

THE WORLD SIDETRACKED



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A Litrpg and Gamelit Series

Jason A. Cheek

Book Fourteen of The World Series

SIDETRACKED
BOOK 14
OF
THE WORLD

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Preface

(A note from the Author)

An update on Amazon's Kindle Unlimited program: Amazon has been reducing the amount of money they give to the authors via the KU program for books read, flagging authors that use AI art, restricting adult content, and these reductions are making it harder to make a living being a writer. Patreon support helps to make up the difference. I do my best to offer a lot of extras for the series: Sneak Peeks for the next book, a variety of concept art for the various characters, interesting articles on VR and FIVR gaming technologies, funny memes, and other stuff about the series. Any support is greatly appreciated and helps makes this series possible. You can find my Patreon page here:

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Thank you for your support. I hope you enjoy the story and apologize in advance for any grammar and proofreading mistakes that are sure to be a part of this work. Being an 'Indie Author' typically means that you do not have the extra money to pay for a professional editor or proofreader and end up doing all of the work yourself and with helpful friends. While I do the best that I can to find mistakes, I know well my lack of ability in the proofreading, spell-checking, and editing arena. At the same time, I have done my best with the tools available to clean up the story for publishing. If you do find something as you're enjoying this story, please let me know at jasonacheek@gmail.com so that I can make the necessary corrections needed to make this book as enjoyable to read as possible. I will gladly give you a shout-out for your contribution here in the book's Author's Notes.

I would like to give a shout-out to a number of fans and friends that have put a huge amount of effort into getting this story into as good of shape as it is in. Eric (Töten Fiend who offered his expertise for editing and proofing) along with friends and fans like Sabrina, Travis Wagner, Steven Weber, and Tricia Harrington who have greatly helped with beta reading

and giving feedback. Additionally, I want to thank those fans who support me on Patreon: PaigeFault, David Cambell, Joshua Spoelstra, Ignatius Colotta, Reinhard Kalser, Silent-Asmo, Susan Star, Ethan Smith, Brian, Cornelius, David Stewart, That Dart Guy, Miranda, Antonio Jesus Montes, Keith Anarold, Ranger, Jerry Harris, Michael Fern II, Justin, Michael Fern, Swen Hieber, Nathan Mazza, Amanda Shelton, Christopher Spear, Jacob Lawlor, Lyndarion, Joshua Ruiz, Anthony Jenkins, Stefan Andersson, Psilocide, Anthony Olson, Rick Dwarf, Alissa Tanner, Iesy, Crewband1701, Jesseray Van Houten, Mathew Ritchie, Dann Douglas, Patrick M. Cullen, Aaron Guhin, Peter Müller, John Blackwood, Dana Miller, Malik El Yahiaoui, Charles, Will, TbxstV, Brian Fuller, Manuel Krug, Jens Nordin, Nick Donaldson, Dylan Detweiler, Olaf Meerländer, Gorgarn, T Lucas, Lukas Lenk, Saap, Jonathan Carpenter, Andrew D, Simon Webster, Nash38724, James, Keith Beeler, Isyldar, Stefan Andersson, Tina-Maria Simms, and Carl Benge. Along with an extra special thank you for going above and beyond for being House of Kayden members to: Rob Tavares, Rylon, Kore Rahl, Bilal Williams, Unwired, Jodi Beck Florence, Luke Ganny, Kirk Bradshaw, Michael Thomas Morton, Dylan Oliver, Patricia Harrington, Trey DeWitt, Aimee Hebert, Thomas Anable, Julian Malze, Larry Kaneer, Stefan Schrickel, Michael Fusselman, Conrad Doroff, Andy Carle, Brian Hansen, Glenda Schillinger, Silbernacht, and Alex Wierbicki,. A truly wow to, BlackFalk, and Miguel Echeverria. These others are my super patrons and amazing fans whose characters you'll be seeing in the series: Patrick Lambert Alberty, Butch Althaus, T.C. Trottier, Jarl Vanagrindr, Kelly Folz, Joshua Levine, Tr4toss, Karl Heinz, Braidborn, Karl Alberty, Dracul Apep, Jarl Vánagrindr, Nick Donaldson, Patrick Lambert, Tenebris Lupus, Travis Wagner (KS), and Tucker Sparks. An extra thank you to everyone helping with the spelling/grammar corrections. All of you've helped to make this series possible and your support is greatly appreciated. Thank you very much for making the series that much better.

If you like the story, please leave a good review on Amazon and Goodreads for the books. Not just mine, but any Indie Author you like, especially if you want to see new stories coming out that are not the cookie-cutter-copies that seem to be so rampant in the genre. The only way you will encourage this to happen is by leaving reviews for the authors you like. It lets everyone know that they're telling a good story, besides being the

only way to protect the authors you love from the established authors in the genre that do their best to block new stories from coming out. Your support in this truly makes a difference.

Lastly, I discuss this because I have personally experienced this type of harassment and trolling since releasing The World series. Every book, whether audible or eBook has been repeatedly attacked. Not just book one, but every proceeding book in the series. Even now, they continuously check my blog to know when my newest book is going to be released to leave bad reviews. It's like battling an in real-life Syndicate guild. Your continued support has been all that has stopped their bullying from being able to cancel my stories.

Map of the World



Chapter One

(Wednesday, May 14th / Day 24 of The World.)

(Alanah Valadhiel and the Brat Pack on the deck of the Doon after leaving Tulduroc.)

“Oh, come on, Femdi,” Zinnaemita wheedled in her best persuasive voice, “Ayda and Norrid said it for themselves. Alanah’s plan is working like a charm on the Newfar!”

“Not just the newfar,” Alanah proudly added from where she stood behind her girlfriend, “Blolnat reported that she’d also heard a number of the city’s Gnome Bards already singing our songs even before we started making our way back to the docks.”

“My name is Captain Deepwater as long as you’re aboard my ship,” Captain Deepwater sternly chastised as she looked down at the younger female Gnomeling hugging her waist.

“Sorry, Captain Deepwater,” Zinnaemita apologized while giving her puppy dog eyes, “But you know what we’re doing for Star is important!”

“That’s not all that’s important to him,” Captain Deepwater groused with a sharp shake of her head, “If I were to allow anything to happen to the four of you, Overlord Ironwolf would rightfully have my head.”

“If anything, Thystaur will be more dangerous for us now that the newfars know we’re traveling on the Doon,” Zinnaemita countered as she stepped back from the older female Gnomeling to give her a serious look, “None of them would expect us to show up in Lonsalindel.”

“Or that we’d be taking a caravan to Purus-thal,” Alanah helpfully added. Seeing the Captain’s scowl at her words, she hurriedly continued, “Not to mention, we’d have Blolnat, Zane, and their troop of Marines to guard us along with the rest of the caravan’s guards.”

“Come on,” Zinnaemita pleaded while clutching her hands to her breasts, “What could go wrong?”

“Lots, that’s the problem,” Captain Deepwater glowered even as she seemed to weigh the request, “There’s no way you’d be able to meet back up with us in Thystaur before we return to Auris Shaeras.” Her lips

pressed together in frustration. “And we can’t wait around for you to catch up because Hollysharp will probably need the delivery of Mana Accumulation crystals we’ll purchase before she can set sail for Dolurn.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Alanah assured the older female Gnomeling as Zinnaemita wordlessly nodded beside her, “Once we finish our performance in Purus-thal, we’ll take the next Trader Junk heading to Thystaur.”

“Father always said there was regular trade passing between the two cities,” Zinnaemita helpfully added as Tavon and Mugor silently shuffled closer to listen in on their conversation, “so there shouldn’t be any problem booking passage.”

“That should allow us enough time to get a couple of performances in before you arrive back in port,” Alanah happily agreed as Captain Deepwater let out a strangled breath. As the older female Gnomeling pressed her fingers against her forehead and turned to face the bow, both of them pressed up behind her as she added, “Then we can try to reach Myathlune in time to join Star for the Battle of BrokenFang Hold.”

“While it would be a pleasure to finally have the responsibility for the four of you off my hands, I was not informed that any of you would be a part of the fighting,” Captain Deepwater let out a strained bark of laughter as her eyes scanned the entrance to the bay of Lonsalindel, “If anything, I wouldn’t find it hard to believe that Overlord Ironwolf would want the four of you kept as far away from the fighting as possible until you’ve come to age.”

“You can’t say that after everything we did to save Darom!” Zinnaemita cried out, “Without us, the city would’ve fallen the day before Star arrived with the rest of the House of Kayden!”

“BrokenFang Hold is my home!” Alanah exclaimed at her words as both Tavon and Mugor hurriedly stepped forward, “I couldn’t miss out on protecting it with the rest of the House of Kayden!”

“As the soon-to-be Chieftain of Clan Ilyrall,” Tavon’s deep voice spoke up in support of his companions, “it is my duty to be with my people in their time of need!”

“It is my sworn oath to fight next to my War Leader’s side!” Mugor added in an almost guttural voice while his scarred body tensed at the thought of being left out of the fighting once again.

Holding up her hand to cut off their protestations without turning

around, Captain Deepwater's eyes continued to study the port. Alanah had a sinking suspicion that meant the stern female Gnomeling wouldn't give in to their request and keep them on the ship instead. If that ended up being her decision, they'd already discussed finding another way off the ship to carry out their mission. As those strained thoughts were flashing through her mind, a familiar voice spoke up from behind them.

"Like the wee Gnomeling lass said," Norrid gruffly barked as he came to a stop behind them with Ayda at his side, "If you give us Blolnat, Zane, and the rest of the Marines, there should be no problems keeping the youngins safe."

"Us?" Captain Deepwater asked, letting out a derisive snort.

"You clearly know what he means," Ayda cheerfully added with a twinkle in her eyes, "And after the win I managed to pull off when we were being chased down by the Orc Hordes and everything the four of them accomplished during the siege of Darom, there's no question in my mind that Overlord Ironwolf will want our Bard magic with him for the Battle of BrokenFang Hold."

As Captain Deepwater hung her head and sighed, Alanah glanced back at the pair that had joined them. Seeing the surprised look on her face, Ayda offered a supportive wink while the gruff Dwarf gave her a silent thumbs-up. She didn't know if she shared the pair's confidence that the stern Gnomeling would agree with their request or not. It might be a sign of her youth, but she couldn't just sit aboard the Doon and do nothing but practice her singing while everyone else was fighting for their lives.

"Blolnat! Zane!" Captain Deepwater barked, cutting Alanah off just as she was sucking in a breath to argue her point further, "Report to the Sterncastle Deck!"

As "Aye, aye, Captain!" chorused back from the main deck, Alanah traded a questioning look with Zinnaemita, Tavon, and Mugor. Without making a sound, she mouthed, "Is that a yes?"

"It's not a no," Zinnaemita mouthed back as the boys traded concerned looks.

Before either one of them could comment further, the Gnome and Wolf Kin came jogging up the stairs. They both traded hopeful looks with the four of them before coming to a stop and snapping to attention.

"Captain," the pair chorused respectfully as the eight of them silently waited with bated breath.

“As you were,” Captain Deepwater replied as she slowly turned around to study them. Meeting the pair’s gaze, a frown came to her stern face, “Alanah and Zinnaemita have assured me that you and your Marines can keep them safe in Lonsalindel and Purus-thal even with those newfar hunting all of them down. What say you to this?”

“With both cities being a part of the Kingdom of Ocilimma, the guards of each city are used to sudden violence breaking out amongst our kind. They are quick to respond before anyone can be seriously injured.” Zane motioned with his head to the group of Marines standing on the main deck. “There’s no doubt in my mind that we can fight off any force needed before the city guards arrive.” He coughed lightly. “With us being full-blooded Beast Kin, I can’t see any of us having issues with the local authorities due to our races.”

“And the caravan to Purus-thal?” Captain Deepwater pressed.

“Again, with the threat of constant attack in the wilds for my people,” Zane continued confidently, “All caravans are heavily guarded and will have our added forces if needed to repel anyone stupid enough to attack our group.” He flashed a cocky grin before adding. “How would those newfar even know where we are?”

“There’s that, but I still wouldn’t put it past them to have some tricks up their sleeves,” Captain Deepwater harrumphed, before demanding from the pair, “What about the voyage to Thystaur?”

“Like any other Trader from the Kingdom of Cadarea,” Blolnat spoke this time, “I know how to check which ships are properly registered and which ones are not.” Her eyes didn’t blink as she held the Captain’s gaze. “With me being a Gnome, signing up as passengers with a Trader Junk that’s making regular runs between the two cities should be no problem.”

“If there are,” Captain Deepwater warned as she explosively exhaled, “You’ll be answering to Overlord Ironwolf with your lives for your failure.” Her emerald green eyes swept over the pair. “Is that agreeable to each of you and your Marines?”

“Aye, Captain,” Blolnat stiffly agreed as she motioned with her chin toward the four of them, “My life is sworn to Overlord Ironwolf.”

“All of us know the life debt we owe Lord Ironwolf.” Zane respectfully dipped his head. “We’ll protect them with our lives.”

“Then I’ll take responsibility for allowing this excursion,” Captain

Deepwater declared as a thrill of excitement ran through Alanah. It took everything she had not to let out a cheer as the female Gnomeling raised her voice, “Nuroor, change course for Lonsalindel’s harbor!”

