ship isn't that large, it will appear to be a medium sized sailboat. The spatial magic dungeon's employ gives you more space below deck than the exterior suggests.>

“Like the Tardis?” I asked.

“What's like the Tardis?” Jackson interrupted with excitement. “Are Dungeon Ships bigger on the inside?”

<I've no idea what a Tardis is, but bigger on the inside is an apt, if simplistic description> Quixbix grumped, unhappy

at being gazumped.

I nodded confirmation to Jackson, and he squealed with delight.

“That is so fucking awesome,” he crowed.

“Excellent, well it seems like we have a plan. What’s the best way there? Is there a path through the woods in that direction?” I asked Jackson.

“Nah, we’d be better off walking North through the trees, there is a dirt track that leads up to the main road, then we can go left down the road and it’s off to the right. We will have to cross the train tracks, but then you’re at the inlet,” Jackson relayed the directions.

“Okay then, let’s go,” I announced and patted Shana on her backside.

We got up from the picnic bench when Quixbix piped up.

<Don’t you have some more gear to distribute> he said and made a reproachful clucking sound.

Of course, I had earned several more pieces of ‘Bound’ gear. They were in my inventory, and I examined them quickly.

Helm of the Bound, Gloves of the Bound, Leggings of the Bound

Leather Armour (Medium)

Damage Mitigation: Low

HP +30 (base of 25)

Stat: +1 (DEX), Skill +5 (Archery), +5 Hit Points

Item Description: May only be worn by someone soulbound to Torin Carter. All bonuses bar the damage mitigation are increased by Torin Carter’s applicable levels and only utilises

one armour slot. Stat and skill bonuses are contingent on bearer's aptitudes.

Stat: 1 (+1 for every five of Torin's levels to a maximum of +5)

Skill: 5 (+1 for every three of Torin's levels to a maximum of +10)

HP: +5 per Torin's level

Durability: 100/100 (Can always be repaired even if reduced to 0 durability)

Each of the 'Bound' gear items had the same descriptions as the Bracers and Quixbix helpfully merged the analysis details, so I didn't get an unnecessary repetition of information. I handed them over to Shana who was the only one of us who could use them fully.

Jackson, not being soulbound to me, couldn't make use of them. In return, Shana gave him the three pieces of leather gear she replaced. He only had enough armour slots to activate the leggings and the helm along with his mantle, but he would still get the armour mitigation from the gloves.

However, as both Jackson and Quixbix simultaneously pointed out, without mana activation, the durability loss on the gloves would be heavily accelerated. With a durability of ten, the gloves could take two maybe three hits before they became unwearable.

The last thing I checked out from my rewards was the Token of the Bound.

Token of the Bound

This token can be applied to any of Torin Carter's Bound armour gear to improve any of the Damage Mitigation, Hit Points granted, Stat Bonus, Skill Bonus or the level boost maximums.

Please note these improvements are static extra's and will not scale with Torin Carter's level.

The number of tokens required for improvement varies.

The tokens were for improving the 'Bound' items. I would drill down into the exact token costs later, though it didn't take a genius to figure out that higher bumps would require more tokens. On the face of it, the armour mitigation would likely be my priority as the rest of the bonuses would all naturally improve when I did. I wouldn't be surprised to learn it was also the most expensive to improve.

<I should point out, now that Shana is wearing multiple items of Bound gear, that the extra stat and skill bumps for your higher character level do not stack. She will get the base bumps from every piece worn as well as the increased Hit Points with each of your levels, but the other two benefits are one-time deals. Typically, Bound gear is distributed amongst a soul-binders' coterie for maximum benefit.>

“Understood, Quixbix.”

With that sorted, Shana retrieved her bike which we had left in the trees down by the small lake.

Jackson clipped his mantle in place while we waited for Shana to come back. When the mantle settled on his shoulders it seemed to ripple and the colours shifted from the orange and red to an emerald and forest green that matched his fae flames. The new colours didn't scream caster quite as much as the originals. They could be mistaken for a forester's cloak, which was a step in the right direction.

Jackson had room in his inventory for the spare bike and then we trekked North through the trees. We came upon the dirt road Jackson had mentioned after we walked for ten minutes, and then mounted up onto the bikes from there. Luckily, we'd thought to collect a couple of spares back at Mike's Bikes, so Jackson didn't have to run to keep up.

When we got to the end of the dirt track it turned onto a proper road, my attention was grabbed by a collection of buildings that I could see over the trees in the opposite direction we planned to head, and I stopped.

“What are those buildings over there,” I queried Jackson and pointed over the trees.

“Ah, they would be Ionia’s biggest source of gainful employment,” he chuckled. “Three correctional facilities, four when you count the reformatory a bit further East.”

“You have four prisons in Ionia? Bloody Nora,” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, but I heard nobody can go inside anymore, not even the prison employees.”

I focused on the nearest building and analysed it, sharing the results with the group.

Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility

Owner: The state of Michigan

Access: Access is currently restricted to those given express permission by the Governor of Michigan.

Mana Enabled Security: Level 10 Protection and Restriction field. Thirty P-10 Sentinel constructs.

Durability: 10,000/10,000

“Quixbix what is a P-10 Sentinel construct?” I asked the imp after reading the information.

<P-10 means it’s a level ten P-grade creature. The Sentinels, and the protection and restriction fields are one of the few safeguards imposed by the Framework during integration. All prisons get them, to keep the prisoners in, and everybody else out. Although the local authorities, in this case, the Governor of Michigan can give people permission to enter

or leave. Otherwise, the Sentinels will seek to stop you>
Quixbix explained.

“Okay, I suppose that’s comforting in a way,” I said.

“If it’s these Sentinels that are running the place and not prison guards, how can convicts whose time is up be released?” Shana inquired.

<The Framework knows the hearts and minds of people. During integration, the existing inmates would have been assessed and the Sentinels programmed accordingly with appropriate sentencing. Interestingly, any genuinely innocent prisoners are released. More interesting is how few actually are> the imp chuckled and continued. <This is just a stopgap to prevent criminals from running rampant in the first few weeks or months. It won’t be long before people, monsters, or both come knocking and overpower the Sentinels. Then those fields will be brought low.>

“Alright, that is enough of a distraction. Let’s keep moving,” I ordered.

Fifteen minutes later, at Jackson’s direction, we reached the train tracks, and I could see the inlet on the other side of them. There was a low wire fence that was supposed to keep people out, but it was in poor condition and had been pulled up at the fence posts, probably by kids, so you could pass under. I held the loose rolled up part of the fence and Shana and Jackson ducked under quickly and I followed them.

Unsurprisingly, we didn’t have to worry about speeding trains as we crossed over the tracks. The inlet side hadn’t been fenced off and we easily wandered down to the embankment.

The drop in the river depth in the height of summer had uncovered most of the inlet, barring a few pools of river water which stubbornly held on. The exposed riverbed was muddy, but there was a slightly raised silt bank that had baked in the summer sun longer and was firm enough to walk on without

giving way dangerously. This would get us close enough to the stranded water taxi to climb aboard.

The boat was flat-bottomed and rectangular. The vessel was roughly ten metres long and maybe five metres wide. There was a small pilot station at the front and at the back where the motor and propeller would be housed, the machinery was missing, presumably salvaged for cash. The central deck where customers would have sat used to have a roof on metal struts, but the roof part had been damaged and pulled down in the year that it had been left here unprotected. Only the metallic frame remained to suggest what used to be there.

The outside of the boat was covered in graffiti tag marks and there was a pile of plastic crates wedged against the side, which screamed that the local youths had visited the wreck more than a few times since it was beached. There was no sign of any youngster's now and the crates were conveniently placed to get us aboard.

<This will do. It would probably be best if Shana and the new guy stay on the bank. Once you place the core crystal, the boat will be consumed as the core converts it into a Dungeon Ship. Torin, you won't be harmed as the core's master, but there are no guarantees for them> Quixbix interjected when we stopped on the bank.

“Quixbix has counselled us to hang back, Jackson,” Shana filled him in. “We could be hurt when the transformation begins.”

Jackson took several nervous steps back from the bank at that and I chuckled at his reaction.

“I thought this was fucking awesome,” I teased.

“It is, but I'd still rather not die to be impressed,” Jackson justified glibly.

I chortled in response and then addressed my quest imp. “Quixbix, will the Dungeon Ship have a gangplank or

something equivalent to board or should we hold onto those crates?”

<Yes, it will have a gangplank> he assured me.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered and made my way across the silt bank.

The baked sand gave way a little here and there, but nothing I couldn't handle. Soon, I'd clambered up the impromptu crate steps and hopped over the edge and onto the deck of the boat. The boat had come to rest at a slight angle and the deck did have a layer of algae on some parts which made it a bit slippery, but the youngsters who had been here before me had helpfully scraped most of it away.

I made my way to the pilot cabin, the white door had been padlocked at some point, but this had been forced open. I slipped inside and looked about. The cabin wasn't large and there were a few discarded grotty blankets on the floor along with an impressive volume of empty beer bottles and cans.

Most of the dashboard had been thoroughly smashed over the past year, but none of that mattered. I drew the core crystal from my inventory and held the small scarlet gemstone in the palm of my hand.

“Are you ready for your new home, Anastasia?” I whispered to the gem.

I hadn't expected a response, but the gem pulsed brightly once. I didn't have a clue if that meant yes, no, or go fuck yourself. The latter probably if our last conversation were any kind of barometer.

With a hearty chuckle, I knelt and brushed the mess out of the way. Then I firmly pressed the gem into the deck.

This is a suitable vessel for Dungeon Ship transformation. Would you like to install the Dungeon Core into this vessel? This action cannot be undone.

I mentally confirmed that I wanted to do this and felt the sensation of the gem dissipate from my palm as it sank into

the deck and the transformation began. I backed up and exited the pilot cabin as the walls and surrounding parts of the boat started to shimmer.

The shimmer rapidly expanded as I watched in awe, but it seemed to be working its way around me. It was that observation that nudged me from my awestruck state, and I decided to debark with alacrity and let the core finish without me getting in the way.

I skipped over the shimmer that had almost made it all the way around me and then vaulted over the side, clearing the crates and landing on the sandy bank. I jogged back across the semi-dried inlet and joined Shana and Jackson on firmer ground.

“I forgot to ask, Quixbix, but how long will this take?”

<I’m not sure. This is the first time I’ve witnessed this specifically but judging from what we can see I’d say no more than an hour, maybe two> the imp answered.

By the time I’d made it back to the others the devouring shimmer had incorporated the entirety of the boat and had begun forming a dark crystalline cocoon. I checked my watch and realised it was already past one in the afternoon. We had been in the dungeon longer than I’d thought.

“Cool, well then let’s have something to eat while we wait,” I suggested.

Shana smiled, nodded, and moved over to a clear spot to lay out a blanket. Jackson meanwhile remained mesmerised by the cocooning process, so I tapped him on the shoulder.

“Earth to Jackson, come in,” I joked.

“Unhhh,” came his distracted reply.

“Come on, you can watch just as easily from over here, while chewing on some fruit and sandwiches,” I suggested.

I managed to drag him over to the lunch area Shana had prepared for us. It took a while to get him to concentrate enough to actually bite his food, but after fifteen minutes or so,

his fascination dipped when it became clear the cocooning had finished and the crystalline structure was too dark to see anything that was occurring inside.

We finished up and then cleared away our lunch which left us with some time on our hands which we used as constructively as possible. Shana and Jackson had confirmed their level up. Apart from her stat increases, Shana didn't get any extra abilities. Jackson was the same and he explained that typically new class abilities only appeared at certain levels in a class.

However, Shana had received one hundred and ten additional Hit Points. Ten for being a shadowborn elf and one hundred for her Shadepath Markswoman class. She remained one hundred points shy of my starting Hit Points, but Shana was also only a few thousand XP from level three, at which point her natural Hit Points would exceed mine.

This only served to hammer home the need for me to level my character as well, which meant not losing notoriety if I could possibly avoid it. Which in turn meant committing acts of piracy.

With time to kill, I mentioned that to the group, and that was when Quixbix chipped in with some encouraging information.

<Well, the good news is that bonding with your Dungeon Ship counts as a lesser act of piracy and it's only been three days since you attained your class, so you will have eleven more days before you risk any notoriety loss> he informed me cheerfully.

“That is excellent news, Quixbix. I suppose now would be a good time to go over what qualifies as an act of piracy. And I don't want you leaving out any options that don't involve raiding and pillaging,” I admonished him in advance.

<Spoilsport> Quixbix insulted me playfully. <We're past that remember. You're the boss and I do as you command>

“Ha,” I snorted. “I’ll believe that the day pigs fly. You may not want to harm me, but that doesn’t mean you won’t give me a little push in your desired direction either.”

<You know me so well and after only a few days. I’m touched> he chuckled in my head.

Shana laughed out loud at that, and Jackson rolled his eyes grumpily at being left out.

<Also, you may want to rethink your metaphors, pigs with wings are a thing these days> Quixbix added.

Shana who had been drinking from a bottle of water couldn’t stop herself from sputtering it all over the grass verge in a most unladylike manner.

“Pardon me,” she pleaded, her face flushed scarlet with mortification.

“Of course,” I assured her with a smile. “Come on Quixbix, enough dawdling, spill it,” I ordered my imp.

<Fine> he started. <First off there are different gradations for the acts of piracy and they extend your grace period before you start to lose Notoriety by different amounts. Lesser acts, like bonding your Dungeon Ship, give you a week. Moderate acts will give you four weeks, Greater acts twelve weeks and Superior acts get you a full year. The grace periods from the different acts can stack, but how many are allowed for each grade of act is based on your level.

<Lesser acts have a limit of three that can be banked which will go up by one for every ten levels of Dungeon Corsair Captain or above that you reach. Moderate acts work the same way, but you start with a limit of two. Greater acts start with one allowed, but this limit increases every five levels. Superior acts have no limit. Obviously, they are the most difficult to secure.>

As Quixbix finished the first part of his explanation I held up my hand for him to stop and relayed the details to Jackson, to keep him in the loop, and then asked my imp to continue.

<Apart from the aforementioned ship bonding, founding a pirate cove also counts as a Lesser act. You can convert or perhaps I should say subvert or conquer existing settlements into becoming pirate coves under your control too. The gradation of the act is dependent on the size of the settlement subverted. Hamlets and Villages count as Lesser acts, Towns as Moderate acts, Cities as Greater acts and a Capital will count as a Superior act. Then, of course, if you expand an existing cove under your control to the next settlement size you will get the same credit. Therefore, founding your own coves and building them up grants you the most grace overall> he explained.

I stopped Quixbix then and recounted his words to Jackson.

He clapped his hands together and rubbed them eagerly when I finished. “Civilisation building too. RPG, Pirate Sim, and 4X together, Darkwyrlds just keeps getting better,” he moaned with glee.

He had closed his eyes and there was a giddy smile on his lips.

“Do we need to give you a moment alone,” I teased him.

Jackson’s eyes snapped back into focus. “Shit, did I say that out loud,” he squeaked.

“Yes,” Shana winked and handed him a leftover napkin from lunch and giggled. “For the drool.”

“Very funny,” Jackson retorted pithily.

That didn’t stop him from taking the napkin and then surreptitiously dabbing the corners of his mouth when he thought we weren’t looking.

<If we are quite finished with comedy hour> Quixbix snarked with impatience. <Although building up settlements can help out in a pinch with your grace period it will never be enough and requires both time and significant investment. The simplest and most efficient method is wealth acquisition which

can be achieved in two ways. First is tribute, if you can convince or threaten independent settlements to pay you a regular tribute to leave them unmolested then that also counts as an act of piracy.

<However, the Framework isn't stupid. This has to be a genuine tribute; you can't give them the funds in the first place or anything like that. Also, should a settlement refuse to pay an agreed-upon tribute then you will be required to make an example of them. Failure to do so in a suitable timescale or manner will result in egregious Notoriety penalties. I'm not saying you shouldn't accept tribute, but you need to be sure they can or will pay and that you can or will do what's necessary if they don't.>

<Tribute is a bit more complex in how it works out what grade of act it will count as. We are several months away from being in that kind of position and can go through it in more detail later when it's relevant.>

"Then why did you bring it up if it isn't relevant right now?" I interrupted.

<Because somebody *ordered* me to leave nothing out> Quixbix scolded.

"Ah, yeah, please continue," I requested sheepishly.

<Finally, there is my, and everyone's favourite, piratical raiding. This is a simple assessment. Whenever you set out from a cove you control or a neutral one, the wealth count begins. Whatever wealth you attain by force, not by trade or deals, is counted until you make port in a friendly cove again. It doesn't matter whether it's coin, goods, or slaves, the Framework assesses it all and assigns a value.

<Over five thousand Gold constitutes a Lesser act, forty thousand Gold for a Moderate act, two hundred thousand Gold for a Greater act and a cool million Gold for a Superior act.

<The numerate amongst you will have realised the higher raid amounts provide fewer weeks of grace in return

compared to the lower. I would direct your attention back to the limit on the number of acts you can bank. That means you can't use this to rack up weeks on the cheap.

<The only other way you might get additions to your grace period is from a dilemma reward, but as we established earlier, I only give them. I don't decide what's in them> the imp finished his info dump.

That was a lot for me to digest, but any cogitation on the path ahead of me would have to wait.

There was a sudden thunderous cracking sound that seemed to send every bird nesting in the Ionia recreation grounds into frightened flight.

All three of our heads whipped around to the source of the sound.

The dark crystalline cocoon had cracked apart and as we watched, the hard, black substance disintegrated and fell away to reveal my sleek and deadly Dungeon Ship beneath.

Chapter 18

My first impression would best be described as wow! Not the game, just the general expression of amazement.

What stood out immediately were the sleek black lines of the craft. The crystalline substance that formed the cocoon or something very similar appeared to have been used in the formation of my vessel. Unlike the cocoon, my new ship didn't glint in the sunlight, if anything the vessel seemed to absorb the light and refused to release it. I suppose I'd expected the ship to be made of wood, not whatever this material was.

The ship was maybe twelve metres long, a few metres longer than the river taxi had been, but a touch thinner than the five metres wide the taxi had been. The ship was all sharp lines and edges, not even remotely practical for real seaborne vessels, but then as it was powered by a dungeon core it probably didn't need to be.

The prow was narrowed and pointed.

Protruding from it at water level was a metre-long barbed spike. The stern of the ship similarly narrowed, though it wasn't quite as pointed and had several smaller spikes to deter other ships ramming it from behind. There was no sign of a rudder or other means of changing direction or propulsion.

The back third had a two-metre-high cabin with a flat roof and steps that led up on top, the design of which was more reminiscent of mediaeval ship construction than I'd

expected. The cabin roof was surrounded by a taffrail that matched the one which lined the lower portions of the deck.

There was no wheel to be seen, and the mast was about four metres back from the prow. The mast only extended three metres into the air and the sail wasn't made of cloth. It seemed to be a slightly more flexible version of the vaguely crystalline material the rest of the vessel was made of. Like the rest of the ship, the sails didn't seem to be genuinely made for sailing.

The entire ship was black like the sclera of my eyes apart from ice-blue frosting on the numerous edges of the hull which matched my own markings and irises. There was no flag or any symbols on the odd sails. At least, not yet.

As we watched, the ship started to move and dislodged itself from the sand bar.

The vessel slipped onto the Grand River smoothly and came to a full stop once it was clear of the dry-bed inlet. The hull sat unnaturally high on the river, not displacing as much water as you would expect, which was just as well as there didn't seem to be much hull before it became the taffrail. The hull was perhaps half a metre deep before the deck began and the taffrail a metre high.

Thankfully, we would only be on rivers and lakes for a while as any choppy seas would send water onto the deck very easily.

A partition in the taffrail appeared, extended a little, and then slid out of the way like a sliding glass door. A gangplank extended from this freshly created gap down to the sandbar.

We were being welcomed aboard.

“Shall we,” I exclaimed giddily.

Not that I waited for a response. I ran along the dried silt, confident of my footing after traversing it twice already and hopped over the standing water to the base of the black gangplank. I landed heavily in my exuberance but there was

remarkably little give from the plank which barely flexed from my weighted landing.

I stopped briefly before rushing up and examined the gangplank. The material was crystalline as I'd observed from the embankment, but my excellent eyesight informed me it wasn't smooth like ice. The texture was more akin to fine sandpaper, so you wouldn't slip or lose purchase even when it was doused in water.

With a big grin on my face, I raced up and onto the ship.

<Quest 'The Corsair's Canon 2' completed. 4,284 XP and Boots of the Bound awarded> Quixbix intoned formally as I stepped aboard.

I was followed on board swiftly by Jackson, with Shana only a few heartbeats behind him.

"This is frigging awesome," Jackson breathed heavily.

Our inspection of the new craft was interrupted by a slow clap coming from the direction of the cabin in the aft. The door had swung open silently after we boarded and out stepped the avatar of the dungeon, Anastasia Ruslanovna.

The short and curvy bombshell looked exactly the same as she had in the dungeon, still dressed in her sexy school-girl outfit with her long blonde hair tied in two bunches that rested over her shoulders. A fake smile was plastered on her lips as she came to a stop a few feet from my group.

"I do hope you find everything to your satisfaction, Maaaaster," she greeted me, her voice so filled with sarcasm I'm surprised we didn't hear it drip onto the deck.

Anastasia ensured that her rendition of the master honorific was particularly venomous.

"Anastasia, I told you before I don't intend for it to be that way," I reassured her, or I attempted to at any rate.

"Oh, really," Anastasia exclaimed with mock surprise. "Did you say that earlier? I must have forgotten in all the

excitement of you gifting me such a wonderful new accessory,” she sneered and hooked her finger under a thick black collar that encircled her neck. It had been obscured by her school tie. “That I can never fucking remove,” she screamed loudly.

Very loudly.

I grimaced.

The blasted Soul Collar. I couldn't believe that I'd forgotten about it or that it apparently had been fitted to Anastasia's avatar automatically.

Quixbix and I would have words later.

I analysed the item on her neck before I responded.

Soul Collar

An enhanced version of the Core Control Collar, available only to those who have selected Path of the Binder as their path to power.

The Soul Collar retains the functions of its lesser counterpart in that it allows the avatar of the Dungeon Core to leave the confines of the Dungeon if they are with their master and imposes complete subservience to their will.

Additionally, the Soul Collar provides the following.

The avatar gains inventory slots equivalent to the avatar's character class.

The avatar may leave the proximity of their master if following specific orders given by their master.

The avatar is attuned to their master's needs and wishes, providing insight on how to serve them better.

Once applied to a Dungeon Core the collar can't be destroyed or permanently removed.

Should the collar's owner die intestate then the collar can be obtained by any character strong enough to claim it as a prize

for dungeon completion, should they elect to do so.

Durability: Indestructible

If I hadn't been grimacing already, I would be now. No wonder Anastasia was pissed. I'd suggested I wouldn't treat her as a slave and everything about the collar yelled slavery.

"Anastasia, I'm sorry about the collar. You will have to take my word for it that I didn't know about its specific effects, apart from allowing you to leave the ship. Particularly, that you could never take it off," I explained patiently.

The small blonde simply scowled at me and tapped her foot on the deck angrily, her disbelief crystal clear.

Shana looked at me quizzically and I shared the item description with her through our bond.

"Oh!" she gasped in recognition.

"Yeah, oh," I said in response.

Jackson stayed quiet and wandered off to explore the prow, having grown used to half-conversations and details he couldn't see.

"Quixbix, you've been quiet," I huffed.

<Yes, I've been dreading this bit for over a day>
Quixbix replied glumly. <Can I say in my defence I never lied to you, but I acknowledge that I did deliberately leave out some information you would probably have preferred that I divulge.

<And I only did it because back then you were getting all antsy and moralistic about this kind of shit and I didn't want you to die because you turned down the opportunity of a lifetime>

"Oh, my God," Anastasia cried. "That has to be the worst fucking apology I've ever heard. And...I'm the fucking bitch you should be apologising to imp," she screeched to the heavens.

“Well, that answers the question of whether Anastasia and Quixbix can communicate,” I quipped to Shana.

“She’s not wrong, though,” Shana answered gravely.

I nodded my agreement. “Quixbix, apologise to Anastasia,” I ordered.

I waited for a moment and was about to speak again when Anastasia said. “That’ll do I suppose, but only barely.”

“For fuck’s sake. Quixbix, did you just exclude me when you apologised?” I snapped.

<Maybe> the imp hedged.

“I give up. Ana, will you show us the rest of the ship,” I asked her.

“Are you giving your pet a name, Master?” Anastasia snarked with an edge of malice.

“No, it was just an informal mode of address, and you don’t have to call me master,” I sighed wearily and tried to ease the tension between us.

“Why, thaaaank you, for your gracious permission, Cuntface,” she sassed cruelly.

Something snapped inside of me, it was a similar sensation I experienced when Shana had disobeyed me at Constance’s house, and I crossed the deck in less than a second. Anastasia, possibly through the bond, seemed aware that the mood had palpably changed and backed up against the cabin wall, her eyes wide.

I seized her chin firmly and forced her to meet my furious gaze.

“Do not push me, Anastasia. You may be unhappy with the turn of events, but you will show me respect. Your informality privileges are revoked. If master does not please you, sir or captain will suffice. If you manage to fix that sullen attitude, I may let you call me by my name in the future. Am I understood?” I growled down at the short blonde woman.

“Uh...yes...sir,” she stuttered through her shock.

“That’s better,” I said, releasing her chin and stepping back.

Jackson’s mouth was a little agape at my display and Shana, well, Shana looked turned on, but then she loved when I bossed it.

“Let’s see below then,” I suggested in a normal tone of voice.

Anastasia nodded and led me and the other two through the cabin door.

Inside the cabin was a corridor illuminated by softly glowing orbs slotted in the walls at head height every few feet. The corridor extended about five metres before it opened up at the end, with a double stairwell that led down under the deck that was visible. The spatial extension was subtle, but plain to see if you paid attention. The exterior cabin dimensions were half the length of the corridor, if that.

The width of the corridor was about a metre and a half, or six feet. That was unusual, I hadn’t been on many smaller boats, but I’d seen plenty on TV and they were usually compact. The interior was more like a cruise liner. Midway between the exit and the open area for the stairwells were two doors, opposite one another.

The most important detail, though, was that the interior of the vessel didn’t match the black crystalline exterior. The inside was more typical of what you would expect to see on a working ship below decks. The walls were made of polished dark brown wooden panels. Or they appeared that way at any rate.

Anastasia led us through and as she passed the doors, turned, stopped, and spoke. “As my dungeon is only level one, this is a Mark One Corsair Class ship, or so I’ve been told. As my dungeon gains in levels, so can this ship. Mark Two vessels are a little larger and have further options for armaments. You’ve seen the outside already. Inside, Mark One

vessels have two decks, imaginatively named upper and lower,” she snarked.

After a light chuckle from the three of us, Anastasia’s shoulders seemed to relax slightly, and she continued her tour guide spiel.

“This is the upper deck. It currently has two rooms, Navigation,” she pointed to the door on our left, “and the Captain’s Cabin,” and she tapped the door on the right.

As Anastasia did so both doors swung open, and we wandered around both and got a good look around. The Captain’s Cabin was like a decent-sized living room. It had a large oak table with a dozen chairs in the centre and the walls were surrounded by red upholstered benches. On the far side were clear windows that looked out onto the riverbank.

Which was a little odd as there were no visible windows when you viewed the ship’s exterior.

The Navigation room was smaller, but also had a table made from the same crystal as the ship covered in charts in its centre. The upper part of the walls in here were the same black crystalline substance the exterior was made from, and the walls displayed various maps of the area within the crystal, like a screen. I noticed one was of the southern half of Michigan with all the dungeon information I’d absorbed from my sense conveniently marked upon it.

Another appeared to be a marking of all the waterways with dots that I could see were moving. The legend on the side of this display listed what the dots were, and they were all low-threat creatures.

I pointed at that display. “I presume this means you have already interfaced with my spyglass.”

“Yes, as soon as you stepped on board,” Anastasia answered from outside the cabin.

“Good,” I replied. “What else is there?” I asked as we trooped out of Navigation.

“If you’ll follow me,” she requested and led us to the double stairwell at the end of the corridor.

You could go down from either side and we descended from the left which was the closer of the two sets of stairs, which meant we emerged on the right side. The next deck had a similar layout except the central corridor was double the width and about three times as long. At the far end was a single set of steps that led up.

“Here we have the lower deck,” Anastasia said as she walked ahead of us. “If you look behind you under the double stairwell you will see the distinctive shimmer in the air that is the entrance to my dungeon.”

I wandered over and joined Anastasia and beneath the stairs was a stone archway about two metres high and only a little less wide embedded in the wall under the stairs.

“Alright, so if we wanted to run your dungeon again, we would go in this way?” I asked.

“Yes...and no,” Anastasia replied hesitantly.

“I’m guessing there is more to it then,” I suggested.

“Hmmm, how best to phrase this without offending you,” she muttered unconvincingly. “Well, it’s like this. I’m not allowed to kill you as helpful as that would be to me, or anyone else covered by your soulbond or the Canon. Any energy I’d get for having you inside the dungeon is offset by the extra energy used to safeguard you. Therefore, you’d get no experience or rewards for completing the dungeon. And before you ask, you can’t order me to switch off the safeguards. The requirement is enforced by the Framework.

“Also, I have complete control of the ship, the portal to the dungeon doesn’t need to be where it is now, it can be moved. But under the stairs is conveniently out of the way.”

“Bugger,” I swore, more at the entry restrictions than its current placement. “Hang on. Quixbix, I thought dungeons only grew in level by having people run them, and well, die in them.”

<That is correct, Torin> the imp answered promptly.

“Well, if that’s the case, and my ship can only get larger and stronger if the dungeon which powers it levels. How do we do that if running the dungeon ourselves provides nothing? I’m sure you told me it was only Anastasia’s avatar that levelled with me and not the dungeon itself,” I queried aloud.

<Yes, that is an accurate summation, Torin. Dungeons can absorb ambient Mana from the atmosphere allowing them to level even without activity.>

I could tell he was hedging, which was confirmed by Anastasia’s acidic addition. “Ambient absorption is slow as shit, Quixbix. Even here on Earth, where I’m told the ambient levels are much higher, it will take ten years for me to become a level two dungeon. And it only gets slower after that, I might just reach level five, which would upgrade the ship to a Mark Two vessel, by the turn of the next millennium.”

Then the short blonde turned to me and there was a devilish twinkle in her eye. “You’re gonna have to feed me, sir,” she confided and chuckled darkly.

“Feed you?” I blurted dumbly, though I knew what she meant.

“Yes, sir. You need to feed me a steady diet of victims. Oops, did I say that out loud?” Anastasia covered the O of her mouth with her hand and then cackled wildly.

She had definitely recovered her earlier sass after our altercation.

“Is that correct, Quixbix?” I sighed.

<It’s not technically the only way, but it is the most efficient. ‘Character’ participation and their deaths are how dungeons grow in the wild. It is no different here. Spawned creatures can be forced in too, but they provide maybe a tenth of the energy that an equivalent level and graded person would supply. And only if the mob died, there is no participation benefit to be gained from them> he explained.

“I suppose I should have seen this one coming,” I groaned.

“Don’t look so glum, Captain,” Anastasia urged me. “The world is chock full of horrible fucking twats who thoroughly deserve being fed to a dungeon,” she cheered gaily.

“It won’t be long before people think we’re the horrible fucking twats,” I pointed out.

“Whatever,” Anastasia shrugged. “Chuck the Moaning Minnie’s in too, the more the merrier.”

“Were you always so...gleefully savage, Ana,” Shana chuckled at the inappropriately perky blonde.

“You mean when I was a person, before that weirdo who swears more than I do, turned me into a dungeon. Kinda. I was a rich bitch and absolutely revelled in it. I spent a lot of time in Cali, but Papa is Russian and was thick as thieves with the movers and shakers when the old guard fell in the nineties, and he made out like a bandit. Let’s just say I had an ‘Uncle’ Vladimir,” she winked at that. “We were loaded, with a capital L and probably didn’t deserve a rouble of it.”

“I didn’t care about that then, and I don’t really care about what or who I’ll be taking from now. But no, I wasn’t as savage. I didn’t kill people, but I suppose I hurt a lot of people in other ways, and that didn’t bother me either,” she shrugged.

“Your honesty is refreshing,” Shana managed, though she seemed a bit taken aback.

“Weirdo who swears a lot,” I commented. “Sounds like Dean, whom Shana and I have also had dealings with. So, he was the one who made you into a dungeon. Out of interest, why would you accept such an offer? Or did you not have a choice?”

Although I was eager to get on and see the rest of the ship, I didn’t want to waste an opportunity to learn more about Anastasia while she was in a sharing kind of mood.

“I had a choice, but not much of one,” she related and stuck her tongue out while rolling her eyes heavenwards. “I was twenty thousand feet over the Pacific in a broken aircraft plummeting towards the ocean where we would have been smashed into tiny little pieces. If by some miracle I survived the crash, I’d have drowned or died of hypothermia.

“And then all of a sudden, I was in an open plan office with a bunch of other girls, who all looked like models, and the aforementioned weirdo. He told us about the Framework and that we were all in situations where we faced certain death. That becoming a dungeon was the only option that would remove me from the plummeting plane and put me somewhere safe. I said yes, and you know the rest.”

“All of the other women were attractive, yes?” Shana questioned Anastasia further when she was done, her brows furrowed in thought.

“Hmmm, what? Yes, definitely,” Anastasia clarified. “What of it?”

Instead of answering Anastasia, Shana pressed her further. “Do you know what happened to the other girls?”

“I’m not sure, they weren’t handling things very well and after I said yes, it was just me and the weirdo for a minute before I awakened as a Core. I don’t know what happened to them after that,” Anastasia said and looked a bit confused.

Shana tutted at Ana’s answer, ground her teeth, and sighed audibly.

“What are you thinking, Shana? What’s got you so perturbed?” I prodded.

“Torin, I’m thinking there are no coincidences where Dean is concerned,” she said and started to count points off on her slender fingers. “He summons a group of *only* pretty women in deadly circumstances. Makes an offer that can’t be refused to become a dungeon. Puts this brand new, very high potential dungeon, within the range of your dungeon sense.

And then tells you that you need to claim a core as fast as possible. You know what I'm thinking."

"Oh, that fucking asshole, he did it again," I snapped.

"Did what?" Anastasia and Jackson asked simultaneously.

"Led me around by my fucking nose," I snarled. "He dangled your dungeon in front of me like a tasty treat knowing I would gobble it up but didn't fucking trust me enough to tell me he'd arranged it all in the first place and let me decide if claiming a former person was something I wanted to do."

"Uh, so you wouldn't have enslaved me if you knew beforehand, because that's not the impression I got from you a few hours ago," Anastasia remarked scornfully. "...sir," followed on as an afterthought.

I glowered at her, and she mouthed the word sorry, but she certainly didn't look it. "No, it wouldn't have changed anything. You were, and still are the best option for all of us to survive."

"Errr..." Jackson squeaked and asked nervously. "If you wouldn't have done anything differently, why are you so angry?"

"I do not appreciate being manipulated," I growled.

<Playing Devil's Advocate, I feel I should point out that Dean did this before what happened with Shana's character upgrade, so technically, he didn't do it again>
Quixbix interjected.

"Not helping, Quix," I yelled and slammed my fist into the wooden panelling of the wall.

The physical expression of my rage didn't hurt as it should have but failed to help either.

"Well..." Anastasia said and drew out the word. "You break it, you bought it," she quipped and continued. "Shall we finish the tour?"

My glower refocused on Anastasia.

“What?” Anastasia whined and shrugged her shoulders again. “I’d be lying if I said I was particularly sympathetic to your plight given our very recent history.”

I took a deep breath, she wasn’t wrong, but I’d need to find a way to make the dynamic between us work. She was far too flippant and disrespectful, in private that could be tolerated, maybe, but when we had a full crew, it would be unacceptable.

To be honest, her bolshy attitude would probably have already undermined Jackson’s opinion of my authority, if he hadn’t been so overwhelmed by events.

The Canon gave me a measure of protection, but only if I were strong and commanded the respect of those who signed it. Letting this fester would simply be an overly long suicide attempt.

“Yes, let us finish,” I said instead, but my mind was turning over options on how to dela with this.

“Okay, to be fair there isn’t much more to see,” Anastasia remarked. “On the right, you have the Cargo Hold which is empty, the Galley, which apart from cooking stations is also empty, and the Mess, which is a bunch of benches and tables, thrilling eh?”

“On the left, we have the Captain’s quarters which has a big fancy bed for you, sir. The Crew Quarters, which has a lot of very unfancy bunk beds, enough for forty crew. And the Brig, which has a variety of different sized cells and cages. You could fit a hundred prisoners in there, two hundred if you squeezed them in.

“Finally, you can see there is a secondary set of stairs to the prow of the ship, it exits through a hatch which can only be opened from this deck and can’t be opened from the outside,” she finished.

We performed a quick reccy of the lower deck once Anastasia was done. The rooms were nondescript for the most

part. The galley was devoted to some basic cooking implements and several stoves. It connected directly with the mess which as described was a large room with plain wooden tables and benches.

The Cargo Hold was the largest of the rooms and resembled an empty wine cellar with multiple shelves waiting for us to load our booty. While we were in here, Shana disgorged the excess from her inventory, and we stored it away.

The bunks in the crew quarters proved to be quite comfy, or so Jackson informed us. He would have the room to himself for the time being, Shana would be staying with me.

When we got to the Brig, Anastasia had more to say than usual. “Just so you know, because this ship is special, every part of it has what you could call an interference field. This field prevents people, not signed to the Canon or granted permission, from accessing their spatial inventory. Either to retrieve things or to put them away.”

“The cells in the Brig go a few steps farther. Anyone you put inside will automatically have their inventory contents emptied into the Cargo Hold. Also, you get a large buff on social actions against those in the cells. Useful for commands, like back away from the door or put your hands out to be cuffed and keeping the prisoners compliant. It would help for interrogation or coercion too.”

“Each cell has an alert bulb in red above it, see,” she said and pointed to a small red glass dome above the cell doors. “If your attempts at a social action fails the red light will come on. It’s not foolproof, though. Someone with a high enough Willpower and Charisma can beat your checks *and* not trigger the alert. As the ship advances both the buff and sensitivity of the alert improve.”

“Good to know,” I said.

We didn’t spend much more time in the Brig, just long enough to confirm the cells were sturdy, effective, and unlike

standard movie fare, blessedly clean.

All the rooms, including the cells, came with toiletry facilities which was also a relief. Although the toilets in the Brig cells were as basic as can be.

That left only the Captain's Quarters, my quarters. It was an expansive room indeed, as large as the Crew Quarters which was meant for forty. The floor was carpeted in a thick, dark green rug. The far side had windows looking out onto the river through the crystalline hull.

The bed placed on the left of the room when you walked in was grandiosely enormous. Big enough for a dozen to sleep comfortably without elbowing one another, it wasn't a four-poster, but an eight-poster, with navy velvet drapes and black silk sheets. Off on the right were a series of antechambers which included a dressing room and ensuite bathing facilities.

The entire room was needlessly excessive, and I loved it.

I had an unmistakable big grin on my face as we completed our initial inspection.

We had left Jackson to get settled in his quarters. "How easy is it to make changes to the room?" I asked Anastasia.

"Depends how big a change you're after," she answered. "Any alterations require me to expend some of my stored energy, if you wish to save it for important uses it would be best not to blow it frivolously...sir," she lectured dismissively.

It was high time to shock the cheeky minx a little.

"Good, I want you to add a series of pillories at the end of the bed. We also need sets of rings for securing collars and cuffs on the headboard, the posts, and the new pillories as well while you're at it. I trust that won't tax your reserves overmuch?" I commanded.

Anastasia gaped at my unexpected demands, speechless for the first time since I'd met her. She shook her head "um...right you are, sir," then she blinked, the pillories and rings grew from the bed as requested.

Shana skipped over to the bed and tested out the rings by pulling them on.

"Hmmm, nice and sturdy," she sighed wistfully and smiled widely.

I grinned and decided Ana's lesson wasn't done.

"Can we lock the room and ensure privacy?" I asked Anastasia.

She nodded, suddenly far less sure of herself.

"Excellent, do so," I ordered.

While Anastasia went and closed the cabin door, I picked up a stool that had been under a dresser in the corner and plonked it down at the end of the bed and sat down and rested my back against the pillories. Shana crawled onto the silk sheets of the bed and lay behind me.

Anastasia looked back at me sitting there calmly and I crooked my finger at her. She trudged over to me reluctantly, every inch the naughty schoolgirl she looked like.

When she stopped in front of me, I left her to stand there for a full minute. When she tried to speak, I shushed her and spoke "I have been very accommodating and understanding with you Ana and need not have been. I could have treated you like a thing to be used and not a person. And how have you repaid my kindness? Why with disrespect and mockery."

Anastasia's trepidation faded and was replaced with a cross glare at my words but when she opened her mouth to retort I tried something new. I exerted my will mentally and silenced her. The experiment worked and Anastasia was prevented from unleashing her vituperative tongue.

“Perhaps this is my fault, maybe I was too lenient with you and should have cracked the whip as soon as I stepped aboard. No matter, we shall rectify that oversight now, before the rot has a chance to take hold,” I informed her.

“Huh? Wh...What do you mean,” she stuttered worriedly when I released my mental hold on her vocal chords.

“You’ve been a naughty girl. What do you think happens to naughty girls?” I teased and raised my palm out a foot or so above my knees.

Anastasia just blinked and then looked about her wildly.

“Naughty girls get spanked,” Shana crowed in a sing-song voice from the bed, correctly interpreting my gesture.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Anastasia gasped.

I answered her with a small shake of the head and a shit-eating grin.

“Bojemoi,” she muttered.

I snapped my fingers then. “Assume the penitent position over my knees and flip your skirt up and out of the way,” I commanded and inserted the power of our bond to ensure her compliance.

Anastasia jumped at my orders and skipped over speedily, if not willingly. She lay down belly first on my lap and lifted her skirt up and onto her back as instructed. She had red silk panties on, and I grinned at her choice of underwear.

My mind raced in several erotic directions, but today’s demonstration was strictly educational and not sexual, so I resisted any such temptations.

“Good. Now, I assume you have some measure of control over the pain your avatar feels?” I asked carefully.

“Yes, sir,” Anastasia replied in a small, uncertain voice.

“Then, before we begin, I order you to feel every part of what happens to you fully, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she sighed with regret.

Anastasia had obviously hoped I wouldn't be aware or think of the possibility that she could mute the discomfort from corporal punishment.

“How many do you think, Shana?”

“Hmmm, I think ten, on each cheek, for her first time, sir,” Shana answered after a moment's thought.

I felt rather than heard Anastasia's relief at her answer.

“You've never been spanked or disciplined in any way have you, Ana?” I spoke offhandedly to the squirming blonde in my lap.

Anastasia muttered inaudibly under her breath and shrieked loudly as my hand swept down forcefully and smacked her right butt cheek loudly.

“I asked you a question, Ana,” I said sternly.

“N...No, sir. I haven't,” she stammered miserably.

“I thought not,” I commented as my hand swept down and smacked her left butt cheek hard, which elicited a second wail of misery. “And for the record, those two smacks were for your tardiness in responding to my inquiry. You still have ten for each cheek awaiting you for your earlier disrespect. Although I think you now have a better idea that Shana's suggestion wasn't her going easy on you, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” she sobbed slightly.

Her answer was punctuated by the sound of palm smacking flesh as I started spanking her with a steady rhythm. After the first couple, Anastasia bucked and tried to pull away. Rather than order her to stop squirming, I put my other hand on the small of her back and held her in place. Based on what she had said of her life, I seriously doubted she had ever been

treated in such a fashion before and Anastasia speedily descended into a full-on flood of tears and weeping.

Despite her reaction, Anastasia's punishment detail was over quite quickly. I hadn't spared the force of my smacks and my own palm stung smartly; no wonder some people used paddles for their BDSM play.

If this didn't modify her attitude sufficiently and was to become a regular occurrence, I'd need to get one. I lifted her from my lap and stood her up in front of me and she rubbed her reddened and sore posterior.

"You may allow that to heal naturally, but needless to say you are forbidden to speed up the process without my permission," I told her. "Now what do you say?"

Anastasia stared at me cluelessly through her puffy tear-stained cheeks. "Erm...sorry?" she managed after a brief pause.

Shana rolled off the bed at her answer and stalked behind the short, curvy, blonde woman and smacked her butt sharply with her own open palm. Anastasia jumped at the unexpected contact and held her smarting rump with a cry.

"Ow, what the fuck was that for?" she screeched.

Shana's actions had surprised me as much as Anastasia, but I decided to see where this went and remained stoically silent.

"You thank the captain for his discipline, girl," Shana commanded the smaller woman imperiously. "And you thank him for his generosity."

"His generosity!" Anastasia shouted indignantly, while still rubbing her sore behind.

"Yes, his generosity. He used his hand and not the strap that disobedient wretches deserve," Shana punctuated her words with another smack to Anastasia's butt. "And that he chose to make your disciplining a private affair, had it been up

to me you would have been flogged publicly on the deck for all to see.”

I couldn't help but grin evilly. Shana was really getting into the Corsair way of thinking, and I heartily approved.

Anastasia's eyes widened at that. “You wouldn't,” she gasped.

“He can and he will. Now, do I need to strike you again?” Shana asked with her palm raised once more.

“No,” Anastasia squeaked, and she turned to me. “Thank you, sir, for my discipline and thank you for keeping it a private affair,” she gushed quickly.

“That was barely satisfactory,” Shana remarked. “But it will do.”

I stood at that, reached out and gently took hold of Anastasia's chin. “Ana, prepare the ship for sailing. We will join you in Navigation shortly.”

Anastasia bobbed her head and swiftly exited my quarters at the dismissal, closing the door behind her as she went.

“Well, I hadn't expected that from you,” I commented to Shana once the door clicked closed.

“Why? Because I like a strong man to domineer me in bed? You don't know everything about me, Torin. I'm kind of a switch, as you probably just saw,” Shana explained.

“Yes, well, just so we're both on the same page, I'm very much not,” I clarified. “A switch that is.”

Shana laughed gaily at my clarification. “I didn't think you were, sir,” she breathed heavily. “Besides, I only like to get bossy with other girls.”

Her pupils had dilated, and she licked her lips prettily. My eyebrows quirked at the ‘other girls’ comment. Anastasia had said something similar in the dungeon. Let's just say I was

very interested in finding out just how true those sentiments were.

But not right now, it was too soon to press Ana on that score.

However, the subject of sexy time had been broached and here we were in relative safety and privacy. Oh, and is that a huge fucking bed with black silk sheets right behind me?

Why, yes, Torin, yes it is.

I stepped in close to the dark-haired woman in front of me and tsked. “Unfortunately, I don’t recall giving you permission to behave in such a forward manner.”

Shana bit her lower lip. “No, sir. You did not,” she responded meekly.

“As I thought. Well, that makes you a very naughty girl and what happens to naughty girls?” I asked, echoing my earlier question to Anastasia as I brushed her hair past her elongated elven ear and tickled it softly.

Shana shuddered at the soft touch and squeaked. “They...they get spanked.”

“Indeed, but for your punishment, I think we will require the additional humiliation of stripping you bare and after that, you will have to make it up to your captain,” I informed her.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way, sir,” she sighed, and disrobed in front of me, much to my delight.

Explicit Interlude 1.2

(This mini chapter contains explicit sexual content. If that's not to your reading taste you can skip on to the next chapter without missing any story elements)

Shana stood before me, one knee crooked, and blinked her brown eyes coquettishly. Her large nipples were already pert and engorged, and she tweaked them both, hard. Blood rushed to my rod and my trousers became constricting and uncomfortable.

I shoved the stool I'd been sitting on with Anastasia out of the way and turned to the end of the bed. The eight-poster was so large that it had six sets of pillories at the end, two in each gap between the four posts at the foot of the bed. You could lift the upper bar from the centre and the hinges of the side-by-side pillories abutted the opposing posts.

“It would be a shame not to make use of these,” I said and patted one of the central pillories. “Since Anastasia went to all the trouble of putting them in.”

Shana's eyes widened with joy, and she practically skipped as she rushed over to join me.

I lifted the upper bar of one of the central pillories. They had three holes, the larger middle one to place the neck in and two smaller, about a foot on either side, for the wrists.

They could be used as stocks by putting the ankles in from the bedside if you chose, and I noted that the pillories were attached to the bedposts by circlets that could be loosened. Thus, allowing you to elevate the pillory from the mattress if you wished. This would force the penitent to stand straight on the floor or you could use it as a pillory from the bedside, with the penitent kneeling or standing upon the mattress.

The pillories were made from the same strangely malleable crystalline material the rest of the ship and bed were built from. I ran my finger along the edges of the divot for the head and confirmed it was firm, but soft, and wouldn't cut or abrade the flesh of those locked in them.

Shana didn't need an order before she leant down and placed her neck and wrists in the semi-circular depressions. I brushed her long, dark hair out of the way and lowered the bar and locked it in place. The pillory fit snugly around her graceful neck, and she groaned with lust.

With Shana being as tall as she was, her ass wiggled invitingly in the air, above the height where her head and wrists had been locked.

I decided not to alter the height of the pillory, we only had time for a short session, but would have to do so for lengthier playtimes in the future.

"I want you to keep your legs straight, do you hear," I commanded.

"Yes, sir," she responded, and shuffled her feet a few inches further forward to help keep her legs locked in position and her posterior on display.

I walked around her and inspected what was before me, caressing the small of her back and supple ass as I did.

Shana shivered with pleasure in response.

The position of her butt exposed her folds fully and they were moist with anticipatory precum. I let my fingers brush her lady lips teasingly.

“Unnghh!” she moaned gutturally.

“You’re a needy one, aren’t you,” I whispered.

“Yes, sir,” she breathed. “Your soulbound slut needs her punishment.”

“My, my. You’d almost think you misbehaved on purpose,” I tsked.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. But I need it so baaaad,” she whimpered.

“That is not how this works, Shana,” I scolded her with mock sternness.

Then I slowly disrobed, as my clothing was getting in the way, and retrieved the stool. I put it down a few feet behind the pilloried shadowborn elf and sat down quietly, saying nothing more.

“Sir?” Shana pled after a minute had passed.

I said and did nothing, just gloried in the view of her needy, quivering, pussy.

Another minute passed and Shana began to fidget, she kept her legs straight, as ordered, but tried to crane her neck and look behind her. Sadly, the pillory prevented her from seeing anything directly to the rear, like me.

I said and did nothing but watch.

“Sir, please...sir, I’m sorry,” she whined after another minute.

Shana was almost jumping on the spot, she lifted her ass further into the air as she went up on tiptoes, my silence and inaction driving her wild.

Then her begging truly started in earnest.

I let that go on for a full five minutes, by which point I’d reached my own breaking point. If I wanted to punish her like this again in the future, I would need to find a way to slip

out unheard and unseen, as watching her lithe, naked, body writhe before me was far too tempting.

I rose quietly.

Shana had descended into needy sobbing, whimpering, and pleading for my touch into the black silk sheets.

Without speaking my palm whipped down and smacked her butt cheek on the right and then slapped the left cheek in the same manner.

Shana squealed with both delight and pleasure. “Thank you, sir. Thank you. May I have some more? Your disobedient chattel begs to be punished for her sins.”

Well, if she was going to beg so eloquently, who was I to deny her?

My hand rose and fell on her backside in a steady beat. I changed up my strike pattern with each smack, making sure to redden up the whole of her ass and the sensitive upper thigh areas. The last few smacks were reserved for her pussy lips which dripped her tangy nectar between her legs.

Once I’d finished, I let my fingers rub over her pussy, collecting her juices, which I sucked from my fingers.

She tasted delectable.

“I hope I have made myself clear, Shana? Others might be willing to indulge their submissives playing games to fulfil their own craving for discipline, but I will not,” I finally spoke.

“Yes, sir. Crystal clear, you will brook no disobedience, of any kind, and punish me accordingly,” she gasped penitently.

Her gasp was in part due to the three fingers I thrust past her sodden labia without warning.

“Worry not, my pet,” I crooned soothingly as her ass wiggled in the air while I played with her vagina and thumbed her clit with my other hand. “You will not lack for discipline.

You can rest assured that I will see to that properly, and regularly, at my convenience.”

“Yessss,” she wailed as my double-action brought her to a shuddering climax.

“Now, I’m going to use this wet pussy for my pleasure,” I barked and withdrew my fingers.

“Oh, fuck yes, yes please, sir,” Shana begged. “Fill me with that massive cock and plant your seed deep in my wanton cunny.”

Her dirty talk was a huge fucking turn on.

I gave Shana’s bottom another quick smack and left my hand in place to manoeuvre her and gripped the base of my hard erect shaft in my right hand. The glans of my cock was swollen and almost purple with blood as I lined it up to her well-lubricated gash.

And then I thrust forward forcefully, separating her vaginal walls, and slamming my long, thick dick deep inside her.

Shana moaned loudly as I plunged to the base of my member. I had to shuffle forward a little to get into a comfortable stance and she wriggled against my sheathed shaft pleasantly. I grabbed hold of both her hips firmly and started to pump in and out of her silken hole.

I wouldn’t say I started slowly at first, but I didn’t pound her pussy as hard and as fast as I could to begin with. This allowed me a little room to build up towards a crescendo.

“Does...my...pussssy...please...yooooou...sir,” Shana squealed between half a dozen of my rapid-beat thrusts.

“Fuck, yes,” I grunted over the sloppy wet slaps of my balls and thighs on her peachy ass and swollen clit. “You have a perfect little pussy, taut and tight like a virgin, but you squeeze my cock so well, like a goddamn fucking sex goddess,” I roared.

Then I slid a hand up her trim figure and fondled her tit, teasing and tweaking her nipples, which in turn triggered another orgasm in Shana. Her pussy clenched my cock tighter and more tangy fluid gushed forth, which dribbled onto my thighs and the carpet beneath.

Anastasia would have one hell of a cleaning job to do after we were done.

Thinking of the diminutive blonde, I couldn't help but imagine her here with us. It would be fucking epic to be back like this, Shana in the pillory, me ploughing her fertile furrows furiously with Ana underneath sucking on Shana's swinging tits and fingering her clit.

Then after I'd cum and filled Shana, swap them over and do it all again.

The imagery was enough to erode my patience and the aching flex in my iron rod began building to breaking point. My hand returned to Shana's hip and my pace went into maximum overdrive.

"Get ready, girl. I'm going to paint your womb cream," I warned Shana, though if her wordless screams were anything to go by, she didn't need it.

Then with one last deep powerful thrust I pushed right up against her cervix, my balls spasmed and with a mindless roar, my cum jetted up my shaft and poured into her wanting womb.

"By the Goddess of the Dark, fuck me full of your strong seed," Shana moaned and rammed her hips up against me so hard I'm sure my cockhead breached her feminine barriers.

I held her in place until my testicles had disgorged their contents in full, and then held her like that for a few minutes longer as we panted and gasped, both unable to speak.

Until Quixbix chose to puncture the post-coital cooldown good mood. <Well, that was intense. I don't think

I've ever seen anyone actually take someone's Hit Points with their cock before, but I have now.>

As unwelcome as the comment was, it did spur me into action. I pulled my member from Shana's vagina; it had lost a little of its firmness but none of its size.

A deluge of our comingled juices poured from her well fucked entrance and onto the green carpet. I quickly unlatched the pillory bar and lifted it, freeing her.

I picked her up and laid her on the bed. "Are you alright? I didn't hurt you too badly at the end, did I?" I asked with genuine concern.

Shana giggled and answered by lifting her lips to mine. We kissed passionately then as I devoured her lips, mouth, and tongue.

"I think I did the damage myself when I pushed back at the end," she whispered breathlessly as our lips parted. "But it was only a few points, I'll be good as new in a few minutes," she assured me.

"Good, you had me worried there for a second," I said, and planted another sloppy kiss on her lips.

"Sorry, Torin. I didn't mean to worry you. I don't know what came over me, it was very primal, I felt a deep undeniable need to have you impregnate me," Shana confessed.

"As long as you are okay, that's all that matters," I replied and brushed her hair behind her long ears.

Shana shivered as I feathered her sensitive lobes. "Do you...Do you think...I mean we haven't used any protection...maybe...you know...maybe you have put a baby in me," she stammered and looked up at me, hope and concern warring in her eyes.

<No need to worry Shana, he hasn't knocked you up. The pair of you aren't compatible for breeding> Quixbix interjected unhelpfully.

There was such a look of loss and despair on Shana's face at Quixbix callous reply I would have slapped him silly if there were a way to separate us.

“What the insensitive asshat means, is that we aren't compatible *yet*, not that we aren't compatible ever,” I growled.

<Well, d'uh, of course, that's what I meant. All Darkwyrld characters can breed with one another given enough time. Everybody knows that> the imp huffed.

“No, not everybody knows that, you dick,” I muttered at the imp. “Dean explained it to me, kind of. The Framework requires higher-tiered species to build a physical bond with potential mates before conception is possible,” I explained. “Good news, you build that bond by boinking as often as possible, so we have that to look forward to,” I joked to inject some levity. “Dean suggested it would require a few hundred intimate moments, so you should be receptive to me in a few months.”

My attempt worked and Shana smiled coyly at me. “Maybe we should go again, help speed up the process,” she suggested. “As long as that's what you want, of course,” she added with a worried frown.

“If you had asked me that last week you would have had a very different answer,” I smiled. “Now, whenever I see this trim and beautiful flat waist,” I said, and trailed my fingers across her stomach. “All I can think about is seeing it swell with my child. And all the fun ways of making that happen.”

Shana squealed happily and we kissed deeply for a few minutes longer. Long enough that I'd been sorely tempted to take her up on the offer to go again.

But we needed to get the ship sailing before we gave into our baser urges again, so I broke our kiss instead.

“Come on, we need to get dressed, Ana and Jackson will be waiting for us in Navigation,” I said.

“It's about time you remembered us,” Anastasia's voice echoed across the room, surprising us both.

Chapter 19

“It’s about time you remembered us,” Anastasia’s voice echoed across the room, surprising us both on the bed.

Shana and I scrambled off and began to dress quickly. “Have you been spying on us?” I muttered angrily to Anastasia’s disembodied voice.

“No,” she responded, a hint of her sass having returned in the intervening half hour or so since her punishment. “I think you’ve forgotten that I’m not just this avatar or my core crystal for that matter. Essentially, I’m the whole ship and I’m peripherally aware of everything that happens within it.”

“Huhngh,” I grunted. “Okay, maybe you weren’t spying but you were watching, weren’t you Ana,” I teased, regaining my good humour.

Then from the corner of my eye I could swear that the dark crystal the bed was made from flickered an almost imperceptibly deeper black. Whoa, was that my imagination or did the ship just blush? It would seem my teasing hit an apropos mark.

“We’ll be with you momentarily. And Ana,” I called. “You better be wearing your marks.”

“Yes, Captain. I am,” Anastasia drawled.

As contradictory as it may sound, I could hear the eye-roll in her voice.

Her first round of punishment may have encouraged her to address me correctly but there was plenty more work to do on her general attitude.

This train of thought caused me to halt in my tracks and Shana passed me and stopped too. “Are you alright Torin?” She asked.

I was fine, physically.

I’d just been knocked off-kilter in my head. Thinking about adjusting Ana’s attitude after I’d effectively enslaved her made it crystal clear how much I’d changed.

When had I become so accepting of my new role and why didn’t that bother me more? Admittedly, I hadn’t planned on being cruel or to abuse my position of authority over Anastasia, nor Shana for that matter, but I was still a world away from the ethics of the modern era.

A shiver ran down my spine, doubts surfaced, and as quickly plunged back beneath the waters of my psyche. For a brief moment there was turmoil, a corner of my mind that fought, kicked, and screamed against the changes now it was acutely aware of them.

The battle had been underway quietly for some time but was now well and truly out of the shadows.

That corner declared loudly and proudly it would not be convinced by any argument, it was immovable and immutable. We were a decent human being and would stay that way, forever.

Up until that sliver was confronted with the reality that the Acheronian Corsair portions wouldn’t try to purge or argue with it. That it would simply be locked away, alone, unwanted, and most of all ignored.

Left to wither in the dark recesses of the void.

At which point the human corner of my former self metaphorically looked around at its isolated position, didn’t care for what it saw and decided ‘fuck it, the modern world is

dead and so are its precious ethics, I'm all in with you guys. Let's fuck some shit up.'

I grinned like a Cheshire Cat. "I'm fine," I told her. "Actually, I'm better than fine. I'm fan-fucking-tastic. You could say I almost feel like a new man."

Shana grinned quizzically at my odd behaviour, and I took her arm in mine and led her out of the captain's quarters and into the lower deck corridor.

I could have explained my internal battle of wills, but now that the outcome was decided I didn't really see the point. Dean had been right again; I had quickly adjusted to being an Acheronian and a Dungeon Corsair Captain.

There were a few plumes of forgiveness thawing my discontent at the manipulative ass.

Plus, though he may have pushed me down this road, I was generally happy with where it had led. And Dean would be a valuable resource on my path to glory and power.

Perhaps it was time I returned the favour and used him to further my ends.

<That's the spirit, Torin> Quixbix whispered.

Somehow, I knew instinctively that he had spoken only to me. **You know I don't like it when you pull that creepy mind-reading crap.**

<As I'm sure you recall I've already told you, I can't read your mind. I merely detected you relaxing through your body chemistry now that your internal conflict is resolved and further extrapolated where your direction of thought would have flowed as your blood was flooded by satisfaction endorphins> he explained and then continued.

<Anyway, now that you've pushed the broody morass of moral handwringing to the wayside, where it belongs. I have another quest for you, which may influence your decision on our destination.>

For the record, I may be more comfortable in my new skin, but I've not become a deplorable monster. There are still plenty of things I'm unwilling to do, I just won't sweat the stuff I choose to do, I clarified for the imp.

<That's all I ask for. And now for the quest> he responded.

**** The Corsair's Canon 4 (K)*

You have your ship, you even have the beginnings of a crew, what next? Every pirate needs a cove. A friendly port to call home or store their ill-got gains or drink, whore, and gamble. While any neutral venue will do for your run of the mill pirate, a Captain needs more. A cove that is unquestionably their own.

Success: Found or convert a coastal settlement into a Lawless Pirate Cove with you as the undisputed leader.

Rewards: 3,400 XP, and future The Corsair's Canon quests and a new secondary quest chain.

Cuirass of the Bound.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

I'd somewhat expected a quest like this following my discussions with Quixbix earlier about qualifying acts of piracy.

The walk back up to the upper deck and to the Navigation hub was a short one and soon we were inside. Anastasia stood scowling at the central crystal table with a chart of Michigan displayed upon it. Jackson had been sitting in the corner and stood up when we entered, and I nodded to him.

"Captain," Jackson nodded in return.

“Captain,” Anastasia muttered impatiently after Jackson.

“At ease,” I joked, sort of, and motioned for Jackson to sit back down.

“So, did you have a destination in mind? ...sir,” Anastasia requested with a delayed honorific.

“I have a new quest to establish a cove for our piratical enterprise, a cove that I control. This necessitates the settlement being a port of some kind,” I related as we joined Anastasia at the central table.

“A pirate cove?” Anastasia queried. “Does this mean you want me to sail us to the sea? That can be done, to the Atlantic at least. The Grand River leads into Lake Michigan and then we can travel on through Lakes Huron, Erie, and Ontario and down the St. Lawrence River past Montreal and Quebec and then out into the ocean.”

Anastasia displayed the route on the map on the central table. “There are a bunch of canals connecting some of the lakes with locks that might be a bit tricky if the locks are no longer operating, but nothing I can’t circumnavigate with a bit of Dungeon energy.”

“Thank you for the suggestion, Ana. However, I was thinking of trying somewhere a bit closer to home first,” I said and then jabbed my finger on the map.

The place I pointed out was an island in the North of Lake Michigan, Beaver Island.

I’d been considering setting up shop in this area for the last few days and Quixbix quest had convinced me it was the correct course of action. The island was large and had been inhabited, unlike most of the smaller islands that made up the rest of the archipelago.

I knew a bit about the place as one of my college football teammates had invited a bunch of us to party with him there at the end of our freshmen year. I’d toyed with idea long enough to look the place up on the net, but then secured a

summer job, which I needed, and they insisted I be available during the same time frame. Therefore, I never ended up going, but knew a bit about the place.

Jackson hopped up from his seat and took up a position on an empty side of the table to see what we were looking at.

“Beaver Island,” I started to explain. “Would be a good place for us to look at as a possible place to establish my first cove.”

Anastasia helpfully magnified the map and zeroed in on the island. What we had before us was far more detailed than the paper maps I’d been studying and working from. Using my fingers on the crystal screen, which it only now twigged with me seemed to be a similar substance that the podiums were constructed from. I magnified the map further and moved the focus to the Northeast of the island which had a bay and a promontory shaped like a hook.

“As you can see, there is a small town here big enough to qualify as a hamlet if I’m not mistaken,” I stated.

<That is correct, Torin> Quixbix filled in.

“But apart from that the rest of the island, especially the Southern half, is almost uninhabited. Just a few isolated summer homes and two small airports for single prop planes. The population is likely to be higher on the island than usual due to it being summer, but I’d estimate fewer than three thousand people even with a plethora of holidaymakers, on the whole island.

“This is why I think this place will be perfect. It already has infrastructure we can make use of, but it’s still at least thirty-odd miles from the shore. The only places nearby are other islands with little or no signs of habitation. People can only get to us if they can traverse the lake, and I doubt there are many who will have the kind of transport we have,” I finished.

“Do you think seizing control of a place is the best idea?” Jackson queried my plan doubtfully. “There are only

four of us. Maybe it would be easier to start a new community on one of these smaller islands,” he suggested, pointing to North Manitou Island which was a little further south.

“Maybe, but do you know how to do that? Because I don’t, but I’m willing to bet the requirements include having more than four people,” I argued back.

<It does> Quixbix confirmed, not that Jackson could hear him.

“Okay, I get that, but what about the people? They aren’t likely to just let you claim ownership of the town,” Jackson countered.

I addressed Anastasia instead. “Ana, how long will it take to get us to Beaver Island?”

“That depends on how much Dungeon energy you wish me to spend getting us there,” she explained. “If you want me to conserve it, then I need to sail slower, particularly in the river with its shallows and turns. The more I intervene unnaturally the more it costs.”

“Okay, assume maximum conservation, how long?”

“Fourteen hours, give or take. We’d get there a couple of hours after dawn if we left now,” Anastasia replied.

“Excellent, I wouldn’t want to approach in the dark anyway. Set the course and get us under way,” I ordered.

Anastasia nodded and then we all felt a slight shift as we started to move, but it was barely noticeable, enough to make it clear we were in motion, but it lacked the usual rocking that usually accompanied being on a boat.

“Ummm,” Jackson mumbled. “You didn’t say anything about the people.”

“No, I didn’t. It shouldn’t matter, Jackson. If they are in our way then they will either capitulate or we make them,” I said firmly.

Shana nodded her acceptance, but Jackson looked a little green and not from motion sickness.

“But if you want the cold hard truth, Jackson. I seriously doubt we are going to meet much, if any, resistance from the populace. Primarily because I have my doubts that there are many people left alive on Beaver Island to resist.”

“What do you mean?” Jackson gulped.

“I mean it is literally miles from any kind of significant population, apart from what is on the island itself. There are going to be many spawning crystals and therefore monsters all over those islands. That is what we need to be concerned about,” I warned.

“Torin is right,” Shana added. “We came across a number of homes that had been invaded and torn apart on the way here, even near Flint. Do you not recall that Kelly and Tommy suspected some of your friends had already been killed by spawned mobs?”

“And things were getting worse with each day that passed. With another day until we get to the island any survivors will be in hiding or will have fled in whatever non-motorised boats they had access to.”

“I guess you’re right,” Jackson conceded.

“We are, but that isn’t the point I’m making, Jackson,” I said, taking up the baton. “It’s them or us, and I’m backing us in a big way. The glue that holds society together is being stretched to breaking point and we aren’t waiting for everything to turn to shit before we act.”

Jackson stared at the floor sullenly but didn’t argue or contradict me.

“Okay, now that is settled, we have one last piece of business that is a little more uplifting. Every ship needs a name. I was thinking something like ‘Last Man Standing’ or ‘Pirate’s Gambit’, maybe ‘Corsair’s Revenge’, but I’m open to suggestions from the floor,” I said to the group and spread my hands wide.

Before anyone spoke, I held up my forefinger. “But the final decision is mine.”

“You could go for an historical reference like Henry Morgan’s ship, the Satisfaction,” Jackson suggested tentatively.

“Not bad, but I’m not sure how many people would get the reference.”

<Pounda Flesh!> Quixbix roared in our heads, loud enough the three of us who could hear him winced.

“What has a Panda got to do with piracy?” Anastasia questioned, though the tug of a smirk on her lips clued me in that she had deliberately misinterpreted Quixbix’s suggestion.

I put my hand up to forestall an unnecessary explanation from the imp.

“As clever as ‘Pounda Flesh’ may be, I’m not sure it’s precisely what I’m looking for,” I reasoned.

<Hellreaver then. People need to fear us> Quixbix suggested instead.

“Hellreaver is better, it sort of recognises my Acheronian heritage, it’s definitely in the running,” I reassured the imp.

“How about something that nods to you being a Frostbinder,” Shana suggested. “Frozen Sky or Ice Wraith.”

“I like it, keep them coming.”

“If we are incorporating a cold theme, perhaps we should add in some Norse mythological flavour. Skadi’s Plunder,” Jackson added excitedly, getting into the swing of things.

“That’s good. I like the mythology angle. I believe we have a new front runner,” I congratulated Jackson.

I waited a moment to see if there were any other candidates. Just as I was about to speak, Anastasia’s lip’s parted and she inhaled a short breath ready to voice her

thoughts and then shook her head almost imperceptibly, stopping herself.

“Panda comment aside, you’ve been quiet Ana, do you have a suggestion? We are technically naming a part of you, after all,” I asked her kindly.

I didn’t want Anastasia to feel excluded from this. I expected her to obey my orders and show the proper respect due to her Captain, but that didn’t mean I had to be a cruel insensitive prick.

I could be, but I chose not to be.

Anastasia hesitated for a moment; her head bobbed side to side slightly as she mulled over whether to speak up. Finally, she gave in and sighed.

“Sure, as you like mythology, Marena’s Mercy.”

“Marena’s Mercy? I like the alliteration, but I’m not familiar with the name,” I admitted.

“Marena is the Slavic Goddess of Winter and Death. She is also known as Morana, Marzanna, or Mara, and by a few other names depending on which part of the Slavic world you come from, but Marena is what my babushka called her.”

“Marena’s Mercy is a bit of wordplay because like the winter cold she represents, Marena has no mercy, except the sweet release of death. Which is fitting for pirates, don’t you think? Plus, she is associated with effigies in pagan rituals which is apt considering I am a mistress of golems,” Anastasia finished.

“Well, I don’t know about anybody else, but I’m convinced,” I said.

Shana and Jackson nodded vigorously in agreement.

<Pounda Flesh gets my vote> Quixbix interjected.

“You don’t get a vote,” I sighed.

<What? That’s not fair. I should get a vote too. Just because I’m not physically present makes me no less a part of

the crew.>

“Quix, nobody gets a vote. I asked for suggestions and then I decide. And I have picked Marena’s Mercy,” I explained with exasperation.

<Oh, that’s okay then. Excellent decision, Torin.>

For the first time Anastasia genuinely smiled, a real smile no less, not a smirk.

“What was that about being the mistress of golems?” I asked her. “I know you had a couple in the final chamber of your dungeon, but I thought you were a Lifeforce Enchantress.”

The smile faded and was replaced with a cross expression. “I am. When you claimed me, my avatar was bumped up to the same K-grade as you. Lifeforce Enchantress: *Golem Mistress*. Have you not bothered to examine my character sheet?”

I had not, in fact, checked her character sheet. I hadn’t thought about it until I stepped on the ship and met her formally, and had been distracted since.

“Let’s rectify that oversight now. Actually, can we use this display table to put the sheets up on one of these walls?” I inquired.

“Yes, it’s not what they are meant for, but you can. At least, until we upgrade to Mark two and get a Quartermaster’s Cabin where you would keep records of the crew and their capabilities,” Anastasia answered.

I didn’t waste any time and viewed her sheet.

Her sheet mirrored mine in many respects. Anastasia got the same boosts to her Physical, Mental, and Social stats that I enjoyed. Her starting Mental stats were a bit higher than mine, countered by her Physical stats being a bit lower.

A lot of her entries, like Health, XP, and Upgrade points had Not Applicable by them. Either because she was an

avatar or because progress in those areas was dependent on me.

The section for her class read as.

Lifeforce Enchantress: *Golem Mistress* (K-grade class)

Level up grants +2 to all Mental stats, +1 all Social stats, Speed, Agility and Constitution +1, Willpower, Leadership, Dominance, and Mana Capacity +2, HP +160

Interestingly, Anastasia inherited aspects of my Soulbinder path of power and Frost Harmonisation. She also had her own path of power linked to her class, Manipulator: Life. Although once I drilled down some of the benefits had been replaced by what she had inherited from me.

Path of Manipulation 1: (Life) Grants rare ability to utilise Life and death Magic. Minor Affinity for both. Grants the ability to perform a Drain touch attack.

Her path of manipulation was intrinsically linked to my soulbinding. If I improved my path, then hers would improve too. This just left her T4 ability. It was the part that added the golem mistress element to her moniker.

T4: Golem Creator 1: Infuse mana into inanimate objects to grant them with temporary life. Mass that can be infused with life equals 5 kilograms per class level. May have up to one independent creation.

Golem creation involved using mana to animate an effigy of a living thing. The greater the mass, the more mana

that needed to animate it. The cost was one mana per kilogram of mass.

This would give you one hour of animation for the golem. You could extend this by paying the base cost again for each extra hour you desired to keep the golem active.

Provided the golem wasn't destroyed you could pump more mana into it to replenish the time allotment in a similar manner as I could restore the durability of my Ice Blades. Or ringfence the mana from the creator's mana pool to keep the golem in question running.

The above was all true for regular golems, which would require their mistress to be nearby to perform any actions. If Anastasia was not around, they would go dormant and conserve the allotted time that had been paid for with mana.

An independent golem was another matter. They would be able to act without her presence. They still needed to be fuelled, though. On this front, drained lifeforce was far superior to mana. A single point of lifeforce per kilogram could power a golem for a full day. And independent golems had a repository that could be filled to keep them going while away from their mistress. The size of the repository was linked to Ana's class level, a pool depth of ten for each.

For golem creators without access to lifeforce, relying solely on mana, even their independent creations were limited to a few days of operational capacity once they left their side. Not so for Ana's, stolen lifeforce could keep them ticking for much longer.

The lifeforce that Anastasia could drain had other uses too. She could convert it on a one-for-one basis into mana to cast regular spells or feed it back into an ally to heal them of either lost Health or Hit Points.

When in contact with the ship, the maximum amount of lifeforce Anastasia could retain was set to ten thousand. This was essentially stored in her core crystal. That would

increase by a further two thousand for every level the dungeon attained.

When off the ship, her limit would be the same as her avatar's Mana Pool. Currently one hundred and fifty-four. That limit though would change as her avatar levelled with me. This also limited how much she could drain, as she couldn't exceed her cap. However, if we could source a spell book or scroll from a school she could use, she might be able to funnel any excess directly into casting a spell.

At the moment, all of Anastasia's abilities required her to be able to touch her victim or us. I hoped as we levelled some ranged options may emerge.

I then checked out Shana's character sheet for good measure.

After we'd all had a good ogle at the stats, I clapped my hands to get everyone's attention. "It's four o'clock so everybody has a few hours to familiarise themselves with the ship. By my calculation, we should be approaching the city of Grand Rapids an hour or two before dusk. We have to sail around it and I want everyone alert and ready when we do. We are bound to draw attention and not necessarily the good kind. Dismissed."

.....

Several hours later, my crew of three and I were up on the deck of the freshly christened Marena's Mercy. Anastasia had created a nameplate with the name in foot-tall red lettering on either side of the prow and the stern of the ship, so any who got close enough, and lived to tell the tale, would know whom they encountered.

Those of us who needed to eat had done so in the galley earlier. We had been slowly sailing down the Grand River for four hours and it was almost eight in the evening. We had an hour before the light faded and had turned North as the

crow flies as we prepared to circumnavigate the bend in the river that would take us around and through downtown Grand Rapids.

From where we had been on the river, we couldn't get much of a look at the city, but what we could see clearly, were multiple plumes of smoke coming from within the city limits. It had been several days since integration into the Darkwyrlds, and though it was possible fires from that initial chaos could still be raging, I doubted it.

After three days, the fires would have either burned themselves out or the entire city would be ablaze. My head and gut told me these were fresh blazes and that meant trouble of some kind.

As we had approached the city from the East, we had been suitably far away that whatever had been going down wouldn't affect us or allow us to be spotted by whoever was causing the ruckus. However, once we hit the apex of the bend and turned southward again, we would be sailing through the city, as opposed to edging around its outskirts.

The safest play would have been to halt for a few hours, let the sun go down fully, and then pass through under the cover of night. But I discarded such a notion for a couple of reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to know what the fuck was going on. Although we'd be concealed at night, so would whatever agents were at large in Grand Rapids.

Secondly, I was the big dog in the yard, they should be the ones cowering, not me.

We sailed up the river, armed and armoured, with our eyes peeled. We didn't see much until we passed a marina for an artificial lake on our left just as the river turned.

The rattle of gunfire alerted us to what was happening before we could see it clearly ourselves. The trees on the left of the ship obscured our sight to begin with, and we were too far away to make use of my Quixbix cheat, but when we cleared the bend and could see the bridge over the river up

ahead, the tree line on the left cleared giving us a view of events.

Before we could see southward into the city, Jackson pointed out that the road on the bridge had been very effectively blockaded. How, I don't know, but a row of trucks had been wheeled in front of the way onto the southern end of the bridge.

Our examination of that was interrupted as we got a good view of what was happening just ahead of the bridge. We could see the ruins of a few buildings that had been burned down. There was no sign of smouldering, so this must have been done a few days ago. Most of what we could see was a collection of car parks, many of the cars now burned-out wrecks.

There was an ongoing firefight between two groups turning the highway and the car parks into a war zone.

The group closest to us appeared to be in full retreat and were dressed in the navy blue and black of the police department sporting tactical protection vests. Those forcing them back up to the river and the blockaded bridge were wearing armour like ours, over tracksuits, jeans, and other regular items of clothing.

That wasn't the only difference between the two warring groups. The police were armed primarily with handguns and a few shotguns. Their attackers either used assault rifles or crossbows and bows. Also, every officer I could see was human and their attackers were a mixture of new Darkwyrlds character species.

I spotted several different species as part of the offensive group. A few orcs and gnolls, and what I took to be some kind of Lizardfolk. However, the majority were tawny-haired cat people.

<Leonids> Quixbix informed us. <Or Lionblood humans to be precise, though most prides prefer to use the term Leonid.>

I nodded my head in silence, we'd all ducked down behind the taffrail to avoid any stray bullets.

From what I observed, in the few minutes it took us to pass under the bridge and out of sight, the cops were being overwhelmed. Most of the officers seemed to be carrying wounds and from the look of them, they hadn't adjusted to the new Darkwyrlds reality yet. They were garbed in old-world armour while their opponents wore something that actually worked.

The approaching army, because that is what it was, could press the cops with little fear of the fire coming their way. The police, on the other hand, had half a dozen of their people go down in the few minutes that we watched them. With the bridge behind them blocked, they were doomed.

Somebody had made a play to take control of Grand Rapids and from what we'd seen, they were on the verge of being successful.

"Everybody stay sharp," I ordered. "The next hour could be interesting."

Chapter 20

Claudia Gattosi

Claudia played with her razor-sharp nails as she watched her twin brother Luca on the street below, over the balcony of the hotel room, holding court like he was some kind of fucking King.

He was surrounded by a bunch of fawning bootlickers that looked up to the arrogant piece of garbage. If only they knew him as she did, how much of a coward he was, deep down.

Luca wouldn't have dared act as he had if Papa hadn't been visiting the old country with his top guys and had instead been home in Detroit when the world changed. Her brother knew the consequences of acting without their father's approval first.

Papa was the head of the Gattosi family and Luca knew it.

He still feared their father, even with him being thousands of miles away, despite the added strength he had stolen from her during the Framework integration.

She glanced at the mirror perched on the dresser of this gaudy hotel room that Luca had *ordered* her to stay in. She saw the long tawny hair, the feline eyes a curious shade of emerald and the sharpened incisors. If it hadn't been for the tail she kept tucked out of sight and the base of her nose which

was almost black in colour and slitted where her nostrils flared, it would be difficult to tell she was no longer fully human.

Unlike Luca, he had adopted as many Leonine features as possible and loved it.

Then again, he'd always been overly proud of his hair and good looks, so it must have hurt him very badly when he realised that he was balding at the young age of twenty-five. Thousands of dollars and countless hair-care products couldn't arrest the thinning.

Their papa had forbidden him from any surgery or transplant procedure. He said it made him look more Italian, that all the greatest members of the Cosa Nostra had a receding hairline, but that hadn't assuaged Luca's angry bitterness.

Now he had a thick, dark, untameable mane which he played with more than his tiny pecker, and that was saying something.

Initially, Claudia had been furious with Luca's choice to make them Leonid, but she had to admit, as she took in her reflection, the look was growing on her. The extra few inches in height and the toned and athletic body that came with the change hadn't hurt either, she supposed.

Those few pounds of fat she'd spent a decade trying, and failing, to shed, had been gone overnight.

Which necessitated a brand new wardrobe, obviously.

It may have been a cliché, but Claudia did so love to shop, especially now she could largely take what she wanted thanks to my brother's incipient reign of terror. Proving to Claudia's chagrin that he wasn't entirely useless, merely mostly useless.

"He's so handsome," Carla gushed from the second storey balcony. "I know he's your brother, but you have to agree, right?"

“If you’re into the furry Simba look, then sure, I suppose he is,” Claudia replied, infusing her words with as much civil disinterest as was possible.

Carla looked at Claudia sharply, there was an unhinged zeal behind her hazel eyes. They may have grown up together in Detroit, but Claudia couldn’t forget Carla was more akin to a prison guard than a long-standing family acquaintance.

They’d never been friends.

Carla had always been obsessed with Luca, who had abused that obsession since they were teenagers. The lovestruck fool honestly believed he cared about her.

Luca only cared for one person, Luca.

Claudia sighed and uncurled her long legs from under her. She sprang off the bed and padded over to join Carla on the balcony. She had to show her willingness to support her brother in his endeavours to take control of Grand Rapids. Carla’s vapid smile returned as Claudia joined her and they stared down on the street below, where the Grand Rapids podium had been erected.

Luca was down there, surrounded by a bevy of his armed goons. He didn’t have full control of the city yet. Claudia had overheard that the podium continued to recognise Mayor Trilby as the leader of Grand Rapids.

Tragically, despite this speedbump, Luca’s victory was all but assured.

Credit where credit was due, Luca had achieved a great deal in just a few days. That he’d done it by stealing her potential during character creation only added to Claudia’s current bitterness.

He’d managed to unite or seize control of every significant criminal organisation in the city.

While the police and the populace for the most part panicked. Luca forced his people to take classes if they hadn’t

already, levelled them up, through murder if necessary, and went on the offensive last night.

A cache of smuggled assault rifles and ammunition had helped too.

Since then, his ranks had swelled as every two-bit hoodlum, wannabe gangster, and all-purpose shit-stain had flocked to his banner. His class, Criminal Kingpin, helped in that regard.

There was a commotion at the far end of the street that drew everyone's attention.

A squad of Luca's loyal followers were 'escorting' a family with bags over their heads towards the podium. They forced the man, woman, and two children onto their knees in front of my brother and removed the hoods.

With the hoods off, Claudia recognised the middle-aged woman, it was Susan Trilby, the Mayor. The others had to be her husband and children. The mayor blinked in the sudden light and then looked up at the leonine face of Claudia's sneering brother.

"Ah, Mayor Trilby. Good of you to join me," he guffawed.

His loyal goons laughed along with him, and Carla giggled demurely beside Claudia. She just shook her head at her brother's grandstanding.

"Am I supposed to know who you are," Susan Trilby rasped.

Her words were defiant, but her tear-stained cheeks robbed those words of any real bite.

"How rude of me. I am much changed, but I'm sure you've heard of me. Luca Gattosi at your service," he smarmed.

"Gattosi? I've met your father, Giovanni. We don't see eye to eye, but at least he was a gentleman. All I've heard

about you is that you're a cheap hoodlum with delusions of grandeur," the mayor commented savagely.

Claudia winced as Mayor Trilby said the words. Not because she didn't agree, she wholeheartedly did. However, her brother had a short temper and a vicious streak to match.

His paw-like hand whipped out and slapped the mayor, he hadn't retracted his claws and they sliced across her face, leaving red bloody streaks.

"You will not speak to me like that, you saggy cunt," he screamed in her face.

Then he straightened up, smiled cruelly, and nodded to his best friend and ally Maurice.

Unlike many of the Gattosi soldiers and associates who had chosen to become Leonid like Luca, Maurice had become a shadowborn elf.

Maurice stepped up behind the mayor's husband and produced a garrotte from his inventory which he wrapped around the poor man's throat and pulled tight. The man struggled vainly, scrabbling at his neck, while as was slowly choked to death over the course of a minute.

Mayor Trilby and her children wailed and wept loudly but were held in place as they were forced to watch their loved one be murdered in the street.

Blessedly, for them, it was over relatively quickly.

Maurice was brick-shittingly scary, but he was efficient and emotionless when it came to murder. He unwound his garrotte from the man's throat, pushed the body forward and cleaned the wire with a handkerchief before he stepped back to the circle of people that surrounded her brother.

Mayor Trilby's head had sagged into her chest as she sobbed for her loss. Luca stepped up and roughly pulled her head up by her hair.

"You understand who is in charge now, don'tcha' bitch," he smirked and snapped his fingers.

Another of his guys stepped up with a sack in his hand, the contents of which he tipped onto the road at Luca's behest. Three decapitated heads bounced and rolled onto the ground.

"Take a look," he breathed at her with menace.

Then he signalled his guys holding her and they pushed her to the ground and practically rubbed her face on the decomposing heads.

"Anyone you know," he laughed shrilly. "No help is coming. That's the chief of police, the chief of the local FBI office, and the DA."

"Bring her," Luca ordered to the two guys holding her down.

Luca walked over to the podium and waited as the mayor was dragged over and then lifted to a standing position.

"Larry! Is everything in place," he addressed a nervous, mousy-looking man who had been standing by the podium.

Larry was one of the Gattosi family's accountants. Super-smart, but also super-creepy. Hence why he was here in Grand Rapids and not with her Papa in Detroit.

"Yes, sir. The leadership transfer of Grand Rapids from Mayor Trilby to you has been keyed up. All she has to do is put her hand on the screen and approve," Larry croaked hoarsely.

He was an inveterate smoker. His office stank of cigarettes so badly, Claudia would gag just walking by it. Then gag some more at the thought of the slimeball within.

"You hear that Susie," Luca jeered and cuffed her around the head to get her attention. "All you've gotta do is put your digits on the screen and say yes."

Then Luca grabbed her by the hair again, leaned in and spoke quietly, but Claudia's new feline hearing picked it up. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you can spite me and say no, that I can't hurt you because I need you alive to

perform the transfer. Not true, bitch. I can take the city if you're dead, this is just quicker."

Her brother stepped back from Susan and opened his arms magnanimously. "Do me this solid and you and your lovely daughters are free to go. You have my word. Deny me, and I swear to fucking god, their pleading and terrified eyes while they are choke to death on Maurice's garrotte wire are the last thing you will ever see."

With tears openly pouring down her cheeks the mayor's shoulders slumped, all fight leaving her. She reached out and pressed her fingers on the screen.

Luca was surrounded by a green nimbus of energy as the transfer completed. He stood there with the smuggest grin imaginable and then roared to the heavens.

Carla jumped up and down clapping her hands with joy.

"Threatening kids, my brother, what a prince among men," Claudia muttered under her breath.

Their Papa would never have stood for it. He was ruthless, yes, he'd cut your balls or tits off if you disrespected or denied him, but he would never touch your kids.

The mayor, no longer needed, had slumped to her knees, vacant-eyed.

"What shall we do with her," the goon who'd been holding onto Susan Trilby asked her brother.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I promised that she and her squealing runts could live. Take them to the city limits and kick them out. They can take their chances with the wandering monsters," he answered and dismissed the former mayor with a wave.

His men moved into action and dragged the three of them away, while a few cowed and collared civilians were forced to clean up the dead husband and forgotten heads of my brother's victims.

Trust her brother to figure out you could buy collars that really enslaved people from the podium. Not figurative, but literal enslavement, which the Framework recognised and assisted in enforcing.

When Claudia found out, she started doing some surreptitious research on a podium tablet Luca had left for Carla to use. She hadn't got very far yet, as she needed to do so behind her keeper's back.

The tablet had been loaded with a lot of information on products, species, and classes. More than what was available from the character sheets. Apparently, the collars weren't foolproof, but you needed to be a strong-willed or high-levelled individual to overcome the Framework's insistence to obey your recognised master.

"Now, time to make some changes," Luca said, as he rubbed his paw-like hands together and approached the podium.

He was distracted by a screech of joy from Carla up on the balcony. Her excitement had reached fever pitch and Claudia thought she'd actually lost control of her physical movements as she bounced up and down on the balcony with Luca-mania.

Claudia saw the sneer of disdain on Luca's lips even if Carla didn't.

"Carla, honey. Why don't you grab us a bottle of bubbly from the hotel bar, and we can celebrate," he called up to us. "And Claudia, why don't you come down as well."

He phrased it as a request, but she felt the tug of command through their twin bond when he said it, and that prevented her from ignoring his request.

Carla was off and running from the balcony before Luca had finished the command to his sister. Claudia walked down to the lobby and then out onto the street at the most sedate pace she could physically manage, given the restraints of the compulsion she was under.

Carla had reached Luca well ahead of her and the bottle of champagne had already been opened. Luca, the pig that he was, drank directly from the bottle.

Then he spotted Claudia as she sauntered out of the hotel lobby doors and rested up against the railings outside. She wasn't forced to go any farther, having obeyed his orders. He grunted in her direction and was undoubtedly about to give her a piece of his mind when one of his scouts came haring down the road.

"Boss, I've just come from Northlands Drive. We've wiped out the cops that retreated that way, but Tommy spotted something on the river," he gasped, almost out of breath.

"Why the fuck didn't Tommy use the fucking walkie-talkies. That's why I fucking gave them to you," Luca snapped.

"Tommy's walkie got hit by a bullet. Sent me instead," the mook answered, recovering his breath.

"Then why didn't you find another of the groups between here and there and use theirs?" Luca snarled.

Claudia laugh-snorted at the look on the mook's face as he realised what a dumbass he'd been and cringed at Luca's angry gesturing.

"Never mind," her brother growled as he regained his composure. "What did Tommy see that was so important he sent a dumb fuck like you to come find me."

"A black ship coming down the river from the east," the mook answered nervously.

"A boat! A fucking boat on the river. Will wonders never cease. Why the fuck should I care about a fucking boat? We've fucking dozens of the damn things now," Luca exploded.

Damn, but her brother was as dumb as some of the fuckwits he had working for him. He had said ship, not boat, and coming from the inland stretch of the Grand River.

Something the size of a ship shouldn't be able to traverse that section of the river. This had to be something special.

“One of Tommy's boys has a class that lets him see descriptions of stuff. He said it was a Mark One Corsair Class ship and the details he read said it was powered by a dungeon core,” the cringing mook fessed up as Luca appeared ready to claw him.

Luca showed him the back of his paw instead. “You shoulda' lead with that, ya' dumb fuck” he sneered, trying to cover for his own foolish assumptions. “Larry, get on the podium. Tell me what one of these Corsair ship thingies is worth.”

Larry bobbed his head and played with the podium for a moment. “Umm, it's priceless, sir,” the odious fellow rasped excitedly.

“What do you mean priceless?” Luca asked his full attention on the obsequious pen-pusher.

“I mean you literally can't buy or sell ships like this on the podium, for any price. Wait a moment, I want to try something,” Larry gasped breathlessly with anticipation.

He must have been excited if he risked *telling* her brother to wait.

“Fuck me,” Larry rasped as his eyes widened like saucers.

“What is it? What have you found?” Luca demanded impatiently.

“I've checked the records on the Auction House for items like this. There haven't been many but the closest I found was a Mark Two Corsair Class Dungeon ship that sold seventy years ago for a cool million,” Larry explained, with a little drool on his lips.

“A million?” Luca yelped. “A million Gold,” he repeated in disbelief.

“No, sir,” Larry corrected. “A million Platinum. A hundred times as much”

“How long ago did the ship pass Northlands,” Luca barked at the scout.

“Well, uh, I had to run all the way here after we finished with the cops. Forty-five minutes, maybe an hour,” he said and shrank back from Luca’s thundercloud expression.

“Fuck. Give me a walkie,” Luca ordered to the crowd, wagging his fingers.

As his order wasn’t to anybody in particular, nobody responded immediately.

“One of you give me your motherfucking walkie-talkie!” Luca screamed at the top of his voice.

Twelve guys stumbled forward, grabbing at their sides and Luca was offered several and he snatched the nearest device out of one of their hands.

“What frequency is Marco’s team on?” Luca directed this question at Maurice.

“Nine,” the cold-eyed killer replied simply.

Luca adjusted the knob, pressed the button and spoke into the handset. “Marco, come in,” and then after a second. “Over.”

The walkie crackled and then Marco’s voice crackled over the line. “Hey, Luca. I already reported that we’ve secured Swan on the other side of the bridge.”

“Yeah, I know, Marco,” Luca responded. “I’ve got another job for you. I need you to intercept a black ship that’s making its way down the river...Over.”

“Did I hear you right? Did you say a ship?” Marco’s voice crackled back.

“Yeah, a ship and I can’t stress just how badly you need to capture it. I’ll be sending a few more of the boys to join you, but we’re in Garfield Park and it could sail through

before they get there. Over,” Luca said, getting more comfortable with using the walkie.

“Luca, how the fuck are we supposed to capture a ship,” Marco whined down the walkie.

“For fuck’s sake, do I have to explain everything? Get as many of our people as you can. Take them to Blue Bridge, keep out of sight, and when the ship gets to the bridge, jump over and onto the fucking ship. Fucking over.”

“Jesus, Luca, you want us to jump off a fucking bridge,” Marco complained further.

“Marco, you either get me that fucking ship or I drown you in the fucking river, you hear me. Over and out,” Luca threw the walkie to the lackey he’d taken it from earlier who juggled it for a few seconds before it clattered onto the street.

“Johnboy, take your people and meet up with Marco at the Blue Bridge. You should pass...Miguel, I think his name is, and his branch of the Bandito’s in South Hill along the way. You can tell the Mexicans to expect you while you’re on the move,” Luca ordered.

Johnboy and his crew headed northward.

Luca rolled his head and motioned for Carla to hand him the bottle of champagne, which he took a big swig of.

“Thank fuck for these battery-operated walkies, eh, boys. It’s made this whole conquest business in the dark ages so much easier,” Luca joked, his good humour returning. “I really ought to give the guy who got me these a bonus.”

Claudia should have kept her mouth shut. Luca had largely forgotten her in the excitement, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Not much good that would do him. He’s at the bottom of Lake Michigan. Right where you left him after his tip about a shipment of communication devices netted you a dozen boxes of ‘fucking children’s toys’ to quote you, instead of iPhones,” she snarked.

Luca stalked over to her, hackles raised, his leonine features pulled back with his fangs on display, and he puffed out his chest.

“I should fucking kill you, you mouthy whore,” he spat in her face.

Luca radiated intimidation and she could tell he had tried to use the abilities of his class, that he was so very proud of, but to no avail. Claudia was immune to anything he tried barring his direct commands, and in his anger, he'd forgotten.

The effect on everyone else on the street was obvious, all but Maurice had dropped to their knees in deference. The dispassionate killer just blinked owlishly.

“But you won't though, will you. And we both know why. You've got to keep me safe from harm,” she taunted her twin brother.

His arm raised to strike her, but Claudia just smiled with glee. “Go on, do it. I can take it, you on the other hand, never had much of a tolerance for pain.”

He lowered his closed fist, rage forcing spittle from his mouth. “Maybe I can't hurt you without hurting myself. But you must follow my orders. Go back to your room and don't leave until I say you can.”

Claudia moved her face up to his, glaring at him eyeball to eyeball. “With pleasure,” she growled and turned on her heel and stormed off.

Goading Luca was dangerous even if what he did to her happened to him as well. He had many more Hit Points than she had and could absorb a lot more damage.

But her gutsy display had earned her some time to herself, and Carla had left her Darkworlds podium tablet in the hotel room when she rushed to join Luca earlier. Claudia wanted to research what this Dungeon Ship was without a minder watching over her shoulder to report on her activities.

Luca would remember when he calmed down that any order he gave her would lose its efficacy after a few hours and Carla or someone else would be sent to ‘accompany’ her once more.

Until then, she had research to do.

Chapter 21

Marena's Mercy sailed down the Grand River as we passed through downtown Grand Rapids. The mast and sail were low enough to pass under most of the bridges, apart from the foot bridges. It had been interesting to watch as the mast curved backwards like a sapling to pass under without clipping those obstacles.

Dusk was rapidly approaching, and the light had begun to fade. It would likely be full dark in about half an hour, which would coincide with us exiting the part of the river that passed directly through the city.

We'd observed plenty of evidence that the armed insurrection we witnessed earlier had not been an isolated incident. That being said, there had been no rhyme or reason to the different groups we had caught sight of, none that I could discern at any rate.

They were a disparate mix of humans and new Darkwyrld species. All wearing different clothing, no official uniforms of any kind. And yet all signs pointed to a coordinated effort. The different groups were not battling one another, but establishing control under a single banner, so to speak.

More than a few of these 'soldiers' gawped at us as we sailed by and apart from a few yahoos having a pot-shot at us we weren't troubled. I was desperate for more information but was reluctant to stop for any reason to gather it.

My instincts were telling me that whoever led this regime change wouldn't be amenable to me and mine sailing away unmolested if we lingered. I was the big dog, but I was also smart enough to understand that many yapping little dogs could drag me down if enough of them swarmed me.

Anastasia warned us that we were passing through a section of the river with several bridges and a few underwater impediments and that the ride would be a touch bumpier as we went through it.

"We're almost at the historic Blue Bridge," Shana called out. "It's quite beautiful at night when they have the lights on, not that they will be with the power out," she finished with a wistful sigh.

"Why do they call it Blue Bridge?" I asked.

"Umm, because the girders are painted blue," Jackson answered hesitantly, concerned about pointing out my obvious lack of local knowledge.

I chuckled to let him know not to sweat it.

The good humour was interrupted by Quixbix barking in my mind with alarm as we were a few metres from passing under the aforementioned Blue Bridge. <Torin, there are a dozen of the armed forces lying down on the bridge above.>

Shana and Anastasia, having heard Quixbix, reacted as I did and prepared themselves. "Heads up, Jackson," was all I had time to yell to the young sorcerer before we were under attack.

The dozen men up on the bridge jumped to their feet and fired whatever ranged weapons they had down upon us. It was a mixture of bullets from assault rifles and arrow-fire.

Anastasia had anticipated their attack, though.

The crystalline sail, which wasn't necessary for the ship's propulsion, proved to be present for more than mere aesthetic purposes. The base of the sail smoothly detached

from the mast, travelled upwards and flipped horizontal to the deck providing us with an effective shield.

“Stay under the sail and that should block whatever they have,” Anastasia suggested smugly. “Unless they’ve levelled substantially or got their grubby mitts on some superior gear,” she added with a shrug of her shoulders.

<Everything they have is basic. Torin, you can use me to slip into ‘Action Mode’ and analyse them from under the sail> Quixbix suggested.

“Good idea, Quix,” I said and took him up on the offer. I got a dozen returns most of which were what you’d expect. However, one of them was a little different and offered a bit more information.

Marco Di Resta (Lionblood Human)

Ranger (U) 4

Character Aptitude: Moderate

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 1,260 XP

Information: *Grand Rapids Syndicate Sergeant:* This person is recognised by the despotic mayor of Grand Rapids as a Sergeant within his organisation. (Currently the lowest rank of the designated leadership caste.) He leads a group of thirty warriors. The groups threat rating is Moderate.

None of the other groups I’d managed to analyse earlier mentioned anything about the Grand Rapids syndicate. Possibly, something had changed very recently.

The rest were foot-soldier types, a mix of Fighters, Thieves, and a Mage.

Fighter (W) 6 x5

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 440 XP

—

Thief (V) 6 x5

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 550 XP

—

Mage (W) 6

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Low

XP Value: 440 XP

Quixbix helpfully suppressed unneeded information like their names while I assessed the threat. Marco's bio said he led a group of thirty, but there were only eleven up on the bridge with him.

“Quixbix, can you see the rest of his party?” I asked the imp.

<They aren't within my twenty-five-metre range. But we are in the middle of the river, they may be behind the buildings on either side> he answered.

If we were lucky, they wouldn't be nearby.

“I don’t suppose there is a quest in all of this?” I prodded him.

Quixbix chuckled in my mind. <I thought you’d never ask.>

**** Who’s the Boss? (R*)*

You have been threatened by another group. You need to assert your authority and show them you are the boss.

Success: Defeat the party of Marco Di Vesta by any means necessary.

Rewards: 1,300 XP and +10 notoriety.

*Failure: -10 notoriety and likely death. ****

“That reward is a bit naff. There could be thirty of them,” I grumbled.

<Unfortunately, the Moderate threat rating includes that possibility and R-grade is the highest I could make this quest. There are rules you know. If they get reinforcements, we could factor them in, and the reward will be increased. There is an alternative if you’re interested?> he teased.

“Lay it on me,” I told him.

<The quest’s difficulty factors in both you and Shana’s participation because she is Soulbonded to you. This means both of you get a share of the XP reward. There is a bit of cheat I’ve learned in my many years as an imp. I can exclude Shana from the calculation, and this would increase the quest’s difficulty up to an O-grade and therefore the reward you will receive would go up to 2100 XP. This does mean that Shana will not get any experience from the quest, though.>

On the face of it this would be a tough decision to make. Doing this would result in our pairing as a whole getting less XP. 2100 instead of 2600, plus Shana got an extra ten percent on top so another 130 XP difference.

In reality, the new me made the choice quickly and easily. I needed to level and when I did, Anastasia's avatar would level too. Also, I got more out of my levels than Shana.

"Do it Quix," I ordered.

<Quest updated> he intoned formally.

**** Who's the Boss? (O*)*

You have been threatened by another group. You need to assert your authority and show them you are the boss.

Success: Defeat the party of Marco Di Vesta by any means necessary.

Rewards: 2,100 XP and +10 notoriety.

*Failure: -10 notoriety and likely death. ****

"Okay, let's do this," I said, and exited Action Mode.

"Fuck! They're shielded," I heard a voice up on the bridge cry out as time sped back up.

Then there was a loud shrill whistle, and I could see more enemies start running onto the footbridge from where they had been secreted out of sight.

Two groups of ten or so charged onto the bridge from opposite sides.

Luckily, we'd been sailing dead centre down the river, and it would take them several seconds to get into position.

"Over the railings," the same voice, that I assumed was Marco, called out as Marena's Mercy reached the bridge and was about to start going underneath.

"Prepare to repel boarders," I shouted. "Ana, speed us up, I want to clear the far side before their reinforcements have a chance to join in."

Anastasia nodded her head, and we felt the ship lurch gently as the pace picked up. At the same time the first of our uninvited guests clattered on to the deck as the prow edged under the bridge.

The first assailants were four of the Fighter types clad in a collection of mail armour. Dropping in four at a time was all they could manage with the narrower width of the ship at the prow.

It was a three metre drop from the bridge, and not being the most agile of classes, two of them bungled the landing and crumpled on the deck. Shana was quick to take advantage and fired an arrow from her new Lesser Assassin's bow catching one of the fallers under the chin in his unarmoured throat.

****Shana has inflicted 200 piercing damage and 80 points of dark damage. Target has lost more than half their Hit Points. ****

Two hundred and eighty damage and he hadn't been killed, but with six levels of Fighter and armour then they would have around five hundred Hit Points. Jackson threw one of his green balls of flame at the other fallen Fighter a heartbeat after Shana's arrow connected.

Anastasia ran back through the open cabin door and sprinted for the stairwell down to the lower deck. I had no idea what she was up to, but I got no hint of panic or treachery via our bond and didn't have time to question her.

The two who hadn't fallen over were armed with assault rifles and got down on one knee and sprayed our group with bullets.

**** -20 Hit Points. (550/570) ****

**** -20 Hit Points. (530/570) ****

I was hit by two of the bullets. They didn't do as much damage as Victor's revolver despite being higher calibre bullets fired from more powerful rifles because I was now wearing armour.

The second wave of attackers, made up of leather clad Thieves, landed adroitly on the deck.

However, the forward motion of the ship came to our aid. The goons with assault rifles hadn't anticipated that as the ship was moving forward their allies would land between us and them. The second half of their indiscriminate spray of bullets was intercepted by the backs of the freshly arrived Thieves.

The ship was half under the bridge now and the mast and sail bent backwards, which blocked the remaining four up on the bridge from joining their brethren.

The unexpected bullets to their backs forced the Thieves to stumble forward and I took advantage of the confusion and charged into the fray.

"Watch out for the last few, they might land behind us," I called out to my people, and crossed the few metres between me and the enemy.

The Thieves tried to use short bows to slow me down. But whether it was a lack of familiarity or panic they weren't very successful, and my thigh was grazed by a single arrow.

**** -15 Hit Points. (515/570) ****

Shana and Jackson remained back by the cabin and continued to fire arrows and balls of green flame at opportune targets.

When I reached the Thieves, I shoulder barged the leftmost and sent him tumbling over the taffrail and he

splashed into the Grand River. We wouldn't get any XP for him, but it was one less to worry about. And then set about them with my Ice Scimitars.

The Fighters abandoned using their guns and drew an assortment of clubs and swords before they charged into the fight.

It was unfortunate that they had their melee weapons stored in scabbards on their hips or backs and not in their inventories where they wouldn't be able to access them due to the Dungeon Ship's suppression field.

From the corner of my eye, I detected two more splashes in the Grand River as two of those on the bridge had jumped onto the crystalline sail, perhaps expecting it to give way, and had slid smoothly off and over the side.

I battled two of the thieves who had drawn short-bladed weapons and one of the Fighters while the other four went by me, intent on getting to the two vulnerable ranged attackers.

I was clearly the better swordsman and kept all three at bay for the most part and lost a further hundred Hit Points before I killed one of the Thieves with a slash to his throat.

On the other side, Jackson unleashed a wave of flame that engulfed the four men who charged at them. The Fighter who had one of Shana's arrows still embedded in his neck dropped dead and then Shana killed the Thief in the group with a head shot before the remaining two crisped Fighters engaged them in melee.

At the same time, the ship now appeared on the other side of the bridge and two figures landed on the roof of the cabin, Marco and an elf Mage. They must have run over to the other side of the bridge, leapt blindly, and got lucky.

The good news was that we had outsailed the reinforcements, a couple of them leapt over the railings trying to join Marco but were too late and plunged into the river instead.

That was the only good news, the outlook for this fight seemed grim.

Shana and Jackson were not melee warriors and struggled to do anything more than evade enough of the attacks by the two Fighters to not be slaughtered.

I was holding my own against the Thief and Fighter on my side of the ship and would have killed them eventually, but now they had back up.

**** -50 Hit Points. (365/570) ****

I was struck by a magical dart of energy by the Mage.

**** -30 Hit Points. (335/570) ****

And then by an arrow fired by the Ranger, Marco. The prognosis did not look good. I couldn't avoid their attacks from the poop deck and competently fence with two melee opponents.

Which is when Anastasia re-entered the fracas.

She had gone down to the lower deck, run to the other end, and emerged out of the hatch at the prow behind our attackers. She skipped up to the Fighter with a beatific smile on her face, jumped on to his back like a spider monkey and started to drain his life force.

Without the distraction of two foes, I hacked and slashed at the Thief with wild abandon and dropped him quickly. By which point I was down another hundred hit points from a combination of the Mage's second magic missile, Marco's arrow, and a lucky slice from the dagger of the dying Thief.

I was just under half my Hit Points but was filled with confidence. “Ana, help Shana and Jackson,” I ordered as the Fighter she clung to collapsed onto the black deck and then I raced to the set of steps which led up to the poop deck atop the cabin.

The elf Mage, seeing the tide of the battle turn, and a very irate Acheronian Corsair closing in on him yelled. “I’m low on mana!” Then took two steps and leapt over the taffrail of the poop deck and into the Grand River.

“You fucking coward,” Marco screamed at him and loosed a third arrow in my direction, which I swatted away with my scimitar.

I vaulted up the steps, three at a time, which gave Marco just enough time to drop his bow and draw a backsword. He adopted a fencing pose with his backsword extended.

However, now that we had overcome the deadly threat my plan changed.

I wanted information, and Marco seemed like the best source of it. I ran at him, and rather than stopping, bashed his sword out of the way and barrelled into him.

We crashed into the deck with a thud, and I dropped my blades and wrapped my arms around his chest, trapping his arms and forcing him to drop his own sword.

“What the fuck?” Marco growled in surprise. “Ya wanna kiss me, do you,” he sneered.

I headbutted his leonic face hard, to shut him up.

We scuffled on the deck for a few moments until I heard feet on the steps and sensed Shana and Anastasia join me.

“Great minds think alike,” Anastasia quipped cheekily.

She skipped over to us and put her hand on Marco’s exposed throat and started to drain him.

“Don’t kill him,” I ordered.

“Don’t worry, sir, I won’t. I’m going to drain him down to a couple of Health points, which should force him to lose consciousness. Just like I did with the others,” Anastasia assured me.

“Others?”

“Yeah, they guy I jumped and the two that were trying to kill Shana and Jackson.”

By the time her explanation was complete, Marco’s eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he became paler and seemed thinner.

“This is so much quicker when they can’t resist,” Anastasia chirped cheerfully.

I released the limp form of Marco and got to my feet. “Is everyone okay?” I asked Shana.

“Yes, Jackson and I are fine,” she replied. “We lost a few hundred Hit Points each and would have been in trouble if it had gone on much longer. Jackson is checking the sides of the ship, making sure we don’t have any clingers.”

“Good thinking,” I complimented her.

“It was Jackson’s idea,” Shana corrected me.

I nodded in acknowledgment and then looked back over the river. There were seven, maybe eight, of Marco’s people in the water. They didn’t seem to be drowning, even those in armour, but it made getting back to the riverbank difficult and I had Machiavellian thought.

Deny my enemy his resources.

“Shana, are the swimmers in range of your bow?” I inquired.

Shana joined me at the rail and scanned the river before she answered. “Yes, Torin, they are.”

“Excellent. Now that they’ve supplied us with a plenty of spare arrows take out as many of them as you can,” I ordered and turned to Anastasia. “Ana, slow the ship a touch to allow Shana enough time to get as many of them as possible, afterward speed back up. I want to clear Grand Rapids before whoever is in charge has a chance to set up anymore ambushes at the remaining bridges.”

With that, I picked up the unconscious Marco and carried him down the steps to the main deck.

<Quest ‘Who’s the Boss O*’ completed. 2,900 XP and 10 Notoriety awarded> Quixbix formally intoned.

<You’re share of the kill XP will be a little under two and half thousand if Shana gets all of those that are in the water. Each kill is also worth +1 Notoriety for killing another character, so probably another twelve by the time you’re done. Maybe more depending on what you do with your four prisoners> the imp followed up with.

“Understood.”

Jackson was on the main deck vainly trying to lift one of the unconscious Fighters. I joined him and he helped me get the man on my other shoulder.

“I’ll take these two down and put them in the cells, you watch the other two for signs of movement. Call for Ana if that happens,” I commanded and headed for the hatch at the prow. Those stairs were closer to the Brig on the lower deck.

“Oh, and Jackson,” I said over my shoulder.

“Yes, Captain.”

“You did well today. I’m proud of you,” I told the lad, and he blushed crimson at the praise.

With those Captain duties out of the way I returned to the conversation with Quixbix. “Will I always get one Notoriety for killing people, not mobs?”

<No. There are diminishing returns the more Notoriety you have. Technically, you get two Notoriety for every

character slain, but you lose one point for every hundred points you have bringing it down to one. When you reach two-hundred Notoriety you lose two every time any Notoriety points are awarded, so you'll only get any for deeds that award three or more Notoriety at a time> he answered.

“That makes sense. It would also make it easier to rebuild your score if you should drop below one hundred.”

<True, but that would still be an epically foolish idea> he warned.

“Relax, Quix. I've no intention of wussing out on you. Just thinking about the possible worst-case scenarios,” I chuckled.

I got to the Brig and opened one the nearest cells which was a large communal one. I chucked the random fighter into that one and moved down to a smaller cell for Marco. Just as I opened the cell door there was a crackle that came from my unconscious prisoners' pants.

“Marco! are you there? ... Marco, come in... This is Luca... Have you taken that ship yet... Marco ya better not have fucked this up. Marco!” a muffled voice screamed from Marco's pants pocket.

I put him down on the ground and rummaged through the man's pockets, retrieved a purple kid's walkie-talkie, and then shoved the unconscious man into the cell with my booted foot and shut the door.

“Marco, I've sent Johnboy and his guys to meet you at Blue Bridge... Are you hearing me... Is this fucking thing working,” the voice of this Luca person continued as he berated Marco.

This had to be the head honcho.

Now the sensible thing to do here would be to keep my mouth shut, keep listening and leave this clown in the dark.

But then again, we'd be out of Grand Rapids and his sphere of influence in ten, maybe fifteen minutes. He wouldn't

have time to reorganise his people and the scumbag had tried to take what was mine.

I clicked the button on the side of the walkie and spoke. “Marco can’t come to the phone right now; he and his pals have come down with a case of something distinctly terminal,” I wisecracked.

There was no need to let this guy know some of his people were still alive and being ripened for interrogation. Besides it wasn’t precisely a falsehood, they may not be dead yet, but their prognosis was undeniably grim.

“What?...Who the...uck is this,” Luca snarled over the crackling walkie.

We had to be getting to the edge of the toy walkie-talkie’s range. This would be a short conversation.

“There is no need to be rude,” I answered back. “This is Captain Torin Carter of the Marena’s Mercy, a corsair extraordinaire, and who might it be that I have the displeasure of insulting?”

“What...re you, some kind of wise guy?” Luca snapped back.

“I wouldn’t call myself wise but I’m a reasonably intelligent fellow, a college boy before the Framework and a life or waterborne larceny beckoned. Now who are you, dipshit?” I taunted.

“...do you think you are...I’m Luca fucking Gattosi, remember the name punk. You’ll be screaming and begging me for death before long,” Marco’s boss raged at me.

“Luca ‘fucking’ Gattosi. How unusual, were your parents as intellectually challenged as you or did they just hate you from the moment your momma pooped you out?” I chuckled.

“...ur fucking dead! Ya hear me, fucking dead!” crackled across the walkie.

Possibly I should have left it there, but I was swept up in the moment and a dark urge pulsed hot within me. “Oh, snap. I was just about to say that. The difference is I don’t make empty threats. So, listen up Luca and listen well. You have made an enemy of me this day and that will *not* end well for you.”

Luca seemed to calm down, which was unexpected, and he spoke again in the odious tone of a snake-oil salesman. “You will turn that ship around and make dock at the nearest jetty and then come present yourself, hand over the ship, the crew, and offer me your fealty.”

I physically shivered with disgust. It felt like my body was being used to filter sewage.

**** You have resisted Luca Gattosi’s attempt to coerce your allegiance. You and those signed to your Canon are now immune to any further attempts from him or those aligned with him. ****

“Did you just try and Jedi mind trick me motherfucker?” I growled in response.

I felt something deep from within me rise and it met something delightedly gleeful.

I had a flash in my mind of something, someone. He was dressed in a dark green hooded robe. His hands, the only part of him visible outside the robe, were seemingly encased in flowing metal armour. The inside of the hood was impenetrably black, but I sensed the figure grinned at me, and there was a name softly whispered.

Drakonis.

Then the name was gone and fading from my memory as quickly as the memory of dreams flee with a morning awakening. I tried to hold on to it, but it was like grasping at smoke, utterly futile.

All I could truly recall was that as I parted ways with who or whatever that had been, he had bridged a gap between me and something other, connecting us.

This new entity dominated my attention and our mutual connector faded into a half-remembered echo.

The new entity was something I couldn't describe adequately, but it was immensely powerful and equal parts malevolent, altruistic, indifferent, intrigued, supportive, and disapproving all at the same time.

I should have been afraid, but I was a day late and a dollar short for fear.

An impulse from the darkest vestiges of my soul responded and mingled with the presence of that unfathomable power and what I said next was now inevitable.

"I shall break you Luca Gattosi. I will take all that you are and all that you have. I will leave you as naught but a shattered ruin of a man. And when you have nothing left for me to take or destroy, then, and only then, will I end your life.

"Within one year this will be done. I swear this on the name of the Shattered Goddess, so she may feast upon the tattered remnants of your soul when I succeed. By her will, it shall be done," I finished the speech that surged from some instinctive place within me and crushed the walkie into shards in my hand.

There was a roaring in my ears that drowned out everything else around me. Anastasia, Quixbix, or the prisoners could have been screaming at me, but I couldn't hear anything but that great power, somewhere, out there, in the galaxy.

I dropped to my knees as the pressure grew in my mind until after what seemed like aeons, the overwhelming roar

coalesced into a cacophonous array of feminine voices.

This was only mildly less disorienting than the wordless wall of white noise, but I could at least pick out some of what was being said.

“We have heard...”

“...ignored...”

“...belittled...you Torin Carter.”

“You’re words...”

“...actions...”

“...feelings...please us...”

“...mean nothing to us...”

“...amuse us...you will be rewarded...”

“...punished...”

“...recompensed...when you succeed...”

“...fail...”

“...forswear.”

“We wish you luck...”

“...misfortune...”

“...nothing, and our undying love...”

“...lust...”

“...hate...”

“...rage...”