“Aye, Captain!” Nuroor smartly replied from where she stood at the ship’s helm, “Changing course for Lonsalindel’s harbor!”

Immediately, Elkusum Tharwess, the ship’s First Officer, began calling out commands to the sailors on deck as the ship began to turn toward the harbor. As the commotion increased around them, the Captain turned back to their group.

“We’ll only be stopped long enough for you to depart before heading on our way, so everyone has approximately,” Captain Deepwater critically eyed the distance before continuing, “an hour to prepare for departure.” She turned to the older Bard. “Ayda, meet me inside my cabin in ten minutes and I’ll furnish the funds you’ll need for your travels.”

“Appreciate that, Captain,” Ayda nodded, before heading below deck.

“Zane,” Blolnat said, turning toward the Wolf Kin, “get your Marines packing while I swing by the Quarter Master’s so we can get our gear prepped.”

“We’ll be down in thirty minutes,” Zane nodded as he quickly headed toward the main deck.

“Make sure all of you are ready to go when we arrive in port,” Blolnat warned them, before following the Wolf Kin and heading below deck.

“We will, Blolnat,” Alanah assured the Gnome, before turning to the Captain, “Thank you for trusting us, Captain Deepwater.”

“We’ll keep an eye out for trouble,” Tavon formally said as Mugor silently nodded in agreement with the Centaur.

“We won’t let you down,” Zinnaemita promised, before grabbing Alanah’s arm and pulling her away while shouting at the boys, “Come on, let’s get packed and ready to go!”

“This is going to be so much fun!” Alanah excitedly squealed as she hurried down the steps arm in arm with her best friend while the boys traded silent looks with one another before following after.

Chapter Two

(Wednesday, May 14th / Day 24 of The World.)

(Scarlett Trenton outside of Southmore Village with a pickup group in Watch Hill's Ruins Dungeon.)

“Dammit, Mahouneko!” Scarlett screamed as she and Fanger, her fellow Rogue, were surrounded, “Where the fuck are you?” Before she could curse at him more, the level 36 Goblin Warrior Shield Bashed her in the face.

“Hold your damn horses,” Mahouneko growled as she was bodily slammed into the wall of the fortress behind her, “I’m just grabbing my gear really quick!”

“You’re supposed to do that after the fighting is over!” Fanger chastised before letting out a grunt of pain as the other two Goblins stabbed him, “Gah!” Triggering a Flurry of Blades, the Light Elf Rogue managed to leap backward and evade their follow-up strikes as he pulled the pair’s aggro.

“Fucking get your ass back into the fight!” Scarlett roared as she staggered away from the wall and released her Bandolier of Iron Knives special attack.

Her hands blurred as within three seconds Scarlett emptied all six Iron Daggers into the chest and face of the Goblin Warrior before he could react. The attack was one of the quick kills options that she had available for emergency situations. Since these idiots were about to get her killed again, she figured this counted as an emergency.

As the Squad Leader’s hit points dropped into the red, Scarlett stabbed her short sword into the green bastard’s kidneys. Ignoring the blood running into her eyes, she ducked below a wild swipe of the heavy bronze shield to get behind the Goblin’s armored back. She only had a second to get the killing blow in while the Warrior tried to yank the iron-throwing knives blocking his vision away.

Focusing on the gap between the Squad Leader’s breastplate and bronze helm, Scarlett triggered her Backstab and lunged for the gap. It was a perfect strike. As her blade pierced the Goblin’s spine, he roared in agony

and spun around to cut her in half.

Playing it safe, Scarlett allowed herself to be flung around like a rag doll on the enraged Squad Leader's back. It made her almost think of Bronco Riding as her dangling feet clipped the Priestess in her respawn clothes. Barely keeping a grip on the slippery hilt from her own blood, she managed to haul herself up enough to slam the second short sword into the green bastard's back and trigger another Backstab.

"Rah!" the Squad Leader roared in agony as his hit points hit zero and he collapsed unmoving onto the stone ground.

"Maho!" The whiny voice of Trynne, the Priestess, that Scarlett had come to despise shouted out. "That rude woman just kicked me in the face!"

"Where's the freaking tank?" Fanger yelled as he got cornered by the pair of Goblin Warriors, "Why am I not being healed again?"

"No one is getting healed until I get my gear back," Trynne protested while crossing her arms over her chest in a huff.

"Honey, that's not how you're supposed to play," Mahouneko calmly explained as he stood up from his gravestone, "We're supposed to work together even when we lose our gear."

"Holy Hell, I'm going to die again!" Fanger screamed as Scarlett drained a Lesser Healing potion and jumped to her feet.

"Stop handholding your girlfriend and start fucking helping us for once!" Scarlett roared as she shoved the Defensive Warrior toward the last two Goblins hacking at their teammate.

"She's being mean to me again, Maho!" Trynne whined as she furiously stomped her foot.

"Don't tell me what to do and stop treating my girlfriend like she's an idiot!" Mahouneko growled as he shoved her away.

"If you don't start helping out, we're going to all wipe again!" Scarlett shouted as she lost the last bit of patience that she'd had. "And your helpless little princess is really going to be pissed off!"

"Stop calling me helpless," Trynne shrieked, "I'm a Priestess, I can't fight."

"We're not asking you to fight," Mahouneko tried again as he followed Scarlett over to Fanger who was being hacked to death.

Tuning out the idiots, Scarlett decided right then and there that she was out of this PUG. She'd rather just snipe from the edges of the fortress

than be stuck with these idiots for a minute longer. Once she'd helped everyone get to their corpses, she was leaving the group and Stealthing out on her own.

Running up behind the nearest Warrior, Scarlett Backstabbed the Goblin to pull aggro. As the Warrior's hit points dropped from her vicious strike, she slammed her second Backstab home dropping the green bastard's health below half. To her horror, the Warrior kept hacking at the dying Rogue with everything it had.

"Rrraaawww!" Mahouneko finally shouted. Instead of turning around to fight him, the one Goblin Warrior continued hacking the Rogue to death while the one she'd attacked turned around and stabbed her in the chest.

"Dammit, Maho! How many times do we have to tell you?" Scarlett yelled as she batted the blade away and stabbed the Goblin back, "You've gotta strike them first to get on top of their aggro list!"

"Heal me you stupid slit!" Fanger screamed as he curled up in a ball on the ground.

"Stop yelling at m-" Trynne began to whine as both she and Mahouneko screamed at her in group chat.

"Heal him!"

A golden glow surrounded Fanger just as Mahouneko managed to finally pull aggro off of the Rogue. Scarlett didn't have a moment to see how close he'd been to dying again. This was going to be another wipe if those two idiots didn't get their heads out of their asses. It was bad enough that Trynne was a new healer, but that would've been okay if she wasn't constantly being a spoiled brat. She refused to listen to simple commands that would keep all of them alive, and even worse, refused to even heal if she got a wild hair up her ass.

Scarlett parried and evaded the Goblin's hacking slashes as she dodged waiting for Fanger to get back into the fight. While she could dish out a shit load of damage, she couldn't take much in return since she was a lightly armored Rogue. She was best coming at her enemies from behind or the side while they focused their attacks on a highly armored target. Seeing the other Rogue climb to his wobbly feet, she was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when the unthinkable happened.

"Fuck this shitty-ass PUG," Fanger grouched as his icon disappeared from her HUD, "I'm out!"

“What the fuck?” Mahouneko roared as he traded hacking strikes with the Goblin Warrior, “I just pulled the aggro from you!”

“Oh, come on, Fang!” Scarlett hollered in alarm as her own health dipped into the yellow of severely damaged, “Let’s help them get their gear back and then we’ll all head out together and call it a night.”

“Not just no,” Fanger growled while flipping both the Warrior and Priestess off, “but hell no!”

As the Rogue turned around and began racing for the exit of the fortress, Mahouneko roared and began hacking and slashing at both Goblins like a berserker. Scarlett didn’t know what had gotten into the other player, but she wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. When the Goblin turned its focus toward him, Mahouneko caught her eye.

“I’ll tank the hits while you whittle them down!”

“You mean what we’ve been trying to get you to do for the last four hours,” Scarlett irritably snapped while she slid around behind the Goblin’s back.

“Stop treating us like noobs and do your job for once!” Mahouneko complained as he backed up against the wall while both Goblin Warriors began hacking at him.

“Do my job for once!” Scarlett muttered under her breath as she Backstabbed the Goblin that had been attacking her.

A set of Backstabs got the monster down to a quarter of his hit points as Scarlett went all out trying to kill the Goblins. They needed to get these two finished off before another patrol came across them. Mahouneko thankfully kept doing his job instead of running his mouth further. When the Goblin aggroed back on her, he did another Intimidating Shout to pull aggro as she finished the Warrior off with another series of slashing Backstabs.

“Trynne!” Mahouneko suddenly exclaimed as Scarlett began working down the last Goblins. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go grab my stuff really quick!” Trynne shouted over her shoulder as she ran down the corridor to the room at the far end.

“For the love of god,” Scarlett shouted in utter horror, “she’s gonna train the entire fortress on us!”

“Just wait for us to finish here and then we’ll all go together!” Mahouneko shouted as he took off after her.

“What the hell are you doing?” Scarlett demanded in horror as the

Goblin Warrior got a solid Backstab on the Defensive Warrior's back.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Scarlett chanted as she began going all out to take down the Goblin and it began chasing after the player.

Scarlett managed to get another Backstab in but not her follow-up as the trio chased each other down the corridor. Reaching for one of her throwing daggers on her chest, she cursed realizing the bandolier was still on its half-hour cooldown timer after the special attack she'd used to take down the Squad Leader. Cursing under her breath, it took every ounce of skill she had to catch up to the Goblin and leap on its back.

Slamming her short sword through its neck, Scarlett clutched the hilt and hung on for dear life. She was just trying to bring her other blade up to slam it home into the Goblin's back when he finally reacted to her attacks. Without breaking stride, the Warrior spun around and slammed back first into the stone wall of the corridor.

"Oof!" Scarlett woofed as the air left her lungs.

Clutching her legs around the Goblin's thick waist, Scarlett managed to slam the point of her second short sword into the Warrior's back even as her head swam from the lack of oxygen. She felt the Warrior rage like a feral animal as it flung itself back first into the stone wall on the other side of the corridor. Even as the low-level pain shot through her body, she began widening the wounds her blades had made in the Goblin's back.

Scarlett knew she had to kill this bastard quickly or she would be dead. There was no doubt in her mind that she wasn't going to get any more heals from that noob of a healer. She scornfully snorted to herself. Even if the idiots didn't die from aggroing another freaking patrol of Goblins. Wishing that she'd simply left the two of them to die alone, she roared while ripping her blades free. As the Warrior turned around and slammed her into the corridor again, she stabbed down, killing the Goblin just as a system window popped up before her eyes.

You have been stunned for a minute from being violently and repeatedly bashed into stone walls.

Oh, how freaking wonderful, Scarlett mentally scowled as she helplessly dropped to the ground still clinging to the lifeless Goblin corpse. A one-minute stun was ridiculous, she sourly thought as she watched the trainwreck of her teammates' deaths unfold before her eyes.

"Oh my gawd," Trynne screamed as she gathered up the gear from

her corpse while staring in horror down the next corridor, “there are Goblins everywhere!”

“Come on!” Mahouneko screamed while grabbing the Priestess by the arm, “We’ve gotta get out of here!”

Without hesitation, Mahouneko dragged his girlfriend back down the corridor the way they’d come as a guttural roar from many voices rang out from further inside the ruined fortress. While she couldn’t see them, Scarlett had no doubt this was the wipe she’d feared. She wasn’t even surprised that the two noobs didn’t even stop to help her as they literally ran over her stunned body to escape.

A moment later, Scarlett saw a large group of Goblins come charging full tilt into the room at the end of the corridor. What a shame, she thought as the five Warriors bellowed and charged into the corridor heading directly toward her. Those two losers might manage to get away from the carnage that they’d caused after all. She was just wishing they’d be hacked apart again for screwing the rest of them over when the squad of Goblins ran over her like she wasn’t alive.

Hot damn! Scarlett silently thought as a thrill went through her. Wide-eyed, she hurriedly doublechecked the timer for her stun. There were only twenty seconds left! She was just thinking that maybe she’d get through this yet when she noticed the approaching sounds of tromping feet.

Ten seconds later, another group of Goblins came charging into the same room at the end of the corridor. This group was geared very differently than the other Goblins. They wore blood-red leather armor and wielded wicked-looking whips and jagged blades. As their beady yellow eyes quickly scanned the corpses scattered along the corridor, they immediately spied her stunned body laying on top of the Goblin Warrior that she’d just killed.

Instead of dismissing her like the other Goblins, an evil-looking grin came to the Squad Leader’s dark green lips as he spied her helpless body. A sickening feeling began growing in the pit of Scarlett’s stomach at the gleam in the monstrous Demi-Human’s yellow cat eyes. There was something about him that made her skin prickle in dread as Nushala’s haunting warning about the Goblins needing breeders came back to her in that moment.