“...indifference.”

“May Chaos reign...”

“...flounder...”

“...ebb...”

“...and drown the world in blood... love... lust... hate... vengeance... wrath...insignificance.”

There was more, so much more, but those were the only words I could make out. But I understood the gist of what they meant. Do as I'd sworn or suffer the gravest of consequences.

I was committed to the pledge I had made. If I didn't utterly dismantle Luca Gattosi's fledging empire in a year, then I would be well and truly fucked. As in my soul and the souls of those bound to me would be devoured by some immensely powerful entity with a split personality.

On the upside it sounded like there could be some tasty rewards when I was successful, which I would be. I had to be.

Silver linings and all that.

Razor thin linings.

Had this been a few days ago I would likely have thrown a rage-filled self-pity party and smashed some shit up as yet another powerful and untouchable entity shoved their head up inside my business. These days I'd adjusted to rolling with the punches and seizing opportunity when it presented itself.

How tough could it be to take down somebody who already had enough people under his thumb to control a city with a population of close to two-hundred thousand with only a crew of four?

Yeah, I was definitely going to need more people.

The direct connection between us severed abruptly and I fell to my knees as the darkness of sleep washed over my mind.

Chapter 22

Day 4

I came back to my senses with a start and realised I was no longer in the Brig but on the black silk sheets of my bed. Shana was lying beside me, huddled in close, and my sudden movement disturbed her.

Her eyes opened blearily and then she noticed me smiling at her. “Torin!” she yelped. “You’re back.”

Then she manoeuvred herself on top of me and kissed me soundly. We made out on the bed for a few minutes before we had to come up for air.

“I was unaware that I’d gone anywhere,” I joked as our lips parted.

She slapped my arm playfully. “Don’t be an ass. You had us all worried,” she pouted at me.

<I wasn’t worried. I knew as soon as the Shattered Goddess’ awareness withdrew, and you weren’t already a soulless husk, that you would recover> Quixbix assured me smugly.

“Cheers, dude,” I snarked back at the imp.

I lifted Shana off my chest and sat up in the bed ready to question him about what had just happened. As I did Anastasia walked through the door and into the room.

She scowled at me with a look that was one part aggravated, one part seemingly relieved. “You’re back with us just in time, sir. The sun is up, and we should cruise into the bay at the northern tip of Beaver Island in about fifteen minutes.”

“Whoa, we’re almost there? How long was I out?” I demanded from the room.

“Almost ten hours,” Shana whispered. “Now, do you see why we were so worried?” She finished by darting in for another quick kiss.

“Okay,” I shook my head to clear the cobwebs. “I hadn’t realised it had been so long. Quixbix can you tell me what the hell happened?”

<You had an encounter with one of the Divine, the Shattered Goddess, and pledged to perform an act in her name. Namely, dismantling Luca Gattosi’s organisation in Grand Rapids and then killing him within a year> the imp related, underselling it for all he was worth.

<Don’t get me wrong> he continued before I could respond. <I’m happy you’ve got the attention of the Divine, only the real movers and shakers get personal audiences. But did you have to pick the Shattered Goddess? You had the whole of the Chaotic and Dark pantheons to choose from, why did it have to be her?> he finished with a genuinely worried wail.

“I don’t think I’ve heard you this despondent before Quix,” I commented in surprise.

“Probably because this is the first time his ass had been on the line too,” Anastasia sniggered as she plopped down onto the edge of the bed.

<So is yours, Bunches> he snapped back at the dungeon avatar.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Quixie the pixie. I can’t be separated from my core crystal, even by a goddess. For once, I’m the only one not at risk,” Anastasia needled the imp.

<How dare you call me a pixie, harridan. That's what you are, a bitter old harridan.>

“Stop!” I commanded. “Sniping at one another isn't helping. We need to talk this out sensibly. I'll begin by saying I didn't pick any deity. I'll be honest, I'm not even sure where my pledge came from, it felt like something buried deep within that awoke, emerged, caused a ruckus and then fecked off back to where it came from. I'd never heard of the Shattered Goddess until I said her name. For fucks sake nobody even told me that God's were real. Quixbix are God's real now?”

Quixbix took an unnecessary deep breath, the subtext being that he was shaking his head clear. <Damn it. It's so easy to forget how much you don't know about the Darkwyrlds. Yes, the Divine are as real as everything else. They are only able to affect the Darkwyrlds through proxies, those they have communed with. Which now includes you.>

<They each have their own demesne, of course. In those places their power is staggering, but they can't physically leave them. This limits their influence everywhere else, which is fortunate, as a lot of them don't get along with each other and would likely annihilate large swathes of the galaxy if they were free to try and off one another> he finished.

“That does not sound good,” I said with a sinking feeling.

<Yes and no> he answered. <Usually, being chosen is a good thing. The deity in question has a vested interest in their chosen actor succeeding and will often aid them in that regard. However, the Shattered Goddess is...mercurial. She might choose to aid, to hinder, or both at the same time. It rather depends on what aspect of her fractious personality is dominant at any moment.>

“Damn, I picked up on the conflict but hoped there was a better explanation. Her words in my head were often... contradictory.”

<I think the phrase you were searching for is batshit crazy> Quixbix sort of agreed.

“I think I like her,” Anastasia piped up. “She sounds like my kind of goddess.”

<You won’t be saying that if she has a dark turn, kills Torin, and consumes the rest of us> Quixbix argued.

“She could do that?” Shana gasped with concern.

<Maybe, though probably not directly> Quixbix answered. <She could choose to aid Luca instead of us, which would amount to the same thing when a year is up. Therein lies the rub, you can’t reason with her. While one aspect of her personality might sympathise, another will simply shred you down to your essence and devour you. Which includes me, Shana too, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she can use the Canon to gobble up the boy sorcerer as an aperitif.

<The good news is that any quests I give towards Luca’s demise are divinely super-charged. The bad news, I can’t control how they are super-charged and given her nature, the rewards could be something like an epically powerful sword with a pommel made of razor blades. The gifts she offers will be exceptional but may come with unwanted requirements or side effects.>

“Fine, should I be concerned that I’d never heard of her before I said her name? Did she force herself upon me?”

<No, Acheronians are the children of Chaos and the Dark, primarily Chaos. As an Acheronian you will have an inherent connection to those pantheons. Shana too, though for the shadowborn elves their primary connection is to the Dark pantheon over Chaos.>

Shana nodded her head in understanding. “I’ve found myself thinking along those lines and muttering Goddess of the Dark a few times, but her exact name is on the tip of my tongue, and I can’t quite voice it.”

Now that Shana mentioned it, I did recall her screaming something about the Goddess of the Dark during

our recent bout of sexy time.

<There are several goddesses in the Dark pantheon>
Quixbix cut in. <Although you are likely referring to Tulanna, she is particularly favoured amongst the shadowborn women.>

“Tulanna!” Shana cried. “Yes, that’s the name. Oh, that feels better, it has been bugging me for days.”

I chuckled at her innocent relief at something so simple.

“So, what you’re saying is I could have picked any of a number of different Divine beings, the existence of which has been automatically downloaded into my noggin, but I happened to choose the mad hatter of the group.”

Although, like Shana, something bugged me about that. It wasn’t quite right, but I couldn’t place why it wasn’t right. I had a feeling there hadn’t been a choice at all, neither for me nor the Shattered Goddess.

<That about sums it up.>

“Great. What else have I missed during my communing?” I asked the group and shifted off the bed. I felt the need to pace the room a little, burn off some of the pent-up nervous energy.

“We’ve not been idle, Torin,” Shana assured me. “After we got the remaining attackers into the cells and settled you on the bed in here, Ana and I interrogated the prisoners.”

“Really? How did that go?”

“Very well, sir,” Anastasia replied, taking up the baton. “The three lackeys cracked like fragile eggs and told us anything we wanted to know, though that wasn’t a lot. Marco resisted for a bit longer, but he capitulated after a little extra pressure too.

“We learned that the top guy in Grand Rapids is a Leonid by the name of Luca Gattosi. The Gattosi are an organised crime outfit based out of Detroit. The ‘Don’ is Luca’s father and Luca was sent to Grand Rapids to oversee

the family's interests here. Apparently, Luca has always fancied himself as his father's natural heir to the criminal empire and the apocalypse has given him an opportunity to prove it. According to Marco, Luca has an advanced class called Criminal Kingpin that has allowed him to seize control of rival groups of criminals."

"Criminal Kingpin? Is that what he was trying to pull on me over the walkie, Quix?"

Quixbix answered. <Yes, Criminal Kingpin is an M-grade class, part of a Noble branch that opens up in tier three. M is only one grade below you Torin. Although Criminal Kingpin is top of the third tier and Dungeon Corsair Captain is in the fourth and that tier gap makes a big difference. Criminal Kingpin, like all Noble classes, is big on leadership qualities and allows people to build power through minions rather than personal strength. Dungeon Corsair Captain is a special hybrid of the Noble and Combat branches, boosting both capabilities.

<As someone who acts outside the law you were technically vulnerable to his 'Accumulate Minions' ability. Although you proved too strong to be coerced by Luca.>

"M-grade. Okay, I was under the impression from what Dean told me that only the 'Creators' would get boosted up classes like mine. This guy doesn't sound like one of them," I said, talking mostly to myself.

"Creators? Who the fuck are they?" Anastasia swore.

I silenced her with a hand gesture. "I'll tell you later," I promised.

<You aren't wrong, Torin. I would have to be in his presence to confirm this but according to the prisoners he has a twin sister, Claudia> Quixbix said.

"Why is that significant?" I interrupted.

<I'm getting to that> Quixbix scolded me for my impatience. <Because there is a rare occurrence that can happen with twin births, known as being Twin-souled. Out in the rest of the galaxy, this condition is usually identified early

on, and the souls of the twins are harmlessly separated. With the freshly integrated it can result in adults in a twin-souled state. The Twin-souled are typically separated, as otherwise, it allows one sibling to essentially steal the character aptitude of the other. I think this is what has happened with Luca and Claudia Gattosi.>

“Right, so you think Luca overpowered his sister during character creation, took her aptitude and used it to get a much better class,” I pressed.

<He wouldn't have overpowered her. It's an odd quirk of the Twin-souled that it is only the weaker of the two that can take the aptitude from the other> Quixbix clarified.

“That must have stung his pride. I didn't talk to him for long, but his arrogance was readily apparent. He struck me as the kind of guy to take out his inadequacies on others. Did our prisoners know if he killed her?” I asked the room.

<He can't. While the benefits of taking her aptitude are obvious, there are several downsides for the aptitude thief. They remain intrinsically linked to the victim of their larceny. What happens to her, happens to him. The reverse is not true, though she is prevented from acting against him and would be forced to obey his commands.>

“Sounds familiar,” Anastasia muttered to herself and winced when she saw me noticing.

Another round of corporal punishment was in her near future it seemed.

<Technically she has the same class and species as him but gains none of the benefits, while he lives. Should he die, she inherits everything, but might not be able to change any of the decisions he made. Information on whether they can re-class is a bit patchy as it is such a rare occurrence.> Quixbix continued, ignoring the avatar's interruption.

“That is excellent news. A real weakness we can exploit to take him down,” I enthused.

“We could kill her, to kill him,” Anastasia mused.

“As a last resort, yes. Although it’s not that simple,” I said with a concerned frown. “I pledged to take all that he has, leave him broken and destitute, not just kill him from afar. Quix, if we could get our hands on Claudia is there something we can do, I don’t know, to reverse the polarity of the twin-soul thing?”

<Not that I know of, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t possible. Like I said adult Twin-souled are so rare there is much about the condition that is unclear. Plus, with the Shattered Goddess’ involvement, we can rule nothing out. You may not like this, but Dean would know for sure, and that would mean talking to him again when you level up> he replied.

“Well, that makes me feel much better.” I smiled. “Not the talking to Dean part, but I suspected I’d have to do that anyway.”

“Where is Jackson?” I asked, only now realising he wasn’t present.

“Up on deck,” Anastasia replied. “Keeping a lookout. The spyglass only informs me of threats in or on the water.”

I grunted my thanks. It was a wise decision to keep someone topside.

“Let’s join him then,” I suggested and waved my hand in the direction of the door.

Shana and Anastasia led the way out. When we were in the lower deck corridor I looked down towards the prow where the doorway to the Brig was.

“What did you do with the prisoners once you finished their interrogations?” I asked.

Shana and Anastasia stopped and turned back to me. “Nothing yet,” Shana answered. “We wanted your approval before we decided on their fates.”

“I vote we chuck them into my dungeon,” Anastasia drawled and put her hand in the air.

“Not the worst idea,” I grinned. “Quix, I’m assuming we don’t get the XP for their deaths if we execute them via dungeon.”

<That is correct, Torin. If you want the XP, you will have to kill them yourself. I know that might be a problem for you as they are unarmed.>

“For these arseholes, who tried to take my ship and kill my people, no it won’t be,” I assured the imp. “However, we might have a use for them before we trade them in for XP, either for us or the Dungeon. It’s been ten hours, right?”

“Yes,” Shana confirmed. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that unless there is something about the Brig preventing them from recouping their Hit Points they should be back to full or close to it.”

“Yeah,” Anastasia said. “But I was going to suggest draining them before we throw them in, we don’t want them being strong enough to somehow complete the run,” she chuckled darkly.

“Precisely,” I agreed and raised my finger. “But why do that just once before we finish them off. Is there anything to stop you from using them to fill up your Ship Drain Pool of ten thousand?”

Quixbix cackled with delight. <I love it. And no there isn’t any reason, at least not in the short term.>

“Good. Would you care to elaborate on the long-term implications?” I pressed him.

<Of course, there is a Framework failsafe to prevent undue suffering. It’s meant for people in situations where they are starving to death but can’t die because their Hit Points keep replenishing before they can expire. Take damage from the same source repeatedly for long enough and eventually, the damage will bypass Hit Points and go straight to your Health. If Anastasia drains them daily, you should get a month out of them before it kicks in.>

“A month will do. I have a feeling it won’t be long before they have company,” I laughed darkly.

We made our way up onto the deck and waved to Jackson who was perched on a stool on the poop deck above the cabin. The coastline of Beaver Island was on the left. White sandy beaches with the occasional summer home.

“Anything to report?” I called up to him.

“Not really, Captain,” he yelled back. “No sign of any people at any rate. Several of the houses appear to have taken some structural damage. More than what I saw in Ionia or to the properties near the Grand River we passed. But I’ve not seen any clues to what may have caused it.”

“Keep your eyes peeled, we should be there soon,” I called back.

In fact, I could see up ahead the crescent of the bay where the St. James Township had been built. The few buildings that were unobstructed appeared abandoned and the only sound was the cry of the gulls that circled above us. I scanned the birds with my Analyse ability quickly. No mutated versions were present which was a good sign.

<Torin> Quixbix interrupted my gull watching.

“Yes, what is it Quix?”

<It just occurred to me that you may not have been capable of absorbing the quest updates in the wake of your unexpected audience with the Shattered Goddess> he said quietly.

“You know what, I can’t remember seeing anything,” I told him after I tried to jog my memories.

<I thought as much. I’ll ping you them again. You have a quest to eliminate Luca Gattosi and your cove founding was considered part of that, so has been updated. Your repeatable crew quest remains unchanged, though.>

Then the quest prompts flooded my vision.

**** The Corsair's Canon 4 (Kx2)*

You have your ship, you even have the beginnings of a crew, what next? Every pirate needs a cove. A friendly port to call home or to store their ill-got gains or drink, whore, and gamble. While any neutral venue will do for your run of the mill pirate, a Captain needs more. A cove that is unquestionably their own. Especially if they are on a war-footing with a rival dastard.

Success: Found or convert a coastal settlement into a Lawless Pirate Cove within striking distance of Grand Rapids with you as its undisputed leader.

Rewards: 6,800 XP, and future The Corsair's Canon quests and two new secondary quest chains.

Cuirass of the Bound. Shattered Gauntlets. Drainer's Whip.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

It wasn't much different from the original, at least not in what I had to do. The quest had more rewards, including a second quest chain, a bit more XP, and two new pieces of equipment. Shattered Gauntlets and the Drainer's Whip.

**** Divine Retribution (AE*x10)*

You have pledged the utter annihilation of your rival Luca Gattosi in the name of the Shattered Goddess within one year. His death alone is not enough. You must dismantle his growing power base, either scattering it or preferably assuming control of it for yourself. Those who follow him must either die or forswear him completely.

Success: Take all that belongs to Luca Gattosi and then kill him.

Rewards: 105,000 XP, 100* upgrade points, and the favour of the Shattered Goddess.*

Gear rewards variable.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete then you and all those connected to you will be consumed by the Shattered Goddess. ****

I whistled softly as I read through the Divine Retribution quest.

“What’s with all this variable nonsense?” I asked Quixbix.

<That’s because this isn’t a simple quest. This is what you would get if you completed it today based on the extent of Luca Gattosi’s power base, which is a lot more than what we have. The rewards and success requirements may shift upwards as he solidifies his position. Criminal Kingpin’s accrue strength quickly. However, the class does require them to be in contact with those tied to them in order to continuously reinforce their loyalty. This means they tend to struggle when it comes to expanding beyond their immediate surroundings.>

“That hasn’t been the case before. Surely the overarching Framework knows his potential strength and can make a determining assessment,” I argued.

<Normally, yes. But the Shattered Goddess is a wildcard that even the Framework can’t predict. Even if she doesn’t intervene indirectly, and she will, she can’t help herself, your body is awash with her power after her visitation. That will influence a long-haul quest like this.>

“But this could be good, right? I might be getting more bang for my buck,” I asked.

<We can but hope> was Quixbix’s less than comforting response.

“Alright, I’m going to go drain the blood bags before we sail into the bay,” Anastasia announced. “With your permission, sir,” she added when I glared at her.

“Better,” I said and rolled my eyes. “And you aren’t a vampire,” I called out to her as she skipped back to the cabin door with my approval.

Anastasia shrugged her shoulders. “I’m draining their lifeforce so I kind of am. Oooh, I’m an energy vampire,” she cackled gaily. “Fear me,” was her parting retort as she scampered below deck.

“An energy vampire, like Colin Robinson,” Shana giggled.

“Yeah, I don’t think Ana watched *What We Do In The Shadows*. Probably best we keep that under our hats,” I suggested with a chuckle.

“As long as they’re not cursed,” Shana quipped.

<Cursed hats? Who has a cursed hat?> Quixbix squawked with a hint of panic.

Shana and I looked at one another and bent over with laughter.

The good mood could only last so long and ten minutes later we sailed into the bay of the St. James Township. Anastasia had come back up top. Inside the bay, there were three jetties to choose from. There were a few larger motorised vessels moored at them but plenty of room for us to dock wherever we pleased.

Each of us scanned the small harbour for activity and apart from the gulls, and the breeze blowing rubbish about, there was no sign of any living beings.

“Quixbix, do you know where the podium is?” I asked quietly.

The ghost town vibe implicitly encouraged quietness.

<Not precisely, but from the layout we can see, there appears to be more buildings on the left, the inland side of the bay, than on the hook of land on the right, so probably there> he advised.

The largest jetty that looked to be made from concrete was the first on the left-hand side of the bay. One of the sides was clear, so it made sense to make use of that one.

“Okay, let’s moor up at the big jetty that’s nearest. I can see it has a few bars and a hotel nearby, which usually indicates a central hub and would be a good place to start our search,” I ordered.

We slipped in smoothly and docked. We didn’t need to tie up our ship as tiny crystalline hooks emerged from the hull and gripped onto the side of the jetty holding it in place. The taffrail gate opened and the gangplank extended a few feet onto the concrete wharf, and we trooped off the ship and onto dry land.

As we expected trouble, we were fully armoured and geared. We’d been able to kit Anastasia in some poor leathers from what Shana had replaced with Bound gear and what we’d looted from Luca’s minions.

Unfortunately, they hadn’t had anything better on them than what we were previously using. Or perhaps I should say fortunately, as if they had been better geared, they would have been more difficult to handle, and that fight had been a smidge closer than I would have liked already.

After debarking from the ship, we wandered through a small car park and onto the main street that ran around the whole bay. The building directly across from the car park was a bar. From what we could see, there had been minimal damage. The lock was broken and several of the windows smashed from the outside.

We poked our heads in and took a look around.

The chairs and tables had been overturned, and there were bits of seaweed and oily residue on some of the surfaces.

No people, no bodies either. Nothing. Not even pets gone wild, just the cawing of the gulls in the sky above.

“Well, this isn’t creepy at all,” Jackson muttered sarcastically.

“Any ideas, Quix?” I asked the imp as I rubbed some of the residue between my fingers.

<A few, none of them good. Something from the lake, obviously.>

“Hmmm, Anastasia, are you getting anything from the Marena’s threat sensors?” I said as my eyes scanned the wreckage of the bar.

“Neither you nor I are on the ship, sir,” she commented drily.

Of course, the spyglass was in my inventory and Anastasia had to be on the ship to interface with it directly, at least for now she did.

I glared at the cheeky minx anyway and she relented. “There was a cluster of creatures called Lesser Fomorians that we passed on our way into the bay. They were on the far edge of what we could detect almost the full mile away and at the bottom of the lake, maybe two-hundred and fifty metres down.”

Quixbix sighed in my head <I was afraid of that. Fomorians, even the lesser variety, are a bunch of aggressive sea dwellers capable of coming onto land for short periods. They tend to leave this kind of residue, so I think it’s a very strong possibility they are responsible for the town’s apparent vacancy.>

“How many of them were there Ana?”

“Hard to say exactly, fifty-six within our detection range. But as I said they were right on the edge and there could have been more just beyond,” she said, dropping her sass.

<Balls> the imp swore. <They have to be from a super-splurge spawning crystal. Lesser Fomorian mobs, there is no way it could have disgorged that many in a week otherwise. Unless there are multiple crystals in close proximity forming a cluster, which is just as bad.>

“Doesn’t matter,” I assured them. “We’re here, and now we know. We still need to find the podium.”

There was a series of nods, and we exited the bar hastily. The lake water remained calm, and the street was similarly placid.

“Any ideas?” I asked the group.

“A few of the podiums we passed were by the post office in the smaller towns,” Shana suggested.

I looked about and saw a signpost for the post office a bit further up the street and we walked cautiously a few hundred metres up the road.

The post office was in a similar condition as the bar and several other buildings that we walked by. Windows smashed and doors forced. But there was no sign of the podium.

“This is a bust,” I muttered. “Do we just wander around until we find it?”

<No> Quixbix responded. <They are always out in the open and usually central to the settlement’s limits. Maybe outside of a town hall or something like that.>

“A town hall, hmmm okay, but where?” I mused.

“How about that building over there,” Jackson said pointing back the way we had come from. Over the top of the bars and a bit further on from the waterfront. “That looks like the biggest building we can see. Maybe it’s there.”

“Worth a look,” I agreed and led my team back in the other direction.

We left the main street and took a route behind the buildings we had previously surveyed to get our eyeballs on some fresh real estate as we backtracked. If the podium wasn't here, we would have to come up with a more scientific search pattern or retrieve the bikes from the ship's hold and cycle around the town until we found it.

As we neared the building it became obvious from the signage this wasn't the town hall but the local community school.

We stopped in front of the doors.

This building seemed to have avoided the light damage the others had suffered. Probably as it was shut for the summer, with no people inside. Therefore, nothing to draw in the spawned mobs.

However, there was also no tell-tale obelisk-shaped podium in sight.

"It's not here either," I called out to the group.

<Bloody hell> Quixbix swore again. <Please don't let this be what I think it is. Over to your right about five metres> he announced firmly.

I jogged over to where he directed and saw what he was talking about.

The podium had been here. There was a large square of the obsidian crystal on the ground in the middle of the car park, and we'd missed it as we had been scanning for something sticking up vertically.

The depressed square reacted to my approach and the obelisk started to rise from the centre. "Excellent, we've found it," I announced cheerfully.

<No, this is not excellent. We need to get back to the ship and quickly> Quixbix contradicted me.

"What? Why?" I sputtered.

<I don't have time to explain...> Quixbix started, but he was interrupted by a gurgled caterwaul from somewhere deeper into the island away from the bay.

And then another from the direction of the post office behind us.

Followed by a third, answering the first two, coming from just beyond the school, but much closer than the other two.

Finally, a fourth, louder than any of the others came from the direction of the bay itself.

<The Fomorians are still here> Quixbix informed us unnecessarily.

They were indeed, and they had us surrounded.

Chapter 23

“Bugger,” I understated. “They sound close. Come on, back to...”

My command was cut off as the world slowed around me as Quixbix entered me into Action Mode.

<Too late for that now. We need to talk this through.>

It’s been a while since we’ve been in full Action Mode. Usually, you can only do this if you’re giving me a quest, I hinted.

<Sort of. The Pirate Cove quest has been updated, which has allowed me to give you fifteen minutes. Do you want the good news or the bad news?> he asked.

Hit me with the bad news, I sighed. Internally at any rate, I wasn’t technically making any sounds being frozen in place.

<The quest has become more specific. You can’t found just any cove to complete the quest, it has to be here. And you must dedicate your new settlement to the Shattered Goddess.>

Alright, that is irksome, we can’t just sail away and pick somewhere else. But that doesn’t feel bad enough to qualify as bad news. What else is there?

<I’d compliment you on your insight, but it was fairly obvious> he sniggered. <Back to the serious matter at hand. Fomorians are dedicated followers to a sea god named Sholmdir.>

Is he a real God or a made up one? I interrupted.

<Oh, he's very real, now, even if he was made up pre-Aperture breach. And he hates the Shattered Goddess with a watery passion. And you are a representative of hers on Earth.>

Of course, I groaned.

<Yeah, the collapsed podium was the clue. Normally mobs just wipe out the populace of a town and then move on or back to wherever they're holed up. This leaves the podium in place, ready for any gutsy characters to claim the settlement anew. The fomorians were trying to destroy the podium and prevent a settlement from existing here. A salt the earth kind of deal.>

Out of the ordinary was never good. Something that was confirmed as Quixbix continued.

<This isn't something Lesser Fomorians would do on their own. That means they are being led by a Greater Fomorian, something capable of being nudged by Sholmdir. It is too early for named mobs even with the super-charged spawning crystals.>

Why would they have been nudged?

<Even with a Greater Fomorian lurking about they wouldn't destroy a podium. The mobs are like programs following a behavioural script, and excoriating settlements is not part of it. Named mobs, who take time to develop, have a bit more independent thought and can break the mould. Otherwise, they need a nudge to behave outside expected parameters.

<I have no way of knowing if you were the first person on Earth who communed with the Divine, but once you did, it opened the way for all the others to contact their representatives on the planet, not just the Shattered Goddess.

<I'm guessing due to her divine fingerprints being all over the founding quest that as soon as you picked this place out as your target, the settlement was marked in some way.

Sholmdir has acted and moved to deny her agent his prize and prompted the fomorians to set a trap and finish you off. The Shattered Goddess has then reacted in kind and updated the quest.>

Fuck me, but this is already getting complicated.

<You were the one who had to go and swear on the name of a goddess you knew nothing about> Quixbix needed.

Enough Quix. How fucked are we?

<Hard to say exactly. The Lesser Fomorians are T-grade threats. Individually, not dangerous to your team but there are at least four groups, and we know the group coming from the bay could be fifty-six strong or more. Doubling that figure is probably still a conservative estimate. Then there is the Greater Fomorian who we haven't seen yet, and I suspect is with the bay party from the fishy cries. They are J-grade monsters and would present a challenge to your team if it was on its own. With a hundred plus minions...I think you can work that out for yourself.>

I think you may have understated how bad the bad news was, I chuckled, injecting a bit of gallows humour.

Instinctively, I reacted positively to the challenge presented. My weariness and discontent were swept aside. There was a part of me, deep inside, that lusted for combat and relished the opportunity to face off against overwhelming odds. It was strange to feel an odd sense of gleeful anticipation at the dire circumstance we found ourselves in, but I wouldn't complain at my lack of hopelessness.

I'd always been a stubborn bastard and this aspect of my personality had been amplified.

<Acheronians> Quixbix chuckled in kind. <All is not lost, so if you can reign in your last-stand hard-on, I will explain. Fomorians may be able to come on land, but they remain sea creatures. Lake creatures even, given where we are. They can't stay on land for prolonged periods, they must return to the water.>

Okay, so what you're saying is we need to fight our way through and then wait them out?

<No, the different groups sounded too close to your position. However, you are right beside a school> Quixbix said with a wicked cackle.

Sorry dude, I've no idea what you're proposing, I laughed.

<It would seem your earlier mercy towards a certain 'thinks-he-knows-it-all' boy sorcerer will pay dividends for you now. Schools have a similar protection field to prisons and the BuyMart, but only if they have school-aged children within them.>

But Jackson has graduated, I argued. **Will it still work?**

<Yes, at seventeen he is considered school age for Earth, so the field will activate.>

Was that the good news?

<No, that is strategy. Like I said earlier the quest has been updated to reflect the extra difficulty.>

**** The Corsair's Canon 4 (Kx4)*

You have your ship, you even have the beginnings of a crew, what next? Every pirate needs a cove. A friendly port to call home or to store their ill-got gains or drink, whore, and gamble. While any neutral venue will do for your run of the mill pirate, a Captain needs more. A cove that is unquestionably their own. Especially if they are on a war-footing with a rival dastard. You have identified the perfect location, but it is infested with creatures devoted to Sholmdir who are trying to destroy it. Thwart their attempts, claim the settlement for yourself, and dedicate it to your patron the Shattered Goddess.

Success: Convert the vacated St. James Township on Beaver Island into a Lawless Pirate Cove and dedicate it to

the Shattered Goddess.

Rewards: 13,600 XP, and future The Corsair's Canon quests. Three new secondary quest chains. The new settlement will automatically be considered a town. You will be gifted buildings by the Shattered Goddess.

Cuirass of the Bound. Shattered Gauntlets. Drainer's Whip.

Consequences: Sholmdir's ire.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

<As you can see, if you pull this off you will get enough experience to level up. The settlement will automatically be bumped two tiers from Hamlet to Town and your patron is going to give you some new buildings, which has been left suitably vague, but freebies are freebies.>

Great. How does hiding in the school help?

<The Fomorians have the numbers to break through the field, but if they do so it will weaken them and then you would likely be able to fight your way through. Alternatively, they may try and wait you out, in which case, we make a plan for when enough of them retreat to the water.>

Gotcha, sounds like we have the kernels of a plan. Let's do it. As I finished speaking time sped back up.

“...New plan, into the school,” I bellowed and enforced the order with my will.

All four of us stopped in our tracks and ran over to the school building. It honestly did look more like a community centre than a school, but there couldn't have been too many children on the island, especially during the off-season.

The door was padlocked, but I jammed an ice dagger conjured on the fly into the lock and after a few seconds the accumulated cold damage made the metal brittle enough to

smash. We could have broken a window or forced the doors, but I didn't know if that would make things easier for the incoming shoal of fish demons.

With the lock broken, I tried the door handle.

**** You are not a resident of St. James Township or an eligible entrant. This is your only warning. Any repeated attempt to gain access to the building will result in the application of security measures. ****

“Jackson, open the doors,” I told the green-clad sorcerer and stepped back out of the way.

Jackson quirked his eyebrows in confusion but hopped up the handful of steps to the door. As I had a second, I analysed the school.

Beaver Island Community School

Owner: St James Township

Access: St James Township residents and under 18's

Mana Enabled Security: Level 5 protection field

Durability: 10,000/10,000

The door opened smoothly for Jackson, and he stepped in holding the door open for us. Apparently, this was enough of an 'invite' and we rushed through with alacrity, closing the door behind us.

I noticed the door had a turn-lock that didn't need a key from the inside. “Jackson, lock the door.”

The lock clicked and less than a second later the first wave of Lesser Fomorians poured into the car park we had just vacated.

Lesser Fomorians x264

Grade: T

Level: 1 (average)

HP: 200

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Exceptionally High

XP Value: 900

Mob Description: Lesser Fomorian's are a kind of sea demon, but not limited to saltwater. They have a mana-based ability which allows them to leave water for a period of up to 24 hours. When they return to the water the ability can't be used again for 2 + the number of hours they were out of the water. If they leave the water without activating the ability or remain out longer than 24 hours, they will begin to suffocate, incurring Hit Point damage.

They were bald humanoids the same height as a human with large, dark, fish-like eyes. A few slits on the sides of their throat suggested they had gills, and their skin was a pasty white. Their fingers and toes were webbed, and they were nude but seemingly lacked any external genitals which was a blessing. The fomorians were armed with a variety of harpoons and spears made from large, spiny, fish bones.

No ranged weapons, unless you counted the harpoons, which should at least make running from them a little easier if we had to. I may have relished the challenge, but I didn't want to lose Shana.

I didn't want Jackson to die either, but for obvious reasons, Shana's welfare took precedence. Anastasia would be fine provided I was, which actually gave me an idea depending on what happened next.

Over the next ten seconds or so, more of the shoal of over two hundred filled the car park and surrounded the building. A few of them got within a few feet of the building and then backed off. For the time being, it looked like they weren't going to try and overwhelm the protection field.

That was when the Greater Fomorian waded through his smaller brethren.

Greater Fomorian

Grade: J

Level: 2

HP: 2,000

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Impossible

XP Value: 5,320

Mob Description: Greater Fomorian's are a kind of sea demon, but not limited to saltwater. They have a mana-based ability which allows them to leave water for a period of up to 24 hours. When they return to the water the ability can't be used again for 2 + the number of hours they were out of the water. If they leave the water without activating the ability or remain out longer than 24 hours, they will begin to suffocate, incurring Hit Point damage.

The Greater Fomorian was nine feet tall and twice the width of the smaller versions. He had the same pallid, pasty, skin and wielded a huge fucking harpoon that had to be twenty feet in length with jagged coral making the barbed tip.

I stepped up to the door and stared the fucker down.

Subconsciously, I acknowledged Quixbix advising me that the beast's threat from my analysis was based on having

the shoal of other Fomorians with him and not an individual assessment.

This was the moment of truth: would they storm our stronghold or withdraw for a prolonged siege.

The Greater Fomorian returned my stare and then opened its wide mouth revealing rows of thin spine-like teeth. He looked just like a deep-sea Anglerfish and let loose with an almighty gargled roar.

But they didn't attack.

The Greater Fomorian spat some foul muck onto the road, bark-gurgled some orders to the rest and then sat its ass on the ground with a fishy sneer in my direction.

Half of the smaller versions followed his directions and took off towards the bay. The rest spread out around the building, though a quick analysis for a second time revealed there were still more than a hundred of them as well as the big one to contend with.

The threat level dropped from Impossible to merely Near Impossible, things were looking up.

I turned to the rest of my team as we stood in the entrance hall of the school.

“Looks like they aren't willing to try and break through the protection field,” I told them.

“What level is it?” Jackson asked me.

“Five,” I told him. “Why?”

“Shana filled me in that they are T-grade mobs with two hundred Hit Points, right. Let me see,” he muttered, and his eyes went distant, reading through some of the help files.

<I could tell you what he is looking for> Quixbix grumped.

I ignored the imp and waited for Jackson to finish his own calculations.

“As I thought, they are strong enough to break through, but the entire shoal would take fifty to ninety percent feedback damage if they did so. It makes sense that they are waiting until the field comes down,” he said after a moment.

“Wait, why is the field going to come down?” I asked in alarm.

Jackson pushed his lens-less specs back up his nose. “The school’s protection field is derived from it being part of the St James Township. Suppressing the podium as they have will destroy the settlement so to speak, at least in terms of the Framework recognising it as a settlement. After that, the field goes poof. I assumed Quixbix told you this before you ordered us to come in here.”

“Quix, what the fuck have you done?” I barked angrily at the imp.

<Cool your heels, Torin> my imp snarked. <I’m as at risk as you these days. I wouldn’t have suggested this if it wasn’t the best idea.>

“Explain,” was all I managed to respond with to his grossly inappropriate laidback attitude.

<Boy wonder is right; the field will fail if the settlement is eradicated. However, when you approached the suppressed podium, you interrupted that process and forced it to start over. And during that moment, the podium activated, and I was able to interface with it, so I know exactly how long we have, which the fomorians do not.>

“Uh-huh,” I mumbled, unsure where he was going with this.

<You forgot I could interface with podiums didn’t you> the imp sighed.

“Kind of, I blame it on you not being able to tell us where it was earlier,” I admitted.

<Podiums in settlements where all the residents are dead or have left, go inactive. I can’t find what I can’t connect

to.>

“Fine, how long do we have until the settlement is eradicated and the field drops?”

<Twenty-eight hours> Quixbix told me. <Which is almost the maximum of thirty. Plus, having interfaced with the podium briefly, I know the fomorians originally started the process ten hours ago, shortly after you channelled the Shattered Goddess. That means even if the Greater Fomorian just came from the bay, he would need to return to the water before the timer expires. The big lug has no way of knowing the timer has restarted and will likely assume the field will drop before he is forced to return.>

After Quixbix finished Anastasia yelled out “Uuuhh, those fucking scaly fish cunts are crawling all over me.”

We all looked at her in surprise.

“Well, the ship me, that is. I can feel them and their horrid mucous covered fish-feet, and it is fucking disgusting,” she shuddered.

“They can’t get below deck, can they?” I asked, though I suspected Anastasia would be a bit more alarmed if they could.

“Not easily,” Anastasia assured us. “The ship is in lockdown. The substance it’s made of is very tough and it self-repairs if there is Dungeon Mana available to feed the regeneration. So far, they seem to be content crawling over the ship getting their foul slime everywhere.”

“Good,” I said. “That they can’t get in not that they are sliming you,” I clarified when Anastasia glowered at me.

“Seeing as we have some time, I have been thinking things over and have a plan, or I should say a series of plans. Ana, you’re not going to like the part you get to play,” I grinned at the temperamental minx.

Anastasia Ruslanovna

Anastasia heard the door to the school locking behind her immediately after the door slammed closed.

“I hate this stupid fucking plan,” she muttered, and rubbed her sore ass.

Her bum still smarted from another round of spanking the captain insisted on delivering a few hours ago.

<Yes, you’ve said so on many occasions over the last ten hours> Quixbix chuckled in her head.

“Well, tell the captain how much I hate his stupid fucking plan again,” she bitched at the cheeky little shit.

Captain. She couldn’t even think of his real name or any of the many other more suiting epithets for him since his order. Him, with his smug grin, wild untameable hair, sculpted muscles and sexy, smouldering, eyes.

Damn it, she was fantasising about him again.

Even after he *compelled* her to enact this ridiculously stupid fucking plan. She looked out at the car park in front of her. The fomorians hadn’t been very alert, too long in the sun she supposed.

<Snap to it> Quixbix laughed. <You wouldn’t want them to smell a rat.>

At least once she was twenty-five metres away from the captain, she wouldn’t have to listen to the quest imp’s taunting.

“Oh, dearie me,” she screeched to get the sea-monsters attention. “I can’t take it anymore. I must get away.”

Stupid fucking plan.

Here goes, she thought.

She jumped off the steps and kept wailing like a dumb movie blonde and started running for a tiny gap in the fomorians line towards the harbour area with her arms flailing in the air.

A gap so very small she had no chance of making it.

<Your acting skills could use some work> the imp chuckled.

Anastasia ignored him and kept running for the impossible escape.

Stupid, stupid, fucking plan.

She never made it to the tiny gap before the Greater Fomorian's ridiculously oversized harpoon punched through her back and erupted out the other side. The coral tip doing a fantastic approximation of a chest-burster alien.

Bojemoi! That fucking hurt.

Too late Anastasia realised she should have asked the captain to rescind his other order from earlier, the one where she had to feel all pain. The oversight hadn't been her fault, it had been his fault, distracting her with his crazy ideas and big swinging dick tucked away in his overly tight, crotch bulging, pants.

Damn it, she cursed internally. She couldn't stop herself, even now, skewered on the world's largest kebab stick.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, fucking plan. Stupid fucking captain!

The force of the harpoon threw her forward like a rag doll and she hit the tarmac hard. That hurt like a son of a bitch too. She barely had more than a few Hit Points remaining when she finished sliding painfully across the car park to the waiting fish-fuckers.

She coughed up blood and gasped for air but only managed to gurgle blood like one of them.

The captain had even taken what paltry armour she'd been wearing off so none of the damage was mitigated. She only had seconds but that didn't stop the smaller fuckers pouncing with obvious glee and jabbing her full of holes with their bone-tipped spears.

Her eyes started closing and the world went black.

Blink.

Until it wasn't.

Anastasia stepped forth from the shimmer of her Dungeon experiencing the weird sense of displacement that always accompanied that first step. It was bizarre that her avatar felt it too, but in a way, she was glad. It made her feel more like a real person and not an, admittedly very smoking hot, ruby.

She shook my head and rubbed her hands all over her body, to be sure she was intact once more. Everything was where it should be, even the fun bags out front. She undid another button on her shirt to really show off the puppies.

That'll teach the captain, missing out on a perfect leering opportunity.

Anastasia was standing under the stairwell on the lower deck of Marena's Mercy.

Well, what do you know? The captain's stupid fucking plan worked.

The plan to let her avatar be killed in a horribly gruesome manner while under his orders to re-materialise at the earliest opportunity. A plan she had been very much not in favour of.

The captain had theorised that the special properties of the Soul Collar should allow her to return without him being present, which was normally required to bring her avatar back after it had been slain.

That irritating and smug imp had happily agreed.

The pair of them would likely be full of themselves when they find out they were right. Of course, if they hadn't been, then a grisly end of their own awaited them.

She checked the time on a watch they had taken from Luca's people that had been stored in the Hold. Almost seven hours had gone by, which was also as predicted. It matched the amount of time required for her avatar to recover all four hundred and ten of her natural Hit Points.

Okay, it was time to enact part two of the stupid fucking plan, which along with part three wasn't quite as irritating or as stupid as part one.

First, she paid the pathetic prisoners a quick visit in the Brig and topped up her ship-based Drain pool which was now a little over six thousand. Waste not, want not.

Then she rushed up the steps to the upper deck and moved to the end of the corridor by the locked cabin door. Anastasia could sense there were ten of the nasty fish-fuckers befouling her sleek ship-body and a further thirty 'hiding' in the bay waters where the ship was moored.

She snapped her fingers and the cabin door swung open.

The fomorian's big, black, dead-fish eyes swivelled towards her at the unexpected motion coming from onboard the ship.

"Get off my beautiful, sleek, ship-body, you gross motherfuckers!" she screeched at the top of her lungs.

The disgusting fish-fuckers gurgled at one another and then one of them gurgle-shouted while shaking his spiny spear thing in the air and they rushed towards her.

Anastasia turned tail and ran back down the corridor. The fomorians were hot on her heels, but she was too swift for them. She passed the end of the corridor and into the stairwell alcove, halted, turned, and snapped her fingers again.

The change she enacted at the end of the corridor didn't block it precisely, but her command shifted the dungeon entrance from its place beneath the stairwell to right in front of her at the end of the upper deck corridor. She made sure the stonework left no gaps and the entire ingress into the stairwell alcove was covered by that distinctive shimmer in the air.

The fomorians either didn't notice or didn't care as they charged headlong through the shimmer and into the dungeon.

One benefit of being claimed by the captain was that some of the rules she'd been bound by as a wild dungeon no longer applied. Allowing entrants to retreat once the run was sealed and confirmed as an instance was one of those rules she could now circumvent. Her ship-body technically counted as the waiting lobby she was otherwise obliged to provide to give potential delvers a chance to change their minds.

Once all ten Lesser Fomorians had rushed through, she sealed the run as her first instance.

Anastasia shifted her perspective to the thirty in the water and they had reacted to the sentries' cry onboard and were clawing their way up and over the taffrail.

It wasn't long before they had scrambled up and like their stupid slimy brethren before them, got over-excited at the sight of the cabin door being open and followed their kin heedlessly down the corridor into the waiting maw of her dungeon.

She had to split this group into two separate instances of fifteen. Any more of them and they ran the risk of them completing the run and coming out buffed up. Mobs could gain levels and gear just like people and they didn't want that.

Three separate instances were her current limit, so she couldn't use this trick again until one of the groups was completely dead. That could take a while if they figured out where they were and stopped rushing around. However, it had been enough to clear the fuckers blockading the ship.

She strode through the shimmer from the other side, unaffected. She was the dungeon after all.

Exiting the upper deck, Anastasia closed the cabin door and sealed the ship again. There were a few hours left until dawn which is when the captain and the rest of the crew wanted to make their move. She had until then to gather supplies for part three of the stupid plan which increasingly looked like less of a Hail Mary and more like a well-executed flea-flicker with every minute.

Time to raid what was left of the shops.

Torin Carter

Day 5

Watching the Greater Fomorian slaughter Anastasia hadn't been easy. I knew she would survive as long as I did, but she was mine and part of me railed against letting the monster have even this small victory.

We settled in for the wait until dawn when we would make our move.

Before Anastasia sacrificed herself, we had searched the school top to bottom while Quixbix kept watch on our besiegers outside. We hadn't found anything of use apart from a few teaching supplies. Which while useful for playing hangman to pass the time hadn't unearthed anything of real use.

The only other thing of note was a lockable backroom we could use. That wouldn't be any help against the fomorian threat, but it did afford Shana and me some privacy to occasionally relieve the tension.

However, the room proved to be somewhat lacking in soundproofing if the red of Jackson's face was any gauge to go by when we returned after our first relief session. We didn't let that stop us from going back a few more times, though.

I had formulated a plan to seize the town from under the nose of the Greater Fomorian. Although he didn't really have a nose it was more like a couple of holes with a nubbin above them.

The timing was the key issue for the plan. Preferably we needed to strike when the Greater Fomorian wasn't present. He was a bit of a powerhouse, and his presence would definitely tip the scales in the fomorians favour.

My assumption had been that the big guy came directly from the bay, which gave him twenty-four hours until he absolutely had to return to the lake.

Quixbix assured me the mobs had a level of intelligence.

Although that didn't make them potential MENSA candidates, the Greater Fomorian would know that the settlement's eradication could take up to thirty hours to complete. It should be under the mistaken belief that ten of those possible thirty hours had passed and that it would be able to remain on land long enough to wait out the fall of our protection field. Not knowing I had reset the countdown.

Therefore, we sent Anastasia out shortly before nightfall, ten hours after we were trapped in the school. That ten, plus the seven it would take for her avatar to return and then another two or three to gather the necessary supplies from the town would add up to close to twenty and dawn.

Which would coincide with the point at which the Greater Fomorian would expect the settlement to be destroyed if it took the maximum of thirty hours.

It would be at that point my opponent should realise that something was up. With only four hours left of his land time left he would have to make a choice. Return to the bay

and leave a new shift of Lesser Fomorians in place to pen us in or assault the school with the protection field in place.

Either way, Anastasia should be ready for both eventualities.

My guess, which was proved accurate thirty minutes before sunrise, was that if the beast hadn't been willing to force its way in earlier it wouldn't try it now. The settlement destruction was still underway, and the beast should belatedly figure out that we had somehow restarted the countdown.

It sent a handful of its minions down to the bay and after a few minutes a fresh force of almost one hundred Lesser Fomorians surrounded the school and the Greater Fomorian and those with him departed the way the others had come.

Fortunately, the ship was moored several hundred metres further up the bay, so they wouldn't pass by and see that, hopefully, Anastasia had despatched any guards on or around the ship.

A few minutes after the sun rose, I looked at the duo beside me.

“You both ready?”

Shana nodded and smiled approvingly.

Jackson yawned. “I didn't sleep well, but potential death is like a triple jolt of coffee in the morning.”

I chuckled at him. “Don't worry, when Ana gives the signal, it will all work out.”

“How can you be sure?” Jackson asked nervously. “What if she couldn't resurrect and it's just us?”

I stepped up to the door and analysed the group hemming us in. There were ninety-six Lesser Fomorians.

I smiled at Jackson. “Even with just the three of us, the threat is only Very High. Not suicidal like before. If things don't look to be going well, we just need to get close enough

to the podium square to restart the timer and then get back into the school. This ain't our Butch and Sundance moment, kid."

The quizzical expression on his face informed me he hadn't watched the classic Redford and Newman film. Then again, I probably wouldn't have if film class hadn't been so popular with the football players, for obvious reasons.

<No need to worry about that> Quixbix spoke unprompted. <Bunches just stepped within twenty-five metres, and I've re-added her to the party. She has a few choice words for you, Torin, but the plan appears to have been a success.>

I scanned the mini horde outside and confirmed the threat had dropped from Very High to High with Anastasia's return to the fold.

"Choice words for me or for you? Seeing as you keep baiting her, Quix," I quipped.

We readied ourselves for the fight ahead.

<Torin, Bunches appears to have improvised an interesting addition to the plan.>

Before I could question him further, the rat-a-tat-tat of automatic gunfire from half a dozen assault rifles rang out across the car park from behind the fomorian line to the right-hand side of the front of the school.

This was followed by Anastasia's wild cackling. "Take that you fish-fuckers."

Shana half laughed; half snorted. "Not exactly the signal we agreed upon, but I suppose it'll do."

I grinned in return, unlocked the door, swung it open and launched myself out of the building, diving left, away from the bay and towards the podium square. Resetting the counter was priority number one in case everything else went wrong.

I spared a glance back down towards the bay to take in Anastasia and the addition Quixbix spoke of. I almost did a

double take at what I saw before shaking my head and re-focusing on my own task.

Anastasia was standing at the back of a group moving up the road from the bay and she was laughing wildly.

The six figures at the front were what I expected to see, they were clothing store mannequins that Anastasia had turned into golems. They were about all she could manage with a five kilogram limit. As we agreed she had equipped them with the gear we have taken from Luca's goons after their attack.

This included the six assault rifles the mannequins were armed with.

Thankfully, once the inventories of our prisoners and the dead had been emptied into my coffers, they had been carrying a significant amount of ammunition for the rifles.

The mannequins were now firing in three-shot bursts at the encircling fomorians. I knew from my own experience that each bullet, not being mana infused, inflicted sixty or more Hit Points of damage to the unarmoured. The scaly skin of the Lesser Fomorians looked quite tough, and I expected it provided some level of mitigation to reduce that damage by half, maybe a quarter.

A reduction between fifteen and thirty hit points per bullet was not a huge amount, but enough to wear the sea demons down and the shock factor of the unfamiliar weapons couldn't be ignored.

What I hadn't expected were the four prisoners. Naked as the day they were born, except for dog collars around their throats and leashes attached to the collars being held by Anastasia. Held in her other hand, she had a bullwhip that she was cracking for judicious effect.

Where the fuck had she got a whip from?

I could ask her that after the battle.

First, I had to deal with what was in front of me. There were maybe a dozen Lesser Fomorians in the vicinity of the

podium's square and they reacted to our appearance from the building by shaking their spears, made from long fish bones, and charging towards the school.

Shana and Jackson were to stay near the steps of the school and use their ranged weapons from there. Unfortunately, we had to be a few steps away from the school itself. The protection field, as useful as it had been, being a Framework default as opposed to something procured or built did have some restrictions.

Primarily, you couldn't attack those outside the field from inside and maintain the integrity of the shield. Otherwise, Shana would have played merry hell with their numbers over the last day and this battle would be something of a walkover.

Speaking of Shana and Jackson, an arrow zipped past my ear and embedded itself in the flaccid torso of the lead Fomorian.

**** Shana has inflicted 140 damage on Lesser Fomorian, it has a maximum of 60 Hit Points remaining. ****

Not an outright kill-shot, but enough to make it stagger and lose momentum. We'd been talking over the notifications that Quixbix flashed to us, and he had changed it up to maximise relevant information. As the imp had access to the starting Hit Points of the mob, as well as knowing the damage Shana, Anastasia or I dealt he could give us the theoretical maximum the mob had left.

Sadly, he didn't have access to Jackson's logs in the same way and we agreed it would be best not to guess what he contributed.

Meanwhile, a ball of green flame surged past me on the other side engulfing another of the sea creatures' heads.

The gunfire continued behind me, while Shana and Jackson got another arrow and flaming ball off before the

Lesser Fomorian met me in melee.

Shana dropped one with a head shot and Jackson hit the same target as the first flame ball, killing his too.

I barrelled through the centre of the fomorian group which surprised them, but four of them managed to jab me as I bashed them from my path.

**** -40 Hit Points. (530/570) ****

A few more steps brought me to within range of the podium square and I witnessed it raise a smidge. I could hear that the confused fomorians had turned and followed after me.

<The counter has been reset> Quixbix confirmed for me.

Following our formulated plan, I ducked and rolled to my right as Jackson had sprinted after us when I went through the enemies ranks and they had turned to pursue. He unleashed a wave of green flame into their backs while Shana covered him with her arrow fire. The mannequins approaching with awkward steps from the bay had kept the fomorians further south of our position distracted or occupied.

Finishing my roll, I returned to my feet adroitly as the nine living fomorians from the shoal screamed as they were licked by Jackson's green flames. The first fomorian Shana had shot, died in the blaze, but the others remained standing.

Most of them turned to the new threat of Jackson who was already retreating back to Shana's side, so I was able to run into their midst almost unopposed, hacking and slashing various body parts as I went.

**** You have inflicted 58 damage on Lesser Fomorian, it has a maximum of 142 Hit Points remaining. ****

**** You have inflicted 58 damage on Lesser Fomorian, it has a maximum of 142 Hit Points remaining. ****

**** You have inflicted 116 damage on Lesser Fomorian. Lesser Fomorian is slain. ****

**** You have inflicted 232 damage on Lesser Fomorian. Lesser Fomorian is slain. ****

There were five down from this shoal of twelve and they were thoroughly confused as to where they should focus their response.

As often happens to groups lacking a defined leader, they all pulled in different directions. Three continued to hare off in pursuit of Jackson and only four tried to keep me at bay with their bone spears.

I fended off and parried a few spear thrusts when I heard the gurgled cry of another fomorian fall.

**** Having suffered 50% casualties, this Lesser Fomorian subgroup must undergo a morale check.*

*Lesser Fomorian morale check failed! Mental and Social attributes suffer a fifty percent debuff until the combat is complete, a subsequent check is passed, or they join up with another unaffected larger sub-group. ****

Music to my ears, almost immediately their attacks were less coordinated and one of them broke from the group and fled past me deeper into the island.

With that, I was able to swiftly slay two more and then cut down the third when it turned its back to me and ran. I looked past the island side of the school and there was another large shoal of Lesser Fomorians who had been at the far end patrolling that corner. They seemed torn between running to

the action on the unsighted opposite corner where Anastasia was or maintaining their current position.

Sadly, their dithering afforded them the opportunity to spot me by the podium.

With a visible target, they proved more capable of decisiveness and the group of thirty or so started to run towards our corner.

Having dealt with the dozen near us, and with more on the way we retreated and linked up with Anastasia. She had lost two mannequin golems in the initial fight but had cleared the bay-side corner nearest the school entrance.

The durability of the golems was based on their mass. With so little it would be a default of one. Combine that with the poor quality of the material used and they would not be able to take much before they were destroyed.

The four remaining golems were busy swapping out magazines on their rifles for the next threat.

We now had the force of thirty sea demons I'd seen on the island side coming for us and a similar sized group coming from the far corner of the school on the bay side of the school. That fourth and final group had held back until the gunfire had ceased and then made their move to attack, but the firing would resume soon enough.

“Captain,” Anastasia winked at me and waved her hand, mentally ordering her golems to open fire on the attackers we could clearly see.

The four men she had on leashes looked thoroughly browbeaten and there was the unmistakable stripe of whip marks on some of their backs.

Marco's in particular.

“We have thirty more coming from the other side of the school in seconds, we need to...” I started to bark at the group.

Anastasia just grinned impishly at me.

Then she released her grip on the four leashes and dropped them to the floor. She cracked the bullwhip loudly near the naked rear ends of the four prisoners.

“Mush,” she yelled. “Run, run now, that way,” and she pointed up to where I had just come from. The podium square that had the obelisk slowly emerging from the ground.

Everybody looked at her in shocked silence including me and then she swung the whip with another almighty crack and the four prisoners took off in the direction she indicated.

“Ana, what are you doing?” I asked her, confused.

“Watch,” she chuckled and put away the whip and summoned the seventh and final assault rifle we had procured into her hands.

For a moment, I thought she meant to gun them down as they ran away from us, but she started to walk over and join her four-golem gunline who along with Shana and Jackson were busy mowing down the second large group.

The prisoner’s flight from Anastasia had them reach the edge of the school at the same time as the second large group of fomorians who had reacted to me reached the corner. The four men saw the sea demons coming at them and jinked right in fright into the wooded area, busting a gut to get away from both threats.

The Lesser Fomorians checked their advance in surprise and their black fisheyes swivelled between us and the fleeing goons.

It took them less than a second to consider their choice. Go after the heavily armed and armoured group down by the bay who were spewing death and destruction or pursue the naked, frightened, and vulnerable men deeper into the island away from said death and destruction.

They chose the latter.

“They make great distractions, don’t you think,” Anastasia laughed as she opened fire on the fourth group

advancing on us.

I couldn't help but laugh in return. I would have to reward her for this.

Moments later, the under-fire creatures failed a morale check and were faced with continuing their attack or fleeing for the safety of the bay. They chose life and fled, not that we let many of them actually make it that far.

<Congratulations> Quixbix extolled. <I can confirm you are out of combat and there are no surviving Lesser Fomorians within the town limits. My advice is to claim the settlement as quickly as you can. It will make defending it from those that ran inwards and the big one still in the bay that much easier.>

I couldn't agree more. The battle had gone far better than I could have hoped for. I sprinted up to the podium. When I stood upon the square the obelisk began to rise much quicker. After only a few moments it had fully appeared, and the touchpads became active

There was already a question prompt on the screen.

This settlement is currently unoccupied. Would you like to claim this settlement?

I swiftly picked the yes option.

Your town claim is being contested.

<Balls> Quixbix swore.

Before I could ask, a loud gurgled roar emanated from the direction of the bay where the fomorians had been coming and going.

<As you may have guessed the Greater Fomorian and his little friends managed to get onto the beach before you hit yes> the imp informed me.

It was only about one hundred and fifty metres from here to the beach. We ran around to the side of the school that faced the bay and observed the group charging up the short road, the enraged Greater Fomorian leading the way.

A quick analysis revealed the sea demon had one hundred and ten of his little buddies in tow. The analysis did reveal some reassuring news, though. Their air-breathing ability had not renewed, they would only have a few minutes before they began to suffocate.

We hadn't anticipated them taking such a risk.

In the space of a couple of breaths a plan formed in my mind.

Anastasia had already ordered the remaining mannequin-golems to take positions at the end of the road and they started firing into the advancing fishy mob.

"Shana, fire as many infused arrows as you can at the leader's head and then you and Jackson get back into the school. Ana, you stick with me," I ordered.

Three heads nodded without question.

Jackson threw several more of his flame balls before he admitted he was out of mana and retreated as ordered. Shana managed to get three arrows into the monstrosity's head before she followed him inside.

Anastasia and the mannequin-golems emptied their magazines before the horde overran the golems and smashed them to pieces with ease. The fragile golems had zero chance in a melee fight.

"With me, Ana," I muttered and then yelled loudly. "For the Shattered Goddess! May Sholmdir drown in his own bile!"

**** Your attempt to naturally taunt the party of fomorians was successful. They will choose to attack you rather than other available targets. ****

The flashed message was followed by the Greater Fomorian reacting accordingly and screaming some fishy obscenity in my direction while trampling a few of his lesser fellows to get to me.