A part of Scarlett froze in terror as the group began making their way down the corridor after her. As they approached, she kept an eye on the

time ticking down for her stun as she mentally reviewed everything that she'd ever heard about situations like this in the MMO. There was something about trying to make the game as real as possible so if you found yourself in an untenable situation with PKers or monsters, there was an option to suicide.

That had seemed odd to her at the time. Why wouldn't the game simply forcibly suicide your avatar? Even as that thought went through her head, she realized that it wasn't as simple as that. At what point would you be considered captured or too hurt to continue on fighting? It was a good question. What happens if that was part of your plan for sneaking into a base or city? Hell, if she hadn't been with a group of noobs, she might have been able to help if her teammates rescued her instead of having her simply out of the fight as a corpse.

All of those thoughts left her mind as the time on her stun hit zero. Leaping up while pulling out her blades, Scarlett triggered a Flurry of Blows to slash the Squad Leader in the face and eyes before he could respond. As soon as the green bastard stumbled back a step from the sudden attack, she spun around and began sprinting in the opposite direction down the corridor.

Scarlett didn't get more than five steps away before a jagged whip wrapped around her legs as she crashed to the ground. Spinning around, she brought her short swords up defensively before her as the group of Goblins rushed her. She managed to get several weak strikes against their knees and ankles before they were on top of her like a pack of savage wolves.

A strangled scream ripped from her throat as Scarlett was quickly hacked to death. Even with her Advanced Start, she barely had the time to notice the reduced pain. It was over almost before it had begun. In what felt like only a split-second later, everything went dark.

A moment later, she was standing in the middle of a graveyard with blood-red letters of a very familiar system message hanging directly before her eyes.

You have been killed by the Slave Master Haheasb Fleshkeeper! Do you wish to resurrect at your corpse or release your spirit to the nearest graveyard?

Okay, that sucked, Scarlett gloomily admitted as she stared up at the ghostly stone statue before her eyes. This was a sight that she'd seen

way too often over the last four hours. Those idiot noobs were close to getting her de-leveled at this point, she sourly thought, while quickly thinking over her options. It had really been the worst idea ever to team up with those losers.

Pissed off at herself for staying so long, Scarlett's fists clenched in fury at the shitty situation she was now forced to deal with because of these assholes. Being a Rogue, she knew that she'd have no problems appearing next to her body, slipping into Stealth, and grabbing her stuff before making a run for it. She'd done it plenty of times in the past while fighting against the stupid Orcs around Myathlune. It just sucked to have spent half of her night getting nowhere in the quest because of a shitty PUG.

Letting out an explosive breath in the ghostly realm of the dead, Scarlett mentally selected "Resurrect at your corpse." She didn't even hesitate after dying so many times tonight. Turning left, she took off at a sprint, diving into the ghostly forest at the edges of the graveyard. She easily passed through bushes, rocks, and low-hanging branches, before being forced to dodge around some of the larger tree trunks. Within short order, she was at the base of the hill that held the old fortress of Watch Hill's ruins.

Luckily, Scarlett was much faster in her ghostly form. Within a minute, she was passing through the stronghold's ruined gates and took the right fork after the great room of the keep. She'd run this path so many times now that she could nearly do it with her eyes closed. As she neared her body, the familiar "Resurrect" button popped open before her eyes.

Instead of doing this from a distance or scouting out the area first, Scarlett simply ran up to her body and hunkered down next to her gravestone. Demi-Humans were stupid and always moved on after killing their victims. Besides, she'd barely been visible for more than a second or two before her Stealth could kick in. After all of her soloing and the crappy night she'd been having with these yahoos, she'd become an expert at this.

As soon as she mentally selected "Resurrect," Scarlett's body popped back into the world of the living as she casually triggered her Stealth and popped open the gravestone's inventory of her corpse. It was a pretty freaky ass thing to be doing in such a realistic FIVR MMO, she thought with a mental snort while reaching for her gear. Before she could take the first item, a wicked laugh sounded directly behind her making her blood turn to ice in her veins.

“Sjáið til strákar,” a guttural Goblin voice eerily echoed off of the walls of the darkened corridor from behind her as Scarlett froze in shocked horror, “við erum með nýjan ræktanda fyrir búrin okkar!” Before she could recover, a clawed fist grabbed a fistful of her luscious red hair and yanked her into the air like a prize as a group of three Goblins in red armor appeared at the end of the corridor. “Yani er aftur á matseðlinum í kvöld drengur!”

“Yyyaaarr!” all of the Goblins in front and behind her cheered.

As she was yanked away from the open inventory window, Scarlett writhed in the Goblin’s grip as she stretched out her arms to snatch up her short swords. Before she could get her hands around the hilts, the window popped close and her face was brutally slammed into the stone wall of the corridor.

Screaming and kicking for all she was worth, Scarlett ignored the blood dripping down the side of her face as she reached out and latched onto the green bastard’s leering face with her clawed hands. Like a cat trying not to be shoved into a bathtub full of water, she began ripping her fingernails down the side of the Goblin’s face for all she was worth.

“I’ll rip your eyes out!” Scarlett shrieked at the top of her lungs, “I’ll shove your goddamn balls down your throat! I’ll-”

“Þegiðu Yani!” the Goblin roared while slamming her into the opposite wall with everything it had.

The second hit broke her nose, while the third and fourth turned her face into a bloody mass. While the actual pain of the savage beatdown was reduced by half due to her Advance Start, Scarlett had never been brutalized like this before in her life. Within seconds, her hit point bar was flashing the orange of severe damage while multiple pop-up windows had appeared before her eyes. Each message was getting progressively worse as she limply hung from the Slave Master’s clawed fist.

You have a major concussion for a minute from being violently bashed into a stone wall.

Your right arm has been broken from being violently bashed into a stone wall.

Your left leg has been broken from being violently bashed into a stone wall.

You have been stunned for three minutes from being violently and repeatedly bashed into stone walls.

It took a moment for the confusion in Scarlett's head to clear enough for her to realize what was happening. As soon as her vision returned, she realized that she was being dragged by her hair along the ground deeper into the old fortress of Watch Hill's ruins. All around her were the clawed green feet of the Goblin Slavers that had captured her. To her horror, a new system window was blinking a blood-red warning before her eyes with a five-minute countdown timer.

Warning! You have been captured by Demi-Humans and are being dragged back to their lair. It is strongly recommended that you choose the suicide option at this point in your adventures. Your body will be resurrected at the nearest graveyard to allow you to continue with your adventure. If you do not select an option, your body will be automatically Resurrected.

Resurrect at this time? / Continue with your current adventure?

Scarlett eyes widened in horror at the message before her eyes. What did that mean? Would she lose all of her gear? How could she recover her body? It's not like she had any backup gear she could use to fight her way back to her body. If she was forced to respawn at the nearest graveyard, she'd have nothing left to fight with. Even worse, she'd spent all of her ready coins getting herself geared up as much as possible before leaving Myathlune!

With her mind spinning, Scarlett tried to figure out what she should do. It wasn't like there were a lot of players doing quests in the area. She'd lose the rest of her playtime doing stupid quests trying to make enough money to buy replacement gear. Even worse, she thought while gritting her teeth. She'd be forced to join another goddamn PUG to work herself that deeply into the fortress dungeon again.

This was just a game, Scarlett thought as she tried to wrap her mind around the issue at hand. How bad could getting caught by Goblins be? They'd what, lock her into a cage? She'd run multiple quests to free Light Elf families that had been captured by Orc Slavers. Except for being ruffed up a bit, they'd been more or less okay. Hell, she'd gotten smacked around in combat worst than that on a regular basis whenever the tank lost aggro on

the monster they were fighting.

Coming to a decision, Scarlett decided she'd run this out for as long as needed. She'd picked up a skill that allowed her to pick a lock with a spell. It was a Rogue Ability that didn't need any lock-picking tools. She'd let these assholes lock her up and as soon as they went away, she'd pick the lock, slip out, and sneak back to get her gear, before getting the hell out of dodge! With that plan solid in her mind, she selected the flashing option in front of her eyes, "Continue with your current adventure?"

Warning! If you choose to continue your current adventure, V-MMORG and its subsidiaries will not be held liable for your decision. As per the EULA, you will assume any and all legal responsibilities for your decision from this point forward. If at any time you decide this is no longer right for you, you can open your HUD and select the "Suicide" option to be resurrected at the nearest graveyard.

That's not ominous or anything, Scarlett uncomfortably thought as she tried her best to calm down and wait for her chance to break out. There was a part of her that was sort of thrilled to be in such a precarious situation. It was like she was going to experience a rare part of the game that most people never got a chance to see. That and it sort of reminded her of one of her chained and bound erotica novels that was a guilty pleasure that she sometimes like to indulge in when she was in the mood.

Not that she could ever buy a novel like that in her small town. No, anything Scarlett bought like that had to be ordered from the internet in complete secrecy. As far as she was concerned, one's porn choices were a private matter and not meant for public consumption. Besides she could never be a supervisor if something like that became public in her workplace. Those old biddies would sell her ass out in a heartbeat to get rid of her!

As those thoughts were churning through her mind, Scarlett's eyes nearly bulged out of her head when the door at the end of the corridor was thrown open. There were no cages here like there had been in the Orc areas. The only things she could see as she was dragged inside the large room were several empty wooden stockades and a wall of torture devices that sent a shiver of terror down her spine.

"Það er kominn tími til að djamma strákar!" the Slave Master shouted with a guttural laugh as he threw her towards the nearest stockade.

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Chapter Three

(Wednesday, May 14th / Day 24 of The World.)

(Startum Ironwolf and friends entering Haldale for the evening.)

The ride back to Haldale was relatively quiet. The trash mobs that were in the area left us alone due to our higher levels, and I was mostly left alone to think while driving the G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon. That's because the girls were busy chatting about the Battle Mage Dungeon and working out ways to increase Neysa's Stealth skills as they scouted the path ahead. The Silver Dire Wolf wanted to make sure the next time something big like this came up that she was ready to go.

While that was a worthy goal to shoot for, skill wasn't the only factor when choosing to sneak through a dungeon. Things like the number of people in the group or raid played a huge factor in this too. It also increased the chance of our group being discovered. The chance of one of us running into one of those Stealthed Mages or hell, one of the visible patrols would've increased exponentially if everyone had been with us on that run.

Not that I bothered to warn them about that. Skilling up was always an important thing to do especially when traveling, I snorted at my own hypocrisy. While I could've been more constructive with my time, aka practicing with my Fire Mage skill, my mind was currently busy churning over the new Battle Mage skills that I'd managed to acquire and how I might be able to use them in the future.

Curiously enough, my Battle Mage skill had shot up to level 35 as soon as I'd learned the new class. The only reason I could think of for that to have happened was that I'd acquired Dual Cast I, Extended Magic, and Focused Casting II earlier on my own. Not only that, but due to the running battle we had with the Orc Horde, Helgath and I had been using all three to enhance our direct damage, crowd control, and group buffing spells.

That means, I could load up all but two of the Battle Mage scrolls that I'd recently received:

Amalgamate Magic – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to combine the effects and/or damage of two spells from different magic trees. Requires

Battle Mage skill level 40.

Penetration Magic II – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to cast spells with increased effectiveness to overwhelm a target's natural and/or enchanted magic resistances by twenty percent. The mana cost requirements to perform the selected spell is increased by two times the spell's base requirements. Requires Battle Mage skill level 40.

For the other Battle Mage skills, they were mostly a progressively increasing series of strengthening spells along with a few curious outliers. Pulling up the system window with the new skills, I briefly reviewed the list for what felt like the tenth time.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Linked Magic.

Linked Magic - (Active Ability) Allows the caster to cast spells through any item they are currently holding in their hands regardless of the material of the item. This also allows for the unique fusion of spells with weapons, gear, and other items based on the magic tree being used. Requires Battle Mage skill level 0.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Silent Casting.

Silent Casting – (Passive) Allows the caster to cast spells without their required verbal or somatic components. Requires Battle Mage skill level 0.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Merge Magic.

Merge Magic – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to combine the effects and/or damage of two spells from the same magic tree. Requires Battle Mage skill level 10.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Penetration Magic.

Penetration Magic – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to cast spells with a 10% increased effectiveness against a target's natural and/or enchanted magic resistances. Mana cost requirements to perform the selected spell is increased by two and half times the spell's base requirements. Requires Battle Mage skill level 15.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Magnify Magic.

Magnify Magic I – (Active Ability) Allow the caster to cast any

regular spell at triple the effect and/or damage of the original spell. The mana cost requirements to perform the selected spell is increased by two times the spell's base requirements. Requires Battle Mage skill level 25.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Dual Casting II.

Dual Casting II – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to dual cast two different versions of the same spell simultaneously. This allows for double the damage or effect with half the mana requirements. Requires Battle Mage skill level 30.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Extended Magic II.

Extended Magic II – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to increase the effect and the range of a spell. The mana cost requirements to perform the selected spell is increased two times the base amount of the base spell. Requires Battle Mage skill level 35.

Congratulations! You have learned the new Skill Programmed Magic II.

Programmed Magic II – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to cast spells with the added option to delay the moment of activation. The delay can be set from five seconds up to thirty minutes with two activation trigger events. Requires Battle Mage skill level 35.