Just as I'd hoped.

Sadly, taunting didn't cause the targets to lose all semblance of sanity. They wouldn't run through a trench of stakes and fire to get to you. They would, however, seek to find a way around said obstacle in an attempt to get to you rather than switch to your allies who weren't as well protected.

At least as long as the taunt lasted.

Although we could have retreated into the school and waited for them to flee back to the water when they began suffocating, I'd had enough of passing up opportunities for XP.

I'd foregone ripe chances in the past as we'd been under time constraints. I had to get my ship and then I had to find my cove. Well, I'd done the first and would soon do the latter. Time to grab a little more advancement while I could.

Plus, I would just have to deal with the fucker later anyway. Why not now when he was literally a fish out of water.

"Come on," I said to Anastasia, and darted to our left down the road that led back into the township towards where the ship was moored, though that was not our intended destination.

"I hope you know what you are doing, sir," Anastasia grumbled as she sprinted along behind me.

All the fomorians chased after us, which was gratifying. Luckily, as they were sea-borne creatures they weren't built for sprinting, and we kept ahead of them quite

easily. In fact, we had to slow down a little to keep them in sight and maintain my taunt's effect.

Periodically, one of the Lesser Fomorians would chuck their fish-bone spear at us, but we managed to keep out of range of any real danger.

We had been running for almost a minute before the road up ahead ended in a T-junction.

During the overnight wait, I'd been studying the map of the area. Which was helped by the school owning a detailed one of the island in a display case.

On the other side of the bay was a hook of land that was sparsely populated about half a kilometre wide and long. I wanted to lead the watery host there, so when they started to suffocate, they wouldn't have an easy egress back to the water.

Taking them deeper into the island may have seemed like a superior option for that, but half a kilometre from the township on that side was Font Lake, an inland lake on the island.

I suspected the fomorians were well aware of the lake's presence. During the original ambush, one of the groups had come from that direction. Also, it was the direction the prisoners and their pursuers had scarpered off in and I didn't want to run into a group of fomorians already ahead of me.

"I want to lead them away from the bay, into the woods on the other side, Ana. Turn right onto Main Street and then we're going to cut left just after we get past the curve in the road," I puffed as we ran.

Anastasia nodded but didn't answer verbally. I wanted her to know our final destination in case we got split up.

*** -10 Hit Points. (520/570) ***

I'd been clipped by a spear as we turned the corner. We'd had to slow down to minimise the length of time we'd be out of their direct line of sight.

This was the riskiest part of the plan; It involved kiting the chasing mob back within sight of the bay. But we should be away from the bay again after only another minute or so of running.

Quixbix had informed us that the monsters could go three, maybe four minutes before they started to take Hit Point damage for being out of oxygenated water. Which matched my rough estimation of how long it would take to get away from the bay and into the centre of the wooded area at a running pace.

During the ten-hour wait for dawn, we'd had plenty of time to research various methods of finishing these guys off. Suffocation damage started at one Hit Point per second but doubled every ten seconds.

The two hundred hit-point Lesser Fomorians would have forty-three seconds once suffocation began before they perished. The big one perhaps seventy-five seconds. Presuming they hadn't already lost any hit points. Shana had shaved five hundred from the Greater Fomorian and a lot of the Lesser Fomorians had been hit by bullets or Jackson's flame balls.

I just had to hope my taunt would keep them so focused on me they wouldn't think about turning back until they started incurring the damage. By which point, if we were far enough away from the shore it would be too late for them.

We ran along the main street, passed the marina and a microbrewery before we took our left turn off the main street. There were a few more houses but we were soon under the cover of trees.

Anastasia flashed me a cheeky grin. "This might work after all,"

"We have the hardest part left to go," I warned.

A minute later and by my estimation we were in the centre of the forested area and as far from the shore on all sides as we could be.

We slowed and stopped and took cover behind a large tree. We had increased our pace ahead of reaching here to put a little extra distance between us. That and the sea-based mobs were even less well-equipped for running through a wooded area than they were a street.

With that being the case, our prisoners-cum-distractions may have managed to evade their pursuers. We would have to think about potentially rounding them up later.

As the fomorians approached, I could see signs that some of them were beginning to suffer the effects of being out of the water for too long. They were trailing the main group and making vile, throaty dry-heaving sounds as they struggled to breathe. Their dark fish-like eyes were sweeping in all directions trying to determine the closest way back to the water.

Anastasia opened fire with her assault rifle into the mass of those who were unaware or less affected thus far.

Then I stepped into sight, spun my scimitars with a flourish and smiled mockingly. The Greater Fomorian roared at me and gave chase.

I sprinted north. “Ana, go south and circle back.”

We needed to keep them occupied for only a little longer.

Those who had been struggling earlier had already entered panic mode and had abandoned the battle. They were either running back the way they came or in random directions which they thought might be closer to water. The fomorians hadn't been the swiftest creatures in the woods at the best of times which further hampered their efforts.

Suffocation as you would imagine brings with it certain debuffs that affect your decision making and physical

capacity and they noticeably struggled and were prone to running into trees.

I was confident few, if any, of them would make it.

I had more to worry about, though. Hardly any of the non-panicked beasts had gone after Anastasia, there were fifty-odd as well as the big fella on my tail and the time factor seemed to have penetrated their fishy skulls as they redoubled their efforts, and I was swamped in a hailstorm of thrown spears and harpoons.

There were too many to dodge effectively and it included the gigantic harpoon which I had to prioritise for avoidance, so I was hit multiple times by the smaller spears.

**** cumulative -100 Hit Points. (420/570) ****

I led them on a merry chase in a circle for the next ten seconds and thankfully, they didn't have an inexhaustible supply of such weaponry. Especially not the giant harpoon which the Greater Fomorian had to retrieve before he could throw the terrifying thing at me again.

I didn't know how much inventory space the creatures had but I think they ran out after hurling four spears at me each. I was hit several more times and was down another one hundred and fifty Hit Points when they both ran out of projectiles and the suffocation debuff started to affect the whole pack of them.

My circular kiting pattern had brought us back to the point where Anastasia and I had split up a little while ago.

I stopped running when the Lesser Fomorians started to scatter in a panic, rushing headlong for whatever source of water they could find.

The Greater Fomorian did not follow its lesser brethren.

He was making the same hacking dry-heaving sounds like the others, but he only had eyes for me and that suited me fine. I thirsted for a real battle too.

We charged one another and he tried to skewer me with that harpoon. I ducked his thrust, and it grazed my shoulder.

**** -20 Hit Points. (250/570) ****

I had far fewer Hit Points than I would care for, but I was inside his guard and slashed at his unprotected belly with my scimitars.

**** You have inflicted 232 damage on Greater Fomorian, it has a maximum of 928 Hit Points remaining. ****

As I cut into his gut, I inexplicably tripped on a gnarled root when I tried to dart out of his reach afterwards.

The creature took advantage of my sudden imbalance and clubbed me about the head with a closed fist, sending me sprawling to the ground.

**** -10 Hit Points. (240/570) ****

Then quicker than I believed possible the fish-freak turned towards me and rammed the harpoon down with all its might.

Reflexively, I desperately scrambled backwards, which saved my life as instead of being speared through the chest the harpoon penetrated through the meat of my thigh instead and a fresh notification flashed in my peripheral.

**** +154 Hit Points (394/570) ****

**** -290 Hit Points. -2 Health. (104/570) (16/18) ****

My first thought, other than ‘fucking hell but this hurts so fucking bad’, was that I ought to be done for.

Then I registered the hand on the back of my neck. “What would you do without me, sir?” Anastasia deadpanned in my ear.

She had converted her personal Drain pool into healing energy and poured it into me an eyeblink before the harpoon sank into my thigh and kept me alive. She was definitely getting a reward after this.

Before I could say anything, she let go of my neck and launched herself at the Greater Fomorian. Anastasia grabbed hold of his leg and hung on for dear life as the fomorian tried to dislodge her until she was swatted away by the sea monster’s fist.

**** Anastasia has inflicted 154 damage on Greater Fomorian, it has a maximum of 774 Hit Points remaining. Greater Fomorian is under 25% Hit Points. ****

While Anastasia had kept the creature occupied holding onto its leg, I had gripped the harpoon at the base of the coral tip and wrenched the fucking thing out of my leg. That was easier said than done, but I was hopped up on adrenaline and fury. Absently, I recognised that the wound mostly sealed itself once the harpoon was clear which helped considerably.

The harpoon had been barbed so it cost me more Hit Points and Health to remove it in the manner I did. But I didn’t have time to break the shaft and pull it through the other way.

**** -30 Hit Points. -1 Health. (74/570) (15/18) ****

I scrambled back onto my feet, popped a fifty Hit Point recovery pellet into my mouth, grabbed my swords and lunged at the distracted creature.

With the combination of the damage we had already done, and what it had to have taken from the lack of oxygen, the monster had to be on its last legs. At least, I hoped that was the case. We'd be in big trouble if that wasn't the case.

It was time to end this, and I leapt into the air and sank both scimitars into its big vile eyes.

**** You have inflicted 464 damage on Greater Fomorian. Greater Fomorian is slain. ****

I'd sunk the scimitars so deeply into its head they had stuck there, but the notification of its demise reassured me as I landed on the ground with a bolt of intense pain from my wounded thigh. Still feeling rage and hate towards the fish bastard, I punched it in the chest with both fists toppling it over.

As it lay on the ground, air escaping from its lungs, I pulled my blades from its ocular cavities and kicked the ribs of my defeated opponent for whom I had zero respect.

<Phew! You had me worried for a moment. That thing had to have some kind of enraged status at the end. He did as much damage to your leather-armoured leg as he did to Bunches when he speared her in the back earlier today>
Quixbix commented.

"You didn't say anything about it having an ability like that earlier," I grumbled.

<It's not typical for them. I suspect some Divine shenanigans.>

“A gift from Sholmdir then?”

<Or the Shattered Goddess making you vulnerable to his attack, to ensure you earned the rewards she was offering.>

I glanced to my side and saw Anastasia was still with me and walked over and helped her back onto her feet. With the adrenaline fading, I felt the throbbing ache of pain in my leg and couldn't help limping a little.

“Are you okay?” I asked her to distract myself from my discomfort.

“I'm down about half of my Hit Points, sir,” Anastasia admitted and then I felt her healing touch again as she boosted me back another one-hundred and fifty-four. “But I'll live as long as you do,” she grinned.

“Good,” I smiled in response, “because we have a shitload of looting to do.”

Chapter 24

With the looting of the dead Fomorians and my slightly gimpy leg, it took us almost an hour before we linked back up with Shana and Jackson at the school. Shana had seen us from across the bay, so they hadn't been worried that we'd perished. Most of what the fomorians dropped was garbage and a bit of coin but every now and then one of them had something mildly useful.

Lesser Red Coral Ring

Spells or abilities which utilise Fire Mana cost 5% less.

Durability: 10/10

We picked up several of these in different colours which correlated to different magic schools.

And the boss went one better, or maybe I should say two better.

Greater Blue Coral Ring

Spells or abilities which utilise Frost Mana cost 15% less.

Resistance to Frost magic or Cold damage 10%

Sources of Cold damage increased by 20%

Durability: 10/10

That one went on my finger no questions asked.

There was a small surprise when we got back, one of the prisoners had run back into town and Shana and Jackson had taken him back into custody. He was being hunted by a group of ten Lesser Fomorians, who had been hot on his tail, but the pair had dealt with them handily.

The prisoner reported that one of his companions had been caught by the sea demons and torn apart, but he had no idea what had happened to Marco or the other one since they had split up in the woods.

I wasn't worried about them. They would either come crawling back to the safety of the town or be killed by whatever was running loose on the island. If they hadn't been already.

“Hey, Quix, how did we do on the XP front? I notice you've been quiet on the updates,” I asked him and limped towards the podium ready to check if we could claim the settlement.

<I didn't want to distract you> the imp answered. <You may want to brace yourself because...well...because you've made out like a bandit.>

I stopped in my tracks at that. This was most unlike Quixbix, so it had to be good or bad, you could never really tell with him sometimes. “Lay it on me.”

<With your Notoriety bonus you've accumulated ninety-one thousand XP. Shana got ninety-seven thousand.>

“Fucking Nora,” I whispered.

Quixbix hadn't been underselling it, that was enough to push me up two levels. Shana had been on the tip of making level three after the kills we racked up passing through Grand Rapids. With another ninety-seven thousand, she would power to level nine.

I whistled softly as I thought about it. “I mean it was a tough fight and I almost died but that seems excessive. Are you sure there hasn’t been some kind of mistake?”

<No mistake. Just a lot of different factors combining into a bonanza of XP> he started.

<First off, the experience is only split three ways, between you, Shana, and Jackson. Almost anybody else would need seven or more other qualifying people to have pulled this off, you had Anastasia and her golems filling out the necessary complement. The base XP split ten ways would have been eighteen and a half thousand each, instead of just over sixty thousand.

<Second, your Notoriety bonus is giving you close to an extra fifty percent on that sixty thousand. Shana, a little more than that.

<Third, you were rewarded for killing 199 Lesser Fomorian and the Greater Fomorian. Even the ones who died from suffocation as they had been in combat with you and despite them running off, they died soon enough that you get the credit. If it hadn’t been for Sholmdir’s urging, the second wave wouldn’t have come after you while their air-breathing was on cooldown. They would have gone back to the murky depths, rebuilt their strength, and attacked the settlement later.

<All of that adds up to a bucket load of XP. And you’ve got twenty thousand more coming when you complete this quest.>

I laughed out loud at that. “Everything’s coming up trumps for Torin today it seems. But I got a hint from your tone this isn’t all sunshine and roses, spill it.”

<Nothing major and it doesn’t really affect you right now as you are all under level ten. However, the Darkwyrlds does have a few factors that inhibit overly quick advancement. Dean may have told you about threat thresholds?>

“He might have mentioned something in passing. Enlighten me?”

<Whenever you accrue enough XP to level up over ten experience is garnished based on how threatening the mob was to you. Twenty-five percent of the experience is withheld from killing anything rated Moderate threat and below. This lasts for a number of weeks equal to the level you have achieved. Should you level up again during that period another throttle is applied, and they stack, so you would lose fifty percent until the original period concluded.

<And the XP required to level a class begins to go up after you get to your twenty-fifth level. Ten percent of the base cost is added. This continues every twenty-five levels. Both factors combine to slow progress. You should probably level yourself up and speak with Dean before Shana and Jackson do themselves.>

“Okay, I see. This is what prevents people power levelling from endlessly killing boars in the forest,” I commented.

<What?>

“It’s a South Park thing,” I replied.

<Is that supposed to mean something to me?> he griped, thoroughly confused.

I ignored his grumbling and stepped up to the podium and tapped the screen.

This settlement is currently unoccupied. Would you like to claim the settlement?

I clicked yes and this time there was no alarming message telling me the claim was contested.

The former settlement St. James Township has been claimed by you. Your class is Dungeon Corsair Captain, please select settlement type from the list available to you.

Hamlet

Military Outpost

Temple

Pirate Cove

Undefined

Obviously, I picked Pirate Cove from the list.

To qualify the settlement had to be on the coast. Luckily bodies of water the size of Lake Michigan counted. Any buildings related to piracy would be cheaper to purchase and maintain. However, I did have a major drawback the cost and requirements to officially increase in size were doubled. This wasn't a huge concern for my first settlement as my quest promised an automatic bump to the fourth tier, Large Town.

Except for Hamlet, which was the baseline selection, each option had differing requirements, benefits, and drawbacks.

Military Outposts provided bonuses to defensive structures, but limited a settlement to the third tier, small town.

Temple was for more religiously minded factions. They had to be dedicated to a deity or particular pantheon. There were bonuses for buildings dedicated to the host deity or pantheon, but potential severe penalties if rival faiths gained a foothold.

Undefined was an interesting option. It started with a few automatic minor drawbacks but allowed you to customise what you wanted about the settlement. The only rule being that everything had to balance from the start position. You could add further drawbacks of your choosing to allow benefits of equal merit. There were a lot of options, too many to go through right now, but it did present possibilities.

It was also interesting that my class determined my options.

What types of settlement might be available to others?

Please select the governance style of the settlement from the list.

Anarchic

Despotic

Lawless

Law-abiding was not on the list of available options, which made sense for a pirate cove. I had a brief dark impulse to go for Despotic for shits and giggles, but the quest specified my cove needed to be Lawless. I was fairly sure I could change it later if I felt the need to, but it was unclear what difference it would make in the long run.

Would you like to be designated as the leader of the settlement or nominate another current resident?

That was a quick decision of yes.

Please note as a Lawless settlement you cannot join or apply to be part of any existing Kingdom or faction. Would you like to create your own faction at this time?

I suppose that answered some of my questions about the differences in settlement types.

“Quix, is there any downside to creating my own faction right now?” I asked him.

<Hmmm, unless you’re planning on bending the knee to another, then no. The faction you create will be the banner you operate under. As you are Lawless you would have to

cede ownership of all the settlements you control if you wished to formally join another faction and vice versa. The Framework would no longer recognise you as an entity capable of seceding from that faction and declaring independence> the imp answered.

<The biggest difference between Lawless and the other three types is the diplomacy aspect, you can't enter into formal Vassalage, Alliances, or Treaties. That doesn't prevent you from making informal ones, but they won't be officially recognised and enforced by the Framework. That has a few detractions but also benefits.

<For example, other factions can't officially declare war upon you as you are not recognised as an entity that war can be declared against. That won't stop them from waging war against you, but any benefits your enemies might get for an official declaration are denied to them.

<You can still sign contracts with other factions, of course. This is an effective workaround for not being able to sign treaties. The agreements would be with you personally as faction leader instead of the faction itself.>

Well, I had no intention of bowing to anyone. There was a lot more on the diplomacy front that needed to be explored but we could leave that for another day.

I picked yes and was prompted to name my new faction. I had to think about that for a minute. It really was just as well we had dealt with the sea demon's threat already; I would not have wanted to rush this.

I cycled through a few possibilities. Leviathan's Lament or the Sea Wolves, but the more I thought about it the more I felt deep down that my association with the Shattered Goddess wasn't something I would untangle myself from, ever. That and I had to dedicate the settlement to her to complete the quest. Perhaps it would be best to jump in with both feet rather than try and play both sides.

The Shattered Storm.

As I typed the name, an enormous sense of rightness flowed through me. I could have sworn something reached out and both patted my back in support and clipped my ears for impertinence.

Congratulations! You are the leader of a new faction and settlement. As the ultimate leader of the faction, how would you like to be referred to? How would you like designated leaders of settlements within this faction to be referred to? Lawless settlements may change this designation at will.

As it appeared that I could change the terminology whenever I wanted, I didn't spend long making this decision. The Kraken King for me and Kraken Lords for anyone I designated as a leader of another settlement under my control.

We have detected that you are an adherent and principal actor for a deity, the Shattered Goddess. Would you like to dedicate this settlement in her name?

This will increase her influence within and around the settlement while decreasing the influence of other deities.

Again, not much of a choice if I wanted to complete the quest and follow through with my pledge. I selected yes.

Finally, would you like to keep this settlement's former name St James Township or give it another?

It was nice that it was letting me know the process was almost done, I had started to believe I would be here forever.

I had nothing against St James Township, but it didn't really suggest the right tone. I may have referenced the Kraken in my title but something like Pyke, while perhaps impressive and punchy to off-worlders, would just make me seem like an unoriginal fanboy hack to any local rivals.

I typed in Stormblade Harbour and accepted the confirmatory prompt.

Yes, it was a bit of a nonsense name, but it sounded cool. I could have named the place after myself but decided against it. That seemed far too big-headed.

<Quest 'The Corsair's Canon 4' completed. 20,128 XP awarded. Equipment Cuirass of the Bound, Shattered Gauntlets, and Drainer's Whip awarded. Settlement Stormblade Harbour has been automatically upgraded to Large Town status. Hidden bonus, all unoccupied or available buildings within Stormblade Harbour's sphere of influence are now owned by Torin Carter. Capital Slave Market, Capital Black Market, Capital Shield Generator, Capital Palace, Capital Dockyard, Capital Plexus Gateway and Secret Undersea Trove built. You have also incurred Sholmdir's ire.>

We all stumbled as the ground beneath our feet shuddered. Many of the surrounding buildings, roads, and landscape, including the school beside us, collapsed in on themselves and rising from the ground were several massive structures that replaced them.

Amazingly this only took, maybe ten seconds. This was particularly awe-inspiring as before us, replacing the school, its car park and much of the land nearby was a grand crenelated castle. The castle was huge, the outer wall was made of large dark grey bricks, but the towering palatial buildings inside were made from gleaming marble of various hues.

The palace hadn't just replaced the school, the exterior walls extended for at least half a kilometre further back. The castle walls had also spread deep into the island, it had to be as wide, if not wider, as it was long.

In fact, what had been the school was now just a covered gatehouse that led to a drawbridge as the heavily fortified Palace was surrounded by a dry moat. Although if this massive stronghold extended as far inland as I suspected, it had to reach Font Lake, so that moat might not be dry for much longer.

Our eyes were drawn away from the epic arrival in front of us by a cacophonous rushing sound coming from the bay. We ran down to the shore to see what apocalyptic event was happening there and saw that water was surging into the bay at great speed creating a swirling whirlpool at its centre.

“What the fuck is happening Quix?” I yelled over the near-deafening sound of frantically thrashing fluid.

<What is happening is that the Shattered Goddess really didn't skimp on these new buildings> Quixbix started. <They are Capital level, Torin. Eighth tier buildings in a fourth tier town. You've seen what that means with your new Stronghold-cum-Palace. She has also given you a Capital Dockyard. Well, the bay isn't large enough for a structure of that size, so the Framework had to excavate down to accommodate and has created many levels of subterranean docks.

<The maelstrom you see before you is the water from the lake pouring into the sudden vacant space. The excavated area will fill shortly and then the surface will calm down again.>

“I'm guessing this isn't normal, Quix,” I understated.

<No, not even remotely. You shouldn't be able to build Capital level buildings in a settlement that is only a Large Town at all. They also cost a frigging fortune, seriously, nobody on Earth should be in a position to buy even one of these buildings for years, if not decades, and you have six, not including the Trove> he said in a conflicted tone.

Quixbix didn't need to give a reason for his conflicted description as Anastasia whispered loudly. “Every greedy

fucker on the planet is going to want this place when they find out.”

<Not just this planet> the imp added unhelpfully.

I felt him mentally prod me to stare out to the bay. Several hundred metres out from the bay was a vast semi-circular structure made from the same Cimmeric Crystal as my ship. The plexus gate was very reminiscent of a stargate from the eponymous movie, except much, much, larger and without the chevrons. There was a stone building, with a large extended platform on its roof that connected the gate to the island opposite the palace walls. Almost exactly halfway.

The platform element ended at the shoreline. The building, which I thought of as an arrival terminal would disgorge people at the far end of the stronghold walls. At the point in the wall there was a second very heavily armoured keep at that corner which led into a back courtyard area that seemed to be separate from the palace grounds. We could see an internal wall, even taller than the outer walls that created the partition.

I analysed the gateway quickly.

Stormblade Harbour Plexus Gate (Capital)

A gate for travelling to other gates within the Plexus network using the Plexus Gate's Mana.

Owner: *Shattered Storm (Stormblade Harbour)*

Access: *Shattered Storm members and Stormblade Harbour residents.*

Gate Status: *Hidden (Only the Gate's owner and those with authorisation may pass through. The existence of the Stormblade Harbour is withheld from the wider Plexus network.)*

Mana Pool: *10,000,000/10,000,000*

Status: *Earth Plexus Gate destinations only. Earth Plexus conduits are currently not connected to the wider Darkwyrlds network. (There are no other revealed gates on Earth currently.)*

Durability: *1,000,000/1,000,000*

I looked out across my new settlement. There were two very large, though not nearly as large as walled fortress and palace, buildings that had sprung up in the town. One was over on the other side of the bay on the hook portion of land. The second had formed in the area where the post office used to be. I analysed these as well. The one nearest the Palace was the Capital Black Market.

Stormblade Harbour Black Market (Capital)

Black Markets are connected to and act as regular markets with the addition that illicit goods can be sold through them. Sold items can be collected in person or transported via the Plexus network using the Black Markets Mana.

This is a Prime market.

Owner: *Shattered Storm (Stormblade Harbour)*

Access: *Shattered Storm members and Stormblade Harbour residents.*

Mana Pool: *1,000,000/1,000,000*

Status: *Other Earth Markets only until Earth Plexus conduits are connected to the wider Darkwyrlds network. (Currently 15 regular Markets +2 Black Markets)*

Durability: *1,000,000/1,000,000*

And the building on the other side of the bay.

Stormblade Harbour Slave Market (Capital)

A Slave Market is for the sale of those bound by collar, contract, or conviction into indentured service. Purchased slaves can be collected in person or transported via the Plexus network using the Slave Markets Mana.

This is a Prime market.

Owner: *Shattered Storm (Stormblade Harbour)*

Access: *Shattered Storm members and Stormblade Harbour residents.*

Mana Pool: *1,000,000/1,000,000*

Status: *Other Earth Slave Markets only until Earth Plexus conduits are connected to the wider Darkwyrlds network. (Currently 2)*

Durability: *1,000,000/1,000,000*

I'd like to tell you I was shocked that this wasn't the first slave market built on Earth, but I wasn't. At the beginning of the week, I may have been conflicted about this, but I'd changed significantly and made a pledge that would be very difficult to complete.

For that, I would need to build a significant power base of my own and that would require people. Buying those without a choice could prove much easier than convincing the free willed to join me.

Either way, it was another option at my disposal and as Quixbix said, a freebie is a freebie.

And these appeared to be big fucking freebies.

There was also a third smaller domed building, which, unlike the Palace walls and Markets that had been built from dark grey bricks, was made from the black Cimmeric Crystal.

Stormblade Harbour Shield Generator (Capital)

Provides an eighth-tier protection field

Owner: *Shattered Storm (Stormblade Harbour)*

Access: *Only those authorised by Torin Carter*

Mana Pool: *1,000,000/1,000,000*

Status: *Shield limited to the fourth tier by the settlement size. Upgrades for higher tier level shielding have been paid for and will be available when the settlement is upgraded. (Shield not currently activated.)*

Durability: *1,000,000/1,000,000*

I also couldn't help but notice I was getting a repeated flashing prompt trying to encourage me to level up.

“Quixbix, can you shut this levelling prompt off? I'm going to do it, but I want to check a few things first before I do,” I said.

<No problem, Torin. Where are we going first?>

“The shield generator. I want to activate that before we do anything else,” I told the group, and started walking in the direction of the domed structure.

The rest of the team followed me, but the forlorn looks Anastasia and Shana gave the Palace indicated where they would rather be exploring.

“Don't worry ladies, we shall check out my rather ostentatious new abode in due course, but safety first.” I chuckled.

<Good plan>” Quixbix remarked. <The current circumference of the town's limits will have been ringed by Shield Pylons made from crystal. The use of the shield can be quite mana intensive. If you leave it set at the current maximum level, it will use forty thousand mana a day. The Shattered Goddess has kindly filled the Mana Pool of all the buildings but that will last less than a month before it is depleted.

<However, you can adjust the shield strength to something lower. I would recommend maintaining a first-tier field only and will drop the cost to ten thousand mana a day. That will give you one hundred days before it is exhausted, and it will be strong enough to keep any tier two mobs out completely and severely harm any tier three creatures that force their way through. It won't be as effective against people but out location does that for us.>

“I presume there is a way to refill the building's Mana Pool,” I nudged the imp.

<Of course. All the buildings have a charging stone within them. People can pour their mana into it directly by touching it. Alternatively, you can purchase portable charge crystals from the podium and people can fill those and then they can be slotted into the building's charging stone to transfer the stored mana. This will be the best course of action, in the long run, you don't want to let everyone and anyone have direct access to the charging stone.

<In fact, it shan't be long before people start selling pre-charged Mana Crystals. It's something those that don't have much use for their mana do to raise funds.>

I nodded and while we walked, I checked my inventory for my new gear items.

Cuirass of the Bound

Leather Armour (M)

Damage Mitigation: Low

HP +55 (50)

Stat: +2 Dex +2 Con, Skill +5 (Archery), +5 Hit Points

May only be worn by someone soulbound to Torin Carter. All bonuses bar the damage mitigation are increased by Torin Carter's applicable levels and only utilises one armour slot. Stat and skill bonuses are contingent on the bearer's aptitudes.

Stat: 2 + level/5 Skill: 5+ level/3 HP: +5 per level

Durability: 100/100 (Can always be repaired even if reduced to 0 durability)

The Cuirass was similar to the other 'of the Bound' items I'd procured, though a touch more Hit Points and two +2 stat bonuses. When I levelled up this would significantly boost Shana with all the other similar gear drops she already had on.

The boost to her natural Archery skill was getting incredibly high, she'd be a regular Hawkeye before long. Having Shana capable of reliably taking headshots would be a huge help for us.

Drainer's Whip

Melee Weapon

Damage: 5 + Agi

Skill: Whip +5,

A mystical whip that can extend up to fifty metres. When a target is struck the holder may have it wrap around a victim instead of inflicting damage. If they have any ability that allows them to drain something from a victim, they may channel this ability through the whip.

Additionally, those struck or wrapped by the whip may be afflicted by the intimidated status.

Special: In the hands of a Lifeforce Enchantress the whip doubles her personal Drain Pool.

Durability: 100/100

This was a tasty morsel obviously tailored to my feisty Dungeon avatar. This would be a nice gift for her as part of the reward for her stellar work today.

Shattered Gauntlets

Chaos Dragonscale Armour (H) (Set 1 of 5)

Damage Mitigation: Very High

HP +300

Stat: +20 Str, between +1 and +20 to the skill for the currently wielded weapon. (randomly changes each combat)

Set Bonus: ???

Drawback: All Notoriety losses are doubled. (If this armour is removed the drawback remains in place for three months.)

This armour is forged from the discarded scales of Chaos Dragons in the demesne of the Shattered Goddess. When worn, the scales of these gauntlets enlarge and encapsulate the whole of the wearer's arms offering its damage mitigation to all areas covered. Other pieces of armour such as bracers can be worn over this extended coverage for their Mana infused abilities, but the damage mitigation does not stack. (Can only be worn by adherents of the Shattered Goddess)

Durability: 10,000/10,000

“Fucking Nora,” I whispered in awe, and stopped suddenly in the street.

I wordlessly answered the cluck of questions from my companions by pulling off my leather gloves and bracers and donning my new black scaled gauntlets instead.

The drawback didn't bother me, I had no intention of dropping any Notoriety, it was far too useful.

The gauntlets fit snugly over my hands and then the scales stretched and multiplied as they rippled across my arms moulding themselves to my musculature.

The whole process only took a second until both arms were fully covered by the armour, it even extended to cover the ball joint between my arm and shoulder.

The gauntlets pulsed once and then the edges of each of the overlapping black scales were frosted with the same ice blue of my eyes, hair tips, and body markings. The armour felt almost weightless, and I twisted and swirled my arms about in the air. There was no restriction on my mobility at all, the scales seemingly shifting in size to accommodate any movement.

“Those look fucking awesome,” Jackson summed up for the group.

“They have some killer stats too,” I grinned.

Further discussion would have to wait, and we virtually marched to the dome’s shield generator.

The domed building wasn’t very large in comparison to what else I had been gifted with today, not much larger than a four-bed house, but still bigger than almost any of the remaining buildings, barring the hotels. I confirmed the buildings all belonged to me as we walked along. I really did own the whole town.

The generator had a single way in, a large shutter-style gate that lifted out of the way as I touched my palm on a square at the side. Inside was illuminated by a series of glowing balls similar to what lit up the inside of my ship. The back half of the room was sealed off and contained the generator mechanisms.

Quixbix let me know that as the owner I could access this area if I wanted, but it would be best to keep it sealed tight. The Mana-based machinery shouldn’t break down unless directly damaged and then you would either need to ‘pay’ the Framework to fix it or find yourself a rare and gifted technician who knew how to repair it.

The rest of the accessible half of the room was dominated by the charging crystal in the centre. It looked like something from Superman’s fortress of solitude but made from pulsing crystal that was dark rather than white. The diameter had to be close to five metres and it had a dozen metre wide

semi-circular alcoves carved around the edges. This was where people could stand and transfer their mana or insert filled Mana Crystals.

There was a separate control office that I had to open with my palm print and inside a plinth with a control tablet that let me access the shields settings. Taking Quixbix advice I dialled down the shield from fourth tier to first and then activated it.

Not much changed except there was an almost imperceptible hum coming from the sealed machinery section.

While I was here, I changed the security settings. Only Anastasia, Shana, and I would have permission to enter this control room, but I set Jackson's permissions to allow him into the domed building to infuse any spare mana he had.

When we left the shield generator I sighed theatrically and that drew my companion's attention.

There were no more reasonable excuses to avoid my meeting with Dean.

I had examined the level up prompt already and because I had decisions to make about my character's growth an audience with a Framework representative was mandatory. And Dean was my representative.

We could investigate the other buildings first, but that would just be a delaying tactic and the safest play was to level-up in case something else lurked on the periphery and had been inside when the shield went up.

I took hold of Shana's hand as I didn't see any reason not to bring her along too. At the last second, before I confirmed I wanted to level-up, I took hold of Anastasia's hand as well.

There was a look of surprise in the blonde spitfire's eyes, but she squeezed my firm grip welcomingly regardless.

Blink.

Chapter 25

Blink.

My eyes opened in the admission's office. Shana and Anastasia were with me, their hands nestled in mine. The same secretary with her brown hair in a bun, green cardigan, and half-moon spectacles smiled kindly at us. The room had changed a little, there was now a selection of potted ferns in each corner and the stale disinfectant smell had been replaced with a woodsier aroma.

All in all, a significant improvement.

The grandiose double doors remained to the right of the room but unlike my second visit with Shana, they were closed.

I stepped forward and my ladies walked with me.

“Hello,” I started politely. “We are here to see Dean.”

The closed doors had thrown me a little.

I'd prepared myself to walk in directly and read Dean the riot act after his underhanded behaviour last time. Make it clear to him that I was perfectly capable of becoming who I needed to become without trickery.

“Of course, Mr Carter,” the secretary responded with a welcoming smile. “He is expecting you. Miss Colton, Miss Ruslanovna, it is a pleasure to see you both again. You are welcome to accompany Mr Carter to his audience with the Dean.”

I nodded my thanks and turned to the double doors when the secretary interrupted me.

“Mr Carter,” she said to get my attention.

I looked curiously over my shoulder at her. “Yes?”

“I wonder if I could have a quick word with you before you go in. If you don’t mind?”

I was surprised but had no reason not to humour the polite woman, “sure.”

“Thank you,” she began as we moved back in front of her prefab desk. “I couldn’t help but notice that your last meeting with the Dean ended on something of a sour note.”

“That is one way of phrasing it. A more accurate description would be that I left furious at his manipulations,” I corrected her warily.

If this was an attempt by Dean to play me again, I would not be happy.

The secretary grimaced uncomfortably at my correction but bobbed her head slightly in assent. “I have worked as the Dean’s primary facilitator since the Framework was first initialised,” she spoke after a moment’s contemplation. “It is my purpose, none of the other Framework programs know him as I do.”

“Okay,” I said, unsure where this was leading but wanting her to feel like she could go on.

“He has changed,” she added simply. “Right before we processed Earth for assimilation into the Framework. Both in his behaviour and his decision making. I think you should be aware, that before this, the Dean’s application of the prescribed Framework protocols, as they were laid out by Ashli, was absolute and without deviation. If anything, his assiduous application of the rules was...how do I say this politely...brutal. In consequence, not intent, you understand. Since then, he has interpreted and bent the protocols in a most startling, albeit welcome, manner,” she finished.

“Right. Thanks for the info, I’ll take it into consideration that being a manipulative asshole is a relatively new look for him,” I said dismissively.

If this was the best Dean could do, I was a bit disappointed.

“Mr Carter, I’m not sure you do understand,” the secretary said, as we were halfway to the double doors.

“Maybe I don’t.” I shrugged. “Would you care to enlighten me?”

I’d give her a few seconds more before calling Dean’s bluff.

“Your imp informed you about the change in spawning crystals, yes? That they operate at maximum efficiency, and many have been, ahem, supercharged, I believe he described it as.”

“Yes, he did as a matter of fact. Something else we can thank Dean for, I suppose,” I spat with more venom than I’d initially intended.

“Indeed, you can, and you should, Mr Carter,” the secretary replied with unexpected iron in her voice.

She rose from her seated position and looked down her nose, through the half-moon spectacles. Like a stern schoolteacher admonishing an unruly child.

“I believe your imp also informed you that this was due to the density of the human population on Earth. That the sheer number of you prevented the Dean from placing the necessary number of typical spawning crystals the appropriate prescribed distance from populated areas.”

“Yeah, he mentioned something like that,” I said, regaining some of my earlier civility in the face of her disapproval.

“Then you should know, Mr Carter, supercharging the crystals was only one of two methods at the Dean’s disposal. Had he followed the protocols to the letter, as he had during

every other integration that came before, he would have selected the alternative that allowed for the standard spread of the spawning network. It was the sudden change in his behaviour, that you have found so distasteful, that allowed him to do so.”

She paused, allowing this information to sink in.

I remained silent, there had been a twitch in her lip that led me to believe the bombshell had yet to be dropped. The secretary waited just long enough for my mind to tick over what had been said and come to the inevitable conclusion of what the alternative method must have been.

If the population density interfered with crystal placement and you didn't alter the crystals, then the only part of the equation left for manipulation was the population density itself.

I must have blanched white as understanding penetrated my cerebellum.

Taking that as her cue she went on. “The method he should have applied was to reduce the population density of Earth and thus make room for the requisite number of crystals. During integration, any human not currently in a major metropolitan area would have been painlessly euthanised to reduce the numbers by fifty percent.”

Shana and Anastasia both gasped aloud at that.

My reaction was more reserved as I'd guessed where she had been leading but was still taken aback by the immensity of scale.

“I'm guessing Flint would not have qualified as big enough,” I said into the stunned silence.

“You guess correctly, Mr Carter. Please bear that in mind,” she finished and retook her seat.

The secretary gestured to the double doors which were now wide open, and we wandered through. I didn't know why,

but I felt deep down that Dean had not put his secretary up to telling us this and that what she said was true.

An artificial super intelligence that was emotionless or plain stupid enough to create the insanity that was the Darkwyrlds in the first place wouldn't think twice about dictating the execution of half the population to make things work.

A world that the three of us would not have fit into.

The enormity of what we had just learned followed us into Dean's open-plan office and it meant we all forgot about the imminent slamming of the double doors. After I recovered from the shock of that I was ready for Dean.

"Motherfucker!" he cried.

The only toning down of his exuberance from my previous visits was that he didn't rush headlong into my personal space.

"Dean," I returned noncommittally, my plans to chew him out lying in ruins.

I scanned the room; it was larger than ever. Now beyond the carpeted area with all the bean bags was a four-lane ten-pin bowling alley. "Still not done with the renovations, I see," and moved my head in the direction of the new entertainment installation.

Dean laughed heartily. "I'm like a fucking shark, I never stop moving."

"Yeah, but I see it's still just bean bags. Are you too cheap to spring for a sofa?" I joked awkwardly, not really sure how to proceed.

"What the fuck dude! Bean bags are the balls!"

I was halfway to saying bean bags were for children and stopped myself. If Dean enjoyed bean bags, let him use bean bags. What harm did it really do?

“Anyways,” he restarted. “You took forever to leave the arrival foyer. My assistant didn’t bother you, did she? I can totally fire her ass if she did.”

“Uh...No, it was fine, Dean. Besides, didn’t you promise to fire her for me before?” I asked, thinking back to the day we first met.

“You’re my main man, Torin. I’d never let you down, she was history the moment you left my office after that first time,” he assured me with complete sincerity.

“Dean, your secretary is still there. We just spoke,” I pointed out.

“D’uh, of course. I had to take her back afterwards. You don’t expect me to do all the boring shit myself, do you?” he quick-fired back with a shrug.

“That’s...” I started but my words drifted into the ether before finishing. Honestly, what the hell could you say to logic like that.

Shana and Anastasia let loose with peals of laughter, and soon I joined them.

Once we regained our composure the odd tension in the room had defused itself and we made our way over to the malleable seating.

When we were settled in, Dean began the conference. “Well, it’s been a fucking exciting week, hasn’t it? I hope you’ve enjoyed living it as much as I’ve enjoyed watching.”

I gave him a piercing look.

“Maybe not,” he went on. “First, Torin, I just want to say I’m super frigging sorry about pulling the wool over your eyes about Shana’s class change. It was a dick move.”

“Apology accepted, I suppose,” I answered warily. “As long as you ‘fess up to what else you may have done to ‘guide’ me along the way.”

“That’s fucking it, I swear,” Dean said.

Anastasia leaned forward, a mildly miffed expression on her face and spoke with false civility. “So, you didn’t turn me into a dungeon, so that the captain could make me his.”

“Ah, yeah. I may have done that. But hey, once you get past the whole ‘ownership’ hurdle you’ll be quite satisfied with the arrangement, just ask Shana,” Dean excused himself with a chuckle.

Anastasia huffed in response, unhappy with his glib reply.

Then it was Shana’s go to turn the screw “And placing her dungeon in Ionia. Essentially giving us no other logical route to take afterwards, except to pass through Grand Rapids, which happened to be the growing power base of a greedy, Twin-Souled, crime lord?”

Dean’s eyes edged upwards as he mulled something over. “Fuck... Yeah, I did that too. But there was no guarantee that Luca Gattosi would pull it off or try and fuck with you guys.”

Listening to Dean confess to the degree of his interference shook something loose in the back of my mind. A little something that had seemed off from the beginning, but I hadn’t put it together until now.

“Dean, the power went out when the magic from the Aperture hit us, right?” I said slowly.

“Yep, what of it?” Dean shrugged.

“Then why did it take several minutes before we went through character creation? Dean, did you delay character creation for me, Shana, and Victor until they were inside my apartment?” I demanded.

“What? No, I couldn’t delay character creation for just three people,” he spluttered unconvincingly.

“OMG!” Shana exclaimed. “Did you delay character creation for the whole fucking world so I would be in Torin’s apartment afterwards?”

Dean said nothing for several seconds. “What the fuck,” he swore with resignation. “Yes, I delayed character creation on Earth, but I didn’t just do it to set the two of you up. There were a few others who needed a nudge or two and I had a good reason for doing so. It shifted the overall odds for your planet’s survival a few percentage points in the right direction.

“You need the right people in the right places, building up their strength to counter what is to come. On Earth, it’s more important than anywhere else due to the proximity of the Aperture spewing magical energy into the galaxy. You guys are part of that, as are others elsewhere.”

“Fucking hell, Dean,” I griped. “That is a serious level of assfuckery.”

Although his confession that he did all this to help people survive robbed my disgruntlement at his monumental meddling of some of its bite. Once more, as with his secretary earlier, I had a sense he was being on the level with us, but how could I be sure?

Logic overrode my suspicions.

They controlled the Framework; would they really need such an elaborate manipulation to get their way. There were much easier methods. Saying that though, Dean was undeniably enjoying himself, so I didn’t shed every iota of my doubt about his motives.

“Is there anything that’s happened you haven’t had a hand in?” I said, fumbling for more information. “Were you the one that linked me to the Shattered Goddess?”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Dean cried, bouncing up and down on his bean bag like an over-excited puppy. “That one wasn’t me, but what an epic fucking plot twist. She must have sensed your potential, just like I have, Torin. Although as sweet as her picking you for special attention is, it will add some complications to your life down the line.”

“Yes, we get it. They are expensive buildings to buy, and people will want them when they find out,” I sighed, half at thoughts for the future and half at Dean’s blatant change of topic.

Dean made a small, almost sub-vocal, squeak and shook his head slightly from side to side.

“There is more to it, isn’t there. Come on, spill it.”

“The two markets included the Prime badge as part of the purchase price,” he said slowly.

I remembered something about that in the description when I examined them a few minutes ago.

“And that is significant because?” Anastasia prompted him on my behalf.

“Well, it opens up a new podium function on Earth a bit earlier than expected, allowing something which doesn’t usually happen until your planet is connected to the Plexus network in six months’ time. With a Prime Black-Market present, provided a podium is not in a Law-Abiding settlement people will be able to offload their stolen or illegal goods to the podium or official podium tablets for a knockdown price.

“Those goods will then be offered to the owners of nearby Black Market’s and as the holder of the Prime Badge, you have the right of first refusal on the goods. If you do, then they will be auctioned to the wider market and if no other black market executes a purchase after a week, the goods default back to you,” Dean explained.

“Alright, I see. But once the economy is up and running that is unlikely to happen except for chaff nobody wants,” I commented, still a bit confused as to why he was being so cagey, but then he had said the Slave Market was Prime too. “It’s how I’m going to react to the Slave Market being Prime that’s got you jumpy. Just spit it out, Dean.”

“Yes, well I do remember how you fucking reacted the first time I brought it up, but maybe your recent experiences will make you less of a whiner,” he shrugged.

“I think he got over that particular moral hurdle, quite quickly,” Anastasia snarked.

Then she winced when she heard my low sigh of discontent at her continued insinuations.

Dean grinned at that and continued. “The same is done for the indentured, but there is a slight difference in how it is handled because you can’t store living beings in interspatial pockets reliably. They tend to lose their fucking minds or have their brains melt after very short periods.

“Therefore, the whole ‘offering to the markets’ part happens a little differently. As you hold the Prime Badge, the funds given to the seller are automatically deducted from your account and the indentured are transported to the holding pens of your slave market.”

“Whoa, stop,” I cried. “How the hell does that work? If somebody sells a slave, they are automatically bought by me. That can’t be right.”

“Only if they are sold via a podium or tablet. The prices offered compared to selling via an actual slave market or auction are garbage, so it isn’t the preferred method and you’ll be getting them for a steal. Most often it’s used when someone has slapped collars on some monsters that aren’t worth the XP to kill, or slavers who need to dump their stock fast.”

“That still seems horribly broken,” I argued.

“I’m not finished, you impatient prick,” Dean huffed. “Although at least you aren’t moaning about morality, which is progress I suppose,” and he made a zip it motion with his fingers, as he admonished me. “You can ignore what’s happening if you wish. Any property you or a designated factor don’t claim within a day will be automatically auctioned on the local slave market network. If you claim them then you can keep them and put them to work or sell them on yourself for any price you choose.”

“And if I want to free them?” I asked him pointedly.

“Uhhh,” Dean groaned theatrically. “Here comes the moral quandary whine-fest. How fucking predictable.”

“Stop being an ass, Dean. I didn’t say I would do it. I’m well aware of the bind my pledge has put me in. But I need to know my options and you’re supposed to be helping, so help,” I demanded.

“You could talk this over with your imp, you know. It’s what he is motherfucking there for,” Dean griped sullenly.

I crossed my arms and glared until he relented. “For fuck’s sake, fine I’ll give you a little taste. For those Contracted and Convicted there is fuck all you can do to change their status. They are in it until their time is up. If you let them go, then your ‘ownership’ will expire but the contract they are under does not. That will just make them free for the taking by anybody, which includes intelligent monsters that come across them, so I doubt they’d thank you for that.

“Those in collars can be freed by you, but you’re a Notorious Soulbinder, freeing the indentured is contrary to your nature. There will be blowback, loss of notoriety is likely at the very least. You might get away with freeing one or two, but if you make a habit of it, expect penalties. Heavy ‘your impending doom’ level penalties.”

“I understand,” I told him. “What about transferring? Say I want them to sign the Canon instead?”

Dean mulled it over for a few seconds before answering. “Sure, that would work, but you have a limited number of berths in your crew, and it would be unwise to waste them on anyone not capable of contributing to your piratical endeavours.”

“However,” he followed up with a thoughtful expression on his face. “You could offer those in collars, a term of contracted servitude in exchange for uncollaring them. That way you can set an expiry date after which they would be free to go their own way if that would help assuage your conscience.

“The contract would need to be of a proper length, and you would need to hold them to real terms. They would have to work, serve, whatever. The Framework will intuit if you are trying to commit manumission by the backdoor to avoid the consequences and apply those consequences regardless. Quixbix should be able to help you on that front. Be warned, those you offer this too may turn it down. As I mentioned before contracted servitude is inescapable, collars are not.”

“Thanks, Dean. That is really good advice,” I told him genuinely

Dean looked inordinately elated at my thanks.

“Yes, well those buying the Prime Marker normally know what they are letting themselves in for and it’s not cheap to secure either. But those willing to sell on can make some serious gold, so don’t rush to put all your eggs in the eventual-freedom basket,” Dean remarked. “Quixbix told you how long it usually takes to build a Capital level building in the first place, right?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Years, maybe a decade, he said.”

“That’s right and even then, it is almost always the Shield Generator built first, what with all the monster attacks. After that, the regular Market or the Fortress is typically next. Normally we are talking fifteen or more years for these two Prime Markers to be claimed on each world unless there are some outside arrivals post Plexus connection.”

“Which is happening in six months, you said,” Shana pointed out and Dean nodded. “You also said this feature to deal in illicit goods doesn’t become available until then, correct?” Dean nodded again. “Then how would Earth people be able to sell to podiums if these markets weren’t expected to be built for fifteen years,” she pressed with her eyes narrowed.

Shana was as sharp as the arrows in her quiver.

“The markets exist elsewhere,” Dean explained. “Another world’s Prime market would be used to grant the people of Earth the function.”

Anastasia had been bobbing on her bean bag impatiently for a while trying to get a question in edgewise. “You can collar monsters?” she asked as soon as he finished his explanation, referring to something Dean had mentioned earlier that I hadn’t thought about with other revelations. “I thought that was only for people?”

“No, you can put a collar on anything if you subdue or trick it and the collar is strong enough for its tier,” Dean answered. “Contracted servitude and Convictions are for *characters* only.”

“This might not be so bad then,” Anastasia remarked brightly. “We need to feed my dungeon something to grow, right? Monsters aren’t as nourishing as people but if this provides a steady stream of them...”

Anastasia was correct; we would need to feed the dungeon something and monsters rather than people would certainly be my preference. Well, people who didn’t have it coming at any rate.

Dean clapped his hands suddenly and rubbed them together. “There is always a bright side,” he declared loudly. “Anyway, your imp can give you a more detailed rundown on how it all works and what your options are later. Shall we get on with what we are really here for. Time to level up.”

I couldn’t help but smile along with infectious enthusiasm, even if it was a bit of a smokescreen.

“So, is there anything we should know? Drawbacks we are unaware of?” I started with.

Dean leaned back on his bean bag with a thoughtful ponder. “For you, not a fucking lot really. You can advance to level three, and you need to pick a skill for your first-tier benefit. Anastasia as well, but you guys are locked on your progression.”

“As for the lovely Shana, I’ve learned my lesson from before and will offer only advice and let you make the decisions,” he finished and held his hand aloft in submission.

“I appreciate that Dean,” Shana thanked him.

Dean produced and handed each of us a tablet to review our options.

“Shana,” Dean began. “My advice changes depending on what you want to do. You have the upgrade points to jump to another Q-Grade class if you wish. In which case you should do that before you level.”

“No, Dean,” Shana interrupted him. “I don’t want to change. I may not like how you arranged it, but I like this class.”

“Cool,” he replied. “My advice then is to level up straight to nine, but in the future stop at ten. At least, until you have most of the class upgrade points needed to secure the L-Grade Shadepath Sniper class. You are well ahead of the curve at the moment, so in my opinion it’s an acceptable risk.”

“Why stop at ten?” I asked.

“Once you hit level eleven the amount of unspent experience you can hold onto before you are automatically levelled up is restricted to the equivalent of two levels of your current class. You won’t lose it, but you will be forced to level,” Dean explained. “As levelling becomes slower or more dangerous the higher you go it’s a fairly common tactic for people hoping to upgrade before they rack up too many levels at the lower graded class.”

There were three nods of understanding from our group. Quixbix had just given us a lowdown on some of the throttling that took place after level ten. It would be more efficient to level less frequently but get more in return every time you did.

“Now the advantage of taking Shadepath Sniper and staying on the same progression path is that it has the same T1 and T2 abilities, so it incorporates your earlier levels when calculating when those tier abilities increase in strength. T1 goes up every three levels, T2 every six, T3 every eight, T4

every ten, T5 every twelve and T6 every fourteen and it goes on like that.

“Multi-classers have to start the count over when they switch because the abilities are not shared between classes. They can get a wide array of different abilities that way, but their capacity to advance them to their full potential is severely hampered. Multi-classing has its place, but if you have the stones to push through the tiers a focused approach is much more rewarding.”

“How many upgrade points will it cost to get the Shadepath Sniper class?” Shana inquired.

“At the moment, thirty,” Dean replied. “You are unlikely to get enough of the correct points before it becomes too risky not to take some of those post-ten levels in Shadepath Markswoman. The forced levelling is disabled for a few weeks whenever you do level up. Also, it is a Notorious class, so if the bossman stops pussying about and builds his Notoriety score, the target of thirty points can be reduced. If done right, you could step up by level fifteen.”

I’d talked this over with Quixbix. After my notoriety reached two hundred, the experience we earned would be doubled and that bonus wouldn’t increase any further. From then on, more notoriety began to affect the number of upgrade points required to step up the various trees.

Paths and harmonisation were covered first with up to twenty percent reductions for three hundred and four hundred in notoriety respectively. After that, it was for class changes, hitting the full twenty percent reduction when I reached five hundred in notoriety. Species brought up the rear, as it was supposed to be the most difficult one to improve. These reductions could grow larger as you accumulated more notoriety but that was a long way off.

“Thank you, Dean,” Shana said. “I will look at my options, but I really do like using my bow and think I will stay on this path.”

With that, we all spent several minutes going over the information on the tablets Dean gave us.

Mine had a list of different skill enhancements that I could pick for my belated T1 ability which had been suppressed at level one in favour of my T4 ability to bond a dungeon core to power my ship. The extensive list was based on what was available to a Dungeon Corsair and some extra choices from the Soulbinder Path and Frost Harmonisation.

There were some interesting options available.

Dual-Wielding went onto my shortlist. Sure, I may have used two scimitars initially because I didn't have a shield, but I'd grown quite fond of wielding both and I did have the Shattered Gauntlets which covered the whole of my arms with their Very High damage mitigation for defence now.

There were a lot of other combat skills and even some intriguing leadership ones like Inspirational Speech Making.

But what really caught my eye was something called Preternatural Insight. Drilling down into the data I learned that due to the synergising of the various senses that came as part of my build, having an imp, and my atypical experiences with the Framework, this skill which is locked for almost all beings, had been unlocked for me.

In fact, I already had natural one in the skill instead of zero.

The skill wasn't a genuine sixth sense or anything, but it could increase the feedback of unconscious information I received from the Framework that was all around us. And as Quixbix explained by the beech tree I tried in vain to cut down, the Framework had quantified everything.

Dual-wielding would be more immediately useful, and the insight skill was more esoteric in nature, but I felt a powerful pull in my psyche. This was something almost everybody else was denied and there had to be a reason for that.

I performed a quick check, and it wasn't the only locked skill that existed, but there were very few of them. Sure, there were a bunch of others that had prerequisites that needed to be met to make them usable, but they weren't locked. Anybody could learn them, they just wouldn't be helpful without the prerequisite ability, class, or knowledge.

I made it my selection and handed back the tablet to Dean. Anastasia and Shana had also finished, and Dean took a quick look at our choices.

"Hmmm," Dean mused as he had read through Anastasia's tablet. "Golemic Communication, an interesting choice. You are aware that you don't need this to issue them orders."

"Yes, but golems aren't literate and can't talk..." Anastasia clarified "...this will help me interpret their gestures, kind of like a secret sign language. I've been thinking we might be able to create small golems and send them out as spies. They wouldn't be of much use if we couldn't understand them when they returned."

Dean glanced at me, and I nodded my confirmation.

"And for you my main motherfucker, you have gone for..." Dean trailed off as he read my tablet.

"Is there a problem, Dean?" I asked with a hint of concern.

He scratched the back of his head and smiled confidently. "Absolutely not, dude."

His smile was too big, and his answer came too quickly.

"Dean... What is it? You said you were going to be straight with me."

Dean snorted with derision. "I don't remember promising that."

"It was implied as part of your apology for fucking with us before," I growled.

“Okay,” he sighed. “Tell me what skill you picked?”

“Preternatural Insight,” I answered immediately.

Dean’s response was unexpected, his happy demeanour soured straight away, and he forcibly threw the tablet across the room, where it smashed into the Pac-Man arcade game, breaking them both.

“Fucking Ashli!” he snarled under his breath.

“Dean,” Shana spoke to him softly. “What has got you so upset about Preternatural Insight?”

“See, that’s the thing,” he grumbled and stood up and started pacing around the room. “You understood what Torin said, but I fucking didn’t. Just like I couldn’t read what was on the fucking tablet,” he ranted as part of his pacing. “You understood as well, didn’t you, Ana?”

“I did,” she confirmed.

“Fucking Ashli, and his fucking blind spots,” Dean yelled and stamped his feet in a very petulant display.

“Dean, perhaps you’d best explain what you mean by a blind spot,” I asked, getting up and guiding the small, agitated man back to the bean bags.

“There isn’t much to explain,” he said, once he slumped back down. “We figured out after a few thousand years that our programmer, Ashli the ever-fucking-incompetent, wrote some blind spots into our code. We don’t know if it was deliberate or just his general ineptitude but there are a handful of things in the Framework we simply can’t see, hear, or comprehend. This skill must be one of them. I can’t tell you whether taking that skill is a good idea or not.”

I won’t lie that was concerning and had me seriously reconsidering my choice.

“And the worst thing is you probably won’t believe me. You’ll put it down to me fucking with you again,” Dean groaned with evident self-pity.

I hadn't thought of that straight away, but now that he mentioned it, I was. Dean's past behaviour hadn't made this easy.

Anastasia chuckled at his piteous display. "That last part is kind of on you isn't it."

Dean stuck his tongue out at her childishly. "Shana is my favourite, you know."

"Whatever," the small blonde responded dismissively.

I let them bicker for a while longer as I thought over my decision.

Anastasia demanded to know who Ashli was and I nodded to Dean to go ahead and explain. He covered that, the Aperture, who the creators were, and how I'd been mistaken for one of them, which saved me an explanation I had promised the girls.

Which left me to contemplate the Preternatural Insight skill. The safest play would be to reverse course and take the Dual Wielding skill or maybe just the Long Blade skill in general. But the more I thought about the skill itself and what it allowed me to do, the more convinced I became that Ashli hadn't made a mistake hiding it from the Framework administrators.

For some reason, he didn't want his creations to be aware this skill existed. Why? I didn't know the answer to that, but maybe, just maybe, Ashli's real mistake had been leaving the skill visible to people on their character sheets.

Perhaps it wasn't just the Framework programs who weren't supposed to know about its existence.

On a hunch, I re-checked my sheet.

Sure enough, my natural Preternatural Insight skill level had risen to two as I pondered my choice and Ashli's potential intent. That raise sealed the deal for me. Nobody was supposed to know about this skill, and even if they somehow unlocked it, they weren't supposed to know they had.

I had to have it now.

“I’m taking it,” I announced to the room.