Already having skill points in Battle Mage allowed me to simply go to the newer spells and leave the lower-level ones I'd already acquired in my bag. These excess scrolls were the following:

Focused Casting – (Passive) Allows the caster to cast spells while physically moving and fighting. This increases the casting time and mana requirements of the spell by half. Requires Battle Mage skill level 5.

Enhanced Magic – (Active Ability) Allow the caster to cast any regular spell at double the effect and/or damage of the original spell. The mana cost requirements to perform the selected spell is increased by half of the spell's base requirements. Requires Battle Mage skill level 5.

Programmed Magic – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to cast spells with the added option to delay the moment of activation. The delay can be set from five seconds up to five minutes. Requires Battle Mage skill

level 10.

Dual Casting I – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to dual cast two different versions of the same spell simultaneously. This allows for double the damage or effect with two-thirds of the mana requirements. Requires Battle Mage skill level 15.

Extended Magic I – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to increase the effect and the range of a spell. The mana cost requirements to perform the selected spell is increased by two and half times the spell's base requirements. Requires Battle Mage skill level 20.

Programmed Magic I – (Active Ability) Allows the caster to cast spells with the added option to delay the moment of activation. The delay can be set from five seconds up to fifteen minutes with one activation trigger event. Requires Battle Mage skill level 20.

While that was sort of cool on one level, I wasn't sure how useful any of these leftover scrolls would actually be. It wasn't like I could offer them to anyone else in my guild or alliance due to the Battle Mage requirement on the scrolls. That also nixed out even being able to make some coins by selling them at the Auction House. And, after everything I'd gone through to complete the freaking Class Quest, I didn't see there being a lot of Battle Mages around needing to purchase the basic scrolls for the class either.

I wondered if they had useless scroll collectors somewhere in The World. Shaking my head at that thought, I simply tucked them away for posterity and went back to thinking of the different ways I could use the new spells in and out of combat.

Linked Magic was pretty cool. Up until now, I'd been forced to free a hand to cast spells. Now, it seemed like I finally had a way to add spell effects to weapons. Did this mean I could have a flaming sword or increase the fire resistance of my armor for a limited time? That opened a lot of possibilities, but it was probably going to take a lot of trial and error to fully flesh out what I could do with this new class.

I mentally snorted at that thought, because I didn't see the Academy of Technomancy being much help with all the Azure Skulls that had infiltrated their ranks. From how the description read, the skill should allow me to cast as if I were a traditional Spell Sword which was cool. Did

that mean I could cast through any weapon or item?

Hmm, I harrumphed to myself, could I shoot Fireballs from my eyes if I were wearing goggles? I snorted as another humorous thought hit me, or from my ass? That brought along a whole new visual with it.

I have the power! The mental shout unbiddenly started running through my mind like a very adult and redneck version of the He-Man cartoon. It must be a Florida thing, I thought with a mental sigh, promising myself to never visualize that again as I went back to my analysis. Overall, it wasn't a bad level 0 Battle Mage skill that might have a lot of interesting uses.

Silent Casting was something I'd probably been near to figuring out on my own, I sagely thought. I'd gotten down the non-verbal part but hadn't gotten past the need for the complex hand motions required for casting the longer spells. While this didn't look like anything super special, it would allow me to do long casts without anyone noticing I was actually casting a long ass spell. So, that was super cool in a sneaky bastard sort of way.

Now, Programmed Magic I was an interesting skill. I'd already tried casting it a few times while we'd been riding but it required me to root the spell with a mental timer to a spot. This could be pretty much anything, aka a tree, person, wall, equipment, or even the ground. Again, it was of limited use since it was only good for fifteen minutes, but in the right situation where we were running for our lives, I could see it being somewhat useful.

Magnify Magic was basically a better version of my Amplify Damage, but useful for Shield Spell and buff spells too. I could triple the power of those spells which would be huge. That made me somewhat concerned about what V-MMORG might do if they got complaints that I was soaking up an unreal amount of damage. No doubt Rani would do her best to gank that spell in a heartbeat once she saw it in action.

A frown came to my lips as I glanced up into the night sky wondering where she'd been. I hadn't seen the annoying woman around for a while now. While I know Domenic had pissed her off, there was no doubt that she was still irked about her death via Wyrms-Ghast. Knowing how she was and the fact that she'd tried to get me banned for forty-eight hours, there was no doubt she blamed me for her first death too. Even so, I would've expected her to turn up like a bad penny for everything that had gone down during the Battle Mage quest.

Dismissing the feeling of being constantly watched, I went back to the bonuses of my new Battle Mage Class. Dual Casting II, Focused Casting II, and Extended Magic II were all basically the same skills that I already had. It just reduced the mana requirements. Really, the only additional new skills that I'd gained were the Amalgamate and Penetration Magic spells.

I was still having trouble with the Amalgamate Magic spell. I'd messed around with combining Piercing Spike with Frost Bane which allowed me to ramp up the damage of the spells nicely with each cast but that really wasn't a wow and still cost me a lot of mana. There were some promising returns on combining Enhanced Shadow Bolt with Dark Lance. It didn't quite have the effect that I wanted. Meaning it lost most of the Dark Lance effects except for increasing the penetration power for the Enhanced Shadow Bolt. I'd have to play around with it more to figure something out, but it was better than nothing.

It was like using Penetration Magic but much cheaper on the mana costs since Dark Magic spells typically had a noticeably lower mana requirement to cast than other magic trees. That made the usefulness of Penetration Magic sort of questionable to a point. I mean, it did allow me to add the penetration effects to my other trees which could be useful if I ever had to heal Töten or fight that Jarl guy's guild of Frost Giants. That was useful for anyone with a naturally high resistance to magic. Not exactly bad but not exactly wow either. It was another feather in my cap of abilities that increased the effectiveness of my Red Mage build.

"Woohoo!" Töten called out from up ahead as we came out of the mountain pass, "Haldale is up ahead!"

"It's about time," Phoenix perked up in her saddle as she peered ahead around the big guy, "All that I wanna do is get a good meal and have a few rounds of ale before calling it a night!"

"Tell me about it," I yawned, feeling completely wiped out after the night I'd had before staring up at the night's sky. It almost felt like I'd been awake for two days straight after everything that had happened, "A good meal and a few rounds of ale sounds like the perfect end to a very successful day."

"I still can't believe it took all of that to complete your Battle Mage class quest," Zeven said with a shake of his head.

"Riiighttt," Töten laughed as he guided us toward the western gates

of the city, “I swear, dude. You have the luck of the devil!”

“Without running into that Braid guy,” Phoenix snorted while shaking her head, “we’d have never managed to pull that off.”

“I don’t know about never, you do have me with you,” Töten scoffed as the rest of us traded looks before busting out laughing.

“You’re pretty tough, I’ll give you that,” Neristhana sarcastically chimed in as Helgath glanced back at me from where she sat astride Neysa’s back and rolled her eyes, “but you’re not level 64 Elite G.O.A.H.E.M Spell Knight tough.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Töten admitted while sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck to a second round of laughter. Sitting straighter in his saddle, he indifferently continued, “I still say we would’ve still found a way.”

“Probably by sending in the Viking minions you hired in to keep it distracted,” Phoenix speculated as the big guy busted out laughing.

“Yeah, like they would’ve been cool being cannon fodder!”

“There is that,” Phoenix agreed, before glancing back at me, “After all of that shit, I vote that Star pays for dinner and drinks tonight.” She held a hand up over her head. “Who’s with me on this?”

“Here, here!” Zeven hollered, raising his hand from where they drove the second G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon as Nahimana hesitantly followed his example.

“Yeeahhh!” Töten cheered following suit.

“Star is already paying for all of our new vassals,” Neristhana countered next to me from where she drove our G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon, “Why should he pay for you guys too?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Phoenix playfully continued, “because we’re more or less his mercenaries at this point in time.”

“And cheap ones at that,” Töten added from the lead.

“Will work for food, drink, and board,” Zeven jokingly agreed.

“Hardly,” I scoffed at my friends’ antics, “If that was the case, all the loot would’ve gone to me and not been split evenly between everyone.” I held out my hand as a smile came to my face. “So, give me back my mon-eyy.”

“Oh, hell no,” Töten and Phoenix both chorused as Zeven laughed and shook his head, “That’s all part of the fee.”

“Is that a fact,” I playfully scoffed at their antics and crossed my

arms across my chest, “In that case, you can vote all you want but that doesn’t mean I have to pay sheeit!”

Laughing at my friends’ playful ribbing, I scanned the area in front of the western gate to enter Haldale as they began talking a bunch of shit. Most of it was about how they were worth every gold piece they’d earned and I was lucky to have them on the team. While it was true, I wasn’t about to openly admit that or they’d have me paying for everything on the way back.

Besides, it wasn’t like I hadn’t been helping Töten and Zeven out too, so they could go pound sand if they didn’t like it. As for Phoenix, she’d decided to come along because she liked being a part of all the shit that typically happened around me. Not that she hadn’t been more than compensated after all of the coins and gear she’d made off the Orc Horde and Battle Mage Class Quest. Then again, ribbing your friends wasn’t so much about the truth as it was about giving them shit.

To my surprise, the Western Gate seemed to be mostly clear with only a few teams in line. Glancing around, my eyes scanned the woods and fields around us seeing numerous groups out hunting the lower-level monsters in the area. A few quick Identifies let me see that most were in the thirty to forty level range. From the looks of it, we were well ahead of the evening rush to get back into the city.

Instead of going in covert, Töten went ahead and had us ride right up to the gates. Besides, it wasn’t like we could hide the G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagons. We reached the gate just as the last group was signing in with the Scribe. As the city guards passed them through, Töten, Phoenix, and Helgath dismounted. While my friends dismissed their mounts, Neysa unobtrusively slipped behind the rearmost wagon and changed back into her Silver Dire Wolf girl form as the rest of us approached the gate.

“My name is Scribe Ridemtort,” the stuffy-looking male Gnome stated in an officious tone as our group came to a stop, “Please state your names and the purpose of your visit.”

“Trader Neristhana Lightouch of the ship, Wind Dancer,” Neristhana announced as she hopped down from the G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon before Töten could speak up. Stepping forward, she waved her arm at the rest of us, “These are my guards and associates. Töten Feinde, Phoenix Sonata, Zeven Al’Zaric, Nahimana Tor’Narc, Helgath Ironwolf, and-”

“Overlord Ironwolf!” Scribe Ridemtort exclaimed as both the city

guards and the two G.O.A.H.E.M. Knights standing by the gate noticeably straightened to attention upon hearing my name. To our surprise, one of the city guards immediately turned around and took off at a run to head through the gate as the officious Scribe continued non-plussed, “Viscount Hollysharp has put out a city-wide summons to all the gate guards requesting that you attend him this evening at his keep upon your return to Haldale.”

“Um, alrighty then,” I stammered as my friends glanced at me in consternation. None of us particularly liked the fact that a messenger had been sent about our arrival but there was little we could do about it without causing an incident. “That’s not a problem.” Doing my best to act casual while my thoughts churned a hundred miles an hour in my head, I tried to buy us a bit of time to figure out what was going on. “We’ll return to the Prancing Pony and get cleaned up. If you’ll send an escort in around an hour, we should be ready to attend-”

“Viscount Hollysharp’s summons specifically stated that you be escorted to his keep as soon as you arrived back in Haldale,” Scribe Ridemtort formally cut me off, “Not at your convenience.”

“Is that a fact?” I grunted while leaning an elbow on my knee as I thoughtfully scanned the group in a half circle around us.

The ire that instantly filled my chest made me want to dig in my heels and tell them all to go fuck themselves now that I had my Battle Mage quest completed. I didn’t mind someone asking for my presence, but demanding that I drop everything at once and come at their beck and call was another matter altogether. Not even the city guards and G.O.A.H.E.M. Knights stepping forward as a silent threat to enforce their noble’s command if I refused made me stand down.

“In that case,” I barked while turning to my friends, “I’ll just take my leave now and camp out in the wilds while all of you head inside to enjoy your evening.” Ignoring the nervous shifting of the city guards at my words, I turned to Neristhana, “We’ll just plan on meeting up in the morning outside the city gates as we previously discussed.”

“I’m not sure if that’s the best idea,” Neristhana hissed under her breath as she sidled up next to my G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon. Jerking her chin toward the Scribe and city guards around, she continued in a low voice, “If Viscount Hollysharp is summoning you before him, that probably means he’s aware of your expedition and the,” she let out a meaningful cough,

“additional components you were seeking to acquire.”

“Additional components?” Phoenix asked out loud in confusion as Töten elbowed her in the ribs to shut her up. Before any of us could continue, the Gnome in front of us politely cleared his throat.

“Before you make any rash decisions,” Scribe Ridemtort delicately continued, “I also have a message to deliver to you from a Lady Tuin’Dyrr of the Crippled Burrick Pub.”

“Isn’t that your Dark Elf Assass-” Phoenix began to demand in an annoyed tone?

“She’s the Lady that is helping with all of my purchases for BrokenFang Hold,” I interrupted, cutting the Barbarian off before she could say something damning.

“If I might continue with the message?” the male Gnome asked as a smile played over his lips. Getting a nod from me, he smoothly resumed his dictation, “Overlord Ironwolf, please accept Viscount Hollysharp’s invitation to dinner. A few questions have arisen about our business arrangements for BrokenFang Hold that require your deft touch.”

“Your deft touch?” Zeven let out a strangled laugh.

“I guess she doesn’t understand,” Phoenix chortled in amusement as she held a fist out to the big guy, “you don’t exactly do subtle.”

“Yeah,” Töten grunted, giving a shake of his head as he bumped fists, “I don’t see this going well at all.”

“Probably not,” I sagely agreed as a frown came to my lips.

Lady Tuin’Dyrr had warned me that our deal could go south if it came to Viscount Hollysharp’s attention. She hadn’t thought he’d pay attention to our business dealings since she’d planned on acquiring most of the items that I was purchasing from Halfling farmers. That or something had happened when her people had been acquiring the parts I needed via a five-finger discount which had forced her to step in as an intermediary. I wasn’t quite sure what kind of mess we would be walking into tonight, but if she believed my presence would help clear up the issue, then I was beholden to accept Viscount Hollysharp’s summons no matter how much it irked me.

Eyeing Prustine’s Runemaster Arc Cane resting beside me on the bench seat, I let out an exasperated sigh. Another possibility was that our business arrangement was bust and she needed me to work my magic to get everything back on track. More likely than not, that was the case.

Obviously, all of the shit-talking I'd done this morning at the Slaifaddwuck's Grill over breakfast was probably coming back to haunt me.

Setting down the reins, I snatched up the ornate cane and jumped down beside Neristhana while casting one of my Summoning spells, "Go ahead and head to the Prancing Pony to take care of our new vassals. Get them set up with food and a room for tonight."

"Is that wise," Neristhana asked in a low whisper as the Scribe and city guards watched us closely, "What happens if your meeting with the Viscount does badly?"

"Will they throw you in prison or stop you from leaving the city?" I asked under my breath.

"The worst I've ever heard happening is the vassals of an exiled lord being expelled from the kingdom," Neristhana hissed back while glancing toward the city guards, "but that hasn't happened in over fifty years."

As the spell completed, green sparkles filled the air as Tengsly took shape in the air before me. The looks of surprise on the Scribe's and city guards' faces at the sudden appearance of the Summoned Pet brought a grin to my lips. I was definitely going to enjoy this new Silent Casting skill. Letting out a happy shriek, he landed on my shoulder and began happily chittering in welcome as I began scratching his forehead.

"I'll send a message if something happens," I explained as a worried look flashed across the female Gnomeling's pretty face, "Worst case scenario is that we get everyone outside of the city so we can head out without any more problems in the morning."

"Understood," Neristhana grunted with a nod, "I'll make sure everyone is ready to leave at a moment's notice if necessary."

"Good," I patted her shoulder, before calling out to Zeven and Nahimana, "You wanna go with us or head back to the inn with Neristhana?"

"I'll go with you guys just in case you need an extra hand or two," Zeven snorted as he jumped down from their G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon. Catching his companion's eye, he jerked his chin toward the female Gnomeling and lowered his voice, "Why don't you give Neristhana a hand with the wagon while I try to make sure we don't get exiled from the Kingdom of Cadarea."

"Not being exiled would probably be for the best," Nahimana

quietly agreed. A troubled look came to her furry face as her Clan Leader strode over to join us.

“Let’s do this,” Zeven grunted as he came to a stop with the rest of us.

“I take it that means you’ve agreed to answer Viscount Hollysharp’s summons and enter Haldale?” Scribe Ridemtort asked as the city guards and G.O.A.H.E.M. Knights visibly relaxed.

“As long as my vassals will be allowed into the city to carry on their tasks,” I agreed as a frown flashed across the Gnome’s face.

“I don’t see why not,” Scribe Ridemtort huffed as if I’d insulted his honor, “Halflings are not forbidden from entering Haldale and carrying out their commerce.”

“Right,” I heard Neristhana mutter under her breath behind me, “because Halflings are always so welcomed anywhere in the Kingdom of Cadarea.”

“What was that?” Scribe Ridemtort asked, not quite catching the female Gnomeling’s comment.

“She asked if they could pass into the city,” I hurriedly clarified before she could repeat what she’d said.

“Sure, let me get everyone’s names first,” Scribe Ridemtort officiously said as he hurried over to the first G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon and began jotting down their names into his book.

“How long do you think this is going to take?” Zeven asked under his breath.

“No clue,” I grumbled as the Scribe efficiently moved to the second G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon, “but thanks for going with us. I have a feeling this isn’t going to be a ride in the park.”

“Just try to not get us backlisted from the Kingdom of Cadarea,” Töten sighed while shaking his head, “The last thing I want to be doing is dodging official and unofficial Bounty Hunters everywhere I go.”

“Remember,” Phoenix let out a snort as a frown came to my lips, “this is Star we’re talking about.”

“Just for the record,” I grumbled under my breath, “I do have a plan for this that hopefully doesn’t make us fugitives.”

“Hopefully?” Zeven gasped, looking like he was already regretting his decision to tag along.

“Eh,” Töten let out a stringent bark of laughter, “I guess that’s

better than the alternative.”

“True,” Phoenix grunted as I flipped them both off.

“What’s the alternative?” Zeven asked in confusion as the Scribe waved the G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagons through the gate.

“Killing everyone and then leaving the city as quickly as possible,” I explained while Neristhana and Nahimana gave us a tense wave as they rode past.

“That’s not even funny,” Zeven fumed as he unhappily crossed his arms over his muscular chest.

“That’s just it, he’s not joking,” Phoenix warned under her breath as the Scribe began walking back toward us. The Barbarian motioned at me with her chin, “What plan is that? Plan B or C?”

“D,” I innocently shrugged as Zeven’s head swiveled around to stare at me with his mouth open, “Plan B is being a raging asshole while C is simply giving up on purchasing the equipment I want and trying to peacefully exit the situation.”

“Then, what the hell is plan A?” Zeven demanded as the sound of approaching hooves came to our ears.

“To handle this professionally,” I chuckled as the Scribe spoke up.

“Your escort to the House of Hollysharp has arrived,” Scribe Ridemtort announced as a group of mechanized horses came trotting through the gate.

The entire group of Gnomes was riding what I assumed to be G.O.H.L.E.M. mounts that were similar to our G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon’s horse part. While similar in basic construction, it only took one glance to know that these were obviously of higher quality in complexity and size. As my eyes scanned the group, I began casting Identify as quickly as possible as the group trotted up.

Eyeing the lead Gnome’s mount, it was obvious to see this was a much higher quality model than the half-horse for our simple G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon. The Gnome rider himself wore a blood-red leather frock coat and forest green leather pants with a short sword and dagger hanging from his waist. All of his gear looked to be of the highest quality that I’d yet to see in The World. As the name Carbom Slangneedon, level 60 Gnome, Marshal of House of Hollysharp appeared over his head, he reined his mount to a stop, which also popped up with the description G.O.H.L.E.M., level 55 Mechanized Mount, Palfrey.

The four G.O.A.H.E.M. Knights escorting him were all on much larger mechanical beasts that almost made Neysa look small. All four held massive shields, two-handed swords, and a monstrous crossbow strapped over their backs that was the size of a small Roman Scorpion. Additionally, they wore matching blood-red and forest green tabards with red crossed G.O.A.H.E.M. closed fists on their chests. As their mounts trotted to a stop behind their leader, the name Nunbim Blimeppig, level 55 Gnome, G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavalier appeared over the first armored figure's head that I'd cast an Identify on. His mount popped up a moment later with the name G.O.H.L.E.M., level 50 Mechanized Mount, Destrier.

"Overlord Ironwolf, I am Marshal Slangneedon of the House of Hollysharp and assigned to deliver you to the Pipe-Wolf Driveshaft Keep," the Gnome officiously announced from the back of his mechanized mount, "Do you need me to call a G.O.H.L.E.M. Carriage or would you prefer to take your own mounts?"

"Pipe-Wolf Driveshaft Keep?" Phoenix repeated, giving me an odd look as I shrugged.

"It's the heritage estate of the Hollysharp family," Slangneedon proudly explained in answer to the Barbarian's question, "which goes all the way back to when Haldale was first founded."

"Oh, this is going to be fun," Töten sarcastically coughed as a frown came to my lips.

Yeah, I had a feeling this was going downhill quicker than shit, I silently agreed as the Badger Kin nervously caught my eye.

"Should I recall Bright Claw?" Zeven asked under his breath as a guilty look flashed across his face.

"Might be for the best," I whispered back not blaming him for not wanting to put up with the Grizhawk's bitching. Zeven had put him away during the boss fight and then decided to leave him for the trip back. That was because he and Nahimana had taken over driving the second G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagon while Helgath and Neysa worked on skilling up the Silver Dire Wolf's Stealth. Raising my voice, I met the Marshal's blue eyes, "Thank you for the offer, but we'll be riding our own mounts."

As I said that, Phoenix whistled for her mount while Töten and Zeven mentally recalled theirs. My friends had dismissed their mounts upon reaching the gates. That's because Töten had explained earlier that riding a mount through any of the main cities was expressly forbidden unless

specifically given prior permission.

I'd been worried about the G.O.H.L.E.M. Wagons and what we'd do with them. Both Neristhana and Töten assured me that wouldn't be a problem. Supposedly wagons and carriages functioned on different rules with cities having a series of back allies to allow the supply carts to get where they needed to go while the carriages had special depots outside of the city for long travel. Not that I'd yet to see any of those during our travels. Hearing Bright Claw's whinny bellows as he appeared before Zeven, I stifled the smile that came to my lips when an alarmed shout came from our escort.

"What kind of mount is that?" one of the Cavaliers demanded as Töten's Nightmare appeared in a burst of flames and heat.

"She's my mount," Töten evenly stated as he easily climbed onto Lilin's burning back.

To my surprise, Helgath and Neysa used that distraction to slip behind Phoenix's mount and quickly change. Without any hesitation, the Silver Dire Wolf girl slipped off her clothing and transformed back into her natural form. Before anyone was the wiser, the Half-Orc had shoved Neysa's clothing into her new Magi-Weaved Traveler's Backpack, before climbing onto her back. None of the city guards or our escort realized we were missing one of our numbers as the pair silently sidled up next to me without a word.

'Smooth,' I silently complimented while climbing up behind the Half-Orc.

'It's a lot easier to get undressed if I shrink my shape slightly,' Neysa preened while happily prancing in place while Zeven, Töten, and Phoenix gave her an amused glance.

'If this breaks out into fighting,' Helgath asked as I wrapped an arm around her waist and settled into place, 'Should I focus on killing the officers first or try to disable them.'

'Let's plan on disabling unless I order otherwise,' I assured her with a reassuring squeeze, 'I'd rather not be completely blocked from reentering the Kingdom of Cadarea unless there's no other choice.' Getting a nod from my friends that they were ready, I turned to the Gnome Marshal, "Lead on."

"Follow me and keep close," Marshal Slangneedon ordered as he wheeled his G.O.H.L.E.M. Palfrey around along with two of his Cavaliers.

Without another word, the Marshal took off at a trot with two of the Cavaliers riding behind him as guards in an arrowhead formation. I silently took note that the remaining two Cavaliers stayed where they were as Neysa followed off after them in a trot. As Töten who was in the rear passed the remaining pair, I glanced over my shoulders to see the Cavaliers whirl their mounts around to take up the rear of our small formation.

We headed through the western gate in a loud clatter of metallic hooves. Coming out the other side, I was surprised to see that the Marshal directed his mount toward the main avenue passing through Mid City as we crossed the kill zone. As we approached the mouth of the busy street, the Cavaliers to either side of the Marshal began bellowing out a warning to those in our way.

“Coming through!” the Cavalier on the left shouted as the one on the right bellowed, “Make way for the troopers of the House of Hollysharp!”

My eyes grew wide as saucers as the people of The World scrambled out of the middle of the street, while the newfars in the packed street continued along their way as if nothing was happening. Instead of slowing down, the Marshal and his Cavaliers drove into the crowd at a full trot while drawing what looked to be iron batons. The newfars that had continued walking along as if nothing had been said suddenly found themselves being brutally bashed in the head or physically knocked out of the way by the iron mounts.

“Gah!” a female player screamed as she was roughly knocked aside.

“What the hell is going- oof!” a man began to holler only to go under the rightmost Cavalier mount’s hooves.

“Oh my god, they trampled Frank!” another female player shrieked before she found herself flung backward from the force of the impact of a G.O.H.L.E.M. Destrier, “Aaiiee!”

“Get out of the way!” a Gnome player shouted while anxiously shoving his teammates from the middle of the main avenue.

“What are you doing-” a female Dark Elf angrily screamed only to fall on her ass as an iron baton whooshed over her head.

“The hell!” their teammate roared in alarm only to catch an iron baton in the face as we rode past.

Surprisingly enough, the word started spreading ahead of us like a

ripple in a still pond. Within a span of a few seconds, the path ahead of us started to clear on its own. To help those that were less resistant to common sense, numerous groups of G.O.A.L.E.M. city guards began rushing out of the side streets shouting and hollering threats at those that were slow to respond.

While most newfar were agreeable enough to listen to clear out of the way, a few stupidly got aggressive and belligerent. I noticed a number of altercations break out ahead of us. Not that they lasted long. By the time we'd reached the scuffle, the G.O.A.L.E.M. city guards were already dragging the corpses away to clear a path.