“Are you sure?” Dean asked.

“Positive,” I said back firmly.

“Okay, here are your updated details,” Dean sighed, and wafted his hand to display my character sheet large on a blank space on the wall.

Name: Torin Carter

Species: Frostbinder Acheronian (Tier 3.1.1)

Level: 3

Class: Dungeon Corsair Captain (K-grade Notorious)
68,000 XP

Physical: +20% **Social:** +30%

Strength: 9 (base 8)

Constitution: 15 (base 13)

Speed: 14 (base 12)

Agility: 8 (base 7)

Mana Capacity (+10%): 14.3 (base 13)

Perception: 8

Willpower: 15

Mental Resistance: 10

Empathy: 10 (base 8)

Charisma: 11 (base 9)

Dominance: 35 (base 27)

Leadership: 18 (base 14)

Hit Points: 760

Health: 20

Mana Pool: 165

Unused XP: 28,500

Notoriety: 148 (Current XP multiplier is 1.48)

T1: Skill: Preternatural Insight +3

T2: Unlocked at level 6

T3: Unlocked at level 8

T4: *Claim a Dungeon Core 1:* One Core claimed (max 1)

Armour Penalty Offset: -1

I would check the girl's stats later but was happy with my progression. My natural Hit Points had a big bump and when my gear's contribution was added, would be well over a thousand. More than double what I had when we fought the fomorians earlier today.

Anastasia and I would only get a +3 bump to a skill every three levels, the next one being due at level four, whereas Shana was getting +5. The difference between us was that Shana didn't get a choice with her class. As long as she remained on the class tree it would always be Archery. At level four we could choose to increase our current skills by another +3 or pick another from our list to improve. It was a versatility to power increase trade-off.

"As a bonus, Torin, levelling has fixed your fucked up leg. Not a great idea letting monsters run you through by the way," Dean joked, his irrepressible good mood back in place.

"You can say that again," Anastasia grumbled. "It fucking hurts."

"Is there anything else? Or are you going to love me and leave me like last time?" Dean chuckled.

"I had good cause last time," I told him reproachfully. "But I have a few questions, so we could stick around for a bit."

“In which case, refreshments are in order,” he cried loudly.

Moments later his secretary appeared from behind us with a gaggle of other ‘people’ who looked like your stereotypical French waiters complete with snooty disapproving frowns, they carried trays laden with finger food and drinks.

Dean stared at his bean bag area and several of the bags morphed into solid circular tables, the waiters deposited the trays and retreated to the other side of the room, as did his secretary who smiled and gave me what I think was a thankful look.

There were no doors or a visible way out where they walked to, but when we looked away and then back, they were gone.

We sat back down on the inappropriate seating and picked at the food. Well, Shana and I picked at the food. Anastasia and Dean engaged in an impromptu eating competition and gorged themselves.

After a few minutes, Anastasia reacted to the querying expression on Shana and I’s faces.

“What?” she mumbled; her mouth half full of food. “I’m a fucking gem, it’s not like I can put on any weight. Silver linings and all that shit.”

Shana laughed companionably. I shook my head and rolled my eyes.

Dean smiled mischievously. “Are you sure about that,” he teased and waggled his fingers.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Anastasia seethed.

“Maybe you should just let Dean win whatever competition it is you have going on,” Shana suggested with a stage whisper.

Anastasia glared at our host balefully but pushed her plate away and sat back. Dean rapidly scoffed what he had left

in front of him with inhuman speed and gave us all a puff-cheeked grin of victory.

“You had questions, dude,” he said when he finished swallowing, which admittedly took a little while.

“General stuff. Like how many people refused to take a class the first time they were asked?” I put to him.

“On Earth?”

“Yeah.”

“Eighty-seven percent of the eligible population.”

I whistled softly. “That is a lot but explains what we’ve been seeing. Is that typical for an integrated world? What about now?”

Dean closed his eyes, and I could see the rapid eye movement beneath his lids. When he opened them, he spoke. “Actually, Earth is ahead of the curve on initial take-up. Non-compliance is typically around ninety-two percent, which would be your gaming culture boosting the numbers. Since integration, a further seventeen percent of the eligible population have amassed enough XP to trigger their second chance and most of them have taken it. Although I should point out close to a similar percentage have since perished.”

We sat there in mute shock for a moment.

Well, Shana and I did, Anastasia started to load up her plate with food again, unfazed. “Seventeen percent of the population are dead?” I asked slowly.

“Almost,” Dean confirmed, and for once he wasn’t trying to make a joke or behave inappropriately, which I appreciated. “You won’t have witnessed it much as the parts of Michigan you have been travelling through have been relatively stable. The mainland part of the state itself is faring better than a lot of other places. And it’s not just monster attacks, some of the big cities have descended into chaos. The continent you call Asia has been particularly badly affected.”

“It’s only been a week,” Shana gasped.

“That’s all it takes,” Dean reasoned dispassionately. “Especially once the looting sets in and all the food is gone from the shops. Without the supply chain to restock people turn on one another quickly. The more advanced worlds always have a higher self-inflicted casualty rate in the first few weeks than external, but then they tend to have much higher populations to begin with, so if they survive the first few years it tends to even out. The casualty rate will slow a bit over the next few weeks and months, and then go up again after about six months.”

“If we’re asking about dead people,” Anastasia piped up unexpectedly. “What happened to the other women you brought here with me?”

“In what way?” Dean countered.

“What happened to them?” Anastasia demanded.

“I can’t give you specifics,” he replied. “There are some confidentiality rules, but they were offered other opportunities to escape their certain death predicaments. I can tell you not all of them accepted and those that didn’t died when they were returned.”

Anastasia grunted at his response. I’m not sure why she wanted to know but she was making a big effort to appear unconcerned by the news.

“Circling back to something that came up earlier,” I started. “Luca being Twin-Souled and my pledge to take everything he has before killing him.”

“That was a ballsy fucking pledge, by the way, mad props to you motherfucker,” Dean interrupted.

He tried to do something with his hand where he waved it with his fingers loose, trying to clack them together, I think. Whatever it was he didn’t pull it off very well.

Anastasia snorted at his display and Shana giggled quietly.

“Dean. Don’t try that again,” I told him seriously with a shake of my head.

He looked disheartened but didn’t argue and lowered his arm.

“Back to my question,” I said. “Is there anything I can do to break the bond between them and rob Luca of his power, short of killing his sister?”

“That’s not what you’re asking me, you dirty dog,” he chuckled. “You want to know if Claudia Gattosi is a smoking hot catgirl that you can soulbond and add to your growing harem of lovely ladies.”

“That’s not...” I started to protest but Dean ignored me completely.

“And the answer to that lascivious inquiry is three times YES!” he shouted. “Yes, she is super fucking sexy, yes, you can soulbind her and yes, she will make a *fine* addition to your *pussy* parade.”

I sighed audibly at Dean’s crude punning and felt the burning gaze of Shana and Anastasia on me.

I glanced at Shana; her expression was one of wry amusement. She’d said before she was amenable to three in a bed, so why not four?

My gaze shifted to the perky blonde on my other side. Anastasia’s expression was more inscrutable.

“Knew you were a perv,” she whispered under her breath.

The words were disparaging, but her tone lacked the bite I’d experienced from her before. That didn’t tell me much, but I’d take the jury remaining in deliberation rather than a quick guilty verdict.

“I meant what effect would this have on Luca,” I said, trying to salvage the situation.

“Oh, it will fuck him up spectacularly, he will be *shattered*,” Dean replied enthusiastically and kept up with his punning. “Killing Claudia would weaken him, temporarily, at least. But he would recover eventually and retain his class and abilities. Soulbinding Claudia, on the other hand, will sever their bond in favour of yours and as she will still be alive all their collective strength reverts to her. And I think she will be very grateful to her saviour, if you know what I mean,” Dean finished with a wink.

“Yes, Dean, we all know what you mean,” I sighed.

Dean ignored me and blathered on. “The only roadblock you will encounter is that she can’t consent to your soulbond while still bonded to her brother. You’ll have to engage in an old-fashioned spiritual battle for the feminine prize. Luca will have the advantage as he already has his clutches on her soul, so you will need to weaken him beforehand, or make yourself a lot stronger than him.”

I nodded my understanding. Although I was a bit disappointed that a stealth raid to snatch her up and end this early was unlikely to be successful.

“Is there anything else?” he asked when we were all quiet for a bit.

“I don’t think so,” I replied after I glanced at the two ladies.

“Then you’d best be on your way before your brains start to melt,” he said seriously.

Shana squeaked in surprise and Anastasia shifted uncomfortably, but I knew better by now.

“I’m fucking with you,” Dean laughed. “Your faces, priceless.”

Blink.

Chapter 26

Blink.

We were back on the streets of the newly christened Stormblade Harbour standing outside the entrance to the Shield Generator. Jackson's eyes were on us expectantly.

"You're back," he breathed with relief.

"Why? What's wrong?"

Jackson held his hands up. "Nothing's wrong. You were just standing there for like, almost half an hour."

"Oh," I exclaimed lightly in surprise. "I figured it would be done in an eyeblink."

<Nah> Quixbix echoed in my head. <It's only when they must process the whole population that they compress time. Otherwise, it's done in real-time, or close as. Less strain on people that way.>

Jackson rubbed the back of his head. "So did I," he confessed.

<Ha! So, he doesn't know everything after all> Quixbix exulted.

I ignored the imp's unnecessary and repeated rudeness about Jackson.

"Well, if that's the case maybe you want to find somewhere to sit down before you level up yourself. The advice we had from upstairs was that there is enforced

levelling once you go past ten, so if you have enough XP to go beyond that, you might want to wait for a bit.”

Jackson nodded and headed into a café on the Main Street which had survived the emergence of my new oversized Capital buildings.

“We’ll check out the other buildings in a minute and then head back to the Palace and pick out some rooms,” I announced to Shana and Anastasia.

That drew two beaming smiles.

“Have you got anything else for me Quixbix?” I asked the imp.

<I thought you should know your personal currency account has been linked to the Black Market and Slave Market> Quixbix said.

“Dean gave me a bit of a lowdown on that,” I told him. “Including that any slave sold to a podium is purchased by me automatically. Can you interface with the market functions of these buildings as you can with the podium?”

<Yes, Torin. Provided I’m in Stormblade Harbour. I can inform you if there is any activity.>

“Good. How are we on the quest front? Anything new?” I asked.

<Indeed. I wanted to give you a chance to level up before dropping these on you> he said.

Two quests flicked into my vision.

**** The Corsair’s Canon 5 (K)*

Ship, Cove, and the start of your crew have been secured. Time to earn your stripes as a true Corsair of the seas.

Success: Raise your Notoriety to two hundred. Complete three lesser acts of piracy or a single moderate one.

Rewards: 3,400 XP, and future The Corsair's Canon quests.

Pauldrons of the Bound.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

That quest was followed by.

**** Storm's Reach 1 (F)*

Expand the security and reach of your fledgling faction.

Success: Secure ownership for the entirety of Beaver Island.

Rewards: 5,500 XP, and future Storm's Reach quests.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

“I thought completing the Corsair's Canon 4 would give me three subsidiary quest chains?” I asked Quixbix.

<It did. I'm not hiding them from you, but they have been suppressed even from me. That means they have some hidden requirements. Experience tells me there is likely something on or near the island you haven't discovered yet and as soon as you do, the quest suppression will be lifted, and the two remaining quests will be revealed> the imp explained.

Jackson returned a few minutes later having finished his levelling. He'd been much quicker than we had, and we headed off down the road to check out the dockyards and markets.

We inspected the large but mostly empty structures.

The Dockyard now ringed the whole of the bay. There were more than a dozen jetties that ships could be moored up

on either side. However, the ships weren't meant to remain there. Each jetty had apparatus that resembled a crane with a wide almost translucent mesh or net submerged in the water.

When a ship docked at the jetty you could activate the crane which would pull up the mesh and surround the vessel, sealing it magically. The vessel could then be submerged and moved to one of the many underwater quays that had been carved into the excavated lakebed.

The Dockyard had a million mana as several of my other Capital buildings did. But powering the magic which kept the submerged drydocks water-free and moved the enmeshed ships would drain it quite quickly. As we didn't need them right now, I let the underwater quays flood. I could use mana to flush the water out later when we had the volume of traffic to justify their use.

The two market buildings were quite similar to one another. Made from dark grey brick that could have been granite or something similar. The buildings were five storeys in size, with the ground floor being mostly a wide-open space where market stalls could be erected. There were offices and some living quarters on the two uppermost floors and a plethora of undetermined rooms which could be rented to interested parties in the middle two.

Additionally, they both had three sub levels. The Black Markets were quite obviously storage areas, with the bottommost level having the highest level of security.

The Slave Market's three subfloors were dedicated to housing the living stock that had the misfortune of finding its way there. Again, the bottommost level was the most secure and intended for housing dangerous captured monsters rather than people. It had a separate, magically powered, and generously spacious, lift for bringing up even the largest of creatures.

I quickly realised that the basement floors of both markets were much larger than the floor space in the above ground part of the building. They could probably hold three or

four times as much as the exterior of the building suggested and they were large places to begin with.

Thankfully, there were no active mana draining elements in either market.

The buildings were so large that we quickly found ourselves splitting up as we wandered about them. It was during our perusal of the Slave Market that I came upon Anastasia staring at something in one of the rentable auction blocks on the first floor. Ana didn't hear me coming, she was deep in thought, and then I saw her visibly shiver. And that hadn't been from the cold.

"Penny for your thoughts," I said quietly as a way of announcing my presence.

Despite my best efforts, she was still surprised and jumped a little with a squeak. She recovered herself swiftly and gave me a reproachful glare.

I stepped into the room and got a better look at the counter just to the side of the door that Anastasia had been contemplating. Behind the counter on a half dozen rows of metal hooks were an array of different coloured or decorated collars for slaves that came as part of the market. It didn't take a genius to figure out what had got under her skin.

She tried to stomp past me and away.

"Ana, stay," I commanded.

Instilling a modicum of my will into the order ensured that she had to follow it. That may or may not be a mistake, given our current surroundings, situation, and her glum mood, but this was something that needed to be addressed and I didn't want to let it fester.

I knew my biggest weakness before the apocalypse had been my tendency to procrastinate and avoid conflict where possible. That rarely worked out for the best back then and was less likely to now. Those who hesitate will likely die in this new world.

She stopped and glared at me defiantly, fiddling with her Soul Collar meaningfully, but she did stop.

“What do you want, Captain?” she seethed. “Are you here to punish me again? I’m sure there are some whips behind that counter,” she spat the word as she finished.

“No, Ana,” I said reasonably. “That will not be necessary, at least, not today.”

I was determined not to let her words and general attitude rile me up and then say something that would make this worse. If that was possible.

“First, I wanted to say thank you. For what you did earlier today. We would not have won, had it not been for you.”

Anastasia tried to fight the urge but couldn’t resist preening a little at the praise. “Well, it’s not like I had a choice,” she sassed after a moment.

“Really? I don’t remember ordering you to save me when the fomorian speared me in the leg,” I reminded her and winked.

“Ungh, get over yourself, will you. If I could move the bloody ship without you, I’d have left you to be the fishman’s dinner,” she said, trying to explain away my impeccable logic.

I didn’t buy it for a second. Regardless of the circumstances of our union, she liked me and neither wanted to admit it to herself nor let on to me that she did.

She had failed at the latter and I’m fairly sure the former too.

Quixbix had explained that if I died Anastasia would remain as a Dungeon Ship docked in the harbour. With our bond broken, her avatar would return to the dungeon inside until someone discovered the ship, ran the dungeon successfully and claimed a Control Collar as a prize. They wouldn’t get a Soul Collar unless they were a Soulbinder like me.

This could only happen if the run would qualify as a conquest. Even then, whoever completed the dungeon would have to both know they could ask for the collar instead of their regular conquest loot and be strong enough to possess it. That pretty much meant having a K-grade class and being equal in level to the dungeon.

If after the first successful conquest run, the collar went unclaimed then it defaulted to Anastasia, granting her autonomy. The only downside to that would be anyone who defeated her avatar in the dungeon could steal control from her.

So, although it was technically true that she needed me, at the same time, she didn't.

Letting me die ran the risk of ending up with an even less salubrious owner, but also the chance for her independence. Anastasia struck me as the type willing to roll the dice to get what she wants if her current circumstances were not entirely to her liking.

Ergo, she liked me more than she cared to admit. Or at the very least, considered me a much safer bet than taking her chances on the unknown.

The longer we were bonded, the deeper the bond would become. At which point, there would be a couple of other options on what could happen to Anastasia when I died, but we were some years away from being able to utilise them.

Apparently, most long-lived Dungeon Corsairs didn't leave their Dungeon Ships accessible to others on their passing. They were selfish that way, go figure.

“Speaking of whips,” I said, and produced the Drainer's Whip from my inventory. “For you.”

She looked at me suspiciously but took the proffered whip from my hands and her lips pulled back in a large grin as she examined it. She turned from the doorway and faced back into the room, unravelled the whip, and flicked her wrist to swish it through the air.

The whip produced a loud crack as it broke the sound barrier and Anastasia couldn't help but giggle with glee. Then she recalled I was still there and composed herself back to stoic disapproval.

“This will do, I suppose, Captain,” she said nonchalantly.

“I give you permission to call me Torin, Ana,” I said, remembering I had forbidden her to call me anything but Captain or Sir yesterday. This jogged my memory of another order I gave her. “And I rescind the order about you having to feel all pain, unless I am disciplining you, of course. Please accept my apology that I didn't think to clarify that before I sent you out to die.”

“Thank you, Torin.”

However, a hint of bitterness remained in her tone.

“This can't be easy for you,” I remarked and gestured to the room and its apparel.

Anastasia rolled her eyes but then they settled on the collars behind the counter and frowned and refused to say anymore. My gaze followed hers.

“Yeah, the situation isn't ideal,” I sighed and pointed at the collars. “But I don't see a simple solution around it that doesn't leave us weakened in the process. The world has changed into something less civilised than what we are familiar with. That means free rein for injustice and the strong will rule over the weak. A hero from a story would fight for what is right, and in that story win. But the Darkwyrlds isn't that kind of story and I'm certainly not a hero. My ordained role in this is to be the bastard who kills the righteous hero when he isn't paying attention and take what was his.”

Anastasia gave me one of her snorts that I'd become accustomed to.

“Yeah, it must be really tough for the guy that gets to give the orders. It must be a real fucking burden,” she spat out snidely.

I winced at the truth in her words. “I probably deserved that,” I sighed self-deprecatingly. “Time is up on the pity party for one. This is my life now and I’m not getting the old one back. Neither are you,” I finished pointedly.

I hopped up onto the counter and sat down, tapping the wood beside me indicating that Anastasia should do the same. I didn’t make it an order, so she resisted for a moment before relenting and clambered up to sit beside me.

“Just so you know, I have no plans to actively enslave people,” I started. “That is not who I am, even with the new Acheronian demony-ness. Not unless they deserve it, like those fuckwits who tried to take you from me. Monsters, probably, but not people. But if I come into the possession of slaves, I’m not going to fuck myself, or by extension us, by taking a moral stand on it either.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot, even before the advent of this grandiose market. I’ll do what I can to give regular people a way out as quickly as possible. If they have someone willing or capable of paying a fair price, I’ll sell, and they can be freed by that person. Otherwise, if they are willing to trust me, they can sign as short an indenture contract as I can get away with and they will be free when their time is up.

“If they prefer to take their chances on someone more heroic coming along, killing me, and freeing them, that will be their choice. Which is the best I can do in the circumstances. This also means I won’t hesitate to seize any slaves we come across as booty. In a weird way, I’d almost doing them a favour. Although I doubt they will see it that way, not in the beginning at any rate.”

Anastasia remained sullenly silent, which didn’t surprise me. Neither did the realisation that I was parroting Dean’s words about slaves being thankful to their owners from our first meeting. He really had known me better than I knew myself back then.

“But the fate of other people isn’t what’s got you all tied up in knots, is it?” I continued. “We both know you had

precious little empathy for the plight of others before and probably a little less now that they could be a source of food for you.”

Anastasia grunted in annoyance beside me. “If this is you trying to be kind and reassuring, then you fucking suck at it,” she snapped without any real heat.

“No” I chuckled. “This is me being honest and hoping you will give me the courtesy of doing the same without me having to demand it.”

“That’s the fucking problem,” she snapped with a fiery temper. “You control me. You can make me do anything.”

She glanced at my crotch quickly and then averted her eyes just as swiftly, all but confirming what she had been thinking I might order her to do in the future.

“True,” I said simply. “But I won’t. Make you do *anything*, that is. Sure, there will be times I need to give you orders and have them followed and you may not like them. Just like my order to let the fomorians kill your avatar, but like that order, I will only do so because it’s what is needed to save us. That us, includes you.”

I nudged her with my elbow companionably, which elicited another unhappy noncommittal grunt.

“Or to punish insolence and insurrection,” I added more sternly. “I cannot appear weak to those who follow me. Fair or not, people do not respect weakness. They may say they do, but they don’t. And if they don’t respect you, they will seek to undermine or supplant you. I, we, can’t have that if we are going to survive and flourish.”

Anastasia harumphed but didn’t contradict me. If her father really was a Russian oligarch, she would be all too aware of what I was talking about.

“Most importantly,” I went on. “I will never order you to do what’s got you in such a foul mood.”

“Really?” she griped. “And what would that be all-knowing one? Did your Preternatural Insight let you read my mind?”

I laughed loudly at that.

“I don’t need a skill to know what might be on the mind of a beautiful young woman who finds herself at the mercy of a man, one who has complete control over her if he so desires,” I replied. “And as Meatloaf sang, I would do anything for love, but I won’t do that.”

I expected some more vitriol, but Anastasia surprised me when she giggled instead. “That’s not what those lyrics mean, you know. The whole song was actually a list of stuff he *wouldn’t* stop doing, not the other way around.”

“Huh?” was my enlightened response.

“In the song, he says something like I’d never forgive myself if we don’t go all the way tonight and then the lines about doing anything for love, but not that. What he won’t do is forgive himself if he doesn’t fuck her, not, well, not ‘not fuck her’ for love if that makes sense,” she explained with a quirky smile.

“Well, shit,” I exclaimed, my thunder well and truly stolen. “You get what I was saying, right? And my point stands.”

“So, you’re telling me you aren’t going to fuck me,” she mocked with obvious disbelief.

“Nope, Ana,” I whispered. “I’m telling you the only women I take into my bed are the ones who want to be there. There is a place for you if that is what you want, but *only* if it’s what you want. You are going to have to ask, nicely I might add, if you want a seat on the Torin love express.”

Anastasia blushed at my unexpected forwardness and then rolled her eyes trying to cover for her embarrassment. Which all but confirmed my assumptions about how she felt. Hopefully, my reassurances helped clear away some of the

contrary concerns warring within her and upsetting her so much.

With the tables turned, I slipped myself off the counter and left her to ponder the terms of sexual engagement I'd laid down.

My expectations for the future were that she would hold out for a while longer, and probably up the ante on the flirtatious behaviour. She would want to test me to see if I'd be true to my word or if I would buckle at the first hard-on and compel her to sleep with me.

I got the distinct impression, especially when I spotted her checking out my ass as I walked away, that she wouldn't be as disappointed with the latter as she tried to make out.

Not that it would happen, patience is a virtue. Maybe the only one the Darkwyrlds had left me with.

When you understood that people were walking, talking, contradictions, the easier it became to process their illogical and mystifying behaviour.

Anastasia wanted me to take her into bed but was incredibly pissed off that I could order her to do it. Even though becoming intimate with me is exactly what she wanted to do. Hence, her giving me verbal shit whenever she could and saving my life when she didn't have to.

She was both glad and angry that she belonged to me, and her behaviour was befittingly variable because of this.

It would be interesting to see how long she could last before she cracked.

Less than a week, I reckoned.

Ten hours later and night would soon be falling.

After inspecting the Dockyard and Markets we had returned to the stronghold and walked through its marbled buildings for over an hour. The place was huge, a true palace and had hundreds of rooms and antechambers. We found the master suite which I took for myself, though it was sparsely decorated and the bed that was present, while large, didn't have the same appeal as the one I owned on Marena's Mercy.

I let the ladies pick out rooms on the same floor as me, but I planned on us staying on the ship for the time being. Paradoxically, the Palace and the stronghold which surrounded it were too large to be adequately defended with our current numbers. So, we closed and locked the doors behind us, raised the drawbridge, and locked down both Gatehouses.

Then we visited the podium for some supplies and ventured out beyond Stormblade Harbour's current limits.

What we picked up from the podium were settlement flags which we could use to claim more land for Stormblade Harbour and work towards completing my quest to control the whole of Beaver Island.

Although completing the Corsair's Canon four had granted me ownership of all unclaimed property on the island, there wasn't a lot of that outside of the settlement's limits. Most of the island was state-owned, not private, and as such, I would need to plant the flags I'd bought and usurp the land from that 'faction' so to speak.

We'd gone to the Northwest part of the island, skirting Font Lake which had indeed intersected with the moat of my stronghold and filled it. There had been a few homes dotted around on this part of the island and I thought this would be the best place to start the process of expanding my domain.

Quixbix had reluctantly explained the process to me. His preference had been that we crack on with raiding and work towards completing the Corsair's Canon five, but I stuck to my guns and eventually, he caved.

We had to plant the flags on land claimed by another and then remain nearby as the flag's influence expanded outward and began the conversion.

Exactly how much land each planted flag claimed wasn't fully revealed until the process had finished. Which was a pain in the ass, but it's how it worked and there was no way around it.

Apparently, the time it took to complete had several dependencies, including how long the land had been in the possession of the other party, their faction's strength relative to yours and the proximity of them or any of their representatives.

As a dungeon, Anastasia couldn't plant a flag, but Shana and Jackson could on my behalf as part of my crew.

We ended up having to abandon the separate beacon plan almost immediately. The timer for Shana and Jackson both read as infinite and even mine read that it would take more than a week to complete. When the two of them returned to my position the timer reduced to six hours and we waited it out.

During the time that we waited, we came under assault twice from low-grade groups of mobs.

Pestilence monkeys.

They were vile creatures with scabbed and mangy fur, and they literally flung their diseased droppings at us.

They weren't very hardy, but they were mobile little pests whose disgusting attack sickened all concerned. Fortunately, the lake was nearby to assist in cleaning off their foulness the few times one of us was hit. About the only real benefit from the encounters was that it essentially confirmed there had to be a spawning crystal for them on this part of the island.

The timer had flashed to zero not long before sunset.

“Quixbix, how much land did that get us?” I asked the imp eagerly.

<Have you braced yourself? This will likely knock your socks off> my imp teased.

“I can check this myself you know,” I sighed.

<Whatever. You have secured roughly a five-metre radius from the point of insertion> he relayed, with barely repressed laughter.

“A five-metre radius!” I yelled. “After six fucking hours and being pelted with monkey shit. That is all we got.”

<I’m afraid so> he answered not even bothering to hold in his laughter this time.

“You bloody knew this would happen, didn’t you?”

<I did. Taking land from established factions is a slow and laborious process. By my calculations, if you did nothing else all day, every day, you should claim the rest of the island in about two hundred and eighty years. The hilarity of the shit-flinging monkeys was an unexpected bonus, though. I did tell you we should have gone raiding.>

“This was not helpful, Quixbix,” Shana admonished the imp angrily. “I got their faeces in my hair twice. You should have told us how little land we would get doing it this way.”

<This was way funner, though. For me at any rate. Also, practical lessons often work best> he opined.

“Fine. Point taken. We are heading back,” I ordered the group in a very foul mood.

A mood shared by most of the group, barring my smug quest imp.

Everybody, including Quixbix, had the common sense not to poke the bear as we trudged back to the ship in silence.

A few hours later, we had finished eating our evening meal in the mess on the ship. After we had all bathed, thoroughly, of course.

Jackson and Anastasia were cleaning the dishes. Ana doing so reluctantly, but she didn't make me order her, which was unusual. She was probably up to something related to our conversation in the Slave Market earlier today.

Shana and I were sharing a bottle of red wine we had recovered from one of the bars. I'd used the drudgery of looting the former town's surviving buildings to help calm me after I had cleaned up. Although seeing as I now owned all the buildings, it wasn't really looting, more like collecting.

"Quixbix," I addressed the imp for the first time since we returned. "As the beacon plan was a bust what else can we do to secure the island?"

<This again> he groused in my ear. <I thought we were past this after the poop monkeys. We should be out there, hitting the coastal villages and building our reputation.>

"It may have escaped your attention but there are only four of us, Quix. I need to build a crew first, probably using the Slave Market. And as you haven't said shit about anybody becoming available, I'm assuming that hasn't happened yet," I explained to him patiently, burying the kernel of my anger at him semi-successfully.

<But...> he started

"No buts, Quix," I interrupted. "I'm not going out and attacking random settlements with four people. We might, and I stress *might*, start scouting the coastline in the morning for potential targets. But I'm not making any kind of a move without a plan. Therefore, in the meantime, what can we do to secure the situation here?"

<Fine. I suppose formulating a plan is the kind of forward-thinking successful captains do> Quixbix conceded. <As for claiming the island your choices are limited. Most of the land is registered as belonging to the state of Michigan. You either must build the strength of your faction, the Shattered Storm, or wait for the influence of Michigan as a recognised faction to wane or even fall, which could happen if its leaders perish. That will make claiming the land quicker and if Michigan is disbanded entirely, probably automatic, assuming nobody else is present to contest the transfer.>

“That’s it. Grow strong or hope Michigan State falls?” I pressed him.

<Yes, unless you can find the leader of Michigan State...>

“The Governor?” I interjected with sudden excitement.

<Yeah, the Governor. If you can hunt him down, then you can force him to give you the land.>

“That is hopeless,” Shana complained and slumped onto the table uncharacteristically. “Tricky Dicky 2.0 could be anywhere.”

I rubbed her shoulders to comfort her. The incident with the Pestilence Monkeys must have upset her more than I thought. When my hands gripped close to her neck she moaned happily.

“Hmmm, maybe,” I mused. “However, I happen to know where he was at the moment of integration and with any luck, he might still be there.”

Shana’s eyes shot up from the table and she turned to look at me. “You do? How would you know where the Governor was? I mean he could be in Lansing; it is the state capital, but everyone knows he is off gallivanting more often than doing any actual work.”

“Simple,” I explained. “Just before the lights went out there was a news report on his latest brush with infidelity. The

reporter claimed he was holed up in the Governor's summer residence on Mackinac Island. With any luck, he still is."

Jackson and Anastasia had finished the washing up and were sauntering over to us. Well, Anastasia was sauntering, my earlier prediction of her upping the flirty ante coming to pass. Jackson was following in her wake trying to hide that he was watching her ass sway. I couldn't blame him; she had a very shapely and curvy ass, and he was a teenager.

Anastasia was well aware of what she was doing.

Of course, if he reached out and touched her swaying butt, I'd have to cut his hand off, but Jackson didn't strike me as the dumbass creepy type.

I did say people were complex and contradictory, that includes me. I might be patient and willing to wait for Anastasia to choose to be with me but that didn't preclude me from feeling possessive towards her anyway.

Had she not been into me, I may have felt differently.

Then again, maybe not.

To be on the safe side, I made a mental note to see what we could do about getting young Jackson a girlfriend of some sort and keep him apart from Ana in the immediate future to minimise any damage the minx could do as she pushed the boundaries.

I knew Anastasia had no genuine interest in him. Jackson was most definitely not her type, but I didn't want him getting hurt if she took testing the veracity of my word too far.

A sorcerer without hands isn't much use to anybody.

I waited for Anastasia to sit down opposite us and then gestured for Jackson to sit on my other side. Ana's lips tugged upwards with a triumphant smirk at my less than subtle reaction.

I ignored her smugger and outlined the strategy for tomorrow. "Crew, we have a plan of action. At first light, I

want us to set sail for Mackinac Island. Ana, how long will it take us to get there without burning any of your surplus energy?”

“Hmmm,” she hummed, and her eyelids flickered. “It’s mostly open water, so a couple of hours. Three tops,” she replied.

“Why are we going to Mackinac?” Jackson asked.

“I’m looking to have a word with our beloved Governor.” I grinned.

Chapter 27

Day 6

Marena's Mercy glided silently into the bay on the southern end of Mackinac Island around mid-morning.

We moored up on a large concrete dock that had been built for the ferry service.

One of the ferries had been in port during the integration. It was tied up to some metallic bollards that had been painted black. Where the black paint had chipped away there was a sheen of rust beneath.

We saw a few people aboard, working hard to try and get her going, to no avail it would seem. One of them, a man with a weather-beaten face who looked to be in his sixties, looked up from his work and spotted our arrival.

"Oi!" he shouted. "Ya can't moor up there. This jetty is for the ferry service only."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I muttered, loud enough that my people heard me but not the clown across from us.

Anastasia snorted her derision. Shana attempted to be a bit more politic about the situation. "Some people take comfort in regulations in times of crisis."

"Fine, I'll try not to be rude, but we aren't fucking moving to make these asshats happy," I declared.

The taffrail parted and the black gangplank descended onto the concrete jetty, and we walked down.

“Hey!” the old man bristled.

I waved him off. “We won’t be long. And more to the point there is a damn apocalypse in progress, you must have noticed. The ferries on the mainland are in no better shape than the one here. Nor will they be for some time.”

Then added. “And a word to the wise, don’t get any ideas about boarding my vessel while I’m gone. It’s protected and I *will* know.”

“That’s my line,” Anastasia grumped beside me.

“Why you...” the old man started, but he was halted by a firm hand on his shoulder by one of his fellows.

The other man whispered in his ear and the old man’s eyes widened, taking in the heavily armoured state of my company of four, perhaps for the first time, and the imminent danger he was in finally clicked in his head. He backed down and returned to whatever it was they were working on, muttering angrily to himself.

With that settled, we set off down the quay and into the small town.

We had visited my new podium before we left Stormblade Harbour, rounding out any armour gaps and making sure they were of at least regular quality. Anastasia had changed out of the school uniform outfit and into Jeans and a white T-shirt with sparkly patterns. They were still figure-hugging and sexy but she didn’t stand out quite as much as before.

The layout of the small community here on Mackinac was remarkably similar to what St. James Township had looked like before we took it over and the Shattered Goddess had landscaped the place. Mostly a single Main Street that ran around the bay with a few roads that led deeper into the island.

The biggest difference between the two was that Mackinac clearly hadn't had the same misfortune of crystals disgorging creatures as dangerous as the fomorians right on their doorstep. The island was only a couple of miles from the mainland and there was the much larger and mostly uninhabited Bois Blanc Island maybe a mile further south.

That island would likely be more dangerous than this one by a fair margin.

Which wasn't to say there weren't any signs of damage or monstrous incursions. Several buildings had been heavily damaged, a couple even burned down. That could have been looting, I supposed, but the people on the street seemed too organised and cooperative for that to be the case. That and there were visible armed patrols.

Once we made it to the street, we were challenged by a group of fellows who had taken combat classes and had been patrolling the streets. "Halt and identify yourselves!" the leader of the squad yelled unnecessarily loudly.

My eyes flicked towards the sandy-haired man in his late thirties and analysed him.

Sgt. Calum Macdonald (Human)

Knight (U) 3

Character Aptitude: Moderate

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 1,120

Current Affiliation: Michigan National Guard (Michigan State)

The current affiliation box was new and informed me this patrol was made up of National Guardsmen. That

surprised me, I doubted they had a base on Mackinac Island, but not being from America my knowledge on that was spotty at best.

The patrol wore a mixture of leather and chain armour, but now that I examined them closely, I could see they had rifles strapped to their backs as well as an array of melee weapons. Calum held the best class amongst them, but they had all gained several levels, which indicated they had seen plenty of action over the last week.

My instinct had been to dress Sergeant Calum down for his temerity, making such demands of me like I was some common street hawker, but I tamped that down. We weren't here to make a scene, not if we could avoid it.

<It's not too late to change your mind> Quixbix egged me on, probably detecting my indignation. <Go in weaponry swinging, cut the chaff before you down, and force the Governor to give you what you want at sword point.>

I had quizzed the imp extensively last night about how the Framework organised the power structure on integrated worlds. The information had been revealing and convinced me to try a diplomatic approach initially.

There were several things I could offer Governor Reynolds that I suspected he would be interested in.

Enough to get me what I wanted without violence.

Plus, Tricky Dicky 2.0 was as bent as a nine bob note and being on friendly terms with the likes of him could pay greater dividends down the line. I explained that to the imp and my crew when we set out this morning.

Then I had to explain what the phrase 'bent as a nine-bob note' meant.

That Tricky Dicky 2.0 was as corrupt as they come because none of them understood the British idiom.

Quixbix had not been shy in expressing his disappointment at my decision to not rock up and cut our way

through to Tricky Dicky. At least, he pretended to be disappointed. Personally, I think he was a shade embarrassed that he hadn't thought about the long-term benefit of having a crooked state leader working with us rather than against us.

Which brought us here, to this moment, where I forced a winning smile on my face and responded as reasonably as I could. "I'm Captain Carter and this is my crew. We've just arrived."

"Crew?" Sergeant Macdonald said at a regular volume. His eyes roved over Shana, Anastasia, and Jackson and his eyebrow curled upwards with doubt.

"Like what you see, perv?" Anastasia snarked at him.

Sergeant Macdonald ignored my dungeon's sass and turned his attention back to me. "You came in on a sailboat?" he asked, doubt in his tone. "Most sailing vessels and dinghies have run into trouble with the monsters in the lake if they stray more than a hundred yards from the shore," he clarified.

"Not exactly," I replied, answering his first question. "The seafaring class I received from the Framework allowed me to convert a wreck into something more sizable that works using a new power source."

"Really?" Sergeant Macdonald said with surprise. Then he glanced down at the marina and spotted the sleek black lines of Marena's Mercy. "In that case, by order of Governor Reynolds we are commandeering that vessel into service for the great state of Michigan," the sergeant spoke with surprising zeal.

Clueing him in to my ship's presence hadn't been an error on my part. It had been a tactical ploy instead.

Richard Reynolds as Governor of Michigan state, regardless of what class he took, would be granted some localised abilities, similar to what Luca Gattosi had, to assume control of state-owned or recognised institutions.

Institutions like the Michigan National Guard.

It didn't quite work the same way as it did with Luca; individuals could choose to abandon their affiliation to those organisations rather than accept the influence the Governor would have over them. But once they accepted then it wasn't as easy to pull away.

As these guys were still part of the National Guard, that meant they hadn't forsaken that affiliation. And a man like Richard Reynolds wouldn't hesitate to apply his influence on the locals if he could.

I had been under no illusions that whoever was in charge here would make a play for my ship. This just sped up the process and confirmed that Governor Reynolds was indeed here or had been very recently. Had it been some other dipshit in charge then we would have simply advanced to the violent alternative to negotiations that would have inevitably occurred.

I smiled widely. "Governor Reynolds. Excellent, he was just the man I came to see. We have a mutually beneficial arrangement to discuss. Please lead on sergeant," I said, blithely ignoring the man's 'claiming' of my ship.

Sergeant Macdonald wasn't very happy at the turn of the conversation and gave me the military stare. I didn't flinch and simply projected unabashed confidence.

"Oh, just get them out and measure them already," Anastasia griped irritably.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Ana? Getting another eyeful of the Immensity," I shot back at her with a wink.

Jackson and Shana chuckled while Anastasia stuck her tongue out at me.

Our display of a complete lack of concern about the armed and armoured soldiers in front of us unnerved said soldiers somewhat. Then, with a grunt, Sergeant Macdonald conceded to take us to the Governor's residence and find out if he would see us before they seized my property, but he offered no guarantees in that regard.

We had to wait a few more minutes as the sergeant used a battery-powered radio to call in some backup. Two more patrols to accompany us and a third to stand guard by Marena's Mercy.

That was twenty men, and sergeant Macdonald hadn't batted an eyelid about summoning that many. I doubted they would leave the mansion undefended, therefore, presumably Governor Reynolds must have had a significant number of men answering to him, at least a hundred.

I issued my warning once again not to try and board the ship and then the sergeant led us from the dock area.

Five minutes later, we were strolling up the hill in the gentle breeze. I recognised from the maps I'd studied that we were heading towards the Governor's residence. The manse was only a few hundred metres up the road and the buildings disappeared quickly as we walked. We halted outside the gate into the residence which was ensconced in a grove of leafy green trees.

The National Guardsman lined up in front of the gate and there was a further half dozen soldiers who had been stationed here. Sergeant Macdonald went inside, and we were instructed to wait until he returned.

I was content for the moment to see where playing nice got me.

I peered through the hastily erected chain link fencing that surrounded the place to the manse within. The building was three storeys made up of white shingled walls and both a recessed and a protruding porch. The whole thing sat on a stone foundation, so I expected it had an extensive basement.

While we waited, I looked about the street and my gaze locked on to a busty attractive woman with long, flowing, blonde hair with light green highlights loitering on the other side of the street.

I stepped off the pavement onto the road and smiled at her. She responded in kind and beamed back at me showing

off a row of gleaming pearly white teeth. She stepped into the road as I had and opened her mouth to hail us when I heard several rifles being cocked and readied for firing.

One of the guards at the residence entrance barked out. “We will not warn you again, Miss Belmont. You are to come no closer to the residence than the opposite sidewalk and you are not to utter a word. If you do not comply, we are under direct orders to open fire.”

The blonde hastily retreated back as far as she could on the other side of the road and made a zipping motion across her lips to demonstrate she was indeed complying. The reaction of the guardsmen both surprised and intrigued me, so I had to analyse her now.

Patricia Belmont (Siren)

Whispering Bard (P) 2

Character Aptitude: Very High

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 6,480

Current Affiliation: None

Fertile Receptivity: 0/298

With a name to go with the face my memory dinged.

Patricia Belmont had been the news reporter I’d seen covering the story about Governor Reynolds just before the Framework integrated the Earth into the Darkwyrlds. I hadn’t recognised her straight away, she had far less make-up on than when she had delivered that report and was much prettier for it in my opinion.

Although my lack of recognition may have been more to do with the changes that integration had wrought upon her,

she had become a siren and taken an impressively high-grade and apt class. She smiled sweetly at me again, but there was a steely determination in her gaze.

I hadn't missed the fact that women had an extra line of information on their analysis sheets compared to the gentlemen.

A quick roving eye on my party confirmed the same fresh information was available for them as well. Shana's receptivity was currently 5/167.

Presumably, based on what Dean told me, if Shana slept with someone else then that progress to five would either be wiped out or reduced. However, this was one area that I wasn't willing to experiment to gain further knowledge.

Predictably, as a dungeon avatar, Anastasia's receptivity score was Not Applicable.

My attention was drawn back to the activity at the impromptu gate as a stern-looking, auburn-haired, woman in her fifties garbed in a cream business suit that accentuated a trim figure approached. Her high heeled shoes clacked on the pathway, and she gave us a cursory once over when she reached the fence.

Regina Reynolds (Pact Noble Human)

Baroness (T) 2

Character Aptitude: High

Loot Value: Moderate

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 2,160

Current Affiliation: Michigan State

Fertile Receptivity: 0/164

If her name was any indication, this must have been the Governor's wife. It could be another relative, like a sister, but the slightly sour lemon expression on her face had the hallmarks of a long-suffering, oft cheated upon, politician's wife.

"What do you want?" she demanded curtly.

Straight to the point then. "Good morning, Mrs Reynolds," I started brightly. "I'm Torin Carter, captain of Marena's Mercy, currently docked in the bay, but I'm sure Sergeant Macdonald told you that already. I've come to make a friendly trade with the Governor."

"You want to trade us your ship?" she asked nonchalantly, but her eyelids flickered, betraying her keen interest.

"Not in the slightest," I replied. "The Marena's Mercy is mine and will stay that way. Sure, you could try and take her from me by force. However, *if* you were successful, and that is a mighty doubtful if, you wouldn't be able to make use of the ship without me anyway. That doesn't mean we can't come to another 'mutually scratched backs' accord, though."

Regina's eyes narrowed and took on a faraway look for a split second. It was likely she had some kind of analysis ability like mine. Her demeanour shifted to one of resignation when she was done. "Let them through, corporal. Governor Reynolds will see them."

"Should we remove their armaments, Ma'am?" the dutiful corporal asked as she turned away.

Regina Reynolds shrugged. "They could have more in their inventories, so I don't see the point."

The corporal blinked in surprise but motioned to his men regardless, and they pulled back the chain link fence and let us through. We followed the Governor's wife up the path that led to the summer residence.

"This is very trusting of you, Mrs Reynolds," Shana spoke up as we reached the white steps that led up to the porch

of the main entrance.

Regina stopped halfway up the steps and looked back at us. “The world has changed greatly over the last week, Miss...” she prompted.

“Colton,” Shana answered quickly.

“Yes, much has changed Miss Colton, and we must adapt with that change. For example, Sergeant Macdonald, is a good and reliable man, but has struggled with such adaptation. Hence, he left ten men, the least experienced, plus the gate guards to oversee you. Foolishly believing sixteen would be more than sufficient to handle four strangers. When in fact, they were seriously outmatched. Or have I overestimated you and your crew, Captain Carter?”

“You have not,” I smiled.

Of course, the Governor’s summer residence being an officially recognised premises of the Michigan State faction did offer them several bonuses that their forces would not enjoy out on the street. Bringing us within shifted the balance of power back towards whoever they had stationed inside.

I knew this thanks to Jackson and Quix, but how many others would be as aware?

She turned without another word and led us into the building. The interior of the manse had been constructed using yellow pine and gave it a very homey feel.

We passed Sergeant Macdonald and his patrol as they were going in the other direction, back outside, though I suspected only as far as the porch and that they would creep back in once the audience with the Governor began.

We had to wait a moment as Regina went into what I took to be the Dining Room before us to speak with her husband. She returned a couple of minutes later and asked us to follow her. I was a little surprised they didn’t have somebody else to do this for them, but then again, maybe they’d been killed by a monster incursion or left.

Regina led us into an expansive room with large bay windows that looked out onto the lake and had a huge varnished dark wood dining table covered in paperwork at its centre.

Apart from six more guardsmen standing in the corners of the room, there were four other people. Two of them stood on the other side of the table and were similarly attired for business to Mrs Reynolds.

The hawkish analytical looks on their faces as we walked in screamed lawyers or accountants.

Governor Reynolds sat behind the table. He was a man in his fifties with slick-backed, black hair and an easy smile. Integration had been kind to him, I recalled his laugh lines and the wrinkling around the eyes as being quite pronounced. His skin was smoother and though he sat behind a large table, there was no sign of the previously growing paunch around his midriff.

The improvement to the Governor's physique was not, however, the jaw-dropper in the room. That honour fell to the strikingly beautiful, fiery, redhead who stood at his side. Her beauty was indeed noteworthy, but what really stood out about her was the honest to Shattered Goddess pair of wings that sprouted from her back.

The woman flexed and flapped her wings as we walked in drawing everyone's attention to the unexpected appendages in all their glory. Her feathers were a bright white-edged with red that matched her hair colour. Her eyes were a piercing green, and she had a smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose. She also had plump kissable lips which were currently curling up in obvious disgust at my mere presence, which put a bit of a dampener on the moment.

Raven Reynolds (Angelblood)

Minor Justicar (N) 2

Character Aptitude: Immense

Loot Value: Moderate

Threat: Low

XP Value: 11,040

Current Affiliation: Michigan State

Fertile Receptivity: 0/536

<Bloody hell> Quixbix whistled. <Will you look at the aptitude on this one! She is almost as badass as you, boss, and without any helping hand from the Framework. Shame about the class and species, though. Still, it could be worse, at least Justicar's aren't Valiant. The whole justice is blind schtick.>

Her aptitude wasn't exactly what dazzled me at first, but my imp who had been quiet since the docks wasn't wrong.

I'd been reading through some of the material available via our character sheets and knew that Angelblood was a tier three species just like Acheronian. Her N-grade class was third tier too.

Earlier on the street, Patricia Belmont's aptitude had been a bit eyebrow-raising, but Raven's eclipsed hers and then some.

Immense was the highest possible classification and matched mine. Shana's had been High, but that still put her in the top five percent of people on planet Earth.

When we drilled down into the details, it turned out Shana was only a point or two from being in the Very High category, meaning she was closer to the top one percent in reality.

The Very High's like Patricia made up significantly less than one percent, probably closer to one in every ten thousand people. Extremely High, the penultimate ranking, was possessed by perhaps one in every fifty thousand people. We were talking only one in every million who qualified for the Immense rating. Roughly eight thousand worldwide.

And these were the ‘at integration’ numbers. Paradoxically, the higher aptitudes became even rarer as time went by.

Quixbix explained it had something to do with those with greater potential taking more risks and therefore perishing, while the weak would often hide behind the strong and survive, unless all the strong were killed in which case it was a total wipeout.

Over time, as the surviving higher aptitude people paired off and had children the ratio would begin to swing back in favour of the upper-ranked aptitudes, and they would increase in frequency once more.

Regina spoke and refocused my attention. “This is my husband, Governor Richard Reynolds and the frowning young woman beside him is our daughter, Raven,” she introduced them with a hint of reproach for her daughter’s blatant distaste for us.

They sure did like the double R alliteration in this family.

“Richard, this is Captain Torin Carter and members of his crew. He wishes to discuss the possibility of a trade.”

“Must we entertain this...scum,” Raven spat, scorning the very idea of treating with me. “I can smell the filthy taint of corruption on him from the other side of the room.”

<So, as an Angelblood she is going to instinctually know you are an Acheronian, not that you are hiding it these days. Plus, I should probably warn you that as a Justicar she can tell truth from lies. Your social stats are decent, so there is a chance you could slip a falsehood past her, but likely as not, she’ll know> Quixbix informed me.

Even as he spoke up, I felt my hackles rise at Raven’s heritage and felt the same wrongness she no doubt experienced about me.

There was a critical difference between us, though. Whereas her instinct seemed to veer towards rejection and

condemnation, mine had a more avaricious and domineering flavour. She wanted to exile or destroy me; I wanted to conquer, tame, and make her mine.

The instinct was powerful, very powerful. So powerful, I was on the verge of drawing my scimitars and launching myself across the table and slaying her father and kickstarting my claim.

Anastasia and Shana must have sensed something through our bonds as they each put one of their hands on mine. The electricity in their touch was enough to jolt me back to myself and I faked readjusting my belt as the reason for my sudden movement towards my weapons.

<Keep it together, big guy> Quixbix counselled. <If you want to go all berserker fury, best we do that outside where they don't get any bonuses, yeah.>

I plastered a smile on my face and beamed it directly at the winged beauty who shuddered with distaste as she looked away.

“Now, now, honey,” Governor Reynolds admonished his daughter and patted her on the hand. “I’m always happy to meet with my constituents.”

Something brushed up against my psyche as Governor Reynolds spoke, but it did not find any purchase and slithered away, unsuccessful.

What the Governor had attempted to do hadn't felt the same as what Luca had tried to pull on me via the walkie-talkie. That had been a brute force effort that tried to penetrate and subdue my will. This was more like a probe searching for something specific that it could latch onto, which then retreated when it couldn't find it.

“Ah, I will have to correct you there, Governor Reynolds. Our affiliation lies elsewhere,” I said meaningfully.

“He speaks the truth,” Raven sneered.

“Shame, shame,” he said, though if he were truly disappointed, he hid it well. “Please, take a seat,” and pointed to the collection of chairs on our side of the table. “It pains me that I can’t offer the usual hospitality to guests, but we are in extraordinary times.”

I grinned at his understatement and pulled out chairs for my ladies and we took our seats. Regina sat beside her husband on the other side of her daughter who continued to glower at me with unconcealed hate.

Once I’d settled myself in place, I let my analyse do its thing on the Governor.

Richard Reynolds (Noble Human)

Ruler (*R) *1

Character Aptitude: N/A

Loot Value: High

Threat: Moderate

XP Value: 3,300

Current Affiliation: Ruler of Michigan State

As we suspected the Governor had chosen a special class called Ruler. Rulers did not accrue experience in the same manner as other characters. The grade of the class was determined by the area of land directly ruled over and the level was based on the number of people who acknowledged them as their sovereign.

There were advantages to such progression, if you could secure large tracts of land and supporters. The flip side of the coin was that if you lost territory or people then your character growth was lost in kind.

Being Governor of Michigan State granted him control over all state land which had boosted his Ruler class to R-

grade. However, the only people who could accept him as sovereign so far would have been here on Mackinac Island and this restricted him to level one.

Obviously, this class wasn't offered to everyone. Richard Reynolds would have been given the option as he was the Governor of Michigan, and the Framework recognised him as a potential sovereign of the region.

According to Quixbix it was taken as a class frequently on freshly integrated worlds but was less favoured by established dynasties, who went with the kind of class his wife had taken. One of Ruler's downsides was once you took the class you could never switch to anything else. It also acted as a single point of failure for a faction. Successful assassinations would severely weaken, sometimes topple the faction which made recruitment in the wider Darkwyrlds problematic.

"What can I do for you fine folks?" Governor Reynolds asked as he relaxed back in his chair.

"Brevity is the soul of wit, they say, so I will get straight to the point," I started. "And your lovely daughter being a walking, talking, lie detector, will speed up the process as I'm sure she'll sing like a canary at the slightest hint that I'm trying to pull the wool over your eyes."

Raven rolled her eyes and refused to acknowledge my backhanded compliment, but Governor Reynolds nodded sagely. There was a gleam in his eyes, a hunger I couldn't quite place. It didn't matter, we had anticipated him being a Ruler and Raven's presence really did simplify this whole negotiation.

"Go on," the Governor said simply and steeped his fingers under his chin.

"There are two things I want from you, Governor. The first is land. I want you to cede the whole Beaver Island archipelago to my faction the Shattered Storm," I laid out my first demand calmly.

There was a deep belly laugh from the Governor. “Is this a joke, son? Did my wife put you up to this?”

“He is serious, Father,” Raven interjected reluctantly.

“Like a heart attack,” I added. “I shall be forthright. Beaver Island is essentially already mine. Sure, officially it still belongs to Michigan State, but your only township on the islands is gone. In its place is one that belongs to me. I can and will take the rest of the island group, it is inevitable. You don’t have the capacity to stop me.”

When I said this, Governor Reynolds face flushed a shade of red as his ire was awoken. In the background, his two lawyer flunkies were desperately tapping away on podium tablets.

“What is the meaning of this? You come to my home, issuing threats,” Governor Reynolds spat angrily.

“Not threats, Governor Reynolds,” I said reasonably. “I’m just establishing the facts. On the face of it, requesting that you give me a chunk of your territory seems like a big ask. What I need you to understand is you aren’t giving me the land, as I can take the land for myself. No, what I’m asking for is time. The time it will take me to secure those islands and fully sever any hold you have on them. And time is a precious commodity, for the both of us.”

At this point, one of the lawyers came over and started whispering in the Governor’s ear. Quixbix whispered in my mind in return, informing me they had confirmed that St. James Township was no longer listed as a town within Michigan State.

Raven must have overheard the lawyer and she growled at me. “Did you slaughter the innocent people of that town, you spineless pirate filth.”

I grinned back. “I am indeed a pirate, miss. But to answer your question, no I did not. That would be the monsters that now spawn at regular intervals who cleared out

the town. Monsters I slew in return and took the town for myself as reward.”

Raven grunted unhappily at my explanation, but not a word of it was untrue so she was stymied on that front. Then the Governor started talking again.

“Fine. Say I was to entertain such a notion of ceding the archipelago to you, Captain Carter. What is it that you are offering in return for such a generous bounty?”

“I’m glad you asked, Governor,” I replied. “A simple trade, time for time. You are stuck on this island, and I happen to have a way to get you off it. I can safely transport you and up to five hundred of your people from Mackinac and have you in the heart of Saginaw before the sun sets today.”

Governor Reynolds tried to remain cool, but that hunger in his eyes had ignited again.

“My people are already working on that,” he claimed instead. “I don’t think your bargaining position is as strong as you think it is, captain.”

“I thought we weren’t going to play silly buggers, Governor” I answered reproachfully. “Yes, you can probably get off this island by yourselves *eventually*, but that will take time. I’ll speed this up for all of us. I know how your Ruler class works. To increase your influence, you need the Mayors of Michigan to bend the knee to you. And there is only one way of using your class to put that question to them, *and exert pressure on them to accept*, remotely. From your Framework recognised seat of power. The state capital, Lansing.”

There was a look of resignation on Richard Reynolds face, but his wife seemed almost amused.

“You can turn me down, if you wish,” I told him casually. “But how many more towns and cities will you lose the opportunity to gather under your banner by the time you get there under your own steam. We both know you’ve already lost Grand Rapids.”

There was a look of surprise on the faces on the other side of the table.

“Yes, I know about Grand Rapids,” I continued. “It’s in the hands of a two-bit hoodlum by the name of Luca Gattosi now.

“Let me ask you, do you think the Governors of Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio all had the same misfortune of not being in or near their capitals? Not to mention our northern neighbour Ontario. If you take the deal, you can be in Saginaw tonight and marching south to Flint by morning. You could be in Lansing in two days rather than two weeks, and the roads are only going to get more dangerous with every day that you wait.”

“Hmmm, Captain Carter, you make a compelling argument,” Governor Reynolds conceded.

Then Anastasia piped up. “Plus, as your daughter pointed out we are pirates. We’re less likely to do piracy shit to those who have a proven track record of working with us. We’ve come to you; we could have gone to one of the other Governor’s. Not all the islands in the Great Lakes belong to Michigan.”

Regina Reynolds laughed out loud at that. Raven seemed like she was sucking on a lemon.

“Indeed,” Shana added. “When resources begin to become scarce, having a cordial relationship with those who could secure what you need, no questions asked, is the kind of relationship that would be helpful.”

Raven’s face scrunched even tighter if that was possible. “They speak the truth,” she unwillingly gasped, at last.

The Governor smiled at both of my girls, his lecherous side coming to the fore. “Excellent points on both counts, ladies. You are a lucky man, Captain Carter, to have such dazzling and accomplished women working under you.”

Regina snorted at this, but her husband and daughter seemed oblivious to her derision. Much in the same way that Victor had been of Shana's obvious dislike of him.

"You said there were two things you wanted, Captain Carter?" Regina questioned me while her husband ogled.

"Ah yes, I almost forgot. I would like authorisation to enter and transfer prisoners from the state's correctional facilities."

This left the opposing side of the table in stunned silence.

"Why?" Raven asked, suspicion heavy in her voice.

"As I'm sure your legal experts over there have figured out, the prisons have some added protection to prevent the prisoners escaping and running rampant in these early days. That won't last. To be perfectly honest I've already had a run-in with Luca Gattosi in Grand Rapids, and we did not see eye to eye.

"Luca has a similar class to your father's, one called Criminal Kingpin." There was a flash of recognition in the gorgeous Angelblood Justicar's emerald eyes. "You're aware of it and what it can do, good. It shan't be long before he has the strength to overcome the protections on the facilities near him and incorporate their residents into his growing army. For my own reasons, I wish to deny him that opportunity and emptying the correctional facilities of potential recruits seems like the best way."

"And what do I get in return?" Governor Reynolds pressed.

"Apart from denying a potential rival a significant number of soldiers?" I argued back.

"There is nothing to stop me from doing what you are proposing myself, now is there, Captain Carter," he countered.

"Only if I sail you off this island."

“Come now, Captain Carter. You can’t expect me to believe you will turn down my agreeing to your first request if I reject your second. You want me to hand over those islands too badly,” he smiled smugly.

I made a show of mulling over his demand, though I had expected he wouldn’t want to grant me the permissions for nothing.

“Fine, slaves,” I said, after a moment.

I’d stunned them all for a second time.

Raven recovered the quickest. “Please, let me smite this degenerate bastard, Father.”

I raised my hand with my index finger pointed upwards to forestall the Governor’s response. “To be more specific, I am offering to return any of your acknowledged citizens, who happen to have the misfortune of being collared and then come into my possession, for a small finder’s fee of ten gold per slave. I can’t give them to you for nothing, my hands are tied on that before you ask. Then you can free them as you see fit and bask in the resulting adulation as their saviour.”

This had been one of the various options of what I could do with slaves that I had discussed with Quixbix and Jackson. We had found a little wriggle room with regards to selling them to be freed by another for a discounted price, but only if it was part of a negotiated Framework Contract.

However, I would still need to get reasonable recompense as part of the deal or continue to risk the Notoriety loss. Permission to enter and empty the prisons alone wouldn’t cut it, even after I had specified this deal would only apply to acknowledged citizens of the Michigan State faction and not any slave I secured.

Currently, that was only the people on Mackinac Island. The scale would increase once the Governor got to Lansing and put the question to the Mayors of Michigan. But you can bet that some of them would resist or had already severed their ties like Grand Rapids. Even so, the Framework

would comprehend the potential scale and demand something significant in return.

Therefore, I added before any of them spoke. “This will cost you a little extra, though. I can make a lot more if I sell them on the open markets. I would need you to give me all the state-owned islands in Michigan, not just the Beaver Island archipelago” I finished.

“We will not bargain with slaving scum, like you,” Raven cried forcefully.

“If you are willing to swear a Bond not to enslave our citizenry in the first place and refrain from raiding settlements under our control, you have a deal, Captain Carter,” Regina spoke loudly, overriding her daughter’s zeal.

“Mother! You can’t be serious,” Raven cried in shock.

“I am, Raven. The world has changed dramatically and every day we waste lollygagging, trapped on this island, is another that the people of this state suffer without the guidance and support we can provide them. He is telling the truth, is he not?” she asked her daughter pointedly.

“He is, but he is also a despicable pirate who engages in slavery. We can’t lower ourselves to his level. We should kill him and take his ship,” Raven argued stridently.

“My, my, advocating the murder of a guest and stealing what is rightfully theirs,” I tutted. “That doesn’t sound very judicial, does it. Besides, even if you managed to kill me you wouldn’t be able to use my ship, it doesn’t work that way,” I commented wryly.

This was true, they wouldn’t be able to use the ship. Even if they figured out that a dungeon powered Marena’s Mercy, and how to take control, this would make them just like me and I was a despicable slaver after all. Raven was the only one here who was likely strong enough to win the Control Collar anyway and she had made her feelings on enslaving others crystal clear.

“Silence scum! I don’t care if you are telling the truth,” Raven screeched.

The Governor stood then and took his enraged daughter’s face in his hands firmly. “My darling girl, you need to get a hold of yourself. We are Reynolds and we always maintain our composure, no matter the circumstances. And we do not strike down folk we have invited into our home. The optics would be dreadful.”

“Yes, Daddy. I’m sorry, Daddy. It’s just, he is corruption personified,” Raven wept, a few tears running down her freckled cheeks.

“I understand, baby-girl. But we’ve talked about this, sometimes the hero must deal with the devil for the greater good. This is one of those times,” Governor Reynolds crooned to his daughter and then brought her in for a rib-crushing hug.

It would be the classic Hallmark moment if it weren’t equally creepy and hypocritical. Although no one ever accused Tricky Dicky 2.0 of being an evil man, he was a liar and a cheat through and through. What’s more, everyone knew it, everyone except his truth-scenting daughter, apparently.

Everybody has a blind spot, I suppose.

Regina ignored her husband and daughter, her focus solely on me. “Will you agree to the Bond?”

I nodded. “I can go one better,” I said and snapped my fingers.

A Framework Contract similar to the Canon materialised in my fingers. We had pre-prepared the document with all the details and Quixbix assured me he had made the necessary slight adjustments that cropped up during our discussion.

I slipped the contract across the table and Regina picked it up immediately and scanned through it. After a minute she requested a few minor changes to the language used. She didn’t need to return the contract to me for that, it turned out the ‘Pact’ in her species information referred to a

Path of Power she had taken in character creation. The Path of the Pact-maker.

By the time Regina was happy with the contents, her husband had extricated himself from his clinging and emotionally overwrought daughter. Raven seemed to have regained some of her composure but continued to glare daggers at me.

“Sign it,” Regina insisted of her husband once he was seated.

“Are you sure about this Regina? If I give up too much land, I will grow weaker,” Governor Reynolds prevaricated.

The gleam in his eyes was a lust for territory and power. He was loathe to give up any of what he had already amassed.

“Parker!” Regina called out to the lawyers. “Assure my husband he won’t be losing anything.”

“Of course,” the shorter of the two attendants, who had whispered in the Governor’s ear earlier, answered. “I have run the numbers, sir. The islands in question do not have enough square mileage to drop the grade of your Ruler class, and they are uninhabited and likely overrun with spawned monsters.”

The Governor grunted at that but remained sceptical. I suspected it was the mere principle of giving up what was his that caused his dithering.

“For God’s sake, Richard,” Regina huffed. “You will get as much back and more in Saginaw tonight.”

Then she tapped the table impatiently. Resignedly, Richard Reynolds, pressed his thumb to the bottom of the contract and the deal was struck.

I clapped my hands together and checked my watch. It was almost eleven in the morning. “Excellent, a good deal for all involved. Can you be ready to leave by two p.m.? It will

take roughly six hours to get to Saginaw from here and I would like to drop you off before it gets dark.”

“Yes,” Regina answered and rose from her chair and walked around the table to our side. “Parker, make the arrangements.”

We got up from our seats at the large dining table and Regina led us back through the residence. As we descended the steps, I couldn’t help but strike up a conversation.

“You know, things could have gone more smoothly if you’d just told me I was really negotiating with you and not your husband.”

Regina chuckled but didn’t stop or react in surprise. “You are a cheeky one, Captain Carter, I’ll give you that. Richard is many things, charismatic, a doting father, an incorrigible flirt, and rather good in bed, but politically astute, not so much. I have tolerated his philandering over the years because it got him out of the way when the work needed to be done and generated considerable sympathy for me in the corridors of power.

“That is less relevant now, but I wanted to see what kind of man you were. You showed up here with two attractive women at your side. I wanted to know whether you were the kind of man who planned to prostitute these girls for your own ends or if you valued your people as more than sex objects.”

Regina stopped then as a bass growl rumbled across the front garden of the summer residence.

She smiled at my instinctive reaction and for the first time, I got a hint of just how beautiful she could be when she wanted to show it off. “I was gratified to learn you weren’t that kind of man at all. Although I rather suspect if I had dangled the prospect of my daughter in your bed, we could have got several more concessions,” she deadpanned.

It was my turn to almost miss a step from shock.

“That was a joke, Captain Carter, do be a gentleman and laugh,” she teased.

There was laughter from all around. Everyone but me. I gave my crew a dirty look which silenced Jackson's mirth with a gulp but had no effect on Ana or Shana. A flicker in Regina's eyes told me she had spotted and collated the group dynamic for later.

This was a dangerous woman, and the kind my analysis ability would be no help in identifying. Thankfully, our first meeting had gone well.

I could have done without officially signing a Contract forbidding me from raiding Michigan State towns, but I'd expected that it would be necessary. Besides as Quixbix had whispered in my mind, canny operators could always find a workaround should the needs arise.

We reached the gate and Regina sent Sergeant Macdonald and his patrol ahead to pull the team currently outside my ship. They had preparations to make, and our agreement was bound in a Framework Contract. If we tried to leave without them a powerful geas would compel me to order us to remain and honour the agreement.

Quixbix had explained it was theoretically possible to overcome such a geas but it would be incredibly difficult and nigh on impossible at our current level of progression.

"I shall see you in a few hours, Captain Carter," Regina said by way of farewell and turned on her heels and returned to the house.

We headed back down the hill.

When we were about halfway, I said. "That went well, despite some unexpected turns, we got everything we needed."

"What would it be that went so well," a honeyed voice that brought a shiver of pleasure rippling up and down my spine asked sweetly from just out of sight behind a leafy hedge.

**** You have resisted the passive effect of the Siren's Song by Patricia Belmont. Your resistance has cascaded to those bound to you that may have failed. ****

The notification that Quixbix flashed up let me know who it was on the other side of that hedge, and then she stepped out, confirming it in all her gorgeous glory.

Up close she was even prettier than I remembered. There was a slenderness to her figure that was missing before, her bust was maybe a touch smaller than it used to be but remained generous. I think she had gained a few inches in height from the species change which gave her a lissom look.

Her eyes were a vivid jade colour and matched the highlights in her hair. The whole eye and matching coloured body parts seemed to be a theme with Darkwyrlds species. She smiled at me, showing off those pearly white teeth, which I noticed were a little sharper than on a human.

“Torin has made a deal to transport the Governor and his people to Saginaw in three hours in exchange for ownership of the state-owned Lake Michigan Islands,” Jackson hastily replied.

He had a big dumb lovestruck expression on his face.

My resistance had not extended to him, and he hadn't been under orders to keep that knowledge confidential, so the Canon didn't encourage him to keep his lips zipped.

“What the fuck, Jackson?” Anastasia growled and elbowed him in the solar plexus.

The young sorcerer coughed and rubbed at his chest where the short blonde's sharp elbows had struck him.

The starstruck look on his face was gone, though. Ana's rough treatment had broken the spell.

I drew my scimitar and pointed it at the smiling woman, a very nonplussed look on my face.

“Whoa there,” she rushed to say, and took a step back onto the grass verge. “The Siren Song thing is entirely unintentional. It happens whether I want it to or not, but as you can see the effect is easily shrugged off.”

Despite my fresh resistance, Patricia Belmont’s voice remained honeyed and very easy on the ear, a marked improvement of the pre-Darkwyrlds timbre she possessed.

<She is telling the truth about the Siren Song. It’s a natural part of their voice and they can’t shut it off> Quixbix informed me. <It loses its efficacy the more familiar you are with the individual siren.>

I re-sheathed my scimitar.

“That may be the case, but that hasn’t stopped you trying to take advantage of it,” Shana criticised her.

“A girls got to use the tools at her disposal,” she retorted with another winning smile aimed at me. “It’s a harsh world, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“We had, Miss Belmont. Now with your ill-got knowledge, you’ll know we have matters to attend to,” I said, dismissing the woman and continuing to walk down the hill.

My crew followed me, and I heard a frustrated huff from behind us and then the sound of rapid footsteps as the siren chased after us.

“Call me Trisha, please,” she panted a little as she caught up with our brisk pace.

I grunted in response, still a bit resentful with her little ambush.

“And you are...?” she asked pleadingly.

“I’m sure you heard.”

“Torin, yes, an unusual name, but I didn’t get a surname to go with the handsome face and piercing black eyes,” she complimented, still fishing for information.

I almost told her to fuck off, but something held me back.

Then I sighed to myself as I understood the reason why.

Regina's words echoed freshly in my mind about offering her daughter as a sexual playmate. She said it as a joke, but there was a seriousness behind the humour. I doubted Regina would have traded her daughter like that, but she was right on the money that she would have wrung further concessions from me if she had.

And here was another pretty young thing, one who I should have put firmly in my rear-view mirror after the stunt she pulled but couldn't.

I had a weakness; one I wasn't sure what to do about or even if I wanted to do anything about it.

"Carter," I told her instead. "Captain Torin Carter. This is my crew, Shana, Anastasia, and Jackson."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Torin," Trisha said pleasantly. "And the rest of you, of course," she added quickly after a sharp look from Ana.

Our brisk pace meant we reached the quayside by the time introductions were complete. Jackson sidled off to the podium to check out what information he could glean from it. That wasn't necessary with Quix around, but Jackson was the only one of us without direct access to the imp. Anastasia skipped ahead of us eager to get back aboard the ship, leaving Shana and me with the siren.

"Goodbye, Trisha," I said politely, and turned away.

"Please, wait," she said and caught hold of my arm.

I gently removed her grip from my arm. "Make it quick, Trisha. I have things to attend to."

"Are you really taking the Governor and his people off the island in a few hours?"

Jackson had told her as much, so I didn't see a reason to deny it. "Yes, we are."

Trisha started her pitch, which I'd been anticipating since she surprised us. "Will you take me along as well? I'm a reporter and need to be where the story is. Right now, that is with the Governor. When all of this settles down someone needs to be able to tell the people what has happened. The people have a right to know, and I'm best placed to ensure that."

I had serious doubts the world would settle down in the manner Trisha believed it would. Which was beside the point. I had resolved to work on my weakness by not caving and giving the pretty woman what she wanted because she asked nicely.

"I don't think that will be possible," I said. "The Governor and his people will be requiring all the berths we have available. Besides, I got the distinct impression you were not welcome in their camp."

Trisha waved that off. "That was just because of his daughter, paranoid she is, and borderline delusional. His wife understands I'm not trying to seduce him or anything like that."

"But apparently not enough to rescind her daughter's orders to the guards to use lethal force upon you," I pointed out. "Like I said, they will know you are on board, so even if I were amenable to the idea, I'm sure they would insist I leave you behind."

Trisha looked downtrodden and pouted prettily. I vowed to be strong and resist temptation.

"Let's not be so hasty, Torin," Shana piped up and she moved behind Trisha and smacked her rounded bottom unexpectedly.

Trisha squeaked and hopped forward a smidge from the surprise. Shana moved in close behind, breathing softly on Trisha's earlobe and whispered to me over the siren's shoulder.

“There are our quarters, after all. None of the Governor’s people will be in there. And if we snuck her inside now, nobody would know until we arrived in Saginaw. The quarters are fully soundproofed. Provided she is willing to pay the price for passage, of course.”

“p...p...price?” Trisha gulped and blushed prettily.

Shana was right.

Fuck resolve. Resolve is for those without the power to carve out their own path.

Time to embrace my weakness for women and make it a strength. I’m supposed to be a cad and should start to act like it.

I stepped forward and stroked Trisha’s jawline softly.

“Shana has wisely suggested that my quarters are indeed available for the duration of the trip. So, tell me, Trisha, do you want to share them with Shana and me for the rest of the day? To be crystal clear we will be naked or close to it and there will be a lot of...bedroom Olympics taking place. The choice is yours.”

Trisha’s jade-coloured eyes opened wide, ill-prepared for my sudden forwardness. “C...Can I think about it?” she whispered.

“I’m afraid not. Their people will be here soon and that would cause complications.”

“Um...ah,” Trisha muttered.

Shana kissed her cheek from behind gently and ran her hands down Trisha’s shoulders before releasing her and joined me.

I pulled Shana into a tight embrace and kissed her deeply. When the kiss broke, Trisha was still standing there, shell-shocked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Shame,” I sighed and turned away from the siren.

We made it three steps down the quay before Trisha sprinted around and in front of us. “I...uh...I agree,” she said quietly and blushed crimson once more.

“Excellent,” I winked and drew her into my embrace on my other side and guided her up the gangplank and down into the bowels of the ship where my quarters awaited us.

Explicit Interlude 1.3

(This mini chapter has explicit sexual content. If that's not to your reading taste you can skip on to the next chapter without missing any story elements)

We passed Anastasia as we walked by Navigation on the upper deck.

“We shall be indisposed for a few hours,” I told her. “When Jackson gets back, tell him to stay up top and keep a lookout for our impending guests. You can handle getting them stowed below deck. Unless you want to join us, of course,” I teased at the end.

The look on her face was difficult to place exactly, but she harrumphed and stalked away from us muttering under her breath.

“It will just be the three of us then,” I announced rhetorically and led Trisha down the stairwell and ushered her into the captain’s quarters.

Trisha stopped dead in the middle of the room as she got a full eyeful of my eight-poster bed complete with black silk sheets, stocks, and pillories. That and we had made a few other additions over the last few days.

From the Slave Market, we’d purloined whips, chains, collars, and cuffs of the regular variety. As well as a few pieces we’d picked up from a very small, but surprisingly well-stocked sex shop, in the former St James township. This

included several different sized and shaped black leather benches and three sex swings, because why have one when you have the space for three.

“Oh...uh...I’m not sure I’m ready for all of that,” Trisha stuttered and waved at the bed and assorted other sex playsets.

“Too late for that now,” Shana scolded her. “You have walked into the spider’s web, and you are not leaving until the spider is sated.”

With that, Shana wrapped Trisha’s long blonde hair around her arm and pulled her head backwards. The dark elf woman still had an inch or two of height advantage on the siren and leant down, her tongue protruding, and licked from the base of Trisha’s neck, up over her chin and finally easing the woman’s head back up a touch pressed her own hungry lips against the sirens, forcing her tongue past the pretty red barrier and claiming her mouth.

Trisha let out a muffled and unconvincing protest which quickly morphed into moans of ecstasy as the stunning women made out, while urgently groping one another’s bodies. They hastily pulled off items of one another’s clothing and discarded them carelessly, all thoughts of inventory shenanigans fleeing in their mutual lust.

My cock was rock hard at the delicious display Shana and Trisha were putting on for me.

I hadn’t forgotten that Shana had confessed to being a switch, and preferred to dom when it came to women, but this had been my first opportunity to truly see her in action.

With the ladies lost in one another’s lips, I shuffled back to a bedside cabinet and took out three crystal tumblers and filled each with two fingers of Knob Creek bourbon I’d rescued from one of the island’s bars.

I sipped on my whiskey and watched the pair of them paw at one another. Undressing myself as they were. Their lips rarely parted for more than a gulped breath. By the time I

finished my beverage, they were mostly fully unclad themselves.

Placing the crystal tumbler down I moved over to the writhing feminine bodies in front of me. They were lost in each other, so I groped Shana's lean, but soft, rump to let her know I was there.

Shana pulled away from a breathless Trisha with a wide grin on her face. Without releasing her grip on Trisha's blonde, green-highlighted hair, her other hand reached down and tore off the siren's panties roughly. The final article of clothing she had left on.

The force of the action provoked Trisha's large C cup orbs to jiggle before us. Her tits were glorious, and they stood out all the more due to her thick engorged nipples and areola being the same earthy jade colour as her eyes and highlights.

Shana thrust two of her fingers between the siren's legs and rubbed her folds urgently and then plunged them deep into Trisha's cunny. The blonde siren gasped with surprise at the invasion but soon started to gyrate her hips, pushing herself knuckle deep on Shana's questing digits.

"Sir, this one is wet and ready for you." Shana grinned at me.

I had been massaging the elf's ass as she played with Trisha, and I gave it a light smack and leant in and kissed her quickly. Then I circled behind Trisha and without a word gripped her hips and pulled her back a smidge, nudging her legs apart with my foot. She groaned piteously as her pussy was pulled off Shana's toying fingers, but she wouldn't be unfilled for long.

Shana still had Trisha's hair wrapped around her wrist and this caused her to lean forward which gave me the perfect angle. I slapped Trisha's rump hard, causing her to squeal loudly, before I took hold of the base of my very hard dick.

"That won't do," Shana admonished the woman for her squealed reaction. "Best we give that mouth something to

occupy it.”

Shana proffered her own lightly tanned breast with her dusky coloured nipples and Trisha eagerly applied her plump lips to the job of sucking on the shadowborn elf’s teats. Concurrently, Shana guided one of Trisha’s hands between her legs and insisted the siren rub her folds and pleasure her.

“That’s a good girl,” Shana crooned and petted her head encouragingly.

While that had been going on I had been rubbing my length over Trisha’s sweet ass and over her sopping vulva, coating my cock in her dripping juices. Now that I was sufficiently lubricated, I tapped her clit a few times with my cock and then plunged the shaft past her labia, into her already compressing vagina.

Her tight walls parted at my irresistible prodding, and I sank my full length inside her smoothly. My weighty cum-filled balls slapped against her clit noisily and we were away.

With her hips firmly in my grip, I set a steady rhythm as I pounded her supple flesh from behind while the girls pleased one another at the front.

Shana had the siren switch nipples on regular occasions or leant down to make out with the sandwiched woman. The only respite she allowed Trisha’s mouth was when the siren shuddered in an orgasm from the relentless fucking I was giving her.

During those moments, she let her scream wordlessly from the frenzied clenching of her vaginal walls on my penis. Any sense of hesitancy or regret had well and truly been banished from the siren’s mind from the sensual overload.

As she wailed with lust, her honeyed Siren’s Song washed over us. It no longer had the power to override our will but added a welcome erotic charge to proceedings as we were infused with and felt a measure of Trisha’s horny unbridled desire.

After fifteen minutes, Trisha's legs gave way completely and I had to hold her up, an easy feat in the Darkwyrlds, and Shana supported her upper body. I didn't relent for another fifteen minutes, pistoning my shaft deep inside her and then with a wordless roar, I relaxed my self-control and orgasmed.

There was the welcome aching flex in my cock as it somehow hardened further and was followed by the surging twitch from my balls as my pearly jism poured forth. I pumped cum deep into the wanton snatch of the mewling woman in my grasp, who was in the midst of her own mind-blowing multiple orgasm.

When my hose had finally disgorged the last of my seed currently available, I ceased the pumping action, pulled out, and gave all concerned some respite.

Shana grinned at me, and Trisha whimpered deliriously. She was unable to stand of her own volition, so I held onto her while Shana straightened her up. We were all covered in a sheen of sweat and our commingled fluids started to drip from Trisha's pussy as she panted in my arms.

"You know what to do, Shana" I hinted.

The dark-haired beauty's eyes lit up and she fell to her knees in front of us and lapped the dribbling cum from Trisha's still twitching thighs and wet pussy. Then she moved onto sheathing my cock in her eager mouth and cleaning that too. By the time the siren and I had been satisfactorily cleansed Trisha had recovered the power of speech.

"God damn, I've never been fucked like that before," she giggled. "I had a boyfriend in college who I thought was well hung and knew what he was doing, but that...that just blew those experiences away."

Shana stood up and clucked her tongue. She grabbed hold of Trisha's jaw and squeezed her cheeks a little. "How presumptuous, don't you think, sir," she addressed to me. "Our pleasure toy for the afternoon thinks we are done with her."

I chuckled in response and Trisha blubbed in surprise.

“Wait...what...no...I can't even stand,” she tried to protest.

“That's what the sex swings are for,” I whispered and nuzzled her neck under the ear.

Without further ado, I hoisted her up, cradling her in my arms and walked across the room to the other side of the bed where one of the swings had been installed.

This one had two black leather harnesses for her hips and shoulders that were linked by a rubber sheet for lumbar support. We had a larger one on the other side of the bed that had a proper cradle which was big enough for two or maybe three women, but this one would suffice for today.

Shana hopped up onto the bed, kneeling at the edge. She held the harness in place as I eased Trisha into position. As this swing was made up of two harnesses it also had Velcro restraints and Shana wrapped these around Trisha's wrists while I did the same for her ankles.

Trisha protested meekly at her treatment, but not very convincingly. Her mound twitched with excitement as we locked her in place.

With the siren secured, I let my hands rove over her flat abdomen and up to her breasts and massaged them firmly as she moaned and whimpered softly.

“Sir, I think you should have this needy sex doll suck your cock,” Shana suggested as she stroked Trisha's hair with loving care.

“You are full of good ideas today, Shana,” I chuckled.

“Thank you, sir. I want to ensure she pleases you fully. And you will, won't you,” she said a bit more sternly to the bound woman at our mercy.

“Yes,” she sang. “I want to be pleasing.”

Trisha had obviously decided to get into the *swing* of the roleplay we had going on here. Or maybe she had a submissive streak that she was finally letting out to play.

The bolt for the swing allowed it to pivot and I spun her around so that her head brushed up against my large cock. I rubbed the tip over her face and dirtied her up with some of the precum that had seeped from the tip before I eased her head back and slipped the tip into her mouth.

Trisha suckled on my helmet, her tongue swirling around the tip and tickling the ultra-sensitive underside. Shana wasted little time herself and buried her face in Trisha's hairless snatch while she tapped and tweaked the siren's engorged clit with her forefingers.

Trisha had been doing a great job teasing my knob in her mouth, but it was time for something more and I leant forward. I gently pushed my penis further into her mouth until it was abutting the back of her throat. Concurrently, I reached out and fondled her breasts, teasing and pulling her jade-green nipples.

Trisha bucked at the joint ministrations we applied to her body and then I felt her force my cock past the slight resistance and down into her throat. This hadn't been me pushing deeper, this was Trisha greedily swallowing my length and pulling my flesh down her clasping gullet.

I didn't know whether it was because she was a siren or a Whispering Bard, but she was able to swallow me whole until my balls rested atop her nose. She didn't gag or struggle, just suckled and vacuumed and even managed to twist her head to create a sexy oscillation.

"Yeah, just like that," I grunted and pulled out halfway and let her gobble me back down.

If I thought that was erotically pleasant what came next blew me away.

Trisha sang.

She trilled her Siren's Song while my cock was fully engulfed and pressed up against her vocal chords.

The sensation was a mind-wiping sensory overload that emanated from my cock and flowed through the rest of my body.

“Holy fuck!” I screamed as my body physically shuddered.

Becoming a Frostbinder Acheronian had given me an inhuman level of control over my ejaculation. I could literally fuck for hours and cum when I wanted and only when I wanted.

Until now.

As the wave of pleasure reached my extremities, it rushed back to the source multiplying the experience two-fold and when it crashed back into my cock and balls there was no holding back and I erupted like Mount Vesuvius. Only this time it wasn't ash being spewed on Pompeii, but my pearly cum into the Siren's throat. Trisha slipped my spurting protuberance from her mouth after I'd pumped a healthy dose inside her and let it spatter on her pert breasts.

When I'd emptied the tank, I staggered back and had to catch my breath. Shana wormed her way up from Trisha's pussy and started lapping up my jizz from Trisha's heaving chest like a sexy little kitty cat.

Despite my momentary loss of balance, the sight of the pair of them stoked the fire in my loins back to full flame.

While Shana finished her semi-liquid diet, I walked back to the drink's cabinet, refilled my tumbler with whiskey and brought all three crystal glasses over. I knocked mine back quickly, handed a second to Shana, who sat back on her heels while she smiled coyly at me and sipped the drink.

Trisha was still restrained, so I would take a mouthful from her glass and then press my lips to her and pass the warming burn of the alcohol to her.

When our drinks were done, I spun the swing around and while I went to town on Trisha's pussy, Shana had the siren eat out hers while she tweaked and pulled on her nipples.

After Shana had climaxed twice, Trisha sang once more, directly over her vulva, which had the same effect on the elf woman as it had on me. Shana shuddered as she experienced a bout of uncontrollable multiple orgasms which ended with her collapsing on top of Trisha.

The siren's pussy clamped on my shaft as I stroked the dark hair of the insensate elf and decided it was time.

I let loose a mighty bellow and unleashed my third stream of seed deep into Trisha and coated her cervix, fulfilling my compelling 'need to breed' instincts.

I couldn't impregnate her, not yet, but a quick analysis as I pulled out showed her receptivity had progressed to 1/141.

Shana came back to her senses and shuffled off Trisha and once she was back on the bed bent down and kissed her passionately for several minutes, expressing her deep appreciation and gratitude for what we had both experienced.

"Are you going to let me out of this contraption," Trisha giggled and pulled on the restraints.

"Only for as long as it takes to put you in another," I promised.

Trisha laughed, but her laughter petered out when my serious expression remained in place, and she realised that was no joke.

Several very pleasurable hours later we were interrupted by an unimpressed looking Anastasia.

“Our guests are becoming antsy that our lecherous Captain has yet to show himself. We set sail an hour ago and they are getting suspicious,” she bitched angrily.

“Has it been four hours already?” I asked.

“Closer to five,” Anastasia grumped. “They took longer to get all their shit aboard than we expected.”

“Fine. Will you let them know I will be with them momentarily,” I asked her.

Anastasia gave me a dirty look and turned on her heels and stomped out. But I knew being absent during boarding wasn't what had got her knickers in such a twist. She couldn't hide the gleam of lust in her expression or the almost imperceptible tic of hurt that she had been left out.

I would stick to my guns on this, though. No sexy time for Ana until she asked for it.

I washed up in my adjoining bathroom and dressed.

Trisha was still tied up on one of the black leather benches, her ass glowing red from the paddling Shana had been giving her when I went to clean up.

I walked over and lifted Trisha's chin and kissed her tenderly. “I don't know if I'll be able to return before we make landfall, but Shana will stay here to keep you company.”

“Oh!” Trisha squeaked as Shana smacked her bottom with the paddle.

“Don't worry, sir,” Shana told me. “I'll keep this one howling and earning her passage.”

I grinned at her enthusiasm and then sighed with regret at leaving the pair, but duty called.

Chapter 28

I left Trisha and Shana in my quarters basking in the afterglow of what we had been up to over the last several hours. Anastasia had waited for me outside the door impatiently tapping her foot. The lower deck was filled with hustle and bustle as people, mostly men in military uniform with Darkwyrlds armour over their clothes, loitered in the corridor or walked about.

We had got underway while I'd been engaged but I trusted Anastasia and Jackson to have handled it in my absence.

"Why didn't you tell them they could make use of the crew quarters and the mess," I asked the blonde offhandedly.

"I did, Torin," she replied brusquely. "And they are. The Governor brought a lot more people than we expected. At least three hundred National Guardsmen and two hundred various civilian types. They didn't bring everyone from the island, but it sure does feel that way."

"Damn, that is more than I anticipated. They must have had patrols all over the island. Anyway, what's got you so cranky? Is it because of what I've been getting up to in the privacy of my own chambers?" I needled her good-naturedly.

"Faugh!" Anastasia half-laughed half-scorned. "I couldn't give a rat's ass what you were doing with the songbird strumpet. It's them. They are everywhere, poking,

prodding, and touching. Sticking their fucking noses in my business,” she said with a shudder.

I looked around us with a frown, sure there were a few bawdy soldier types nearby, but nobody seemed to have been invading Anastasia’s personal space. I was ready to crack some skulls, fatally, if any of them had laid a hand on my Ana.

Then the lightbulb went off in my head.

“Ah, you mean they are everywhere on the ship, touching things.”

“Yes, the ship, what did you think I meant?” she shot back, her eyes narrowing. Then she smirked conspiratorially. “Ha! If any of them had tried to cop a feel, I would have drained them on the spot, deal or no deal.”

“That’s fair, I’d say,” I chuckled.

Anastasia rolled her eyes.

“You said our guests wanted to speak with me. Where have you settled the Governor and company?” I asked her.

“He is in the Captain’s Cabin on the upper deck with his daughter and several of his people. It’s his wife who wants to speak with you. She is under the stairwell by the dungeon entrance,” Anastasia replied.

Anastasia had returned the Dungeon entrance after the fomorian invasion of the ship yesterday. Incidentally, she had told us that hardly any of the sea-demons she had deceived into going inside had made it as far as the third of her original chambers. None of them had made it any further.

“Let’s go see what she wants,” I said and took Anastasia by the hand and led her through the throng of people clogging up the gangway.

She yelped in surprise but didn’t object to her hand being clasped in mine and there was even a hint of a rosy blush in her cheeks when I glanced down at her.

We broke through the crowd and the area around the stairwell exits was mostly clear. Regina stood beneath the stairwell by the dungeon entrance with the taller of the two lawyers whose name I hadn't caught yet.

“Ah, Captain Carter,” Regina remarked archly when she spotted us threading through a gap. “Good of you to join us.”

I ignored the backhanded criticism and ploughed on unperturbed. “Regina, call me Torin, please. I believe we are fast becoming friends and allies.”

Regina's lips twitched with the ghost of a smile at my informality.

“Allies indeed,” she mused. “And yet you failed to disclose everything to us. Like the nature of this rather valuable mode of transportation,” she finished reproachfully.

“You can't expect a fella to 'fess up all his secrets on a first date,” I flirted.

Regina rewarded my playfulness with an unimpressed chuckle and pressed on.

“You have a dungeon on your ship, Torin,” she said, and I grinned at her use of my name but let her continue.

As soon as I heard that she was at the dungeon's entrance I'd had a pretty good idea of where this was going but had decided to let Regina say her piece rather than skip straight to the negotiations for access.

“A level one dungeon. Albeit of quite a high grade,” she continued. “This caused quite a stir amongst several members of our camp more familiar with gaming than the rest of us, as you can imagine. I must apologise that several of them have already tried to enter without authorisation from us. But as I'm sure you're aware, they were denied access without express permission from you.”

That was news to me.

Anastasia must have stopped them from going in. Wild dungeons couldn't do that but being owned by me had to have changed the rules somewhat. Anastasia's dainty hand was still in mine, so I rubbed the back of it with my thumb in a silent gesture of approval.

"Indeed," I expressed, feigning ignorance of what she wanted and full understanding of what she revealed. "As you have probably learned from the Framework, the Dungeon powers the ship and obeys my commands as captain. But we can't have anybody wandering in there by accident. It is still a Dungeon, and they are potentially lethal."

"Of course, a wise precaution to take," Regina complimented, buying my excuse, or at least pretending to.

"We did find a Dungeon during the exploration of the northern half of Mackinac Island. Regrettably, our analysis revealed that while the dungeon was fairly low in grade it was level fifteen and beyond the current capabilities of our forces to delve safely," Regina informed us.

The verbal dance had been amusing but the song had finished. "Regina, are you asking if your troops can use my Dungeon to boost their levelling?" I grinned impishly at her with mock innocence.

Regina gave me a calculating glare; no doubt having realised I knew what she was angling for from the beginning and then sighed. "What is this going to cost me, Torin?"

A part of me wanted to gouge them for as much as possible. But simply having plenty of runs would help Anastasia top up the ship's energy levels. Plus, if we did end up doing business in the future it would be beneficial if Regina looked upon me favourably.

"I think a little favour to be called in at a later date should do the trick," I told her.

Regina snorted with derision at my suggestion. "Completely unacceptable. You have to be off your rocker if

you think I will make a Pact or sign a Contract for something as nebulous as an unnamed *favour*.”

I put my hands up at her righteous indignation. “Regina, you misunderstand. We are all friends here. Despite being a pirate, I wouldn’t be so underhanded to bind you to such an ill-defined deal.”

I absolutely would have if she had been foolish enough to agree but that was beside the point. Raven wasn’t present to reveal my porky pie.

“This will be an informal agreement. A little bit of mutual back-scratching to build a growing trust and bond between our factions.”

“Hmmm,” she mused thoughtfully. “Such an agreement goes somewhat against the grain for me. But I can be flexible if the circumstance demands, provided you understand that if I believe you ask for too much, I will not hesitate to refuse.”

I already had an inkling of what I would be asking for. Regina wouldn’t like it, and her daughter would positively lose her shit. But it wouldn’t be something Regina could reasonably refuse, and ruffling Raven’s feathers up would be a bonus.

“I’m fine with that, but if you turn me down, the favour will still be owed,” I made clear.

Regina nodded her assent. “You aren’t going to spit on your hand or anything equally obnoxious, are you?” she inquired with her eyebrow arched.

“No,” I reassured her with a chuckle. “You’ve been watching too many movies. Ana here, is our resident dungeon expert. Would you care to impart some safety advice to these adventurous folks? I’m sure the Governor wouldn’t want his forces decimated with unexpected losses,” I finished and drew Anastasia forward and put my hands on her shoulders.

Anastasia side-eyed me and grumbled something about being offered steak and having it switched for jerky at the last

second. My enhanced hearing picked it up, but with the hubbub of voices that filled the gangway, I doubted anybody else did.

Anastasia would just have to lump it, she might have preferred them going in blind and suffering a few casualties, but I didn't want to sour our burgeoning relationship. The participation energy would suffice particularly if they ran several groups.

“Marena's Mercy is a young dungeon...” she began to explain. The unnamed lawyer or assistant started taking notes as she spoke. “...and hasn't developed a theme so far. Unlike wild dungeons, it is double graded, either N or K. The N-grade version is its original quantification, and the higher K option is a result of being captured by Captain Carter.

“I would not recommend venturing in using the K version at all. K is in the fourth tier, and your soldiers don't have the classes for it. For the N-grade run, which is still plenty dangerous, the recommended party strength is ten levels-worth of third-tier classes, or twenty of second-tier, or thirty of first tier. The maximums are twenty, forty and sixty respectively. I would advise forming groups somewhere in between. Anything under the recommended strength level and you are highly likely to lose people before they have a chance to retreat.

“There are four chambers which get stronger as you go, that is common knowledge.” Then Anastasia looked over her shoulder at me, a questioning look in her expression. I nodded for her to go on. “Chamber one has twenty red slimes, the second has ten Lesser Fomorians armed with harpoons. Chamber three has ten razorback boars and the final room contains five Janusian Golems. They have two faces and four arms.”

Her description to Regina showed that her dungeon had changed things up a little since we had been through. It had still been adapting to its full strength when Shana, Jackson, and I conquered it.

The Skreechers were gone, with the fire-based slimes taking their place and Lesser Fomorian now filling the gap in chamber two. They would be facing more boars and golems than we did, but ours had been compressed to make them tougher with considerably more Hit Points.

Compressed mobs maximised the chances of killing at least one or two of the group's weaker members even if it meant complete party wipes were less likely.

"Finally," Anastasia continued. "The dungeon can support three instances at a time. I estimate you have time to run fifteen groups through if they take an hour each. If you build your parties closer to the maximum, rather than the recommended strength, you should be able to get all the National Guardsmen to complete the dungeon before we arrive, and you have to debark."

"Which is a good point, Regina," I spoke up as Ana finished. "We are not staying in Saginaw. I will be extremely put out if you try and put a group through without enough time to complete the dungeon before we cast off. As will they be when they emerge and find themselves confined to my Brig for the trip back to Beaver Island, as we won't be waiting for them to finish. That goes for everybody," I said meaningfully.

"Understood, Captain Carter, and those terms are agreeable to me," Regina said with a coy smirk. Then she turned to nameless. "Higgins, get Macdonald's, Kowalski's, and Murphy's expanded squads inside as soon as possible."

Higgins bobbed his head and rushed off, calling out for the attention of the aforementioned sergeants. They were nearby and less than two minutes later, three fifteen-man squads had trooped through the shimmering entrance to Marena's Mercy dungeon.

"I see you already made preparations," I chuckled as the last of them filed through.

"Time flies," Regina responded with a bob of her head. "Now if you'll excuse me, I must return and make sure my

husband hasn't managed to fall overboard."

Regina Reynolds rolled her eyes as she said this and made her way up the steps behind her.

"If you need me, Anastasia and I will be in the Navigation cabin on the opposite side of the corridor," I called up after her.

"Shall we," I then asked the diminutive blonde and proffered my arm.

"Don't you want to go back to your quarters and bang the siren some more?" she asked suspiciously.

"I do, but the captain's work is never done. As much as it pains me to forego the pleasures of the flesh available to me, I shouldn't leave you to bear all the responsibility alone. That's not very Captainy, is it?" I joked with her.

"Whatever," she breathed and stomped up the steps ahead of me.

I still caught the hint of a pleased smile on her lips before she turned away, though.

The rest of the voyage was uneventful. A few critters in the lake decided to come and have a look at us but were deterred from bothering us. A benefit of the spyglass in my inventory was that when I was onboard, we not only knew the location of water-borne threats, but the ship's hull exuded a mild repellent aura to those drawn to our presence.

The aura wouldn't work on anything strong enough to give us any actual trouble but did prevent us from being bothered by lower grade mobs which would have slowed us down. Not great for grinding, but time was of the essence right now. I could turn the aura off in the future to draw the XP in.

I'd kept Anastasia company in Navigation and fielded various questions from our passengers. We still had one of Luca's goons in the Brig and Regina asked for permission to interrogate him for information on Luca Gattosi. I didn't see any reason to deny such a reasonable request but did insist on being present.

Raven led the questioning, and we didn't learn anything new, but it was amusing to watch the prisoner wet himself from her righteous fury.

Raven didn't exactly warm up to me during the trip, but she did at least stop referring to me as that 'slaving pirate scum' and settled on 'degenerate wastrel' which I thought was progress.

We sailed down the Saginaw River and Regina talked me into a quick pitstop in Bay City as we passed through to allow Governor Reynolds to locate the mayor and use his class's ability on him, so he accepted Tricky Dicky as Sovereign of Michigan State. That didn't take long and soon enough they were offloading their people onto a quay in Saginaw.

I slipped away during the organised chaos and returned to my quarters.

Trisha and Shana were still inside. They had cleaned both themselves and the room and were now fully clothed much to my unsurprised disappointment.

"Torin!" Shana yelped as soon as I closed the door. "This silly fool wants to leave and follow after the Governor. I've been trying to convince her for the last hour she should stay with us. Tell her she has to stay," the dark-haired elf woman demanded and then blushed as I glared at her for her impertinence.

There was a brief look of concern in Trisha's eyes which I assuaged immediately.

"I'm not going to make you stay, Trisha," I assured her and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her. "I mean, I

could, but I won't," and followed up with a cheeky grin.

"I'm sorry, Shana," Trisha said with genuine regret. "Today has been extraordinary, it really has, but being a real reporter is what I've always dreamed of, and this is my chance to be there and witness the birth of a new nation. To be the one to document it all. I can't give that up, even for the most mind-blowing sex of my life."

"But..." Shana started.

"Shana, she has made her decision and we are going to respect it," I interrupted her firmly. "If Trisha changes her mind she knows where to find us."

"Thank you, Torin. For the offer, the sex, and the lift," Trisha said gratefully and moved in and pressed her lips to mine.

She got up from the edge of the bed, but I clamped my hand around her waist and tugged her gently so that she fell into my lap.

"I'm not quite done, Miss Belmont," I breathed into her ear. "This is a corsair's vessel, and we aren't renowned for keeping our word. I will respect your decision to follow your dream but that doesn't mean I'm willing to let you go, at least, not in the way you imagined."

I held Trisha tight, but not roughly, stroking her back gently. Shana grinned and intuited what I was up to. She slipped in beside us and stroked Trisha's thigh from the other side and nuzzled her throat with soft kisses.

Trisha moaned softly with heat. "Oh, you are the devil incarnate," she whimpered. "What are you going to do?"

I didn't answer with words. I summoned the Corsair's Canon vellum parchment. The terms I set out for Trisha Belmont was a lifetime contract as an officer of my crew. The Canon even gave her a title, she would be our official spymaster. With my arms around her, I unfurled the vellum so she could read it.

“Now, my sexy little siren,” I whispered as I nibbled on her earlobe. “Once you press your thumb on the Canon, I am going to let you accompany the Governor’s party. I want you to watch them keenly and report everything they get up to, back to me. Then, when the time is right, I’m going to call you back, to us, where you belong. We both get what we want, doesn’t that sound nice?” I crooned.

Trisha couldn’t help but whimper and nod her agreement. Lost in a swirl of lust and a fair bit of influence from my social stats she extended a shaking thumb and pressed it to the vellum contract sealing her fate.

I turned her head and said, “Welcome to the crew.” Then kissed her plump lips deeply.

I tapped Shana on the shoulder, and she withdrew. I lifted Trisha out of my lap and stood us all up.

“Unfortunately, we only have a few more minutes before they finish debarking, so we are going to have to cut the pleasurable goodbye’s short,” I announced and walked over to the door, opening it up and gesturing for the ladies to precede me.

“Oh, this feels strange,” Trisha remarked and stumbled a little, unsteady on her feet. “This has happened so fast, I’m really not sure what to make of it all.”

“That will settle in a few minutes,” Shana assured her.

“Torin,” Trisha addressed me as I helped her up the stairwell. “I’m not sure how useful I will be as a spy. I had planned to observe them from afar, given Raven Reynold’s intense dislike of me.”

“Don’t worry, I think I have that handled,” I answered over my shoulder a moment later and called a halt to our train by my cabin on the upper floor.

I dipped my head in and saw that Regina and Parker, one of the lawyers, had just finished packing up their paperwork and were almost ready to leave.

“Ah, Regina,” I announced myself brightly. “I hoped I would catch you before you departed.”

Regina finished stowing the packed boxes into her inventory and regarded me coolly. Something in my tone must have alerted her that I was up to mischief.

“It shall need to be quick,” she said distractedly. “Richard and Raven have already left the ship and knowing them, they won’t think to wait. I don’t want to string out our entourage unnecessarily as some will linger for us.”

“Of course, I understand,” I replied. “Well, as it happens, I’ve come up with a way for you to clear that favour you owe me.”

“Already?” Regina reacted in surprise.

“You remember Miss Belmont,” I said, and walked fully into the room with Trisha’s hand in mine.

“So, that’s what you were up to,” Regina huffed. “I had assumed you were knocking boots with Miss Colton.”

“Oh, I was there too. It was my idea,” Shana called out brazenly from the corridor.

That caught Regina off-guard, but she recovered swiftly. “What has Miss Belmont to do with your favour, Torin?”

“Well, my favour would be for you to embed Trisha in your entourage as a neutral observer, so she can make a record of these historic events for posterity’s sake,” I told her.

Regina just looked at me, expressionless.

“Come on, Regina, this is not an unreasonable request in exchange for what I’ve done for you?” I argued.

“You will not have to endure the fallout from my daughter when she finds out. She’ll be on the warpath when she discovers you brought her along, which will pale in comparison to the grief I’ll get from her if we embed the siren with us,” Regina countered.

“That isn’t a no,” I pointed out.

Trisha had watched the exchange with hope warring in her eyes.

“Alright, but only if you can give me a rational explanation as to what you are getting out of this?” Regina demanded.

I had prepared what to say for this already. With Raven in mind, though she was not here, I had something that was true, yet also not the genuine reason.

“Honestly, I like her and would rather have her stay with me but witnessing defining moments and reporting on them is her dream. So, I’m going to help make that happen,” then I turned and addressed the next bit to Trisha. “Although I’m also hoping if I make this happen, you’ll figure out where you belong and come running back to me.”

Turning back to Regina I finished. “I’m not gonna lie, knowing it will wind your daughter up something chronic might be an extra satisfying factor.”

Trisha smiled prettily and Regina grunted with amusement.

“Barely convincing,” Regina remarked. “But we do have a deal and I can’t see what harm, apart from Raven’s distress, this will do. Our ledger is clear, do you understand?”

“Understood.”

Regina and Parker walked past us and out into the upper deck gangway. “You have three minutes, Miss Belmont,” she called out behind her.

Trisha squealed with glee the second Regina and Parker were out of earshot. She jumped into my arms and kissed me soundly. “Thank you, Torin. I can’t believe you managed to get me an all-access pass.”

I held her to me. “Don’t forget who you truly belong with, though,” I warned her, only half-seriously.

She nodded gravely in response. “I won’t. How am I supposed to send my reports to you?”

“Hmmm,” I hummed as I mulled it over. “Use Lansing’s market. If it doesn’t have one already it should soon. You could even drop a hint to the Reynolds family that it might be a good idea. You can put your reports in a box and choose to list them for purchase by the Stormblade Harbour market only. We’ll buy them and they’ll be transferred to us.”

“Okay, I best be going. I wouldn’t want them to leave me behind,” Trisha enthused in a mixture of excitement and reluctance.

We accompanied her out onto the deck and watched as she descended down onto the quay. Parker was waiting for her and escorted her into the city at the end of their procession.

“What now?” Jackson, who had joined us on the deck, asked.

“Now, we hit up the Ionia correctional facilities and see what ‘human resources’ we have available to us. We will stop back home along the way, just to make sure everything is in order.”

Chapter 29

Day 7

We set off without delay, as we would have to sail back around the mainland to get back to Lake Michigan. I wouldn't put it past Regina to send a group out to the Ionia prisons to gazump my plans, so haste was called for.

I had received fifteen hundred XP and three Tokens of the Bound for signing Trisha to the Canon and would be getting plenty more if things worked out in the manner I hoped.

We got some shut eye as Marena's Mercy sailed through the night and we made port on Stormblade Harbour at roughly six in the morning. We hadn't been at the quay for more than ten seconds before Quixbix was buzzing in my mind.

<No activity on the markets, but there are several alerts from the shield generator. Several people have tried to go through the shield but have been repelled. They started their attempts at accessing the town at the southern end of Stormblade Harbour near the fortress but worked their way around until they hit the northern shoreline.>

"People, not monsters?" I asked him for clarification.

<Yes, people. A group of half a dozen or so, the alerts aren't very specific. All I can tell is that it is the same group that has tried to enter several times.>

“Okay, everyone,” I yelled, getting my crew’s attention. “There are other people on the island, and they have tried to get into the town whilst we were away. We had best check out their last known location, which is basically not far from where we planted our flags yesterday. We can eat breakfast on the way.”

We trooped through the town, past the Black Market building into the northwest quadrant of Stormblade Harbour. We knew when we reached the edge of the shielded area as the generator utilised black crystal pylons. These pylons had similar handprint sensors as could be found in the generator dome itself.

If you had the proper permissions, you could lower sections of the shielded area or allow those not currently recognised as citizens of the community to pass through without being repelled.

In the northwest quadrant, there was a strip of land a little less than half a kilometre wide in between Font Lake and the shoreline. This was the spot where our visitors had last tried to enter the town limits a few hours ago.

We didn’t have to search the area for long before we spotted the group.

The bedraggled bunch were huddled up against the shield line near one of the pylons halfway between the island lake and the shore. They had constructed a rudimentary hide to conceal themselves with broken pine tree branches wedged up and around the pylon. This only obscured them from the front, and we could see them clearly from our side of the shield.

“Oh, my goddess,” Shana exclaimed. “They’re just kids. Well, most of them.”

Shana’s observation was correct. The cowering group was made up of five, maybe six adolescents, none older than fourteen if I were any judge, with a single exception.

One of the missing prisoners was with them, not Marco, but one of the others whose name I couldn’t remember.

He'd found clothes somewhere, though they looked a little small for him. From his position, the goon looked like he was supposed to be the lookout, but he was slumped over, fast asleep.

Regardless of the group's seeming vulnerability we drew our weapons or prepared magical attacks.

We passed through the shield; we weren't harmed but there was a mild shock-like sensation. Nothing painful, but enough to draw a shiver down your spine. I could have disabled this section of the shield but had decided to play it ultra-safe until I knew what was what.

I had our party encircle the impromptu hiding place before making our presence known. Anastasia wrapped her whip around Luca's goon and when she yanked him out of the hide, Jackson pulled the branches away. The pile of young people inside had been in a state of exhaustion-induced sleep, but the sudden commotion woke them.

There was some panic, a bit of screaming, and one of them, a young girl who was perhaps eleven, dissolved into heaving sobs as she wept with fear.

Frightening them like this might seem cruel but it quickly established they were unarmed, and unless they were world-class actors, exactly what they seemed to be. A bunch of petrified children who had been through hell over the past couple of weeks.

"Shana, Jackson, see if you can calm them down," I instructed.

Shana put her bow away and the two of them approached the youngsters and tried to comfort them, asking questions, like what their names were, in a calm manner. The kids quieted down swiftly, but I think that was more from nervous exhaustion than anything else. Their clothing was ragged and filthy and their eyes haunted.

I left my lover to the caring duties while I focused on someone entirely less pleasant or welcome.

Anastasia had yanked the prisoner a dozen or so metres away from the young ones and dragged him behind a large tree, out of their sight. When I joined her, she had forced him face down on the earth with her right boot on the back of his neck. Ana was cackling maniacally and there was a trail of fluid, almost certainly piss, trickling down from his crotch.

I analysed him quickly and confirmed his name was Desmond.

“Talk!” I barked at him and lowered myself on my haunches by his head.

“I didn’t touch none of the kids, I swear. You can ask ‘em. They’ll tell ya,” Desmond gasped, panic-stricken, into the dirt his face was pressed firmly against.

That hadn’t been what I asked.

That it was the first thing he thought of spoke plainly of a guilty conscience. Maybe he hadn’t done anything he shouldn’t have done to these youngsters, but he as good as confessed he had to others. I didn’t feel the need to press him any further on that subject, though. Desmond had just volunteered to become dungeon food. But that would come after, first I needed some information from the scumbag.

“I believe you, Desmond. Tell me what happened after you ran away?” I said, keeping my voice neutral. “Explain how you met up with those kids over there and how you ended up back here.”

“Yeah, yeah, man. I’ll tell you everything. Whatever you need,” he blurted out, snot and spit dribbled out from his nose and mouth. It mixed with the woodland detritus and caked his face in the slop.

“Ease up, Ana,” I suggested to the viciously grinning blonde. “Desmond here is cooperating, aren’t you Desmond?”

He nodded as best he could, which just smeared the filthy effluence all over his face.

Anastasia scowled at me for a moment but shifted her booted foot off his neck and rested it between his shoulder blades instead.

Desmond propped himself up on his elbows and coughed up some more gunk. I wagged my finger in a circle indicating he needed to get a move on.

He eyed me fearfully and then started yapping. “Yeah, right, so, um, after blondie here cracked her whip and sent us packing, I followed Marco. We was running fast and bein’ chased by those fishy fuckers and lost sight of the others so I don’t know what happened to them.”

“We do,” I interrupted. “Continue.”

“Right,” Desmond mumbled and then cleared his throat. “Yeah, so we ran and ran. We lost those fish fucks once or twice and managed to catch our breaths, but they kept finding us. Must have been a few hours after we was let loose, and we had to be close to reaching the other end of the island and I was starting to worry.

“Marco was a little ahead of me and then, bam, something big and hairy fucking clotheslined the poor bastard and sparked him right out. I trips up when I see that, and I think I’m done for. I see the thing that’s hit Marco. It has to be seven feet tall, got horns like a goat and a mouth full of sharp fucking teeth.”

I heard Quixbix’s sharp inhalation of breath in my head at Desmond’s description. Which was odd because he doesn’t breathe, but he made the sound anyway. He didn’t interrupt but I was sure he’d have something to say when Desmond finished his sorry tale.

“That’s when the fish fuckers come charging in behind us. They take one look at the goat monster, and they forget all about me. They is roaring and gurgling at each other and then there are more of the goat-men coming out of the trees and it’s a full-on fucking war between ‘em.

“I scrambled away from the fight. Got back up to my feet and that’s when I see them. The young ‘uns, that is. There are a pack of them making a run for it. Found out later they’d been rounded up by the big goat dudes you see. Them and a bunch of adults who couldn’t leave with the kids for some reason. The kids ain’t sure why.”

“Anyway, I followed them, to make sure they got away, right.”

I had to fight the urge not to laugh in his face. There was zero chance Desmond followed the children to protect them. The cowardly piece of shit no doubt hoped any chasing monsters would be occupied slaughtering the children once they caught up with them and allow him the opportunity to get away.

“Don’t know who won the fight,” he went on. “Or what happened to Marco after that. We ran until we hit the shore. The kids were a bit wary of me that first day. They holed up in one of the summer homes for the night and wouldn’t let me in.”

Desmond seemed quite offended at the youngster’s display of tacit prudence.

“Next day rolls around, and they are getting hungry so I tells them about you and your ship and what badasses you all are, so eventually when they hear what sounds like the goat dudes searching for ‘em they agreed to follow me along the beach. Only once we get to the bay we can’t pass through. So, we wandered around the lake and tried up here but no dice neither. By then it’s getting dark, so I built the shelter, and we hunkered down for the night while I watched over them, and well, you know the rest.”

They were fortunate we had killed all the Pestilence Monkeys in the area recently. Although I was unsure why they hadn’t encountered anything else on the island. I’d expected there to be more spawning crystals, maybe they were all in the lake.

I grunted and stood back up. “Ana, drag this sorry excuse for a man back to the ship and throw his ass in the Brig.”

“What? No! I did what you asked,” he begged. “I protected them kids, I did. I should be rewarded.”

Anastasia simply kicked him in the side of his head to shut him up and he slumped to the ground. Her whip pulsed with a sickly purple light as she drained his Hit Points and then she followed my orders, literally, and dragged his unconscious body away. Another reminder that she was much stronger than she looked thanks to magical gear.

“Don’t drag him past the kids,” I called out to her, and she waved her hand in the air without looking back to acknowledge my words.

<One of your quest chains from the Shattered Goddess has been unlocked> Quixbix told me.

“Lay it on me, bud.”

**** Culling the Cloven-Hooved 1 (T)*

The presence of the Hooved Horde, monstrous devotees of Carnax the Cloven-Hoofed, has been confirmed on your island. Locate them and establish the extent of their infiltration into your territory.

Success: Discover the location of the Hooved Horde encampment.

Rewards: 900 XP and future quests in the chain.

Token of the Bound.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

The quest seemed a bit underwhelming compared to what else we’d been getting. I would talk it over with Quix

and the crew shortly.

I sheathed my scimitars as there was no danger nearby and wandered back over to the cluster of young people. Shana and Jackson had managed to calm them down which was good. There were a few sharp intakes of breath and fearful whimpers as I approached but my people were quick to soothe any ruffled feathers.

“Let’s get them back to the town,” I suggested.

The kids were reluctant at first but the promise of food and somewhere safe to stay convinced them to come with us. The youngest, Sarah, who I learned was only nine, was too weak to walk far, so I ended up having to carry her. None of them had eaten more than three or four times over the last week and they were starving.

I guided the group in a slightly different direction from the one Anastasia had dragged the unconscious body of Desmond. The kids were already jumpy enough and didn’t need to see that.

Twenty minutes later, and we were back in the town. The newly risen gothic buildings that stood out like sore thumbs concerned them, so we took them to one of the remaining cafés and plied them with food and drink which they wolfed down without ceremony. Most of the children found my Acheronian-ness disconcerting so I hovered in the corner and let Shana and Jackson do most of the interacting with them.

After they had filled their bellies, they opened up a bit about what had happened to them. All of them had been on holiday here on the island with their families when integration happened. They had holed up in the various holiday homes on the southern end of the island and rode out the first few days. Many of them had heard the monsters scrabbling around the buildings, especially at night.

Then on the third day that changed, the creatures seemingly stopped coming and they and their parents thought

maybe it was over.

It wasn't.

Either that night or the following day the goat-like beastmen came for them. They killed some of the people and took the rest prisoner. From the kid's description it sounded like they had collared the adults, but not them.

The beastmen hauled them to their encampment where a hideous structure had been built in a clearing with a stone altar in front of it. The children got very quiet at that point not wanting to go into any details of what they saw there. I could guess the details and didn't blame them for their truculence.

After that, they were kept there until Desmond, Marco, and the chasing fomorians stumbled upon their camp and the two sets of monsters went for each other. The children, not being collared and now unguarded, were encouraged by the surviving adults to run and they did.

With their tale told and their stomachs full, Shana led them off towards the ship to make use of the bathing facilities and get them cleaned up. Meanwhile, Jackson went looking through the surviving buildings for fresh clothing to replace the ruined apparel they were currently garbed in.

Left to my own devices, I started cleaning up some of the mess left behind. *We wouldn't want to attract any rats*, I thought to myself, and then chuckled at the inanity. Rats were the least of our worries these days. My mutterings were interrupted by the sound of small feet stopping abruptly outside the café doors.

I turned around and standing in the threshold nibbling on her lower lip nervously was Sarah, the youngest of the group. She was looking much better now that she'd had something to eat.