The brutal treatment was definitely causing a stir amongst the player base. I saw numerous hands being held up to take screenshots as we rode past. No doubt the players on the forums that saw this would be able to identify me easily enough. My disguise wouldn't stand up to any real scrutiny, especially not as I was mounted on a Silver Dire Wolf with Helgath sitting in front of me. Regardless that I was being escorted by the city's elite guards, they'd surely blame me for the city guards' no-nonsense behavior.

Whatever, I silently thought, not overly worried about being unjustly blamed for things I didn't do. It was more or less par for the course at this point. On top of that, I wasn't going to be in the city longer than tonight. I snorted at that thought while considering my current situation. Maybe not even that long if things went south tonight.

As the Marshal led us into the Upper City district, I went ahead and began buffing everyone up just in case. It would help to give us a few more seconds of life in case of an altercation and was better than just worrying. Seeing what I was doing, Helgath silently joined me as we passed by the elegant shops.

We'd nearly finished buffing everyone up when we passed the last of the shops and began crossing another kill zone. Ahead of us was another set of defensive walls and a gate. This was different than the other parts of the city and was obviously set up as a last stand in case the rest of the city fell to invaders. The pedestrians here were groups of richly dressed nobles with private guards surrounding them that bespoke noble houses and lots of money.

Approaching the base of the wall, I silently took note that all of the G.O.A.H.E.M. guards at the gate were all wearing the same tabards as the

Cavaliers escorting us. There was also what looked to be a high-level G.O.A.L.E.M. The officer leading them was wearing a similar livery to that of the Marshal. That's when it dawned on me that the banners besides those that were for the Kingdom of Cadarea were probably those of the House of Hollysharp.

Huh, was that simply for decorations and prestige? I silently harrumphed thoughtfully to myself. Or was it an upgrade that somehow helped to empower the defenders of the keep?

To my surprise, the gate guards to what I assumed was the Highborn Quarter of the city just waved our escort through. I'm not sure why that surprised me. It was obvious that we were being escorted by the House of Hollysharp's troopers. Maybe, I was just used to modern-day authentication of lists and passwords but that sort of threw me for a loop as we trotted through the gate.

If we'd somehow taken the group down and taken their gear, would they have simply waved us through too? That might have been too simplistic of a perspective since we were dealing with having to have five Gnomes and their functioning mounts. A frown came to my lips. Still, if I'd had Ayda with me, couldn't she have simply cast an illusion spell to get us through their lax security?

I know that was neither here nor there, but nonetheless, I tucked that piece of information away in the back of my mind and kept my eyes peeled. Who knows when I might need to break into a guarded inner city like this? Best to know ahead of time what I might need to have at the ready if that situation ever came up.

To my surprise, the Highborn Quarter was not a city with shops and restaurants like the other city districts had been. No, here it all looked to be high-quality homes that were set up side-by-side like you'd expect to find in a large city's wealthy neighborhood. Each home had low walls and what looked to be gardens and park-like grounds behind the wrought iron gates that were guarded with their own set of G.O.A.H.E.M. guards. Each of which, I curiously noted, wore different colors on their tabards than that of the House of Hollysharp.

"Damn," Phoenix swore and let out a low whistle, "these are some ritzy apartments."

"You said it," Zeven agreed in a low whisper as his shaggy head swiveled from side to side.

It reminded me of the movies I'd seen of downtown areas in Brussels and Berlin where countries set up their embassies near the head of governments. It made sense in a way. This was the decision-making area for the noble families in the city of Haldale. Many of these homes were probably more temporary housing where nobles stayed during court to have their voice be heard while their actual holdings were much further away in the countryside.

"From what I remember from closed beta," Töten explained in a knowing tone, "They're mostly apartment mansions for the higher nobility, rich merchants, and diplomats from other kingdoms looking to build new trade agreements."

As everyone rolled their eyes, I caught sight of Dwarves and even Dark Elves behind two of the different walled mansions that we passed by. Huh, I thoughtfully grunted, considering the implications of what the big guy had said. This area acted like a semi-embassy of sorts. It made me wonder if a player could get in on this action too.

"Supposedly players can have representatives from their guilds here too," Töten continued as if reading my mind, "but no one I ever knew got their keeps built up high enough to give it a try."

"I wonder how you'd purchase land here to get in on the game," I thoughtfully said out loud while considering his words.

"From what I remember of the rumors going around the closed beta players," Töten proudly continued, "You have to be invited by the local nobility." He let out a loud snort at that. "Which probably means following some super long quest line in the local city and kingdom."

"You mean like getting Honored or Exalted reputation status in WoW?" Phoenix asked with a sour expression on her face.

"More or less," Töten grunted in agreement.

"Yeah, fuck that shit," Phoenix venomously snapped, "Building reputation usually sucks the big one in most games."

As Zeven, Töten, and Phoenix took off on a bitching tangent, I tucked that bit of information away for the future in case something like this ever became an option for the House of Kayden. Who knows if anything like this would ever become available to me, but with how I was building up my lands in The World, this might be a way to access a higher-level diplomacy option that no one had explored yet.

With that curious thought percolating in the back of my mind, I

found my eyes drawn to what looked to be a walled keep at the end of the main avenue. This, I suddenly realized, was most likely our destination and the Pipe-Wolf Driveshaft Keep that was mentioned earlier by the city guards at the western gate. That would make sense since Haldale was the power base of the House of Hollysharp.

From what I could see, the keep was an impressive sight. The stone wall was half the height of the outer wall of the Highborn Quarter, while the keep itself towered above them both. Judging by its size, I roughly guesstimated it was at least five times the size of my keep back in BrokenFang Hold. Its size alone made me realize just how much further I had to go if I wanted to build up my home to be anything nearly this spectacular. It also brought home the fact that I was basically nothing more than a poor Halfling Lordling living on the outskirts of civilization.

Well, maybe not just a poor Halfling Lordling, I silently corrected with a slight lift of my chin. The title of Overlord that I'd earned from my accomplishments and current alliance with the Kingdoms of Kader and Tak'Ula'Kastadar, aka Human and Sea Elves, officially put me at a higher "noble standing" than a Viscount. Even one as ostentatiously successful and rich as this Gnome Lord.

A self-deprecating grin flashed across my lips as my fist unconsciously tightened around the Prustine's Runemaster Arc Cane held in my hand. Be that as it may, I wasn't here to play fair or be cowed by any stuck-up nobles. This command to appear before Viscount Fendano Hollysharp wasn't issued on the basis of mutual respect from one lord to another. No, it was basically a noble dick-measuring contest and he'd struck first to purposely impugn my honor.

The concept of "noblesse oblige" was mostly a foreign concept for a modern-day man like myself because it was at odds with my worldview of equality and merit. Even so, I was based enough to understand the implied insult for what it was. It basically equated to confronting an obnoxious macho man getting in my face at my favorite local pub. That I did know how to handle, I thought as a wicked smile came to my face. If that was how Viscount Hollysharp wanted to do this, I was going to make sure he got more than he'd bargained for. With that silent promise, I cracked my neck in anticipation of the showdown that I expected was coming as we were waved through the gate to the keep.

'Whatever this is,' Helgath sent, feeling the fury growing in my

chest over our soul link, ‘we will face it together.’

‘All three of us,’ Neysa growl reverberated deep in her chest as the pair of Cavaliers directly behind the Marshal warily glanced back at us.

‘While I appreciate that,’ I mentally replied while doing my best to stomp down the seething anger threatening to break free inside of me, ‘we’ll only go there if there’s no other way.’ Another snort escaped my lips as we trotted up to the keep’s entrance while my calculating gaze swept over the twenty G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers and a squad of uniformed Gnome servants standing at attention before the open double doors, ‘If we turn to violence first, then we’ll have lost the high game.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Helgath sent as she rested a reassuring hand on my armored thigh.

‘If this turns out to be as obnoxious as I expect it’s going to be from Lady Tuin’Dyrr message. This is going to turn into a trade war where I expect he’ll try to deny us the purchases that I want to help kick-start our farming so that we don’t starve over the coming months. That means I’m gonna have to bait him into doing what I want.’

‘How are you going to do that?’ Neysa curiously asked as she trotted up to the entrance.

‘By indirect insults and dangling something that he wants back just out of his reach,’ I replied as the Marshal reined his mount to a stop, ‘If I play this right, he’ll either lose his temper or be willing to make a bet against me to get what he wants.’ I mentally shrugged. ‘Either way, we win.’

‘Sooo, we wait for Viscount Hollysharp to initiate the violence first,’ Helgath agreed with a nod as she turned back around, ‘Check.’

‘Basically,’ I agreed, giving her hip a quick squeeze as everyone began dismounting, ‘Now help get Neysa changed while I get the boys to block everyone’s view.’ As I dismounted, I continued out loud in group chat, “Hey, guys. Mind making a quick wall so Neysa can change back into Humanoid form?”

“Uh, sure,” Zeven stuttered as he dismissed his mount.

“You’ve got it,” Phoenix agreed, sidling up next to the Badger Kin as her Palnisdale Horse faded away.

“I’ve got the rear,” Töten grunted while stepping up behind the other two. As Helgath slid from the Silver Dire Wolf’s back, his fiery Nightmare puffed out of existence.

“Overlord Ironwolf, welcome to Pipe-Wolf Driveshaft Keep,” a well-dressed older Gnome in the uniform of the House of Hollysharp announced as I turned toward the group of waiting servants, “I am Murrath Slillbiss, Viscount Hollysharp’s Steward.” His lips turned down into a disapproving frown as he motioned toward the Silver Dire Wolf at my back. “Shall I have one of the grooms lead your mount to the stables or will you be-”

The words died on his lips as the Gnome’s dark brown eyes slightly bulged in their sockets while a ripple ran through the awaiting servants and G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers standing before the entrance. I assumed their surprised reaction was due to Neysa transforming into a very naked Silver Dire Wolf Girl before their eyes. Acting nonchalant, I slowly walked up the stairs with my cane clicking against the stone steps with each step. Coming to a stop in front of the old Gnome, I planted the cane in front of me and cleared my throat as his eyes guiltily snapped back to mine.

“That won’t be necessary,” I assured the Steward who pursed his lips while studying the cane held in my hands intently. As I stood with my hands atop the cane and my arms slightly akimbo, Helgath and Neysa stepped up beside me on either side and smoothly slid their arms in mine as if we’d planned the move ahead of time. Without missing a beat, I continued in a confident tone, “You may lead us to Viscount Hollysharp.”

“Ah, yes, um, please follow me,” Steward Slillbiss stammered in confusion before his mouth caught up with his mind as he tore his gaze away from the cane, “Viscount Hollysharp is in the great hall with the other guests invited to the feast.”

“Oh, snap,” Phoenix coughed under her breath as the Gnome snapped his fingers at one of the female servants. As she hurried ahead into the keep, he calmly turned around and motioned for us to follow, “G-Money has just entered the keep.”

“More like G-Wannabe,” Töten scoffed as Zeven choked back a laugh at the pair’s comments. Instead of reacting to my friends’ ribbing, a frown came to my lips as we began following after the old Gnome.

“Feast?” I questioned while cocking my head to the side.

I’d been under the impression that this was going to be a private meeting between Viscount Hollysharp, myself, Lady Tuin’Dyrr, and possibly Gearhead Hurkoort in regards to our desire to purchase farming G.O.A.L.M.s and G.O.A.H.L.M.s. A feast meant this was going to be

anything but a private meeting. That didn't make any sense unless our private business was being put on public display for some ignominious reason.

"Pardon me, Overlord Ironwolf," Steward Sillbiss said in a voice that sounded anything but apologetic, "but yours and Lady Tuin'Dyrr's business deal just happened to coincide with the celebration of an auspicious discovery." The old Gnome let out a prideful sniff without turning around. "One that will alter the future of the Kingdom of Cadarea along with the entire Nordic Region."

"Huh," I noncommittally grunted as I silently studied the banners, monster heads, and tapestries hanging from the walls.

"That's not foreboding at all, is it?" Töten muttered under his breath in group chat.

"Why do I suddenly feel like we're somehow behind the eight ball?" Phoenix added with a deep exhale.

"Seriously?" Zeven asked, giving the rest of us an amused look, "Not everything has to be about us or our recent quest."

"Uh, you do know, don't you," Phoenix asked in a voice dripping with sarcasm, "that's how quests work in most MMOs, right?"

"More or less," Töten agreed with a sigh.

"Oh, come on," Zeven let out a dismissive chuckle, "You both act like we're going to run into more Azure Skull Mage Cultists or something. We're way ahead of any possible response and the quest isn't even over yet, is it, Star?" I caught the Badger Kin motion at me with his chin out of the corner of my eye as he confidently continued. "This Viscount Hollysharp will probably just fine you some extra gold for not getting approval first and the problem will be resolved quickly enough."

"Oh-my-gawd," Phoenix said in jest as she did her best to stifle her giggles, "This furball here has no idea who we're dealing with?"

"Tell me about it," Töten let out a short bark of laughter, before elbowing the Badger Kin, "You really need to take some time to catch up on Star's videos so you know what's all going on."