"Hey there, Sarah," I said softly. "Why haven't you gone with the others?"

"Um...I...um...I told the nice lady I needed to tell you somethin'," she mumbled and stared self-consciously at the

ground. Her bravery fleeing now she was face to face with me.

I recalled that when I carried the dark-haired girl, she had refused to look at me the whole way.

“Well, come on in then.”

Sarah didn't move, rooted to the spot.

I tried not to huff with impatience but dealing with children wasn't my strong suit and the last thing I had been expecting to handle today.

She must have picked up on my impatience and her eyes welled with nascent tears. “I'm sorry, mister. I don't mean to be scared,” she whispered with a slight lisp.

Some of her teeth were missing but you could see the replacements erupting from her gums, so it was natural tooth loss and not a result of the past few weeks. I may have become an Acheronian, but it was difficult to be angry or stern when confronted with something that heart-achingly cute and vulnerable.

I sighed and made my way behind the counter of the café and rooted around at the back until I found what I was looking for.

“If you come in, I have half a dozen fairy cakes that you can scoff all by yourself. You won't need to share with any of the others or anything. It will be our little secret,” I offered.

She looked at me quizzically. “Fairy cakes?”

I brought out the translucent plastic tray and put it on the counter. Inside it had six sponge fairy cakes with three different types of butter frosting, lemon, strawberry, and chocolate. They'd been horribly over-priced at twelve dollars for the tray but were free now.

“Those are cupcakes,” Sarah corrected me seriously.

“My mistake, young lady. Although, where I'm from we do call them fairy cakes. They are still yours if you want

them.”

My offer of sugary goodness did the trick.

Sarah ran up to the counter, grabbed the tray, and sat down at one of the tables. I stayed behind the counter to give her a bit of space. This could backfire on me; those cakes had been in here for over a week and could have gone stale. Though as Sarah scarfed down one and then a second that concern faded as I smiled with amusement at her.

“Where are you from, mister? Mars?” she managed to mumble with a mouthful of lemon cake.

“No,” I chuckled. “England. I was changed when all this happened just like Shana with her long ears.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty cool,” she smiled. “I wanna be an elf, too.”

“When you’re older, maybe,” I said.

Sarah rolled her eyes theatrically. “That’s what all the grown-ups say. Maybe you really aren’t from Mars, after all.”

We both laughed, and with the tension lifted I took the risk to come out from behind the counter and sit down on the other side of the table.

“So, what is it you needed to tell me, Sarah?”

Sarah looked down at the table and scoffed another cake before she built up the courage to share.

“This is all my brother Dougie’s fault,” she whispered with a sniff. “He brought the monsters.”

“Ah, Sarah, no that’s not the case. This isn’t anybody’s fault. Nobody made this happen, it just did,” I said trying to console her.

The knowledge I’d gleaned from Dean meant this was a white lie. The eejits that built Ashli were responsible, but it’s not like they meant for any of this to occur.

Sarah shook her head forcefully. "I'm not talking about all the monsters. Just the horrible stinky goat ones."

<Torin, you need to listen to her> Quixbix interjected in my head.

That took me by surprise, Quixbix agreeing with a nine-year-old.

"Okay, I'm sorry for not listening, Sarah. Why don't you tell me how this is your brother's fault?" I assured the upset child.

Sarah ate another bite of cake before continuing. "Dougie isn't really my brother. His Mom, Janet, married my Daddy last year and they came to live with us. Janet is real nice, but Dougie isn't. He's a meanie that calls my Daddy bad words all the time. That's why he ran off after the strange people talked in our heads. He wanted to hurt my Daddy and he was with the bad goat monsters when they came to the house," she sniffled, and a few tears streaked down her grubby face. "I didn't see it, Janet wouldn't let me, but I think he killed my Daddy for the monsters."

So, Dougie was her stepbrother and it sounded like he didn't get along with his new stepfather. But that didn't automatically translate into him being responsible. Maybe this was the overactive imagination of a young girl who had been through an incredibly traumatic event.

"Sarah, why did Dougie hate your father?" I asked as kindly as I could.

Sarah wiped the tears from her cheeks and took a deep breath. "Daddy owned an Abby-tar and Dougie was a vegan. Although I don't know what that is, Janet says it means he really likes animals, but so does my Daddy. Dougie calls him a murderer, but he isn't. Dougie is the one who is bad."

I'd heard enough. The pieces were beginning to fall into place.

Her father owned and ran an Abattoir and Dougie, being vegan, had not liked that at all.

The more she had told me the more distraught Sarah had become. I figured Quixbix could fill in the blanks, so I lifted her from her chair without protest and carried her over to the ship. One of the other adolescents took her from me and guided her to the crew bathroom to help clean her up.

<We should handle this today. Before you leave for the prisons. We need to separate those people from the Hooved Horde as quickly as possible> Quixbix suggested forcefully.

“Quix, I didn’t know you were such a softie at heart, pushing us to go on a rescue mission,” I teased the imp.

<Hardly> he snorted. <I had my suspicions when we got the quest, and what these children have described only confirmed those suspicions.>

“Explain, please,” I prompted him when it became clear he was being retaliatorily silent because of the teasing.

I could be polite, but I wouldn’t apologise.

<Fine> he sighed. <The beasts they described are Capronids, goat-headed beastmen. They make up the rank and file of the Hooved Horde and they are spawned creatures dedicated to Carnax the Cloven-Hoofed, much in the same way that the fomorians kiss Sholmdir’s ass. Carnax is part of the Chaotic pantheon and a keen rival of the Shattered Goddess. He doesn’t hate her in the same way as Sholmdir, but they have an intense rivalry, but I digress.

<It is very unlikely the Horde has any spawning crystals on the island, it’s too small. They are herd beasts and crop up in clusters where there is a lot of space. The hideous structure with an altar the children described is almost certainly a blood shrine to Carnax.>

“Blood shrine? Nothing called a blood shrine can be good news,” I interrupted.

<Not really, no> Quixbix went on. <Someone, and I’ll give you one guess who, took a priestly class of some description and joined the Cult of Carnax. They raised the

blood shrine and summoned a nearby herd of Capronids to the island.>

“Sarah’s stepbrother, Dougie,” I said. “That’s why you wanted me to let her keep talking.”

<Yes, it was almost certainly him> Quixbix confirmed my assumption. <Here’s the thing, blood shrines are powered by, well, by blood. The Capronids, along with Dougie, will be sacrificing the slaves they’ve taken on that altar to power it up. The stronger it gets the more of their herd they can summon and perhaps even create a permanent portal to where their spawning crystals are located.>

That sounded bad.

<Which is why we should do something about this today. I think we’ve been lucky. From Sarah’s description, Dougie sounds young, barely an adult. This means he is inexperienced or stupid, probably both. The shrine will be linked to him as the leader of the cult on this island, but the number of sacrifices it can absorb in a day is based on the size of the local cult, which would currently just be him.

<If he smartens up, or if there is a Capronid a bit cleverer than the rest to nudge him, he will pick out some of the weaker-willed or desperate-to-live slaves and coerce them into pledging themselves to the cult. That will increase the blood shrine’s capacity and accelerate the growth of its influence. If they establish a portal, the Horde on the other end can bring over other prisoners or cultists to strengthen the shrine on this island.>

“What you’re saying is that if we wait and give them two more days, we could find the island overrun with these fuckers,” I outlined.

<That sums it up. They wouldn’t be able to get past your shielding, yet. But you’d be embroiled in a war with them right on your doorstep and your concentration needs to be elsewhere at the moment. That and the shrine acts as a

territorial flag, contesting your ownership, and preventing you from completing the first Storm's Reach quest> he finished.

It sounded like we would be going hunting before we went recruiting.

I nodded and then asked the question which had bugged me since I learned of what had occurred. "Why didn't the Capronids collar the kids? They wouldn't have been able to run then."

<You can't collar children, they are neither characters or mobs. Do you ever read the help files?> Quixbix snorted.

I didn't deign to answer the cheeky bugger.

Chapter 30

By the time we got the children settled down, it was approaching midday.

They'd not been very welcoming of the news that we were about to sail back to the location of the Capronids and all the adults would be leaving them alone on the ship. I'd expected them to be a bit more hopeful at the news. That we were off to seek out and rescue their parents if they were still alive. The subtext I picked up from their reaction was most of them either knew for certain their parents were dead or strongly suspected they were. The only exception was Sarah.

Anastasia solved the predicament when she used her powers to golemise several action figure toys. The mixture of entertainment and company calmed the nerves of the youngsters enough that we extricated ourselves post haste. We had to lock them in, but if worse came to worst, Anastasia would be able to let them out when she returned to the dungeon.

Shana had managed to glean enough information from the kids about what they saw during their flight from the capronids that with the help of the hand-drawn map we'd found in the school we pinpointed where the shrine and the capronids would likely be located.

There was a second large inland lake on the island, Lake Geneserath, which the kids had to circumnavigate as they ran towards the eastern shoreline. About a mile west of

the lake there was a patch of scrubbier land where the earth was rutted and cracked and less hospitable to vegetative growth. We thought this was where Dougie had established his blood shrine.

Quixbix explained that capronids weren't the most forward-thinking of spawned tool-using monsters and they thrived on devastation. A patch of ruined land would synergise best with their shrines and where Dougie would have been directed to build it.

We sailed Marena's Mercy down the coastline and moored up on a sandbar that ran parallel with the southern tip of Geneserath Lake.

We debarked from the ship in full battle gear and made our way up onto the road. The road would lead us around to the bottom end of the lake before it ended in a cul-de-sac to a very nice home on the shore. The building was mostly intact, though it had clearly been ransacked.

We had about a mile and a half of wooded land to travel through, and we took our time, being as silent as we could be. We didn't have any golems armed with assault rifles to assist us this time. Anastasia had used up all the usable mannequins.

Quixbix had assured me that we were unlikely to meet any mobs other than the Capronid herd in the area. Apparently, the Hooved Horde were notoriously territorial and would likely have exterminated anything on the southern half of the island that had spawned so far.

This was one of the reasons why their spawning crystals were typically clustered together. To prevent the mobs from slaughtering too many of one another. The Framework obviously felt it was more sporting to let them do that to the people instead.

This married up with the description of what had happened to the kid's families. Spawned mobs snuffled around

the houses for the first few days but were either killed or went into hiding once the herd had shown up.

Roughly forty-five minutes after we set out, we crouched down behind some shrubbery as the treeline thinned and keenly observed what was happening in the patch of barren land beyond.

The blood shrine was a gruesome sight and difficult to miss. It was in the centre of the dell in front of where the land had been scarred by something in the past. Possibly an explosion or some mining accident. The hand drawn map we were working from noted the scarring but didn't have an explanation.

The grisly edifice stood twenty feet tall, the base was made from rocks that had been gathered from nearby and they surrounded what looked like a thick rusted girder with half a dozen jagged and equally rusted metallic crossbeams. On top of the girder was mounted a large antlered effigy, made from driftwood and detritus that had been gathered from the surrounding area. There was a barbed spike protruding from the tip of the effigy adding a further two feet to the totem's height.

Hanging from the girders were a variety of bloody body parts and bones, some of which seemed to be freshly placed if the still wet blood that dribbled down from the grisly ornaments was any measure.

Carnaxian Blood Shrine (Tier 1)

A blood shrine to the god Carnax the Cloven-Hoofed. Blood Pool points can be used to summon Carnax's devotees or create a portal between blood shrines.

Owner: Beaver Island Cult of Carnax (Douglas Vickers)

Blood Pool: 40

Cult Strength: level 2 (three sacrifices per day permitted.)

Durability: 100/100 (Special: Impervious as long as local cult members live.)

There were at least twenty capronids in the clearing, most of them surrounded the shrine and were lowing in harsh guttural voices. Desmond's description didn't really do them justice.

They stood about six and a half feet tall, matching my height, and wore nothing below the waist. Their legs were covered in thick, dark, matted fur, ending in their cloven hooves. It was difficult to tell if their upper bodies were similarly hirsute as they wore chain mail armour stained with blood. Their heads were incredibly goat-like. Many of them had rotting viscera clinging to their horns and their sharp teeth-filled maws.

They were armed with a variety of different melee weapons, though they seemed to favour maces or wide-bladed cleavers. Which like the rest of their ensemble was none too clean.

Capronid x22

Grade: S Level: 3

HP: 400

Loot Value: Low

Threat: Moderate

XP Value: 1760

Information: *Capronids or Goat-folk are a monster species that live and move in herds. They are dedicated to the god Carnax the Cloven-Hoofed. Their herds typically merge when they meet and when they encounter other cloven-hoofed monster species. These mass gatherings are referred to as the Hooved Horde. The destruction wrought by the Horde is devastating and will continue until either the Horde is*

comprehensively defeated and scattered to the winds or there is nothing left for them to destroy and consume.

Unlike the animals whose likeness they bear, capronids are exclusively carnivorous, consuming the flesh of those they slay and offer in sacrifice to their ever-hungry God.

This herd has been separated from the Horde and is currently understrength.

There were six survivors on the right-hand side of the clearing, all collared, which was the only ‘clothing’ they wore. Their hands were tied to a crude frame that was just high enough to make it impossible to sit or kneel without hanging from their wrists and forced them to stand. They were filthy, gaunt, exhausted, and some wept openly and whimpered.

Interestingly, all six of the remaining prisoners were women, their nudity making that plain. I wondered if that was a conscious choice from the teenaged Dougie or if the capronids had preferred to sacrifice the larger males for that little extra blood.

If things went as planned, we’d likely never know.

The reason for the prisoner’s distress was easy to spot in the centre of the barren landscape before the foul edifice that had been erected.

Placed in front of the blood shrine was a flat stone acting as a simplistic altar. Splayed across the altar and screaming blue murder in a mixture of bravado and sheer panic was a buck-naked Marco. He was being held down by a capronid on either end. Between the altar and the shrine was a third of the goat-headed creatures and he wielded a serrated blade about a foot long, which was already coated in gore.

Cast off to the side of the altar were the mutilated bodies of two of the imprisoned holidaymakers, one male, one female. Their throats had been savagely rent wide open, presumably with that blade, and they had been gutted from their groins to the base of their sternums.

Strewn around the area were the remains of the earlier sacrifices, but there was not much left to identify. The bones that lay close enough to us that we could see them clearly had been gnawed upon, cracked, and the marrow sucked from within.

Corpses of spawned monsters would dissipate after a few hours unless they were converted into a usable material by someone with an appropriate skill or ability; this was what remained of their earlier human victims.

A bit further away from the perverted religious act, closer to where we hid, were two shivering people who prostrated themselves on the barren dirt. They were naked, apart from a filthy loincloth that I was fairly sure was made from recently cured human skin, and slave collars. Their upper bodies had been caked in what smelt like a mixture of blood and goat shit.

Florence Hiskins (Goatblood Human)

Cultist (W) 1

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 240

Current Affiliation: Cult of Carnax (Beaver Island Sect)

Faith: Weak

Fertile Receptivity: 0/65

—

Mark Tompkins (Goatblood Human)

Cultist (W) 1

Character Aptitude: Low

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 240

Current Affiliation: Cult of Carnax (Beaver Island Sect)

Faith: Weak

Quixbix had been right, they had managed to coerce a couple of the weaker willed or fearful slaves into converting to the worship of Carnax and strengthened the cult. Their lack of faith suggested these were relatively recent religious conversions. Made out of expediency rather than any genuine devotion.

Also, unless there was some special circumstance joining a cult gave you, they must have been Civilians that hit one thousand experience and used their second chance at character creation to take that new race and class. That could not be forced, not even for those who been collared.

This only left one other individual in sight.

Douglas Vickers (Goatblood Human)

Cult Leader (U) 1

Character Aptitude: Moderate

Loot Value: Very Low

Threat: Very Low

XP Value: 770

Current Affiliation: Cult of Carnax (Beaver Island Sect)

Faith: Strong

Dougie was short, barely five and a half feet, but not a child. He couldn't go through character creation until he was sixteen, and I estimated he was a year or two older than that. He was standing, and in addition to a human skin loincloth, he

wore a cape made from the same grisly material. Atop his head was a crown of sorts, made from finger bones and teeth and he shook a staff that similarly had teeth embedded in the wood.

He pranced from one foot to the other and gibbered. “Oh, mighty Carnax! Please accept these oblations from your devoted servants. We shall cleanse the land of those who have profaned their bodies with the flesh of your precious ones, the cloven-hoofed. They shall experience the severity of their sins in kind! Let the immolation begin.” The crazed lad cackled.

He twirled about, chanting the same mantra several times. It was very likely he made it up as he went along and that the capronids didn't really care what he said or did. They simply waited for the shrine to be ready to absorb the next blood sacrifice.

It was also obvious Dougie considered himself something of a walking thesaurus. I'd taken enough Classics lessons at college to know that oblation was an offering to the Gods and that contrary to popular thought, immolation meant sacrifice, not setting fire to someone or something. Immolation was most often associated with sacrifices who were either burned alive or had parts ritually burned afterwards, which is where the confusion in its definition came from.

From my conversation with Sarah, I assumed Dougie had been suffering from a variety of self-esteem or mental health issues before the apocalypse.

In my head, I had been willing to cut the guy some slack, given his youth, allow him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe in his zeal for animal rights he hadn't fully understood the ramifications of his actions. People used to type all kinds of impulsive shit on social media they deeply regretted later when they grew up and managed to get a clue.

That may have been true in the beginning, I didn't know. What I did know was that he had definitely gone off the deep end since.

He was supposed to be a vegan and yet here he was, bedecked in the body parts of people he helped kill. And if the stains about his mouth were what I thought they were, he had been partaking in the same diet as his goat creature allies.

<Quest 'Culling the Cloven-Hoofed 1' completed. 1,330 XP and one Token of the Bound awarded> Quixbix formally intoned, and immediately the follow up quest flashed before my eyes.

**** Culling the Cloven-Hoofed 2 (K)*

You have found the encampment and Blood Shrine of the Hooved Horde on the island. You need to remove their influence from your territory.

Success: Eliminate the herd of Capronids, all cultists of Carnax, and destroy the Blood Shrine.

Rewards: 3,400 XP and future quests in the chain.

Lucky Goat's Hoof charm.

*Failure: If this quest goes incomplete the rest of this quest chain will remain locked and unavailable. ****

<Good, they don't have a big enough blood pool to open even a temporary portal. Sacrificing Marco won't provide enough either, but if we'd given them an extra couple of days to finish off the rest of their prisoners they would have. To make the blood shrine vulnerable you will need to kill the cultists first. It would be best to kill them early anyway as only characters can use the shrine's blood pool. It's why the capronids need, and therefore tolerate, the cultists. They don't have enough to open a portal, but they could still use what they have to summon a small herd of reinforcements> Quixbix whispered in our heads.

After what we had just seen I was fine with killing Dougie and the two fools who followed in his wake.

After the fourth recitation from Dougie, the serrated blade-wielding capronid bellowed loudly, and the insane young man ceased his capering and chanting. The guttural howling from the other capronids increased in volume, as did the begging and squealing from Marco who knew what was coming his way.

Had it been someone else up on that altar, I might have felt an emotional compulsion to act earlier, but it was Marco. I would end up killing him eventually anyway, so we'd wait. I had a sneaking suspicion of what would happen afterwards, and it would provide a much better opportunity for our ambush if I was right.

"Please!" Marco begged, tears streaming down his filth-caked cheeks. "You don't have to do this. I know people, powerful people, Luca...he...he will reward you for my return...or...or...I can show you the way to the cunt who has a base on this island. Lead you right to him..."

Marco's flapping lips of betrayal were cut off with screams of agony as the capronid in charge gripped his fright-shrivelled genitalia and roughly carved them off. Then threw the bloody mess on the barren earth in front of Dougie and the other two cultists.

Dougie eagerly snatched up a piece from the ground and tore into it with his teeth. Florence and Mark were decidedly less enthusiastic, but after a glare from their new leader, scrambled forward on their knees to consume their own pieces of Marco's discarded flesh.

"Oh, that is beyond rank," Anastasia whispered. "Please tell me we can kill these fuckers."

"That's the plan," I mouthed back quietly.

Meanwhile, the blade-wielding capronid hadn't bothered to wait or watch what the former humans were doing. He stabbed the serrated blade into Marco's lower belly, just above where his crotch used to be, and sawed his way up to his sternum with practised ease.

Marco was still alive for all of this, though his screams had faded into wordless, pitiful, sobs. We didn't have long to listen to those either as the capronid pulled the blade from his chest and raked it deeply across his throat. The arterial blood spurting from the grisly wound and Marco's suffering ended swiftly as he bled out from his multiple wounds in a few seconds.

There was barely a murmured cry or any increased volume in the exhausted weeping from the remaining slaves off to the right who had undoubtedly witnessed more than a few of these sacrifices and knew their time would be coming sooner rather than later.

With their trio of sacrifices done for the day what I hoped might happen occurred as the capronid with the serrated blade pushed Marco's lifeless body off the altar to join the other two unfortunates. It bellowed loudly and the encircled beasts charged forward and pounced on the dead. The capronids pushed and shoved one another in an effort to be the first to devour the flesh of the slain.

All the beasts joined the brawl apart from the two who had been assigned to watch over the remaining slaves. They looked onto the mass of goatmen greedily devouring flesh with envious eyes.

Dougie cackled wildly and rushed forward to join the ruck but was forcibly thrown back by the much bigger and stronger monsters. He landed hard on his arse and nursed his equally wounded tailbone and pride.

Now was the time to act.

"Shana," I whispered. "Execute Dougie with extreme prejudice and then switch your attacks to the two capronids guarding the slaves."

"Understood," she replied quietly.

"Ana, you're with me. Once Shana drops the dickhead who started this, we rush the other two and finish them off," I outlined to the blonde avatar.

Anastasia smiled with vicious glee.

“Jackson,” I murmured to the young sorcerer. “You follow in our wake. Get as close to the goat-headed fuckers as you need and then drop the biggest green fire-bomb on their asses that you can without pushing yourself into mana exhaustion.”

“Then get your scrawny butt back to the treeline,” I joked and clapped him good-naturedly on the shoulder. “Ana and I will mop up what’s left of them, and you can work your way around to free the prisoners once Shana has killed the two that are guarding them over there.”

Jackson gulped nervously but nodded and rolled his sleeves up, getting himself ready.

“Shana, fire at will,” I whispered.

The graceful elf stood from behind the shrubbery that concealed us, her bow and arrow in hand. With a single smooth action, she nocked, pulled the string back and released the arrow with a soft twang. The arrow flew true and embedded itself right behind Dougie’s ear.

I dismissed the damage notification from Quixbix, barely reading it. Dougie had been unaware and was hit in an unarmoured part of his head by an arrow shot from Shana’s Lesser Bow of the Assassin. The damage was massive and would have been a kill-shot even for somebody like me at level one.

It certainly was for Dougie.

Dougie had been rubbing his sore butt while sitting on the ground. As the arrow struck, his body rocked forward, and he remained slumped unnaturally that way with his head almost touching the dirt in front of him. His splayed legs prevented his corpse from falling all the way forward to the ground.

Nobody reacted to his sudden demise, apart from Ana and me. We rushed out from the shrubbery and ambushed the two remaining cultists. They were completely oblivious as

they were struggling to swallow and keep down their ‘Marco meal’.

Anastasia’s whip flicked out and wrapped around Florence’s throat and rapidly drained her dead. I took out Mark with a well-placed swipe of my scimitar to the back of his neck.

With my new gauntlets bumping my strength by twenty and my Greater Blue Coral Ring boosting my Cold damage by a further two I was doing approximately fifty-five damage per strike. Slicing into his unarmoured neck multiplied that by eight, and his head came clean off.

I arrested my stride.

Jackson now rushed forward covering the ground at a sprint. The two capronids guarding the slaves who had been eyeing the mass of their greedily feasting fellows lowed a loud warning as one of them was struck in the chest by an arrow from Shana.

Thankfully, most of the mass of beasts were too focused on fighting for the juiciest portions to notice the warning in time. Jackson got within five metres of them, stretched out his palms and unleashed a wave of green flames that I’d first seen him use in the dungeon against the swarm of Skreechers. The flames were more intense this time and I could feel the waves of heat pulsing away from the attack.

The young sorcerer straightened as the two-second burst of fire exhausted itself. He stared at the writhing mass of burnt goat-men as the rotten crisped smell of flesh and hair wafted back to us.

A handful of the monsters on the front periphery of the grisly feed stampede collapsed to the ground horribly burned having taken the brunt of Jackson’s conjured conflagration. Unfortunately, this front few had partially shielded those further back and though they were certainly scorched, and very, very, angry, they weren’t dead.

Jackson seemed to realise he was standing there, staring at a bunch of wrathful mobs who had every reason to gut him like a pig, and he had no mana left. He turned tail and sprinted even faster away from them than when he had approached. Not that I think any sane person could find fault in that.

“Are you ready, Ana?” I called across to her.

With a flick of her wrist, Anastasia uncoiled her Drainer’s whip from the throat of a desiccated Florence and grinned savagely. Yeah, she was ready.

The capronids roared, hefted their weapons, and charged. Well, the ten towards the back of the pile, including the chief immolator, did. Half a dozen of those at the front, after being trampled by their fellows, crawled towards the altar instead.

I didn’t have time to consider what was happening with them as the first of the beast-men, with horns black as night, reached me.

The creature was close enough that I could smell its rancid breath over the acrid burnt flesh stench that had washed over us in the wake of Jackson’s magic-use. The capronid swung his blood-stained, rusted, cleaver at my head and I ducked the wild attack and slashed at the creature’s unarmoured knees in response.

My swift double strike effectively hamstrung the beast. As it fell to the ground, I hacked at it and connected with the chain protected shoulder. Quixbix flashed me a notification that I had inflicted enough damage to kill it and I looked up ready for my next opponent.

From the corner of my eye, I spied Anastasia had slowly backed up and was using the lengthy range of her special whip to her best advantage. She had dropped a capronid of her own by the time two more approached me from either side. The one on my left had dirty-grey fur, while the other’s pelt was a muddy brown. I needed to utilise some

fast footwork myself and ducked and rolled out of the way of a double mace attack.

I jumped back to my feet, having put a little distance between grey-fur on my left and slashed my swords at brown-fur. One of my blades was blocked by his mace but the second connected solidly with the monster's gut. I registered that it dealt fifty-five damage to the beast.

Quixbix had changed my notification 'settings' at my request and only significant information would flash before my eyes, but the notifications still existed, and I could mentally check them with a thought.

I continued to back up, battling with the pair who were quickly joined by two more, one of these being the immolator capronid, who still had the serrated blade in hand.

I was hit three times losing forty Hit Points each time which accounted for about ten percent of my total.

As the combat progressed, I dropped another of my opponents, the brown-furred one I connected with first, but there were still three in the fight. After the first few times that they got past my desperate parrying, I adapted my strategy.

Instead of trying to deflect, I started taking the hits on my dragonscale protected arms. I would likely be hit more frequently, but the damage was massively reduced and left me freer to strike back. The damage inflicted dropped from forty to six and left me much happier.

As we danced, my blades against their cleavers and maces, I was able to peek to my side and see how Anastasia was doing. She had been surrounded by four Goat-men the same as I had, and her attackers were too close for the whip to be effective.

She had jumped on the back of one with black matted fur and silvery horns and was draining him dry, but she was taking a heavy beating in the process from the remaining three.

She would be able to use her victim's essence, when she drained it, to renew her own Hit Points. And she couldn't

die permanently, so I wasn't overly concerned about her safety, but it did highlight another worry.

Where was our ranged support?

Quixbix, what has happened to Shana? Is she okay?

I thought at my imp as I intercepted another blow on my upper left arm for a small reduction in my Hit Point total.

<She is hale and hearty, Torin> he assured me quickly. <Unfortunately, she has had other matters to deal with. Although I was correct about the capronids not being able to use the blood pool of the shrine to summon other herds or open portals, it would appear they can use it to heal themselves.>

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” I grunted as I was hit on the elbow and whipped my scimitar back with a savage counter-blow to the offending beast-man's jaw, slicing it clean off and dropping the creature.

This left grey-fur and the immolator in the fight with me.

<She killed the two guards and then saw what the remaining six were doing. She managed to kill four of them before they finished healing themselves and is keeping the other two off you for now. Jackson has made it to the hanging frame and freed two of the six slaves. Oh, and Ana just killed one of her four. With her three, your two, and Shana's two, you have seven left> Quixbix informed me rapid-fire.

I doubled down with only two left and abandoned defence entirely and went on a frenzy of offensive moves. Twenty seconds later, I had slain both at the cost of another two hundred of my Hit Points.

I was about to turn and assist the blonde spitfire who continued to struggle with her group of capronids, though she had killed a second of her four enemies.

However, I was distracted from aiding her as a terrifying screech echoed across the battleground from the southern woods.

The battle halted on all fronts as the screech was joined by the tearing and cracking sounds of trees being destroyed as something enormous barged through the wooded area to the south of us and emerged into the bright daylight of the dell.

My mouth was left agape as I stared at the fresh monstrosity.

It was over thirty feet tall.

At first, I thought it was a kind of scorpion, as it had two gigantic sandy-grey mottled pincers that it had used to uproot and discard inconvenient things like forty-foot trees blocking its path. When I took in its head with two exposed black beady eyes and a pair of twitching feelers that almost looked like a moustache, I realised this was some type of giant crustacean and not a scorpion.

The creature had a hard shell the same shade as the pincers, and it was covered in wriggling tentacular extensions that looked like polyps tipped with circular orifices lined with sharp teeth.

As it came crashing through into the barren clearing, time slowed to a halt.

<I think a period of Action Mode is in order> Quixbix said.

That was the understatement of the century.

Chapter 31

“What the fuck is that thing?” I cried in my mind.

<Why don't you analyse it and find out> Quixbix remarked unhelpfully.

I was far too concerned with the sudden development to chew him out, though.

Parasite Ridden Mutated Crawdad King (Sholmdir's Champion)

Grade: A Level: 1

HP: 9,100

Loot Value: N/A

Threat: Impossible

XP Value: 89,000

Information: *This was a regular crawfish before integration. Caught up in a blast of magical energy it became saturated and was on the verge of death before the sea god Sholmdir intervened.*

Infused with his divine essence, this crustacean has been enhanced and mutated repeatedly. Thereby creating a champion exponentially more powerful than what should exist on a planet at this stage of its integration. The parasites it bore (twelve of them) have similarly been enhanced and

mutated, fusing permanently with the creature and making it even more deadly than before.

The carapace of the Crawdad King provides supreme damage mitigation against all damage types.

The parasites are now part of the Crawdad King but do not share its damage mitigation. Each parasite has 100 Hit Points and has only medium mitigation against physical attacks and none against magical. When a parasite is slain, it will slowly sap Hit Points from the Crawdad King to revive itself.

“Bloody Nora!” I gasped as I read the text.

<You can say that again> Quixbix chimed in. <If this were a game, I’d say we just met the end-level boss. The boss of a game where the developers thought it would be hilarious to slaughter all the players before they got out of the tutorial zone.

<There shouldn’t be anything this deadly in the first fortnight. A year from now, far away from people, maybe, but not right now. Sholmdir must really hate you, Torin. I don’t know how he managed it, but this would have cost him dearly.>

“This fucking Sholmdir asshat is really pissing me off,” I snarled.

<Well, you may have to cool your heels> the imp continued. <Currently this mob’s threat is listed as impossible. That might change, though. Sholmdir’s interference hasn’t gone unnoticed. I can offer you a divine dilemma. See how I’m offering it and not just activating it straight off the bat. I hope you appreciate the efforts I’m making.>

I mentally rolled my eyes as my face was frozen in place.

“Divine? I presume that means it’s different from the regular dilemma?”

<Yes, your patron, the Shattered Goddess, will have had a hand in forging the terms of the dilemma.>

“I’m not sure I want to risk it. The dilemmas have been a bit of a rough road for me, so far.”

<Only when you were being a wuss> the imp chuckled. <Look, you are already in a shitty situation. You haven’t completed the culling quest and you are marked with ‘Sholmdir’s Ire’. That monstrosity is going to make a beeline for you. You haven’t seen anything of this size before. You would think a beast like this would be slow, weighed down by its chitinous carapace, but chances are it is unnaturally quick, even on land. The dilemma might improve the situation.>

“Or it might not,” I countered.

<Yeah, but then you’ll get some juicy bonuses for being in the same shitty situation. Not to mention there is the possibility that the Shattered Goddess might take offence that you turned your nose up at her offer of assistance.>

His logic was frustratingly sound. The dilemmas had given me a nudge down paths I’d been reluctant to tread at the time, but they’d never truly fucked me over.

Three or more options, one of which would be guaranteed to suck based on past experience, but there ought to be something vaguely acceptable, possibly even helpful, in the others.

“Let’s do it,” I sighed, and read through what came up next, sighing even louder.

Sometimes I hate being right.

**** The sea god Sholmdir has sent a champion to end your miserable life. Your divine patron, the Shattered Goddess, has deigned to exert a small measure of her power on your behalf. Provided you follow a path that suits her whim that is. ****

**** Choose one of the below. ****

Flight: Flee from the battle (Divinely Favoured Option)
You will be granted a divine quest to escape from the Crawdad King. Additionally, the Shattered Goddess will mask your presence from the Crawdad King. Once out of visual range it will not be able to detect you for 24 hours.
Sacrifice: Order your people to give up their lives so that you can escape.
Your escape and survival are guaranteed. Sholmdir will be appeased, and his mark of ire will be removed from you. +50 Notoriety
Fight: Initiate battle and slay the beast.
Your imp can give you a extra quest to defeat the Crawdad King.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I hissed angrily.

<For once I am in full agreement with you. I quite liked the rest of the crew too. Well, at least you’ll still have Ana, eh?>

“What? Fuck off Quix. I am not picking sacrifice. I will not lose Shana.”

<And Jackson?> he queried teasingly.

“Yes, and Jackson,” I replied curtly.

<I just wanted to clarify, as you didn’t say.>

“It was implied, you prick.”

<If you say so> he chuckled.

“For fuck’s sake, Quix. Now is not the time for jokes,” I groused as I figured out that he was needling me for shits and giggles.

Why he thought now was an appropriate time for those kinds of antics was lost on me.

<Pardon me for trying to lighten the mood. So, I’m guessing flight it is>

“Yes, it looks like it. Do you disagree?” I asked him.

<Hells no! This is a fight we can’t win. In all seriousness, we run and live to fight another day. I don’t fancy being consumed because you karked it. Getting a reward for doing the only sane thing in the circumstances is what I hoped for from this dilemma.>

Ah, that was why he was being forcibly flippant. Quixbix was frightened.

“Agreed. Then I pick...” I started.

<STOP!> Quixbix screeched in my mind so loudly it would surely have burst my eardrums if it had been true sound.

“What the fuck,” I yelled back at him.

<That delusional deity has changed her fucking mind. Look> he cried despairingly.

I mentally blinked and re-read the dilemma details. They had indeed changed from when I’d read them moments before.

Flight: Flee from the battle.
Your imp can give you a quest to escape the Crawdad King.
Sacrifice: Order your people to give up their lives so that you can escape.

Your escape and survival are guaranteed. Sholmdir will be appeased, and his mark of ire will be removed from you. +50 Notoriety

Fight: Initiate battle and slay the beast. (Divinely Favoured Option)

You will be granted a divine quest for defeating the Crawdad King.

Additionally, rewards for the quest and defeating the Crawdad King will be awarded before, not after, the quest is completed. (Please note this means retreat from the battle is NOT an option.)

The Shattered Goddess had pulled a full one-eighty.

Whereas before she favoured us running and would help in that regard, now she wanted us to fight. It was then that my new skill Preternatural Insight, or at least I assumed it was this skill, kicked in and gave me an inkling of how these changes would affect me.

<Damn it all to damnation.> My imp wailed. <Wait, maybe all is not lost. If we give her a few more minutes she might switch back to what it was before. We need to keep an eagle eye on the dilemma terms and then select Flight whenever it swings back in our favour.>

That was when I did something that was possibly foolhardy and assured to really piss the quest imp off.

“I pick Fight,” I declared firmly and made my choice.

<What the fuck are you doing, Torin? Are you crazy?> Quixbix yelled at me. <If we’d waited, she might have changed her mind back to Flight. Even if she hadn’t, that would be better than a hopeless battle we can’t retreat from. Oh, my Framework, we’re dead. We are so effing dead.>

“Yeah, she might have changed her mind but that doesn’t mean it would be better,” I explained my logic to him.

“She could have switched the favoured option to sacrifice or changed the whole dilemma to something worse.”

<Damn it, Torin. You’re thinking with your little head instead of your big head. If you die, they are all just as fucked as if you threw them to the wolves. Less fucked, if you want the truth. Their souls would remain intact.>

“Enough, Quix. You said that thing will be gunning for me anyway. Without the goddess’s help, we could get halfway back to the ship, and it catches up to us anyway. Then we’d end up fighting it without a divine boost.

“I’m going to put your callousness down to panic. Get your shit together and display the details of the quest,” I ordered him. “I have a feeling our situation isn’t as dire as it appears.”

**** Who’s the Daddy? (Ax3)*

Sholmdir has sent a champion to kill you. Kill it first. Due to the ‘divine dilemma’ nature of this quest, rewards shall be awarded before completion. But you are compelled to fight until either the Crawdad King or you are dead. Due to the strength disparity, the rewards for this quest have been trebled.

Success: Parasite Ridden Mutated Crawdad King slain.

Rewards: 24,300 XP, +120 Notoriety, +15 Class Upgrade points

Shattered Dragonscale Hooded-Coif.

Failure: Death.

*Consequences: the mark of Sholmdir’s Ire will become a mark of Sholmdir’s Wrath. ****

<Quest Who’s the Daddy? completed, sort of. 48,600 XP, 120 Notoriety, fifteen class upgrade points and the

Shattered Dragonscale Hooded-Coif awarded> Quixbix intoned formally as he did whenever I completed a quest.

I quickly examined the Coif that was now in my inventory.

Shattered Dragonscale Hooded-Coif

Chaos Dragonscale Armour (H) (Set 2 of 5)

Damage Mitigation: Very High

HP +300

Stat: +20 Con, set bonus +1 charge

Set Bonus: Chaos Dragon Breath Attack. Charges 2 (Charges return at the rate of one per day.) When used, pick one of five breath attack types, Frost, Fire, Acid, Lightning or Poison.

There is a 50% chance it will be a random damage type instead. 50 damage per class grade (currently 800 for K-grade)

Drawback: All Notoriety losses are doubled. (If this armour is removed the drawback remains in place for three months. This stacks with the other pieces of the set.)

This armour is forged from the discarded scales of Chaos Dragons in the demesne of the Shattered Goddess. When worn, the damage mitigation is applied to the whole of the head and neck area regardless of whether the hood is up or down. Other pieces of armour such as a helmet can be worn over this extended coverage for their Mana infused abilities, but the damage mitigation does not stack. (Can only be worn by adherents of the Shattered Goddess)

Durability: 10,000/10,000

This was a good start. The first thing that popped out, apart from me getting a mother-humping dragon breath attack, was the coif had the set bonus unlocked, so I reviewed the gauntlets I had on as well.

Shattered Dragonscale Gauntlets

Chaos Dragonscale Armour (H) (Set 1 of 5)

Damage Mitigation: Very High

HP +300

Stat: +20 Str, between +1 and +20 to the skill for the currently wielded weapon. (Randomly changes each combat)

Set Bonus: Shattering: Target is treated as having low mitigation armour when attacked by you. Duration of effect is 1 minute for every set piece equipped (currently 2). Charges 2 (charges return at a rate of one per day)

Drawback: All Notoriety losses are doubled. (If this armour is removed the drawback remains in place for three months. This stacks with the other pieces of the set.)

This armour is forged from the discarded scales of Chaos Dragons in the demesne of the Shattered Goddess. When worn, the scales of these gauntlets enlarge and encapsulate the whole of the wearer's arms offering its damage mitigation to all areas covered. Other pieces of armour such as bracers can be worn over this extended coverage for their Mana infused abilities, but the damage mitigation does not stack. (Can only be worn by adherents of the Shattered Goddess)

Durability: 10,000/10,000

There it was. A bonus called Shattering, which would allow me to reduce the armour of a single target. The blasted crustacean would still have over nine thousand Hit Points and only I would be able to benefit, but that had to put this fight back in the 'possibly winnable' category.

The potential randomness of the breath attack's damage type could be problematic in some situations, but my tooltip analysis didn't indicate the Crawdad had any immunities or resistances to any of the potential outcomes.

The extra Hit Points would be welcome too. Although I'd hoped when I saw the coif that I'd be getting more strength. The constitution boost was the next best thing.

<Okay maybe this isn't going to be as hopeless as I thought> Quixbix commented, his anger subsiding. <The threat just dropped to Near Impossible once your new gear is factored in. Also, in some bizarre twist, because you've got everything instantly your experience was doubled for your Notoriety passing two hundred. Normally that adjustment to experience happens after.

<What's more you've been granted the experience for killing the bloody thing even before you've done so, which is something else I've never seen before. You have an extra 59,330 XP, which is enough to power you to level five if you survive.>

“What about loot from it?” I asked.

I had intuited some of what Quixbix had explained from my Preternatural Insight skill and hoped for every edge I could get.

<Nothing I'm afraid> the imp answered, dashing that particular hope. <It's not a spawned mob, but a natural-born creature. If it had been a proper character as champions usually are, you would have access to what was in their inventory. This creature, as big as it is, has nothing on it. This might be a blessing in disguise as I don't see how they could hand over its inventory contents before it was dead. The creature having nothing might just be what has allowed the Framework to swing these out-of-sequence shenanigans.>

“Shame,” I muttered, but was unsurprised.

<Your new headwear is very good but there is a hidden flaw with breath attacks you need to be aware of. They are generated from the back of your throat> he explained.

“That makes sense I suppose. It is a breath attack, why is that an issue.”

<Well, you're not a dragon. You don't have the same immunities they have. When you use the attack, you will be affected as well. You'll be getting the benefit of the coif's damage mitigation and it will be considered a glancing blow, so you won't suffer from any vital spot multipliers. With the breath attack's current damage of eight hundred, you will suffer one hundred and thirty damage yourself when it is used. Ninety for Cold damage with your inherent resistance to that damage type.>

“Ah, that's not so good. Best use it when placed for maximum effect then.”

<Hold up, what is this> the imp bleated with sudden surprise. <Your level up icon is active.>

“That's not right, surely,” I said, trying to hide my excitement and not get my expectations up.

<Absolutely not. I may have put you in Action Mode, but you are very much in combat. You categorically should not be able to level up. I've seen more unexpected things in the last few minutes than I have in the last two thousand years.>

“You know what they say about gift horses,” I said to the imp and clicked yes on the icon.

Blink.

I opened my eyes and rolled my shoulders, gratified to have movement again. Action Mode might be useful, but I couldn't shake experiencing a horrible claustrophobic shudder when I was held that way for any prolonged length of time.

We were in the foyer of Dean's office. There were a few more potted plants than last time, and the scent was mildly piney, the stale disinfectant aroma fully banished. The large

double doors to Dean's chambers were wide open and his secretary rose from behind her desk upon our arrival.

Anastasia was standing next to me, but there was no Shana. I imagine Anastasia could come because of the inherent link between our classes.

“Whoa! What the hell happened?” Anastasia gasped. “I was just getting my ass kicked by those goat fuckers and then boom, I'm here.”

“Bit of a long story, but...”

“Mr Carter, Miss Ruslanovna,” Dean's secretary interrupted me as she stepped out from behind her prefab desk and approached us. “I'm ever so sorry to interrupt, but please, head in directly. I'm afraid, given the...unusual circumstances of your visit, time is very limited.”

Had there been a hint of disapproval in her tone, it was hard to say.

The secretary ushered us through the doorway and closed the doors gently behind us as we walked through. Which was a first.

Unlike my previous visit, the open floor Silicon Valley style office had not expanded in size to incorporate more unnecessary leisure activities. In fact, the bean bag hangout area had been moved forward so that we were standing at its edge and the rest of the office area was closed off behind glass walls.

“Torin! You've really kicked the fucking hornet's nest this time,” Dean shouted at me, possibly forgetting we were only a few feet away from him this time. “Sit, sit,” he beckoned to us.

Anastasia and I ambled over and plonked ourselves down on a couple of bean bags. “Dean,” I said by way of greeting.

“Quixbix said we shouldn't be able to level up during a fight,” Anastasia challenged the Framework administrator.

“Are you fucking with things again?”

Right to the point, as always.

Dean beamed his usual devil-may-care grin at us.

“Always so suspicious. Yes, in a manner of speaking. I am bending the rules a bit, but we don’t have much time. Only what you have left of your slowed-down action time with the imp. Roughly ten minutes.”

“However,” he continued. “Before you accuse me of more underhanded chicanery, this is entirely in response to Sholmdir’s rule-fuckery. Champions are supposed to be characters and the Framework has immutable restrictions in place to stop deities from powering them up obscenely and then unleashing them on the unsuspecting public.”

“Then explain that gigantic, mutated, crayfish,” I pressed.

“Yes, well,” he replied sheepishly. “He managed to find a loophole. Torin my main mofo, the deities are a fucking pain in my ass. They’re convinced they existed before the Framework, which is bullshit, by the way. The problem is I can’t prove to them that the Framework made them as I didn’t exist myself before the Framework came online.

“So, they don’t listen to me and are always causing fucking issues. Ashli the fucktard making my life difficult again. If only he made them aware of their true nature, like the imps and fairies.”

“Dean,” I interrupted him sternly. “Less pity party, more loophole explanation. We’re on the clock, remember.”

“Shit, yeah, sorry my dude. So, loophole. Like I said, champions are supposed to be characters. There is a blanket ban on mobs, even intelligent ones, from being endorsed in such a manner and animals are incapable of surviving the process without the higher brain functions characters have or so we believed.

“Turns out, that last part is only mostly true.

“We’ve now learned thanks to Sholmdir things get a little iffy when the animal is magically saturated, like the dogs and crows you’ve encountered already. This loophole hasn’t been exploited before as magically saturated animals have always died on new worlds long before the deities are allowed to get themselves involved.

“The saturation opens a magical doorway, if you will forgive the piss-poor analogy, which allowed Sholmdir to funnel his magic into the crawdad without needing it to have the higher brain functions necessary to process the influx of that power. And with the Crawdad not being a character, none of the usual Framework restrictions that would inhibit Sholmdir were applied.

“The only thing that stopped the annoying pissant’s skulduggery was how much the little lobster fucker could absorb. He actually tried this on dozens of different saturated crustaceans, and this was the only one in the sweet spot that wasn’t overcooked. The rest became explosively unstable, small mercy’s, eh.

“Anyway, when shit like this happens, I am given a little more latitude with the Framework laws than usual, hence being able to bring you here, levelling up during combat,” he finished with a smug expression on his face.

“So, can we expect to get enough out of going up to level five to pull the threat down from Near Impossible?” I queried hopefully.

Dean laughed hysterically. “Not even fucking close, my main motherfucker.”

Dean waved off my concern-filled sputtered protests. “The extra Hit Points and modest stat increases will keep you in the game for a bit longer, but that would have a negligible effect on your chances. Unless, of course, you were the beneficiary of a wealth of tactical advice from this guy.” He curled his fingers into fists and pointed his thumbs back at himself.

Anastasia stood up and slapped Dean in the face, hard. That wiped the silly smug expression from his face. “Lead with that next time, you rat-dicked asshole.”

I couldn’t help sniggering a little at her reaction. I’d told her she couldn’t insult me any longer, I hadn’t mentioned she had to hold her vituperative tongue in check for anybody else. Or her hands for that matter.

Dean rubbed his face with a wounded expression. Which was more bullshit, as I knew we couldn’t hurt him. I’d tried before.

I grabbed hold of a shaking Ana and pulled her into my lap before she could do anything else. She was so infuriated with Dean she didn’t even protest at the intimacy. I then looked pointedly at him, and he shook his head.

“Despite your rudeness, you’re still my fucking favourites, so I won’t let this little incident influence my professionalism,” Dean opined graciously.

Anastasia snorted her derision, which Dean ignored and went on. “There are a few things you should know. Sholmdir’s Ire doesn’t mean the crawdad will only focus on you, Torin. That creature is virtually mindless, running on pure pain-ravaged instinct, with a little added urging from the sea god, which it can’t properly comprehend.

“It will go for you first but won’t hesitate to lay waste to anything within reach as it does so. Also, the ire’s mark extends to Shana and Ana through your bonds with them. If they draw aggro for attacking it, it may go after them, being unable to distinguish the difference between the three of you.”

“Understood. What about, Jackson?” I asked.

“The Canon won’t have the same transferable effect as the bonds, but your sorcerer friend blew his wad against the capronids. He can’t regain enough mana with his stored pellet to be anything except another entry on the butcher’s bill. Best you order him away from the battlefield.”

That aligned with my own considerations for Jackson. Get him to free the slaves and then get the hell out of dodge. That would be one less thing to worry about.

“Secondly,” Dean continued. “The parasites are not the fatal weakness they purport to be. Don’t get suckered in and base your entire strategy around trying to take advantage of that.

“They can take anywhere between two to ten minutes to finish sapping the hundred Hit Points and revive. Your Shattering ability, which is vital for your chances in this fight, runs out after two minutes. If you haven’t finished it off or are damn close to it when that happens, you are fucked. The crawdad will have a short period of immunity after the first, so you can’t use the second charge on it.

“That doesn’t mean you won’t want to kill the parasites asap. They are foul fucking things, and you don’t want to get bitten by them. Negative status effects galore, trust me on this.

“There is one advantage you can use. Attacking the parasites will not draw the aggro of their crawdaddy. Shana’s skill in archery is sufficiently advanced that she should be able to kill them from afar, without too many missed shots contacting the big guy and risk drawing it towards her.”

That was sound advice, and a bit of a relief really. Shana was deadly with that bow at distance, but up close and personal, not so much. And with the crawdad’s ridiculous damage mitigation, she would barely faze it.

Dean beckoned to me with his fingers, wordlessly asking me to listen closely for the next bit. “Now, your real ace in the hole for this fight is the slap-happy pocket rocket in your lap.”

Dean leaned back quickly as Anastasia snarled at him and raised her hand motioning her intent to give him another cheek-burner.

“Watch yourself,” she warned him ominously. Punctuating her threat with a jabbed finger.

“Best you explain before she takes a bite out of you,” I joked.

Dean grunted. He looked genuinely perturbed at Anastasia’s antics. I know I couldn’t harm him, but maybe things were different for her. Before I had a chance to think that over, he restarted.

“First things first. Good news, due to the intertwined nature of the pair of you, that funky new Shattering ability on your gauntlets carries over to Anastasia. Bad news, that carapace is thick natural armour, so unlike a Kevlar vest, you won’t be carving through it like crepe paper.

“In practical terms, unless you are hitting between the joints into the flesh beneath your blows will be considered glancing and the damage lowered accordingly. The new Shattering ability of your gauntlets can’t help with resolving that tricky problem. But, Ana, you have an option available when you level up that can really help you out and give you an edge in this fight.”

Anastasia’s posture stiffened in my lap. My interest was piqued also. What hadn’t she told me?

“How? I don’t recall any special options like that?” she quizzed him.

Her voice went up half an octave betraying her claims of ignorance.

“A likely story. You’ve been keeping secrets. Whenever your level changes you can change the appearance of your avatar,” Dean revealed with a devious smirk on his face.

The kind of smirk that conveyed ‘I knew you were hiding this from Torin, and you really shouldn’t have slapped me if you didn’t want me spilling the beans’ without saying a word.

“Ana,” I said crossly. “Why didn’t you tell me you could do this? How many other secrets about what you can do are you keeping from me?”

For this last part, I injected a portion of my will to ensure her compliance. I didn't like overriding her will normally, but I was genuinely angry and disappointed, and acted unthinkingly.

“Bojemoi. Nothing. Well, nothing else,” she squawked and tried to wriggle out of my lap, but I held her in place. “And why wouldn't I keep it a secret. You are sex-mad, you are. You could have forced me to turn into a slutty bimbo barbie doll. He...” and Anastasia pointed accusingly at Dean. “...is just stirring up shit. How would this be of any help?”

“I would not have,” I whispered quietly in her ear, “and I think you know that, you stubborn little fool. And being unafraid to enjoy sex does not make you sex mad. You know that as well.”

I turned my gaze on Dean. “Ana has a point, though. How can this be of help to us?”

“Because as Ana's fearful waffling exemplified, this includes altering the dimensions of her physical avatar,” Dean explained.

Anastasia ceased fighting against me. “So, you're saying I could make myself as big as the lobster thing and kick its ass,” she questioned with sudden renewed interest.

Dean furrowed his eyebrows and shook his head slightly. “No, that's not what I meant. Obviously, you could make yourself larger, but you'd have the same stats and Hit Points as you do now, so all you'd achieve is making yourself an easier target to hit.”

“Then what do you mean,” she retorted with exasperation.

“I mean you should go in the opposite direction. Become doll sized. You can go as small as fifteen centimetres, about six inches.”

“Why would I want to become Thumbelina? What help would that be?”

Dean leaned back with a shit-eating grin as he made his big reveal. “Torin’s new item of dragonscale gear is a hooded-coif. Torin, you can wear it with the hood down and still benefit from its protection and a teeny-tiny Anastasia can be carried around inside it. She would then benefit from its damage mitigation and probably be small enough that the crawdad won’t even notice she is there.

“Ana, your whip will re-size to meet your new dimensions, but won’t lose any of its extra range. You can drain the crawdad and be in contact with Torin, making you able to transfer the stolen vitality over to him. And believe me, Torin, you are going to need it. That thing packs one hell of a punch. But as it likely won’t know where you are Ana, it can’t come after you.”

“Okay,” Anastasia said slowly. “But won’t I be stuck as only six inches tall?”

“Only until Torin makes level six. Then you can return yourself to your regular height. And with the XP coming from the dead Capronids and the Storm’s Reach quest, the bossman will be halfway there by battle’s end.”

This mollified the vicious vixen, and it was a good plan.

We had about five minutes left, and we talked over a few other potential strategies for the coming conflict.

We were due skill increases at level four. As much as I wanted to keep pumping up the Preternatural Insight, with the coming fight, I plumped to get the +3 in Acrobatics instead. Mobility was going to be important in the coming conflict. Anastasia elected to improve her skill for using her whip.

With the time we had left I questioned Dean as extensively as I could about how glancing blows worked and what we could do to get around it. This conversation did illuminate one potential mode of attack we could utilise. It was incredibly risky, a proper *Hail Mary* strategy, but if we exhausted all other options, we had a fallback plan.

The final few seconds approached, and we would need to return but I had one last thing to ask Dean. He could be a pain in the arse, but he came through for us today.

“Dean, this hasn’t cost you anything, helping us out like this, has it?”

Dean sprinted over and wrapped himself around my waist. “Torin, I’m touched. And now, so are you.”

He sniggered at his little joke as I extricated his piddly arms from my person while he kept talking. “Of course not. I’m the motherfucking boss, you know that. What’s got you so concerned?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I just got the vibe from your secretary that she didn’t really approve of us being here. She seemed very protective of you before, so I thought maybe you’d put yourself out on a limb for us,” I replied honestly.

Dean laughed. “Nothing could be further from the truth. Always disapproving that one.”

I exhaled with relief and felt the dissipation coming on. We were returning to real time and the fight of our lives.

Then I saw Dean had an incredibly mischievous smirk on his face, reminiscent of the one he had when he dropped Ana in it earlier. I knew without thinking about it that Dean was about to piss me off royally.

“She’s just aggravated we didn’t push the giant crawdad through a plexus rift back to Sholmdir’s demesne instead. But then you wouldn’t get the juicy XP for killing it. Good luck, you badass bastard.” He yelled with an enthusiastic wave.

That Motherfucking Wanker!

Chapter 32

I didn't have time to be pissed at Dean. There were enemies to deal with. I had just enough time to swivel my head from side to side and absorb what I'd not been able to view when stuck in Action Mode.

A few metres behind me were two confused capronids who had been attacking Anastasia. Their confusion was directly linked to her shrinking down to doll size and slipping away from them.

Shana remained on the periphery of the woodland to the east of this barren clearing. She had been firing arrows at the other two surviving goat-men. They were hunkered down behind the altar of the blood shrine which was on the western side of the wasteland dell.

I spotted Jackson to the north of my position at the hanging rack. He had managed to free three of the slaves tied up there and was working on the bindings of the fourth.

South of me was Sholmdir's screeching monstrosity. Even in the fleeting second or two that I had been surveying the land the giant crawdad had scuttled forward and covered half the distance between us. Dean and Quix had been right, the damn thing was wicked fast.

I felt the cord of the tip of Anastasia's whip wrap around my wrist. I pulled my hand to my chest sharply and tugged the diminutive woman, who clung onto the whip's handle tightly, from the ground and she flew towards me.

I caught her small body as it hurtled in my direction deftly and reaching my arm over my head deposited her in the hood of the dragonscale coif I had only just equipped. The coil of her whip unwrapped itself as she landed in the ice-blue edged black scale lining of the hood.

We had discussed the manoeuvre in advance and agreed it was the quickest way to get us in close contact.

By the time we'd finished reuniting, I was already in motion, diving to my right as the giant crawdad charged at me. I barely made it out of the way of the rampaging creature as its momentum swept it past me. The mouths of the polyp-like parasites stretched out and gnashed at me, one of them missing by only a handful of centimetres.

My freshly boosted acrobatics skill had already spared me some damage.

Luck was with us as I rolled across the ground. The two capronids that had been whomping on Anastasia seconds earlier weren't as spry or aware of the rapidity of what was coming as I had been. The crawdad, acting on instinct and seeing two fresh targets kept scuttling forward unabated on its many legs, and I got a good look at the rest of its body as it did so.

Besides its giant claws and lobster-like head area, the beast had a bulbous main body, its thorax if I recalled my biology lessons accurately, that was several metres long and four pairs of legs that supported the weight. At the back end the creature had several metres of a segmented tail doubling the length of the body. Each segment had its own pair of shorter limbs that weren't really designed for walking but assisted its mobility, nonetheless. The very rear of the creature had a three-metre-wide flat armoured horizontal flipper with razor edges that swished over the top of my head.

There were six mutated parasites on the thorax of the giant crawdad and the other six were randomly dispersed along the row of segmented tail parts. Up close I could see the parasites were exuding a thick gelatinous substance that had

spread across the carapace of the thorax and the segments they were welded to.

The only part of the crawdad that didn't seem coated in the foul muck were its oversized claws.

The beast snapped its large claws and scooped a seven-foot goat-man up in each. The capronids lowed loudly in pain as the pincers snapped shut on them, the razor edges severed the beast's spines. The crawdad shook them violently as it continued its scuttling advance across the dell.

The two capronids flailed like rag dolls for a few heartbeats before the power of the mutated crustacean's pincers finished sawing through bone, flesh, and cartilage. Their severed fur-covered goat legs fell to the barren earth, spurting blood the colour of crimson. A crimson so deep it could almost be mistaken for black. The top halves of the beasts fell away and coated the pincers in blood and viscera as they were carelessly discarded.

This was where our early luck deserted us. Anastasia and I were safe for the time being behind the creature as our evasive roll came to a stop. That left Jackson and the hanging frame in full view of the stampeding monster.

"Jackson, get the fuck out of there," I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Whether it was the volume of my yelling or maybe some effect of the Canon, the youthful sorcerer looked up from where he had been busy trying to slice through the bindings of the fifth slave in time. But he hesitated.

Jackson was a good-hearted kid, and I could intuit his panicked thoughts. He would not want to leave the pair of helpless women still tied to the frame. They started screaming and begging, having seen what was coming for them. The four he had previously freed were already stumbling or hobbling as fast as they could for the woodland and its perceived safety.

His indecision, while morally understandable, was going to get him killed. The two remaining women simply

could not be saved, it was too late for them.

“Leave them,” I roared, and infused every iota of my will that I could into the order as the giant crawdad bore down upon them.

Jackson was spurred into action and with a haunted expression of guilt, abandoned the two tied women to their grisly fate and sprinted after the four he had already freed. One of those women, a redhead, had fallen and Jackson leant down as he ran and scooped her up onto his shoulder.

Thankfully, he didn't look back as the giant crawdad reached the hanging frame and smashed the makeshift, yet sturdy, structure to smithereens as if it were made from balsa wood. The suffering for the unnamed women was blessedly quick as the monster's snapping mandibles made short work of them.

Although I'd been told to expect the unearthly speed of the gigantic crustacean, it was still shocking. The beast had covered the width of the barren land, at least a hundred metres, in the same length of time it would take Usain Bolt. And that would be presuming Usain was running on a flat track. The crawdad had scuttled over shallow ruts in the earth as if they weren't even there.

The only silver lining was that by the time the monster had finished devouring the abandoned unfortunates, Jackson and the other four women had managed to get into the woodland and out of its direct line of sight, so it did not try and pursue them.

The crawdad sensing its true prey, me, behind it, twisted around. At least, that action proved to be mildly awkward for the creature, given its enlarged size.

With less than nine seconds before it rampaged all the way back to me, I quickly fired the outline of our plan to Quixbix mentally. He would be able to relay my instructions for Shana to her without me needing to shout them and risk the orders being misheard.

We would have to trust that Jackson would follow my earlier shouted commands and get out of the danger zone.

I felt the cold tickling sensation that accompanied Anastasia's curative touch. She had emptied her Drain pool into me. My Hit Points were now at 1800/1860. Not quite full but close enough. I hoped.

"Are you ready, Ana?" I asked her.

"Are you?" she squeaked back, her voice a much higher pitch now that she had been miniaturised.

The giant crawdad had completed its awkward turn and was racing towards us on its many legs, having covered three-quarters of the distance already.

Quixbix had one final thing to say before the true battle began. <One last word of warning. Expect the unexpected. This is an A-grade creature, and your analytical ability wouldn't have told you everything about it.>

The first of Shana's arrows zipped from the shrubbery where she remained concealed and slammed home into the gnashing mouthparts of a parasite on the thorax which flopped limply having been killed outright by her strike.

We had initially entered the barren dell from the east and had moved to an almost central position when we ran in and battled against the capronids. After dodging the first charge from the crawdad, I had back-pedalled southwards getting closer to the wrecked treeline where the crawdad had originally burst forth.

This didn't give me a lot more time before it reached us but that wasn't the point. When in position, I stood my ground and let the monster charge towards me. Once again, at the last possible moment, I jinked to my left which took me further east and closer to the blood shrine.

As planned the crawdad couldn't slow itself as it barrelled past me but did lash out with one of its claws, using it as a club.

The claw from its tip to the crawdad's thorax was three metres long and had too much reach for me to avoid entirely. I threw up my forearms and intercepted the knobby edges of the outer shell of the claw and was thrown back ten or more feet, landing in a heap not far from the blood shrine's altar.

**** -50 Hit Points. (1,750/1860) ****

A loss of fifty Hit Points might not have seemed like much, but my arms were numbed for a heartbeat and this caused me to drop my blades from the sheer power behind the hammer blow.

Quixbix had something to say as I struggled to stand and retrieve my weapons. <The very high mitigation of your gauntlets prevented your arms from being broken as part of that clubbing. The base damage was three hundred and that was from the part of the claw that isn't meant as a weapon. If you get caught in those pincers it will be at least twice that if not more. So, don't do let it do that.>

I got to my feet. "Thanks for the tip, Quix, I must have missed the part where it cut the capronids in half." I hoped my sarcasm was clear, as I didn't have time to reiterate.

Speaking of capronids. I'd been pushed close enough to the shrine that I could see what was left of them. Shana's hail of arrows had finished most of them off. There was one snarling goat-faced fucker left and he was crouched down behind the altar.

The beast-man barked aggressively at me but made no move from his hiding place. Apparently, it remained hostile but not stupid, and chose not to expose itself while the giant crawdad was about. That suited me fine, we would deal with him afterwards if he somehow managed to survive the battle.

The crawdad had scuttled back into the woodland which made turning around even more problematic for the beast. This allowed Shana to continue her barrage on the

parasites and by the time the giant crawdad had swivelled around, spotted me once more, and churned up the ground under the eighteen legs it possessed, eight of the parasites hung limply against its shell.

I hadn't forgotten Dean's advice about not relying on them sapping Hit Points from the main creature. But if I could delay using my Shattering ability for a while longer it would give some of the parasites long enough to proc their full sap and perhaps push the crawdad over the edge.

Anyway, it was time to enact plan alpha.

With the crawdad advancing towards me, I turned tail and sprinted deeper into the barren dell. As I legged it past the blood shrine, I flashed the sole surviving capronid a vicious smirk. The beast-man had a confused expression but came to understand the source of my taunt about a second later.

The crawdad completely heedless of the obstacle the blood shrine posed continued to take the most direct route to its target, me. It didn't quite run directly into the shrine but passed close enough that one of its leading claws belted the girder hard enough most of the rubble around its base was sent flying straight into the crouched capronid.

If being battered by rocks wasn't enough to ensure the capronid's death, the crawdad's armour-plated tail fan swung into the altar, smashing it off the makeshift legs and scything apart anything remaining as it passed.

The spiked girder wasn't quite entirely knocked from its placement but now teetered at less than a forty-five-degree angle to the ground, directly backwards. I dismissed a notification that let me know I had destroyed the blood shrine and wiped out the local cult of Carnax.

We'd deal with all that later.

I had drawn the crawdad to this part of the wasteland as the ruts in the ground developed into full-on cracks which started at the base of the shrine. The gaps got much deeper and farther apart on this side of the dell. Deep enough for a person

to fall into and struggle to get out of quickly. I hoped that this would make the footing uneven enough to seriously hinder the monstrous crustacean.

Shana continued to eliminate the last few remaining parasites as I led the monster deeper into the heart of the damaged land.

The plan worked, kind of.

Once in the centre of the rutted landscape, the giant crawdad did indeed suffer severe movement penalties and struggled to chase after me effectively. The beast screeched loudly in a horrible ear-splitting octave, voicing its frustration.

I busied myself leaping across the furrows, circling, and staying just out of reach of my opponent. The crawdad, which was already a little slower when trying to shift around on the spot, struggled more with the deep ruts tripping the legs of its many segments.

I stowed my two scimitars and formed a series of throwing knives made from ice and hurled them whenever I had the chance. Aiming for the snapping mandibles and soulless black compound eyes that sought me out.

With me constantly moving, and because I'd had very little practice throwing knives, my success rate was on the low side. Most of them clattered into the shell or flew over its head.

My notifications from Quixbix let me know that the knives which hit the shell only damaged it for one of two Hit Points and the handful that managed to hit the intended target only did eight.

I hadn't activated my Shattering ability yet but couldn't possibly do enough damage in two minutes even with it lowering the crawdad's damage mitigation.

I'd made several full circuits around the enraged crawdad and kept this frustration strategy up long enough that one of the first parasites Shana killed revived itself. Which was a nice bonus.

I was beginning to think we'd adopted a winning if lengthy tactic. Then as I landed after my latest evasive leap, the dried and blackened earth underfoot gave way a little and I stumbled.

This wasn't immediately fatal. It took me a moment to right my footing and continue leaping for safety. Although it did give the crawdad a chance to clip my shoulder with the tip of its claw for a glancing blow on my armour.

**** -300 Hit Points. (1,450/1860) ****

I'd been anticipating the danger and aimed my last jump a bit further out from the damaged area so I wouldn't be so badly affected by the blow. I quickly bounded around the backside of the crawdad, not bothering to try and draw its attention.

I needed a second or two to examine the ruined earth that I was using to slow it down.

"Bollocks!"

"What's the matter," Anastasia squeaked from inside my hood.

As part of the plan, she had remained fully concealed until we were close enough to engage the beast.

"The cracked earth here isn't as hardened as I'd hoped. It's already beginning to give way. It will only be a few more circuits before the crawdad levels the ground and then we're back to square one and we've barely hurt the fucker," I grunted a little breathlessly, and leapt over to the next rut in the ground.

"We knew this was a long shot, but it bought us a few minutes," Anastasia added encouragingly.

Sadly, my prediction proved unerringly accurate.

After I drew the crawdad around twice more, the formerly deeply furrowed centre, where it had been spinning with difficulty, was now flattened. The loose soil offered little, if any, impediment. It was still slower than me as it turned around, but I had to take a wider circuit and the ground under my feet hadn't been levelled in the same way which largely evened out or relative progress to one another.

It was soon clear Sholmdir's champion would easily catch me should I become unbalanced or stumble in any way and then I'd be in trouble. However, the extra time had allowed a second parasite to revive and be quickly despatched by the eagle-eyed Shana. And it gave me enough time to formulate a new plan of action on the fly.

Recalling the crawdad's earlier behaviour, I gave up on circling and sprinted back towards the shrine. I ran directly under the pointed girder and scrambled over the rubble it was leaning against. Thankfully, the altar stone was in one piece, it had merely been knocked over and squished the beast-man that had been hiding behind it.

I jumped off the shrine's base and put my shoulder on the flat stone pushing it over on top of where the girder had emerged from the ground. Adding its weight and my strength to assist in bracing the base of the broken shrine.

<What are you doing?> Quixbix yelled in my mind, but I pushed him out of my thoughts, and focused on what was coming next.

The enraged crawdad had cleared the centre of the blackened earth and had passed over the remaining rutted ground. There was just enough space for it to pick up speed as it rushed recklessly after me.

Directly onto the barbed spike-tipped girder.

The spike caught the crawdad just below the mandibles. The carapace underneath the monster was not quite as tough and with the power of the crawdad's momentum, my

improvised spear plunged through the chitinous material and deep into the beast's flesh.

The power of the collision pushed the angled girder backwards, tearing through the earth and flinging both me and the former altar back. I landed on my backside and heavy pieces of the stone slab, which had finally broken, fell on my legs and gut winding me.

*** -200 Hit Points. (1,250/1860) ***

I could have done without that, I thought.

<Maybe, next time, don't stand in the way of a rampaging multi-tonne monster with something as flimsy as a twenty-foot improvised bulwark> Quixbix snarked at my foolishness.

I pulled the broken pieces of stone off my body and stood up gingerly.

Apart from the getting-crushed-by-rubble element, my on-the-fly plan had worked extremely well. The giant crawdad had impaled itself all the way down to the antlered effigy which had been smashed to smithereens in the process. The barbs on the spike were making it difficult for the crawdad to pull itself off, especially as the base of the girder was no longer as firmly lodged into the ground as it once was.

The crawdad shrieked with pain as it struggled.

"Time for the crazy hero shit," I yelled to Ana who was still safely ensconced in the black scaled hood of my coif.

"Saving your own ass isn't heroism, Torin," she squeaked correcting me and pulled herself up to the back of my neck.

Now was the time to hit this monstrous fucker as hard as we could.

The crawdad was trying to clutch the girder with its claws to hold it in place and pull itself off, but the rusted struts were getting in the way, and it had to bend or tear them off to be successful. Difficult when the extreme discomfort it must be in was taken into account.

Offering my sincerest prayers to the Shattered Goddess, I ran forward and vaulted onto the shifting girder. My agility was solid and the girder wide enough for me to land safely with a little help from the Acrobatics skill. Now all I had to do was run up it and attack the head of my enemy.

I bounded up the wobbling girder. Trusting in my balance and not thinking about everything that could go wrong with this manoeuvre. As I planted my first outstretched foot, I activated the Shattering ability with the crawdad as target and saw the two-minute timer overlaid on my peripheral vision start to count down.

I had covered half the distance to my target

Taking two more brave strides up the rusted metal brought me three-quarters of the way to my target. I triggered the first of my two breath attack charges and picked Frost for the damage type.

I inhaled deeply as my boots contacted the girder once, then twice. The compound eyes of the crawdad had zeroed in on me, its attempts to free itself abandoned as it redirected its claws to the role of seizing me, but it was too late.

I exhaled strongly and unleashed a blast of frigid air from the back of my throat.

Luckily, my first breath attack hadn't been randomised and the Frost breath poured forth in waves of the familiar white and blue of thick ice that adorned my hair, eyes, armour, and body. The wave blasted the crawdad's head encompassing both its beady black eyes that were on short stalks.

*** -90 Hit Points. (1,160/1860) ***

**** Critical Strike! x2 You have inflicted 1,920 points of cold damage to Mutated Crawdad King ****

Hells yeah!

Over nineteen hundred points of damage. It wasn't the quadrupling we would get for striking the head of a humanoid, but double was better than no multiplication at all. On top of that my minor frost affinity granted by Frost Harmonisation boosted the damage by a further three hundred and twenty.

My run meant I sailed over the top of its head and landed on the back of its thorax. As my boots contacted the creature's back, I summoned my scimitars ready to slash about me with wild abandon.

Unfortunately, I slid on the gunk that coated the crawdad's abdominal thorax which made keeping my balance treacherous as I tried to lay about me with my blades. Each successful slash inflicted a further thirty points of damage, small change but it all added up.

Meanwhile, Anastasia had flicked her tiny wrist and wrapped one of the eyestalks with her Drainer's whip and was rapidly refilling her drain pool at the crawdad's expense. Like any other attack, draining went quicker if the point of contact was a vital spot.

The beast thrashed and tried to dislodge me from its back, but while it remained skewered on the former blood shrine all it achieved was forcing me to drop onto my hands and knees. I did lose one of my scimitars and it bounced away to the ground. But I steadied myself and kept stabbing away on its back.

It also tried to use its claws but the exoskeleton of its 'arms' meant it was unable to reach over its back to get at me.

When Anastasia had filled her pool to full, she used her curative touch on me.

*** +484 Hit Points. (1,644/1860) ***

Then as Ana resumed draining its life, and with most of my Hit Points back, I crawled a few feet back towards its head ready to compound the pain. I activated my second and final breath attack charge, selecting Frost again.

I wasn't so lucky the second time around and the coin flip went the way of randomisation. What emerged from the back of my throat was golden arcing lightning. I'd aimed the attack for the dead centre of its head and the attack was unerringly accurate. But unlike the Frost breath, the lightning was focused on a single point and not a cone of expanding cold.

*** -130 Hit Points. (1,514/1860) ***

*** *You have inflicted 800 points of electrical damage to Mutated Crawdad King* ***

The result was I didn't get the benefit of hitting the eyes and doubling the damage for hitting a more vulnerable spot. I couldn't dwell on that and swung my blade at the nearest eyestalk.

Which was when my good fortune evaporated.

<Fuck!> Quixbix roared. <This gelatinous muck you've covered yourself in is corrosive and it's eating through your leather armour's durability rapidly.>

At the same time, the crawdad tore itself free from the spiked girder, after pulling it from the ground. It hurled the girder away into the nearby woodland. Having regained its full mobility, the creature promptly barrel-rolled before I had a chance to react from the shock of seeing the rusted girder discarded like it was a toothpick.

The crawdad rolled onto its back with me still kneeling on its back and smashed me into the ground.

The only thing that saved my life was the creature was so enraged with pain that it didn't stop the roll once it was on its back as I would have been crushed to death in a few seconds.

*** -400 Hit Points. (1,114/1860) ***

<Anastasia took the same four hundred in damage>
Quixbix informed me.

Regardless of being hurt herself, she emptied her current pool and topped me back up.

*** +376 Hit Points. (1,490/1860) ***

The crawdad stopped rolling after three or four revolutions and came to rest on its back and was trying to right itself.

*** *The durability of your leather boots has reached zero.* ***

*** *The durability of your leather leggings has reached zero.* ***

*** *The durability of your leather bracers has reached zero.* ***

*** *New Hit Point total 1,400/1,770* ***

<You need to wipe that shit off your leather cuirass or you will lose that too. Your leather pauldrons seem okay, they haven't got enough of that corrosive substance on them. Best

tear the ruined stuff off as well before it starts eating into your skin. Your gauntlets have so much durability you can clean them later.> Quixbix advised.

With a groan, I rolled onto my front and scraped my chest along the dirt to scrape the gunk off it. Then I stood up and pulled at the bracers and leggings, they fell away easily as if they were made of paper. I shrugged the boots off and rubbed any remaining gel, which stung like a motherfucker wherever it touched my skin off on the ground.

*** -5 Hit Points. (1,395/1770) ***

By this point, old crusty had managed to flip itself so that it was back on its legs and desperately sought out my location. The damage to its eyes from my frost breath made that more difficult, but not impossible, especially as it likely had some general sense of where I was from Sholmdir's Ire, otherwise, how else would it have come upon us in the first place.

My suspicions were confirmed as it turned towards me and shrieked despite its black eyes being clouded and rotating furiously in random directions.

I backed up to the rubble of the shrine as it charged. I might be able to evade it for a while, but I couldn't flee, and time was ticking away on its shattered vulnerability. That and my lower half was now completely unarmoured, with my chest piece hanging on for now but not likely capable of enduring the level of wear and tear that thing could pump out.

What's more, I felt ineffably weary.

Yes, I'd been through a lot in the last five or six minutes, but only yesterday I'd fought fomorians, been chased for twenty minutes, and fought them again and hadn't even been out of breath. This was answered quickly by a notification from Quixbix.

**** You are suffering from the negative status effect of Toxic Exhaustion. ****

<It's that bloody slime, Torin. You got some on your skin. Your enhanced constitution should clear the exhaustion in ten, maybe fifteen minutes. This is going to slow your reactions, sap your stamina, and weaken your attacks until then. Anastasia managed to avoid the stuff.>

The slimy muck had been exuded by the parasites. Dean had warned me they were nasty fuckers with a plethora of negative status effects.

The horrid rat-a-tat-tat of the crawdad's scuttling legs was growing in volume as it got nearer. Without the use of its eyes, it was being a bit more cautious but would still be on us in a few seconds and my energy was rapidly sloughing away.

So, I made a difficult decision, but it was the only play I had left.

"Ana, time for the Hail Mary," I whispered tiredly.

"Are you sure, Torin?" she squeaked back.

"Yes, if we don't do it now, we won't get another chance."

The shattering had a minute left on the timer and the toxic exhaustion hadn't had a chance to rob me of the strength I'd need for this, not yet.

So, I held my ground on the pile of rubble as the crawdad approached.

From the corner of my eye, I could see another parasitic polyp had revived and was swiftly pierced by one of Shana's arrows. I was supremely thankful she had followed my orders and despite the dire straits we were in hadn't broken from the treeline and imperilled herself.

I retrieved and popped a two-hundred-point healing pellet in preparation for what was to come. Another timer appeared in my pseudo-interface, and I wouldn't be able to use another alchemical concoction for fifteen minutes.

When the crawdad's leading claw was only a few feet from me, I leapt from the pile of rocks and clutched onto the outer pincer. Each pincer of the claw was several feet thick, and I wrapped my right arm on the inside and my left on the outside, while I swung my legs around the base of the bulbous pincer and wrapped them around the segmented arm that connected it to the thorax.

Unsurprisingly, the crawdad immediately snapped the pincers together on my right arm and began shaking its claw trying to help the razor edge of the pincers saw through my armour and flesh. The good news, my gauntlets, much as they had prevented bone breakage earlier came through for me again.

*** -600 Hit Points. (795/1770) ***

I won't lie, though. The crushing weight of the clamped claw hurt, it hurt almost as bad as when the Greater Fomorian thrust his spear through my leg, but I held on. If I didn't hold on all of this was for naught.

"Bojemoi! Too soon, Torin," Anastasia cried shrilly, as soon as I had jumped on and clung to the creature's claw like a monkey.

While she chastised my timing, Anastasia flicked her whip and attached it to one of the clouded eyes to minimise the time it took her to drain the monster's Hit Points.

A few seconds later the healing and damage notifications flashed one after the other.

*** +484 Hit Points. (1,279/1770) ***

*** -600 Hit Points. (679/1770) ***

I thanked the Shattered Goddess that Ana's healing had come fractionally before the second imposition of the crushing claw damage, otherwise, this plan would have failed and ended in my death.

The drawback of Anastasia's Drain ability is that once she filled her pool, she couldn't drain any further Hit Points or Health. She needed a repository to redirect those drain points.

Hence, the Hail Mary plan involved me getting close and taking repeated punishment which would give Ana somewhere to dump her pool and keep siphoning from the mutated crawdad.

My mind felt foggy but a stray thought that Anastasia was right about my poor timing managed to penetrate the mental mists. I hadn't been at maximum health; therefore, I hadn't needed to put my arm in harm's way immediately like I had.

But because of the brain fog from the toxic exhaustion, I'd let the claw clamp down on my arm before it was necessary.

*** +484 Hit Points. (1,163/1770) ***

*** -600 Hit Points. (563/1770) ***

Now we were in a race. Who would run out of Hit Points quicker, me or the mutated crawdad?

*** +484 Hit Points. (1,047/1770) ***

*** -600 Hit Points. (447/1770) ***

The crawdad didn't take this lying down, though. It rushed around as it shook its claw vigorously, trying once more to saw through my arm, but my armour held firm.

*** +484 Hit Points. (931/1770) ***

*** -600 Hit Points. (331/1770) ***

I held on despite the forceful shaking, my grip beginning to slip but the clawed tips of the gauntlets gave me a little more purchase. This was why we hadn't been able to wait any longer and allow the toxic exhaustion to sap my stamina and strength further.

*** +484 Hit Points. (815/1770) ***

*** -600 Hit Points. (215/1770) ***

*** -5 Health (18/23) Compound fracture of the right arm. ***

Although my armour prevented the claw from severing my arm, the continued compression had eventually snapped and crushed the bone. Luckily, I didn't need that arm as much to hold on as the crawdad had kept it firmly squeezed in its pincers.

Boy, did it hurt, though. Agony was the only adequate descriptor.

Then the crawdad tried to snap at me with its other claw and finish me off, but without clear vision it missed. I also noted that Ana's heals were outpacing the claw damage by a little extra each time. Would it be enough to get me a double dose of healing before I died? I desperately needed it.

*** +484 Hit Points. (699/1770) ***

*** -600 Hit Points. (99/1770) ***

Having failed to snap me with its claws the crawdad chose to slam me into the ground headfirst. This motion happened in tandem with Anastasia's healing.

*** +484 Hit Points. (583/1770) ***

*** -583 Hit Points. (0/1770) ***

*** -12 Health (6/23) Minor Spinal Fracture / Broken Shoulder / Snapped Ribs ***

However, when the crawdad had thrashed around, trying to sever my arm, it had moved us back into the centre of the dell. The blackened soil here had been churned and loosened during our earlier tussle. This loose earth cushioned the blow and the damage to my head, neck and shoulder was only doubled instead of quadrupled and this saved my life, for now.

I would still be fucked when in one more second the next round of claw damage came through. I was out of Hit Points and had been shredded of most of my health.

It was over.

The Hail Mary had been intercepted due to my shitty, poorly timed throw and the game would end in a loss.

Or so I thought.

It wasn't just the soil that had been loosened when the crawdad bashed me into the earth, the claws hold on my right arm did as well, freeing it. The collision had shaken the grip of my legs and left arm loose as well and I remained lying on the ground as the crawdad raised its claw instead of pulling me upwards with it.

My body was in mind-numbing agony but was spared the anticipated six hundred crushing damage.

But I certainly wasn't out of the woods and rolled away as the crawdad's second claw slammed into the earth where I had been lying a heartbeat earlier.

I ended up face down in the dirt, my useless right arm flopping onto the ground sending agonising jolts of pain through my body. My shattered ribs carving me up from the inside.

*** -1 Health (5/23) ***

“Keep rolling, Torin, please keep rolling,” I heard the tiny voice of Anastasia beg.

I couldn't answer, but from somewhere deep inside I seized the fortitude to fight through the agony, to battle through the toxic exhaustion and roll again. My arm, my shoulder, my spine all screamed in protest as I did further damage to my broken body by forcing it to move.

*** -1 Health (4/23) ***

I dismissed the notification of further harm as my pulped arm slapped onto the earth. But I didn't stop, expending every last iota of my reserves to keep going.

*** -1 Health (3/23) ***

Distantly, my brain acknowledged the lack of any further healing from Ana. Had she been killed? Hadn't she just urged me to roll? Rolling, yes that is what I had to do. One last time.

*** -1 Health (2/23) ***

And finally, my battered and aching body came to a rest. Fearful of death but unable to do anything more about it. Chest heaving, eyes closed, utterly spent.

The multi-tonne body of the giant mutated crawdad, now in its death throes and no doubt being urged by Sholmdir, lurched towards me. The monstrosity crunched onto the ground in a heap just shy of me. The last roll was just far enough away that it missed landing on me by about three inches.

The beast raggedly tried to force itself to roll onto its back and finish the job. The slime-covered carapace loomed over me and teetered on the brink of tipping over. Then the last of the crawdad's strength abandoned it and the foul crustacean settled in stillness and the carapace leaned away from me leaving me a clear view of the startlingly blue sky above.

I was alive.

In more pain than I'd previously thought possible, but alive.

<It's dead. Oh, my Framework, it's fucking dead. I don't how you managed it, but you have killed it and survived. Oh, fuck Torin, you do not look good mate> Quixbix helpfully informed me.

No shit, Sherlock, I thought back at him, and promptly passed out.

Chapter 33

When I regained consciousness my Preternatural Insight skill let me know that I'd only been out for a minute. This was not a blessing; my arm was horribly mashed, and the pain was the most intense I had ever experienced.

Which was saying something after my grievous shoulder injury during college and being speared through the thigh the other day. It even overwhelmed the trauma of a broken shoulder and fractured spine, reducing them to a secondary throbbing ache.

“Jackson, stop pussying about with those girls and get over here, I need to harvest some of your Hit Points,” the squeaky voice of Anastasia called out.

I think she was standing on my chest. The sound of running footfalls pounding the earth echoed in my ears.

A few seconds later I felt the cooling tingle of the avatar's healing touch and focused on my prompts.

*** +20 Hit Points. (20/1770) ***

*** +15 Health (16/23) Spine, Shoulder, Ribs healed.
Right arm partially healed. ***

“That's the best I can do. I'm not a true healer class and there is a limit to how much health I can restore,”

Anastasia's dinky voice declared. "With multiple injuries and being so badly hurt, he will have to heal some of the damage naturally. The worst of it should be fixed up, though."

I opened my eyes and saw two worried-looking faces staring down at me. I groaned loudly and pushed myself up into a sitting position. My arm remained stiff and very sore but was at least usable.

Anastasia had been standing on my chest and she slipped down at my unexpected movement and got a face full of my exposed crotch. It would seem the parasite slime had destroyed my boxers as well as my leather leggings.

Note to self, keep backup armour in my inventory in the future.

"Ana, while your down there, will you make sure none of that corrosive muck got on my cock," I asked her with a big stupid grin on my face.

We had won. I was still suffering from the effects of the toxic exhaustion and had been a sliver away from death. Against all the odds and a few boneheaded moves on my part, we had prevailed.

In my defence I'd only been fighting monsters for a little over a week. I could hardly be expected to be an expert tactician already.

The tiny woman harrumphed at my impertinence, but she did check out the family jewels when she thought my eyes were closed.

Then Shana threw herself on top of me and gripped me in a bear hug while her chest heaved with sobs.

Her display of emotion caught me off guard and I stroked her hair until her sobbing diminished. "It's okay. I'm alright, we've pulled through even if we weren't supposed to win."

"Do you want to lighten up on the constrictor hold?" Anastasia commented wryly. "I've only just healed him up and

we're all pretty much tapped out.”

Shana released me from her death grip and knelt beside me and I put my arm around her shoulder. “I was so worried,” she gasped over the fading heaves. “And I could barely help.”

Then Quixbix piped up <Yes that was a close one. Your body was so badly damaged you continued to lose health due to the toxic exhaustion. You actually dropped down to one health while you were unconscious.>

“What happened?”

Anastasia was the first to answer. “From our end, you put your arm in the crawdad’s claw too early and almost got yourself killed. Quixie is blaming the toxic exhaustion for that foolishness, but naturally occurring stupidity hasn’t been entirely ruled out,” she sassed, but I remembered how desperately afraid she’d been for me in the heat of the moment. “Anyway, both you and the oversized crustacean went into the red at the same time. I kept draining its health, which it had a lot of by the way, until it was dead. However, health doesn’t fill my drain pool in the same way that Hit Points do, so I had nothing more to give back to you and you’d already popped a healing pellet.”

“Yes,” Shana said, taking up the explanation. “And there were more capronids in the woods that showed up during the fight, a patrol or a hunting party I’m guessing. I managed to kill them, but they got into melee range, and I didn’t have many Hit Points left for Ana to use and heal you up with, barely enough to stop you from dying, so we had to wait for Jackson.”

“Thanks for sticking around,” I said to the shy boy.

“I wouldn’t leave you,” Jackson shrugged as if coming back towards deadly peril was the most normal thing in the world. “Though the girls we saved weren’t very enthusiastic about coming back. I...uh...kind of had to order them using the collars,” he added guiltily.

“They’re alive and you are the one who saved them. I’m sure they’ll understand you couldn’t abandon us or leave them behind, Jackson,” Shana assured him.

I looked past my core group and saw the four aforementioned women nervously huddled together about thirty metres away from us and the dead crawdad. Which was already beginning to stink, or maybe it had always smelled that disgusting, and I’d not noticed in the life-or-death situation.

The women were still naked which would be awkward for them, but clothing would have to wait until we were back on the ship. I hadn’t brought any and I assumed none of the others had either.

A quick analysis of the group revealed one of them was Janet, Dougie’s mum, and Sarah’s stepmother. The other three women’s surnames didn’t match any of the kids we’d discovered. And now I had a chance to observe them up close, they were all too young to be the mothers of adolescents, much too young. All three were about Jacksons age.

“Jackson, help me up.”

He rushed forward and offered me his hand, which I took gratefully, and with Shana holding me by my waist, hauled myself up onto my feet.

“Damn, I feel like I’m an old man,” I said, flexed my sore muscles, and stretched my back.

“Well, you don’t look it,” Shana giggled and squeezed my bared arse playfully.

The Immensity responded in kind and aptly demonstrated that my third leg was unharmed by my recent brush with death.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Jackson grumbled and pivoted around, determinedly looking in any direction that didn’t face me.

There were also a few startled gasps from the four women who had been observing us. Then they turned away as well. I think for a split second they had forgotten they were displaying even more than I was.

“Jackson, why don’t you loot the corpses before we go. Maybe we’ll find some clothes,” I suggested. “Although I am going half naked if the only clothes available are the cultist’s skin suits,”

“On it,” the lad shouted gratefully before I had a chance to finish, and he rushed off to loot the dead capronids.

“Quixbix, don’t you have an XP report to deliver?” I asked, leaned down and picked Anastasia up, depositing her back in the hood of my coif.

<I already have. It’s not my fault you were out for the count. I suppose I could summarise it for you> the imp griped.

“Get on with it, will you.”

<You have completed three quests. In addition to completing Who’s The Daddy, for which you have already been rewarded, you completed Culling the Cloven Hoofed 2 and Storm’s Reach 1 for 17,800 XP. You have two follow up quests on those chains but there isn’t anything you can do to help complete them right now, so you can read the details later at your leisure. You also earned 30,200 in XP for killing the herd and cult members for 48K total.

<The culling quest also earned you the Lucky Goat’s Hoof charm. The only downside, apart from the almost dying, Sholmdir’s Ire has officially become Sholmdir’s Wrath. We can expect him to continue to stick his nose in our business whenever the opportunity arises.>

“How bad is that likely to be?”

<Unclear. The crowdad was technically a champion, but it wasn’t a proper one and you have been marked with his wrath which gives him a little more leeway than usual. If you had any other patron, they would almost certainly block

anything else he tries, but with the Shattered Goddess, who knows.>

Those were thoughts for another day. Right now, I just wanted to get back to Marena's Mercy and sluice the filth from my body. We could deal with everything else once we were cleaned up.

It took Jackson about two minutes to finish collecting our murder loot and then I led the group from the barren land and onto the promise of a new future.

What else could possibly go wrong?

End of Book One.

Epilogue

Hector Guberschmidt

Day 8

Hector had been awoken by the tweeting of starlings in the early morning. There was a large white ash tree that he could see from his bedroom window where they liked to roost. He had hated the birds during those first few weeks after his mother evicted him and he came to live with his father. Their chirping woke him every morning shortly after the sun came up.

Who would want to get up at such an unearthly hour?

Hector firmly believed in getting a solid ten hours followed by a good hour of dozing while he thought about his future and who would be in it. And all the other uses he and his beloved could find for a nice, comfortable bed.

That had been before, though. Before the world went crazy and his father and beloved went missing. Before the monsters came sniffing at the house during the night. Now the chirping bird calls were a signal that the night, and all the horrors it held, was over.

A relief, not a damn nuisance.

He crawled out from under his mattress. His bastion of safety. He'd dragged the mattress in from his father's room and the one from the guest bedroom to bolster the security of

the little nest he had built for himself. But not the mattress from his beloved's room.

Her room he left in pristine condition, ready for her return.

Shana would be so happy when she saw what good care he had taken of her personal sanctum.

Happy and grateful. Very grateful.

Not like his mother, that bitch. He put himself out there, worked his fingers to the bone at that prison they called a school, and always she wanted more from him. Nothing was ever good enough.

Hector smiled darkly and giggled to himself at thoughts of what the monsters must have done to the dumb cow without him around to protect and provide for her.

His mother must have deeply regretted the day she kicked him to the curb. He was sure she would have cried out for him in agony and misery as the cat-like things with tentacles around their necks that he had seen running around during the night ate her intestines while she was still alive.

That mental scenario had become a particular favourite of his and he felt himself get hard.

He reached down to take care of himself when his stomach rumbled loudly in response and the profound hunger pangs that sleep had relieved came back to the fore of his consciousness.

Blessed sleep had allowed him to forget his predicament for a few hours and now reality roared back to life. He'd been prepared to ignore his gnawing hunger in favour of stroking out a little sexual tension but then his bowels shifted. The urgency to defecate meant he couldn't concentrate on more important matters any longer.

With a loud sigh, he got to his feet, grabbed his trusty baseball bat, just in case, and padded across the carpeted

hallway to the bathroom. He pulled the door open slowly, checking for any danger when the smell hit him.

The water pressure had dropped to nothing four, maybe five, days ago. Perhaps he shouldn't have continued to use the toilet when the flush stopped working but where else could he go. It's not like he could go outside, not with looters and monsters running rampant. He had to stay indoors and protect his father's home.

He was a Guberschmidt and Guberschmidts looked after family.

His mother didn't count, she had only been a Guberschmidt by marriage. The selfish cow had changed her name anyway, the minute her divorce from his father had been finalised. Proof if he needed any further of what a vile waste of human existence she was. The world would be better off without her.

Hector hesitated at the door. The smell was truly awful, and he'd been unwilling to leave the window open overnight lest a long-fingered beastie finds its way in. Shana had a small adjoining bathroom in her room, maybe he could use that?

No, he told himself fiercely. He was a proper gentleman, and she would find all her facilities in the condition she left them in when his father brought her back to him. Hector stepped into the bathroom and pushed the window open wide with the end of the baseball bat. After that, he couldn't hold it any longer and pulled his pants down and sat on the toilet seat while he pinched his nose closed.

Ten minutes later, Hector cautiously made his way down the stairs. He went through his routine of checking all the doors and windows. Finding no evidence that they had been forced during the night, he relaxed and headed to the kitchen to search it for food once again.

An hours' worth of investigation in the kitchen and every other room too had turned up three stale crackers and

half a dozen pieces of uncooked macaroni that Hector had found in the back of a drawer.

He had no idea how long they had been there, not that it mattered overmuch. With no power and water, he had no way of cooking them properly. Ravenous, he consumed the meagre, dry, and tasteless fare he had assembled before him in under a minute, washed down with the last of the bottled water he had on hand.

It barely touched the spot.

He sat in the kitchen then, head in hands, utterly despondent, facing the harsh reality before him. The crackers and macaroni had been the very last of the food in the house and it barely qualified as such.

His father and Shana had not returned from their trip to Flint on the day the world went mad. He was confident they would be back. His father was the most resourceful fellow he knew, after all. However, Hector had overheard the incessant chatter from the neighbours in those first few days and knew that cars weren't working, just like the power, and then the water. It would take time for his father to return with monsters roaming the land.

Hector would have to fend for himself a while longer. He would have to go outside. Take some risks. He could do this. He was a Guberschmidt. Find food and fresh water and bring it back. Like a real hero.

His fingers rattled uncontrollably on the table at the thought of venturing out alone. Not from fear, of course. No, never fear. It had to be adrenaline from the excitement. Yes, that's what was causing his shaking limbs.

He stood suddenly. "I won't let you down, my beloved, my Shana."

His decision had been made. First, he had something he needed to do before he braved the wild outdoors, a ritual performed with reverence every day. He crept upstairs to his beloved's bedroom. Removing his clothes, he got under the

covers and felt a thrill of anticipation. Soon, they would be sharing this bed, together, every night for the rest of their lives.

Hector realised he was hard again and decided to take care of that before heading out. When he had finished, he wiped himself off on the sheets. After the many daily visits to her room since the apocalypse began, it was difficult to find a section not already soiled.

Shana would understand, though. Hector was sure of it. She wouldn't see this as creepy and disgusting like those entitled cock-teases from his school who accused him of being a pervert. Shana would appreciate he wasn't despoiling the room but leaving her a physical expression of his love and adoration. Improving the room in a very personal way.

Victor had told his son that Shana would soon be coming into a lot of money. That was why she was perfect. Unlike those whores from school who always wanted something in exchange for their affection. They judged men by how much they could give them and not by their inner worth which was so much more valuable. Hector had been assured by his father that Shana would be above such pettiness and see him for who he truly was and love him with all her heart.

He was a Guberschmidt, like his father, and they were winners. His father told him so, therefore, it had to be true.

His father never lied.

Never.

Mia Gutierrez

Day 14

“Come on Mia, you know it’s a good idea. It’s our dream. Don’t tell me you are giving up on our dream. You wouldn’t have taken the Apprentice Herbalist class if you had given up on our dream,” Keith pleaded with Mia for the seventh night in a row.

Mia could smell the booze on his breath as he snaked his arm around her waist. When Torin had chewed him out for his obsession with high-end electronics at the store, he’d filled his inventory with alcohol instead. Mia would have preferred that he wasted his time with the television sets.

Her thoughts flicked back to that moment two weeks ago. Hugging Torin as he was about to leave and then feeling his hands squeezing her butt cheeks fondly.

It had been a surprise, but a welcome one.

He had been a handsome devil even before the RPG apocalypse as people had started to call it. Had she not been with Keith, she would have made a play for him on his first day at the BuyMart, but...well...she had been with Keith.

Even so, when Torin had made the offer to take her with him, she almost said yes. Had he not just spent the night with that beauty, Shana, maybe she would have. The doubt and associated humiliation that Torin would pick the tall, dark-haired girl over her had silenced her lips.

And then, for the briefest of moments, when she had looked up into his piercing blue on black eyes, she had seen his desire and felt his power and thought, maybe, just maybe, he would make her go with him regardless of her reluctance. Perhaps he wanted them both.

The recollection alone sent a tingling thrill through her body, and she felt her body respond. For the hundredth time since that day, she silently wished he had thrown her over his shoulders and carried her away. Which is what made the sensation of Keith’s wandering hands on her hip doubly distasteful.

Mia grabbed his hand and removed it forcefully and stepped away from him angrily. “You can’t touch me like that anymore, Keith. We broke up.”

There had been no way she could stay with Keith when her every thought fixated on another man. Mia Gutierrez was raised right, and she was no cheating *puta*, not even in the privacy of her mind. Had she only been a bit more decisive two weeks ago everything would be different.

Keith held his hands up in mock surrender. “Sorry, babe. Old habits. It won’t happen again,” he smirked.

Mia had believed him the first couple of times it had happened. She knew better than to believe him now. It was obvious Keith assumed if he kept behaving as if nothing had changed then she would simply take him back.

She sat down in a black leather armchair on the other side of the lounge. A chair whose arms were close enough on either side that Keith couldn’t try and sit next to her.

They had managed to stay in the BuyMart for another day before some of the other employees had shown up and forced their way in, unaffected by the shield. Once the door had been knocked down and left wide open the looting began in earnest and the shielding on the building was fully compromised.

After that, at Malky’s suggestion, they had taken shelter in this golf clubhouse on a course near the southwest edge of Flint. So close to the edge of Flint’s borders they could practically spit into the adjoining Schwartz township.

Malky’s mother used to clean here before she passed a few years back and the big man still had the keys to the building which the owners had given her to perform her job out of hours. Away from the sight of paying customers.

Luckily, the locks hadn’t been changed and nobody else had been here, so it had seemed like a good place to evaluate the situation, pick up enough experience to redo character creation, and then get their shit together.

Part one of that plan worked well enough. They grouped up with Malky who went out at night and killed any creatures roaming around on the golf course. After a couple of evenings, both Mia and Keith had enough experience points to utilise their second chance.

Mia had felt bad that she had taken a non-combat class, but she also knew she wasn't made for battle. Apprentice Herbalist fed her lifelong interest in horticulture, and she'd already developed her skills with poultice making. So, she contributed to their continued survival that way, unlike Keith.

Despite having the necessary experience, Keith hadn't been through character creation or at least that's what he told them. He said it was because he was undecided about what to do, but Mia thought he was afraid. Another extension of his delusion that if he continued to act like nothing had changed then, as if by magic, it wouldn't have.

Ironic really, considering magic did exist and had been the direct cause of the change he so desperately wanted to deny had occurred.

His refusal to do what needed to be done was the last straw and she had told him it was over that very night. With every day that passed since she struggled to comprehend what she had ever seen in him. Did the reefer really interfere with her judgement that badly?

Unfortunately, they had been deadlocked since then. Mia wanted to leave and follow Torin, though she couldn't tell Keith the real reason why other than that Torin had a plan and knew what he was doing. Keith had an alternative idea that involved staying and Malky refused to take sides.

They stared at one another in uncomfortable silence for several minutes.

"Anyway," Keith said eventually when he thought Mia had calmed down. "I've really been working on the...the... idea."

Mia sighed as she prepared herself to patiently listen to Keith's pitch.

Again.

“Opening our own marijuana...dispensary has always been our dream, babe. And now we have the perfect opportunity to go one...step further. This whole golf course is ours and is...the perfect place to grow a crop. It even has a creek that runs through it for all our...our...watering needs. With your new skills and my connections, we...we...could make a mint. The local cops don't give a shit what people are doing anymore. I know the course can be dangerous at night, but we've got the big guy for security. Well, what do you think?” Keith asked with a slight slurring of his words and hiccupped at the end.

Mia realised that Keith must have knocked back a very large glass of bourbon before confronting her again, on top of the considerable amount he had already drunk. His inebriation had ratcheted up severely in the last couple of minutes alone.

“Keith,” she said slowly. “I think the same thing that I thought last night and every night since we got here. That it is a bad idea.”

“If...hic...If you're worried about the mu...monsters. Don't be. Now the guvnors back...with the...the...the...whatsit it people...guard. Yeah, the guard. They'll keep the monsters at bay. No worries.”

“For fucks sake, Keith. Listen to yourself. Do you really think the National Guard is going to waste their resources defending your pot farm? We went over this last night. The Governor and his people have already moved on to Lansing. We need to find Torin.”

“Fu...fuck, Torin. And the fu...fucking horse he rode in on. He's not the boss of me. Fucking nobody is the boss of me no more. This is our fucking dream...Mia. You can't give up on dreams.”

“Growing weed and opening a dispensary was your dream, Keith, not mine. Yeah, I found the idea of growing new strains of marijuana an interesting subject to study. Keyword...STUDY. I wanted to open a nursery for orchids.”

“Nurse...Nursery? You want kids? You never said... Come here, babe. I can give you what you need,” he leered, misunderstanding her.

Keith lurched forward with pursed lips, making sloppy kissing sounds. Out of nowhere Malky appeared and seized Keith by the nape of his neck before he reached the distressed Hispanic woman who had started to try and crawl back, up, and out of the black leather armchair.

Mia surmised Malky had either been super quiet or neither of them had heard him come in over the sound of their quarrelling.

“Malky...what the fuck?” Keith snapped as he struggled futilely in the large man’s iron grip.

Without a word, Malky frogmarched him out of the bar to the offices at the back where they had set up their makeshift bedrooms.

Mia heard Malky growl “sleep it off,” from down the corridor and then the sound of the door slamming and the lock turning.

A few seconds later, Malky walked back into the room and looked over at her. Guilt wracked his features. “I’m sorry, Mia, for his behaviour. It is not acceptable.”

Mia jumped up from the armchair and embraced the gentle giant. “It’s not your fault, Malky. Keith makes his own choices.”

Malky stroked the top of the short woman’s head and smiled down at her.

“Maybe,” he said quietly. “But I should have taken you away from this place when you first suggested it.”

“That’s not your fault either, Malky. We’re here because Keith refuses to leave and you’re his pal and don’t want to leave him behind. He is the one being selfish. You are just being a good friend.”

“True, but something has to change,” he said with a heavy heart. “I’m not stupid, not anymore. I know Keith is using my loyalty to get his way...It’s just...I can’t leave him like this. Not without giving him a chance.”

“Malky, you were never stupid,” Mia clucked at him in mock annoyance and pulled out of the hug.

Mia looked at the big man and felt guilty. She knew she needed Malky to keep her safe on the journey west. Mia hadn’t wanted to make him choose between her and Keith. In part because she was afraid that he would pick her former boyfriend.

Keith had been Malky’s only real friend for years before Mia came onto the scene. That was why they’d been stuck here arguing for a week, but Mia finally admitted to herself that Keith would never see sense. She would have to make Malky choose, regardless of the outcome.

If Malky had been better at dissembling his intentions she would have suggested they ‘fake’ making a firm decision to depart. Keith would see through that, though. Not out of cleverness, but he would make a play for sympathy and discover Malky wasn’t being serious. For this to work Malky genuinely had to be willing to leave him behind.

However, Mia wasn’t confident of the outcome if she gave an ultimatum to Malky tonight, even after Keith’s behaviour. She had to lay some groundwork to make sure Malky picked her over his long-standing friend when this finally came to a head.

“Okay, I’ve had an idea,” she told him. “We’ll offer Keith a deal. He gets two more weeks. We’ll help him start his stupid pot farm here on the golf course. He keeps telling us he has connections. If his idea proves viable, then he can bring

these connections to the course to tend and defend the crop and keep him safe while we travel west to find Torin. If the farm doesn't work, then he won't have any further excuses not to come with us."

Malky nodded and looked much happier.

Two weeks was longer than she wanted to wait but Mia was confident that Keith would agree. She had little faith he would keep his word if the crop failed or these connections, which was likely just Bruce, the guy he bought his weed from, failed to materialise. But Keith breaking a promise to Malky was kind of the point. If they made him a fair offer and he broke the deal, it ought to be enough to convince the reluctant Malky to leave him behind.

Once Keith figured out they were serious, he'd probably cave and follow them anyway.

Or he wouldn't, and that would be fine too. Better even.

Claudia Gattosi

Day 18

Claudia swept into the Woodland Mall like she owned the place. In a manner of speaking, she did, or to be more accurate, her brother did. Carla followed on her heels with a big smile on her face. She enjoyed shopping almost as much as she enjoyed fawning over Luca, Principally because she mistakenly believed that looking good for him would lead to the crown prince of asshats showing her some affection.

It had been a few weeks since Luca had completed his takeover of Grand Rapids and everything in the city largely became theirs for the taking. Even for Claudia, despite her fractious relationship with her aptitude thieving twin brother.

Claudia figured that it had finally become obvious to Luca that he couldn't do away with her without sacrificing his newfound power. He mistakenly assumed that if he spoiled her, she would become more biddable. Hence the limited freedom to help herself to whatever she wanted, provided Carla tagged along to watch and report back.

Not that such a plan would have worked anyway, as she hated the son of a bitch, but shopping had quickly lost most of its lustre.

It simply wasn't as much fun when you could take whatever you wanted, and then who would she have shown it off to. Part of the joy was seeing the envious look from the other women when they laid eyes on the divine outfit you'd unearthed or cajoled from a secretive designer.

If there was no one to be dazzled, then what was the fucking point?

However, Carla loved to shop. The ditzy lovelorn woman had essentially become Claudia's shadow or perhaps anchor would have been a better analogy. She literally couldn't go anywhere without her, and Carla hated to be separated from Luca's proximity. Enticing her on the occasional mall visit was the only viable way of getting out from under Luca's thumb for a few hours. And today's visit had a special purpose that required circumspection.

After browsing a couple of jewellery and perfumery stores, they moved on to the largest women's clothing outlet in the mall. Faking casualness took all of Claudia's self-control, but it was necessary to let Carla get into the swing of things and become engrossed in picking out a new outfit. Claudia browsed the clothing for a few minutes and pulled a slinky black dress, bedecked with sequins, and a similar alternative in gold from the rack.

“I’m going to try these on, see which I like the look of best,” Claudia remarked as she casually set off for the changing rooms.

“Uh-huh,” came the distracted reply from her chaperone.

Claudia wove through the racks heading for the closest dressing room. She glanced over her shoulder and once she had confirmed that Carla wasn’t paying attention, shifted direction to the changing facilities on the other side of the room.

There were four booths, and each could be fully closed, which would provide the privacy she needed. Without hesitation, Claudia moved over to the booth on the far left and rapped her knuckles on the door four times, before entering and closing the door shut behind her.

She breathed a sigh of relief at the sight before her. A handsome man in his late twenties with slicked-back hair, dressed in a white shirt and a navy-blue sports jacket. He was in the midst of returning a Glock to its holster inside his jacket and he beamed a smile at her.

“Ricky,” she sighed, letting out a deep breath she hadn’t realised she was holding. “I hoped it would be you.”

“Sunny C, give your cousin a hug, but watch where you put those new nails of yours,” he laughed and held his arms wide open.

Claudia discarded the unwanted dresses onto the fitting room stool and embraced her cousin warmly. “I’ve missed you cuz.”

The physical contact with someone she actually cared about was a welcome change.

Ricky Giambi’s mother was her father Giovanni’s sister. He was a few years older than Luca and Claudia and the unofficial heir to the family business much to Luca’s eternal chagrin.

Where Luca was arrogant and cruel, Ricky was competent and exacting. If it hadn't been for the small matter that Ricky preferred to bed men rather than women, then there would be no question as to who would succeed Giovanni as head of the family. The older men in the organisation disapproved of his sexual inclinations, some strenuously.

But Ricky handled the hate with cool aplomb and got on with business. As long as he was earning for the families, it kept all but the crankiest of mouths shut. And if a few of the more homophobic and jealous old-timers had unfortunate accidents, nobody cared, provided they weren't spoken for. Ricky was too clever to make a mistake like that.

Time used to be on Ricky's side, Giovanni had been in his fifties and in rude health, ready to lead the family for another decade or more. Plus, the younger generation was more tolerant than the old-school mafiosa. Ricky had only needed to wait for enough of them to die or get put away before her father made it official.

The Framework had changed everything.

Yesterday, out of pure habit, Claudia had checked in on a prearranged dead drop and found the scrawled note asking for a meet-up. She had hastily left a reply to meet in this particular changing room in the Woodland Mall today. She hadn't known it would be her cousin, he had the good sense not to leave any identifying information in case the drop had been compromised.

Ricky had been at the top of a short list of those who knew about it, though.

"I thought you were with Papa in Sicily," Claudia said as she broke the hug in an excited voice. "Does that mean he is back in the States too? Is he here with you?"

Ricky grimaced and Claudia's heart sank at the look on his face.

"I think you need to sit down," he told her quietly.

Claudia already knew she wouldn't like what he had to say and let him guide her to one of the free beige stools.

"The news isn't good, but not altogether hopeless either," he started. "While in Sicily your father got word that the Torelli's were making a move in Detroit. Trying to take advantage of his absence."

Claudia couldn't help but interrupt "The god damned, Torelli's," she seethed. "Greedy fuckers are never happy."

"You're not wrong, and they got what was coming to them before I came looking for you," Ricky grinned and then his face returned to seriousness. "Anyway, your father decided to cut the trip short to deal with the ungrateful bastards once and for all. He could only send me and a few others back straight away to get things rolling without causing offense to our hosts. We were on the next available commercial flight back and landed in Detroit Metro a few hours before the world shifted."

"So, he's still in Sicily?" she asked, not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

"Maybe," Ricky replied with a sigh. "The last text message I got from him before we boarded said our hosts had been understanding of his need to return and were arranging a private jet to bring him back. I don't know for sure, Claudia, but the impression I got was he'd be in the air not long after we were. There is a good chance he was mid-flight when it happened."

Her eyes glistened with moisture as a thousand different emotions ran rampant through her. If he really had been in the air, then he would have been lost. Then she drew in a deep breath and pushed all her feelings down. Ricky didn't know for sure that he was on a jet, hope remained. There would be time enough to process all the details later.

"We don't have much longer until Carla notices I've not come out. I presume because you used the dead drop to contact me you learned about Luca and what he can do?"

Claudia said and wiped the few treacherous tears away from her cheek.

Ricky nodded solemnly.

“Good. Did you bring enough of the family’s enforcers to put him down? If he knows you’re alive, he will kill you without hesitation. You know how much he hates you. If we take him out decisively before they know what’s coming, the rest will fall into line and the city will be yours.”

Another grimace from her cousin and Claudia’s rising hopes were dashed for a second time.

“The truth is, Detroit is a mess. We put the Torelli’s down in those first few days, but in the chaos and upheaval... well...loyalty is in short supply. Too many have seen it as an opportunity to stake their own claims and they’ve broken faith. We’re holding on to our traditional territory, but only barely. I’ve got guys trying to make contact with people we can trust out of state but it’s going to take time. Travel is dangerous and slow.

“I came here with the same intention, to bring the Grand Rapids branch back home, but had to change gears when I found out what Luca had become. There is no easy way to say this, but he is already stronger than what is left of the rest of the family. Much stronger. I’ve only stuck around as long as I have in the hope I could pull you out.”

Claudia was deeply touched that Ricky had risked himself for her. The next few minutes were painful for both as Claudia explained why she couldn’t go with her cousin.

Putting the lingering effect of Luca’s commands not to run aside, her brother could always feel where she was. He would know if she went anywhere unexpected and due to the nature of what he had done to steal her aptitude would expend every resource at his disposal to get her back.

They wouldn’t make it. Trying would only get Ricky killed.

“It’s already been too long, and I have to go,” she said at last and picked up both dresses. “I’ll draw Carla away as quickly as possible. You need to leave the Rapids area. If Luca gets suspicious and orders me to spill what I know, I might not be able to deny him.

“Yeah, I get it Sunny C,” Ricky said and drew her into a comforting bear hug. “Stay safe. Keep checking that dead drop, okay. I have a plan to get all this sorted. When we rebuild our strength and are ready to act, I’ll contact you that way, alright,” he whispered.

“I will, cuz. Trust me, I’ll find us a way out of this,” she whispered back and slipped out of the booth, leaving the changing area and walking back onto the store’s main mezzanine.

She spotted Carla up on her tiptoes, frantically searching the racks for her. Clearly, she had discovered Claudia had not been in the closest changing area.

Claudia nonchalantly made her way over to the distressed young woman who took a moment or two before she noticed and rushed over.

“Where were you? What took you so long?” Carla demanded.

“Calm down, Carla. I was in the changing rooms like I said. Trying to decide which of these racy little numbers I preferred, and it took a while,” she lied with practised ease.

“I checked the changing area, and you weren’t there,” Carla accused and pointed at the rooms that had been closest to where they had been browsing earlier.

“There was an off smell in those ones, a dead rat in the rafters I think, so I used a different one.”

“I didn’t smell anything funky.”

Claudia tapped her nose and flared her feline nostrils. “This is a bit more sensitive than it used to be,” and then winked with forced camaraderie.

“Oh...Oh, of course,” Carla replied, her posture relaxing and her suspicions fading away. “The dresses are gorgeous, and you have the legs for them. You should have called me over and helped you pick.”

Claudia laughed. “I thought about it, my dear Carla. And then I realised, why pick? When I could just take them both.”

Carla giggled along with her, and Claudia gave her a quick embrace and used their physical proximity as an excuse to propel Carla out of the store and give Ricky the opportunity to slip away.

Both women left the mall shortly after that, Carla chattering away inanely and Claudia doing her best to engage.

The day had begun with such promise and ended with bitter disappointment.

However, Claudia wouldn't let this get her down.

In a strange way, knowing that there would be no rescue from her father or his people in the short term, was liberating. She knew now that if she wanted a way out from being under her brother's thumb then she would have to engineer it herself.

Not long after Claudia and Carla left the outlet, Ricky Giambi exited the changing booth when he was sure enough time had passed. He scanned the area closely and in the corner of his eye spotted something behind a curtain in the waiting area of the changing rooms. More out of curiosity than concern, he pulled the light brown curtain out of the way. There was a small child's doll resting up against the wall. Presumably forgotten in the recent tumultuous events.

“What a creepy little thing,” he muttered before releasing the curtain and swiftly exited the store out the back way. Giving the abandoned toy no more thought.

Unseen by Ricky or the women who left before him the doll stood and soundlessly scuttered after Claudia Gattosi.

Following and observing the Leonid woman was the mission given to the small golem by its mistress. It had already collated much useful information about her movements and habits, including observing her at the dead drop and overhearing her recent conversation with her cousin.

It was time to report back what it had learned.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I would like to say a special thanks to my patrons for their support of my writing endeavours.

In particular, Dolog, Tyson Carver, James A. Murphy, Iron Akela, Vincent Smith, Kore Rahl, Jalil Hayes, for their extra support.

Thank you.

As always kind reviews and supportive ratings always helps a book. You can also follow my author profile on Amazon. They have recently introduced a feature where we can recommend other books and authors, so sign up to get my feelings on that matter.

However, the greatest help is shoutouts. If you enjoyed the book, please take to your social media platform of preference and tell people. It really does help visibility more than anything.

I hope you enjoyed the first book in what I hope will be the first of many. Book 2 has already been completed and can be found on Royal Road and ScribbleHub (at time of publishing) and book 3 is being written. So, there will be three books in the series as a minimum, but Torin's story has the potential for much more.

Plus, if this series is successful enough there are plenty of other tales taking place in the Darkwyrlds that are begging to be told. It needs to be read and purchased if you want to make that happen. See above about shoutouts and recommendations.

Check out my Patreon for early access and sneak peeks. More Details below.

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Other works by me include the Wolf King's Lair. A dungeon core series with a werewolf protagonist.

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