"Ha!" Zeven exclaimed as I rolled my eyes at their back and forth, "Like I have time to do that playing sixteen to seventeen hours a day with you jerk-offs."

"I swear, Töten," Phoenix joked shaking her head, "Some thanks that is."

“Eh, what do you expect from a Beast Kin,” Töten chortled back as Zeven flipped them both off.

“Stop horsing around,” I hissed, seeing a pair of G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers up ahead. They were standing to either side of a set of ornate double doors, “we’re approaching the great room!”

The trio immediately spaced themselves apart and acted like they weren’t horsing around as we were led to the doors. Rolling my eyes at their shenanigans, I contemplated why there were so many guards stationed throughout the keep’s corridors. Was it a simple display of power, concerns about political assassinations, or because there was a large group of nobles present? It was a curious question. When we were just ten feet before them, the two G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers seemed to take notice of us and silently moved to open the doors without a word from the Steward.

I was unsurprised at the sight of the luxurious room on the other side of the doors. It was more or less what I expected at this point. The immense chamber was decorated like a medieval ski lodge with a roaring fireplace along the far wall. There were a number of vicious-looking monstrous heads on display over the stone mantle along with a number of broken weapons and shields.

What did catch me by surprise were the numerous nobles in high-quality social clothing who seemed to be mingling together in small groups with actual wine glasses in their hands. This was a much larger get-together than I’d initially expected from Lady Tuin’Dyrr’s short message. Even with the Steward’s warning, I felt goosebumps instantly run down my arms as the crowd of nobles turned to stare at us with expressions of polite disdain etched onto their pompous faces.

It reminded me of being a transfer student in high school. You know, the first moment you enter your homeroom a few months after the first semester has already started and everyone has had a chance to form their social clicks and they give you that unwelcoming glare. Yeah, it was like that but a hundred times worse with us being a group of Halflings. Without a second thought, an indifferent mask slid over my face as I stiffly turned back toward the Marshal. I was somewhat surprised to find him whispering in low voices with an ornately dressed female Gnome servant standing beside the entrance.

“Overlord Ironwolf, Herald Wofonklap will take over from here,” Steward Slillbiss explained while offering a polite bow, “If you’ll excuse

me, I'll be on my way.”

He'd said that like I had a choice in the matter. Whatever, I sourly thought, giving him a curt nod back. Without a second look, he immediately took his leave. As the doors closed behind him, the female Gnome cleared her throat and faced the room full of nobles and guards.

“Announcing Overlord Startum Ironwolf of the House of Kayden!” Herald Wofonklap professionally bellowed over the low mutter of the room as she swept an arm toward me. “His titles include: First Settler, First Village, Hero of Delonshire Mine, Lord of BrokenFang Hold, Wurm Slayer, Tribal Leader, Mine Boss, Noble Warden, Ship's Captain-” As the Herald began listing off my first lower-level titles, most of the nobles scoffed loudly to each other that I was nothing more than a Provincial Lordling. Those supercilious looks began to slowly change to ones of shock as the female Gnome continued. “Protector of Auris Shaeras, Orc Bane, Sekolahian Bane, Beastkin Brother, Noble Defender, Scourge of the Dishonorable, Protector of the Kingdom of Kader, Champion of the Royal House of Isolde, Scourge of the Dil-Hilth Race, Honorable Noble, Scourge Bringer-” The alarmed murmur that passed through their ranks was immediately silenced as the Herald finished with, “and Hero of the Gigantic Cheliferidae Risso Infestation.”

As the Herald took a deep breath, I saw Lady Tuin'Dyrr quietly making her way toward us with Ezio Firzene, the Shadow Slayer Assassin from Crippled Burrick Pub, at her back. There was an amused twinkle in her eyes as she took in the stunned reactions of the nobles around her. Not hesitating, the female Gnome swept her arm toward the Half-Orc standing by my side next.

“He is escorting his wife, Lady Helgath Ironwolf,” Herald Wofonklap professionally continued as many of the nobles turned toward the Half-Orc, “Her titles include: Soulmate, Ex-slave, Prodigy of the Mind, Defiant One, Orc Bane, Sekolahian Bane, Scourge of the Dishonorable, Scourge of the Dil-Hilth Race, and Hero of the Gigantic Cheliferidae Risso Infestation.” Ignoring the shocked gasps, the female Gnome motioned toward the Silver Dire Wolf girl on my other side, “Along with his mistress, Neysa Ironwolf.”

“I'm not his mistress,” Neysa protested as her voice rang out over the murmurs of disgust coming from the nobles at the Half-Orc's ex-slave title, “I'm his Combat Mount!”

That admission shocked the Herald to silence along with the onlooking nobles. For a second, you could've heard a pin hit the floor, which meant that Phoenix's sarcastic question, "You ride both, so isn't that basically the same thing?" resounded throughout the great room much louder than she'd planned along with Töten's hiss of "Nice one, Exlax!" Ignoring the gasps of indignation from several of the finely dressed female Gnomes at the implied insult, I shook my head at the red-faced Herald, before taking a step forward so that my friends could be introduced next.

"Announcing Chieftain Zeven Al'Zaric of the House of Bruic Diongmhalta!" Herald Wofonklap called out once again as she swept an arm toward the Badger Kin. "His titles include: Beithir Slayer, Noble Guardian, Honorable Wanderer, Hero of Kragrock, Honorary Member of the Clan of Hammertoe, Hero of the Gigantic Cheliferidae Risso Infestation."

As Zeven stepped up beside me, I gave him a nod at his in-game titles. While different than mine, they were nonetheless impressive. From the murmuring of the watching nobles, there were a number of incredulous voices denying that a Beast Kin of all creatures could have achieved such acclaim as Töten stepped forward next.

"Announcing Lord Töten Feinde of the House of Muspelheim!" Herald Wofonklap's voice rang out once again as she swept an arm toward the towering Oni-Fire Giant. "His titles include Oath of Redemption, Sole Survivor, Orc Bane, Noble Guardian, Scourge of the Dishonorable, Honorable Wanderer, Heroic Defender of Darom, Hero of the Gigantic Cheliferidae Risso Infestation."

Töten proudly took his place next to us as the murmurs around the great hall increased. I didn't know what was considered normal for titles in The World, but from the reactions of the nobles around us, they must not be anything like ours. I heard repeated whispered exclamations about the Bane and Heroic titles as Phoenix stepped forward next.

"Announcing Dame Phoenix Sonata!" Herald Wofonklap shouted even louder to be heard over the low roar coming from the room as she swept an arm at the Barbarian. "Her titles include Barbaric Defender, Heroic Defender of Auris Shaeras, Peer of the Kingdom of Tak'Ula'Kastadar, Sekolahian Bane, Orc Bane, Heroic Defender of the Kingdom of Kader, Dil-Hilth Bane, and Hero of the Gigantic Cheliferidae Risso Infestation."

When Phoenix joined us, I began leading us further into the room as the scathing comments of Barbaric Defender and Peer of the Kingdom echoed around us. The titles seemed to irritate the majority of the nobles. From what I could make out of their angry comments, they despised that a commoner had been uplifted to their ranks due to their accomplishments. Not even a commoner, I realized, overhearing a group of nobles as we passed, but a Barbarian of all things.

“How in the hell did you earn a Knight’s title?” Töten demanded as the Barbarian glared back at the riled-up roomful of nobles, “Aren’t you an Advance Start player?”

“It was for my help with the Sea Elves in their fight against the Sekolahian Empire,” Phoenix explained in a haughty tone. Seeing the surprised look on my face, she demanded, “What’s that look for? You’re not the only one that can earn cool titles.”

“I’m just trying to figure out how you got a title from the Sea Elves and I didn’t?” I grumbled in mock offense.

“Says the Half-Elf that is the Overlord of the entire Kingdom,” Phoenix scoffed in annoyance.

“She has a point,” Töten added in an amused tone.

“Whatever,” I dismissively grunted while suppressing a grin. Coming to a stop in front of the Dark Elf and Gnome, I gave them both a respectful nod, “Lady Tuin’Dyrr, Ezio Firzene.”

“Overlord Ironwolf, I’m so happy you could join us tonight,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr greeted while the male Gnome silently glowered at me from behind her back without saying a word. Motioning toward the mana accumulation crystal-topped cane in my hand, she flashed me a toothy smile, “I’m glad to see you’ve come prepared.”

“It’s not like I had much of a choice if I wanted to stay in an inn tonight,” I replied with a sour shake of my head, “or ensure that my farming purchases were approved without a hitch.” A frown came to my lips as I met her blue eyes. “So, do you want to explain what happened?” Ignoring the look of annoyance that flashed across her face, I gave a meaningful cough, “I thought you had a solid angle for acquiring the items we agreed to with your special five-finger discount?”

“That I did,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr grudgingly agreed as she nervously bit her lower lip and gazed toward a group of richly dressed Gnomes at the far end of the great room, “But Arcane Magus Givunkuss somehow found

out about our deal and is using Baron Flebbramel to block your purchase of G.O.A.L.M.s and G.O.A.H.L.M.s.”

“Arcane Magus Givunkuss?” I asked, not recognizing the name, when my eyes fell on a female Gnome wearing the familiar purple and blue robe of an Azure Skull Cultist, “Let me guess, she’s the one with brown buzz-cut hair?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, that’s her,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr gave me an odd look, “How did you know?”

“Let’s just say it has something to do with the quest you offered me earlier,” I replied, not particularly wanting to say more here as I pressed my lips together in concern. As Helgath angrily shifted beside me, I turned back to the Leader of the Crippled Burrick Pub, “Any idea what she said to block the purchase?”

“From what Ezio was able to overhear of their conversation earlier, she doesn’t like Halflings purchasing rune-powered G.O.L.E.M.s and mechanoids,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr explained as she motioned toward the Gnome Assassin standing behind her, “She also delivered a nasty message to Viscount Hollysharp about you taking his exiled daughter, Prustine Hollysharp, as one of your vassals, and that you were now here in Haldale trying to purchase a number of G.O.A.L.M.s and G.O.A.H.L.M.s without his prior approval for your lands in the Kingdom of Larethien.”

“So, what’s the big deal?” I asked, not quite following the logic, “Can’t we just offer him some more gold or something to smooth the problem over or-”

“You accepted his exiled daughter as your vassal,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr dryly repeated while letting out an exasperated sigh at my obvious ignorance of court politics, “That alone has earned you his everlasting enmity.”

“Like that’s not completely fucked up or anything,” Phoenix commented behind us as the Dark Elf grimaced.

“It’s how a lot of the noble family relationships went in closed Beta,” Töten explained in group chat, “As quest lines go, it’s usually best to avoid any of those court quests like the plague or you get sucked into the politics of the local region.” Seeing my annoyed glance, he gave me an indifferent shrug. “Unless you like that sort of gameplay.”

“Not particularly,” I distastefully grunted in group chat. As I turned back to Lady Tuin’Dyrr who was watching our exchange, she spoke first

catching me by surprise.

“Well, you’re involved in the court politics of Haldale now whether you wanted to be or not.” An amused smile played over the Dark Elf’s beautiful lips at our shocked looks as we realized she’d just listened in on our private group discussion. “Be careful who you’re speaking privately near when talking in group, raid, and clan chat,” she warned, “because you never know who might have the skill to overhear what you’re saying.”

“Damn, I didn’t know that was even possible,” Zeven stammered in surprise.

“You’re telling me,” Töten agreed as the Barbarian gave me a put-out look.

“The one time you need a Closed Beta player to know something,” Phoenix groused shaking her head, “and they step all over their dick.”

“And how,” I agreed as Töten began protesting that he didn’t know everything. Ignoring the twos back and forth, I turned back to the Dark Elf and gave her a polite bow, “We appreciate the warning.”

“I did that to make a point,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr pointed out as she severely met each of our eyes, “Just make sure you don’t try pulling that trickery in front of Viscount Hollysharp or-”

“We can kiss away pulling this deal off,” I interrupted, finishing her sentence as the rest of my friends nodded in understanding.

“That might be the least of your problems,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr disagreed, letting the warning hang in the air for a moment.

“So, what?” I asked, getting back to the topic at hand, “Viscount Hollysharp invited me here to read me the riot act or what?”

“I don’t know what a riot act is,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr pressed her lips together in distaste at my newfar slang, “But I expect he’s going to demand that you expel his daughter from your service or he’ll threaten to deny your request to purchase those farming G.O.A.L.M.s and G.O.A.H.L.M.s that you want.” The look on her face turned even grimmer. “He might even deny allowing you to purchase the seeds and food you need along with confiscating your payment in lieu of a fine.”

“Oh, fuck that jazz,” Töten exclaimed as both Barbarian’s and Badger Kin’s eyes widened in horror.

“Dude, if you lost all that gold-” Phoenix’s voice trailed away at a loss for words.

“You’d be ruined,” Zeven finished for her as he shook his shaggy

head in dismay. “And that doesn’t include your people starving to death in the months to come.” His thick black lips pressed together in thought. “I know Lady Tuin’Dyrr believes all of this is being done to block your purchase of farming G.O.A.L.M.s, but maybe it’s retribution by the Azure Skull Cult for your part in that Battle Mage quest.”

“Azure Skull Cult?” Lady Tuin’Dyrr asked in a hushed whisper.

“They’re a subgroup of the Academy of Technomancy in Tulduroc that we sort of pissed off to complete my Class Quest,” I explained while calling up the Quest Log in my HUD.

From what I could see, nothing had changed. My Battle Mage quest was completed without killing the two other bosses in the dungeon. That also meant there were no updates available as to how the Azure Skull Cultists might be reacting to the loss of their Eldritch Crystals. The only quests that might have an effect on what was going on with Viscount Hollysharp were the new Nordic Region quest to “Rediscover the ancient technology of Arcane Spatial magic via the use of static Portals or Teleportation spells!” and the “Influencing the direction of a magic tech revolution!”

Checking over the quest Objectives of each, I saw that there were no further updates listed on any of the objectives. That didn’t mean the Azure Skull Cultists weren’t somehow on to me. While they did have my name due to everything that went down in the Great Library over the Portal and Teleportation quest, it would still take them time to reach Haldale to start causing us problems, wouldn’t it?

Not unless the Azure Skull Cultists had already figured out a way to use static portals or teleportation spells, I silently considered, answering my own question. As I eyed Arcane Magus Givunkuss over the roomful of Gnome heads, she turned around as if feeling my eyes on her. Meeting my hazel eyes with her own, a gleeful sneer came to her lips as if she had some sort of score to settle with me.

You wanna play, I fiercely thought, matching her sneer with a savage grin of my own. So be it, we can play all night long if you want.

“Okay, let’s talk to this Viscount Hollysharp and get this over with so we can go drinking,” I growled while continuing to stare down the Azure Skull Cultist.

“What? You don’t recognize him?” Lady Tuin’Dyrr let out a clear piercing laugh at the look of annoyance that flashed across my face.

“You’re looking right at him!” Even though I hated being the one to break the staring contest, I turned to glare at the Dark Elf as she motioned her chin toward the group around Arcane Magus Givunkuss, “He’s the muscular stern-faced Gnome with the white beard and hair.”

“You mean the mob boss guy everyone is talking to?” Phoenix asked as all of us followed her gaze.

“Damn, he looks tough as nails!” Töten let out an impressed whistle.

“You sure you wanna be pissing that guy off?” Zeven asked, giving me a worried glance.

Ignoring the Badger Kin’s rhetorical question, I hit the hard-faced Gnome at the center of the noble group with an Identify while studying the Viscount closely. He was wearing a burgundy frock coat with a dark-brown fur collar and matching dress pants with a red vest, leather-string tie, and a white silk shirt. His left arm below the elbow was a bulky mechanical construction. I wasn’t sure if it was a gauntlet or a replacement limb like the one that the Gearheads had crafted for Alanah. Whichever it was, he moved it around as freely as he would a normal arm while talking to the nobles standing around him.

Curiously, I noted that the Viscount had what looked to be a large wide-bladed dagger strapped to his upper thigh in addition to the large ornate cane he proudly held in his hand like an oversized walking stick. Instead of a mana crystal attached for a handle, it had a thick, ribbed-steel cap that was heavy enough to be wielded like a spiked mace. As the name Fendano Hollysharp the Fourth, Level ?? Gnome, Viscount of Haldale appeared over his head, I could only frown and shake my head. Obviously, Prustine’s father was no blue-blooded pussy like so many of the other nobles I’d seen in The World.

“I wonder what that stands for on his belt buckle?” Phoenix asked as she elbowed me in the ribs.

Following the jerking motion of her chin, I saw what she meant. The Gnome’s steel belt buckle had gold lettering that spelled out GMTAF.

“He looks like an Italian Cowboy with that big-ass belt buckle!” Töten chortled following our gaze,

“It stands for Golem Magic-Tech Assault Force,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr explained as a frown came to her lips, “Viscount Hollysharp is the General of the Kingdom of Cadarea’s Eastern Region Imperial Forces.”

“Imperial Forces?” I asked as everyone but Töten glanced back at the Dark Elf in confusion.

“The Kingdom of Cadarea has their own standing army in addition to the troops that they send to the Royal Army to assist in defending the Isolde Line,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr explained as if that clarified the situation.

“Most of the Closed Beta players considered them more of a mini-empire than an actual kingdom,” Töten added in a low whisper as the frown deepened on my face, “If they ever find a way to power their G.O.A.H.E.M.s and G.O.A.L.E.M.s over long distances, they would become a major force that could possibly take over the entire Nordic Region.”

“That’s an adept analysis,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr congratulated the big guy, before adding, “and that’s one of the other reasons the House of Tuin’Dyrr has me deployed in Haldale.”

“Not for the Kingdom of Thayjar?” I glanced back at the female Assassin questioningly.

“That’s more or less the same thing,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr laughed with a twinkle in her eyes, “The House of Tuin’Dyrr is paid good money by the Kingdom of Thayjar to keep a close eye on their Gnome allies.”

“I’m sure along with all of the other kingdoms too,” I nodded in sudden understanding.

I’d have to talk to Mike later about all the extra services his House offered the next time we had to chat. Turning back to Viscount Hollysharp, I called over my shoulder as I began making my way across the great hall, “Come on, let’s go get this over with.” Before I’d taken five steps, I saw Viscount Hollysharp raise the head of his steel cane into the air over his head.

“Now that the last of you have arrived,” Viscount Hollysharp announced in a booming voice to the room, “It’s my pleasure to announce a new discovery that will change the future of the Kingdom of Cadarea forever and set it on a course of dominance in the Nordic Region!”

I growled under my breath in frustration as the roomful of nobles began clumping up in front of Viscount Hollysharp. There was no way I was going to be able to get through the crowd blocking my way now. Wonderful, I gritted my teeth and came to a stop as Viscount Hollysharp continued with his speech. There goes my evening of talking shit and drinking with my new friends.

“Ever since our creation of mana-powered machines, the Gnome race has been trapped within the boundaries of our kingdom unable to extend the reach of our power. No matter the immense knowledge, and overwhelming power that we wield within our borders, we have been unable to alter the events occurring beyond our borders and have been forced to watch as our allies within the Nordic Region have thrown away the lives of our people and either wasted or outright stolen the resources that we’ve supplied them for the Isolde Line!”

Coming to a stop, Viscount Hollysharp reached into the pouch at his waist and pulled out a large mana accumulation crystal that was as big as his head. Holding it up for everyone to see, his rough voice was tinged with anger.

“No matter our rune skills or how expertly we reduced the consumption of mana for our mechanical creations, it has never been enough. Mana Accumulation crystals are simply not powerful enough to keep our G.O.A.L.E.M. Magic-Tech Assault Force empowered outside the net of our mana accumulation crystal towers. For generations, the greatest Mages and Gearhead Engineers of the Academy of Technomancy in Tulduroc have spent their lives striving to solve Klekadam’s Postulate to no avail. Without higher mana storage capabilities, our race’s desires for expansionism have been denied with our people being strictly confined to the cities of Tulduroc and Haldale. As a race, we’ve been denied the ability to truly alter the events occurring beyond our borders or be fully recognized by the other races around us for the greatness of our accomplishments!”

As Viscount Hollysharp’s bellow died away, a low muted muttering began coming from the Gnome nobles at his words. It was obvious that all of them felt the same way about their history as Prustine’s father. Motioning for the Arcane Magus to step up beside him, a feeling of dread hit the pit of my stomach as he reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a familiar purple glowing crystal the size of his fist, and held it up to display to the crowded great room.

“Arcane Magus Givunkuss has just brought to me the discovery of a new mana crystal that will revolutionize our entire society.” A supercilious look came to the proud female Gnome’s face as Viscount Hollysharp reverently continued. “This Lesser Eldritch Crystal carries the power output of a hundred large mana accumulation crystals!” The angry muttering voices in the room immediately died away that bold

proclamation.

“One crystal can power one of our Magic-Tech Assault Force G.O.A.L.E.M.s for four days at a time. Though these new mana crystals can only be used once, I’ve been assured that the process of creating these Lesser Eldritch Crystals is relatively cheap and easy. That means we’ll have more than enough long-lasting mana power to increase the reach of our troops and take the fight to the enemy.” Pumping a fist into the air over his head, Viscount Hollysharp shouted, “With this new power source, we’ll march our forces to the Isolde Line and bring the invading Northern Clans to their knees and take over the leadership of the alliance!”

As the great room erupted with thunderous applause and cheering, Viscount Hollysharp puffed his chest out as he stood proudly, relishing in the adulation of the moment. To my surprise, it wasn’t just the nobles who were excited about the news of the Lesser Eldritch Crystals, but even the servants and guards were celebrating the news. It was like every single Gnome in the great room was ecstatic that the other races of the Nordic Region would finally understand their race’s true greatness.

Maybe it was due to the entire species being of short stature, I silently thought with a mental snort as the Randy Newman song, Short People, began running through the back of my mind. If the stereotypical jokes about Napoleon and the temper of short Sicilian men held even a sliver of truth, how would a race of short people react to finally being able to show the bigger races around them that they were more skilled and powerful than them? On top of that, if what Viscount Hollysharp had said was true, the entire species had been dealing with this racial embarrassment of not being good enough in comparison to the other races around them for multiple generations.

Glancing around at the handful of non-Gnomes, I took note of the conflicted looks on the faces of the guards, merchants, and nobles. It was obvious that they were uncomfortable with what was being said. A part of me found this immensely humorous on one level. The World’s Character Stats made differences in height, sex, and race all but moot so why would one’s height matter so much? Hell, it could even be argued that being shorter in-game was better because you were a smaller target to hit.

Then again, I hadn’t gone for a smaller character shape like I typically did in most First-Person Shooters. That was partly because of the body scan that was taken for my Nightmare Start, and partly, it was because

I was playing an MMO. I'd spent more than enough time in the past playing as a Gnome and was done with staring at everyone's crotches wherever I entered a crowded area.

Looking around at the zealot-like expression on the excited Gnomes' faces, I could only shake my head at the ridiculousness of it all. Did the entire kingdom associate stature with success, power, and strength? I honestly would've expected this to be more of a newfar thing and not a Gnome thing. Did the entire Kingdom of Cadarea have an issue with being too short? Was that why their G.O.A.H.E.M.s were so tall? The ridiculousness of it all actually made me laugh out loud.

While that was doing nothing to alter the grim future that I'd envisioned back in the mini-boss cave from unfolding before my eyes, I had to admit that it certainly tickled my sarcastic sense of humor on one level. That might sound a bit strange, but sometimes, all that you could do was laugh at tragedy to remain sane. Nonetheless, this was like watching the beginning stages of the Holocaust. As the clapping and cheering of the clueless Gnomes started to die down around me, an idea of how I might be able to pull the brakes on this train of horror began forming in the back of my mind.

Raising my gloved hands, I began slowly clapping as loudly as I could. It only took a few moments for the last of the Gnomes around me to quiet down. By then, the sound of my solo clapping was all that was left echoing around the room.

At first, no one seemed to pay any mind to what I was doing. As the slow clapping sound continued to ring throughout the room, the nobles nearest to me began giving me nasty glances and muttering for me to stop. Not that I did even as Lady Tuin'Dyrr and my friends gave me worried looks. Dragging out the obnoxious sound, I continued clapping as the crowd before Viscount Hollysharp opened up a space between us. Seeing the male Gnome suck in a breath of air, I called out before he could speak.

"That's a great idea! Who are you planning to sacrifice first in Haldale for this new future?" My cheery tone was at odds with my grim words as a look of alarm flashed in Arcane Magus Givunkuss's hazel eyes. "Let me guess, you'll slaughter all of the Halfling males and females in Old Town first."

'Stand back with the others,' I silently warned my girls, before unhooking my arms from theirs as Phoenix murmured under her breath.

“Dude, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“By the dark, I imagine you’ll even be able to get decent Lesser Eldritch Crystals from slaughtering all of the children too,” I cockily continued, ignoring my friends’ nervous glances as I confidently began striding through the gap toward Viscount Hollysharp with my cane clicking against the stone floor with each step.

“It makes sense in a sick sort of way. I mean, it’s not like the children would be able to survive on their own, so in essence, you’re almost doing them a favor by killing them at that point,” I crassly continued as my eyes bore into the female mage whose face had just turned white as a sheet, “Tell me, Arcane Magus Givunkuss, am I right? Is that the logical next step the Azure Skull would take after kidnapping and slaughtering the Halfling children’s parents?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, you demented Halfling,” Arcane Magus Givunkuss venomously spat even as a panicked look flared in her eyes.

“These sick accusations are dishonorable and an insult to the Academy of Technomancy,” Viscount Hollysharp managed to huff out before I could continue my tirade, “I will have-”

“These are not accusations,” I roared, overriding him while swinging my new Magi-Weaved Traveler’s Backpack to my chest. Reaching inside, I selected a desiccated Gnomeling corpse and threw it onto the stone floor with a wet thud, “I’m telling you how the Azure Skulls from the Academy of Technomancy create Lesser Eldritch Crystals!”

Shrieks of horror rang out from the nobles as they fearfully backed away from the vine-covered corpse. Whatever excitement they had about the new discovery was instantly forgotten. Ignoring them and the guards around the room that started rushing forward, I continued in the same relaxed cocky tone as before while reaching back into my bag.

“The only problem is what will you do when you run out of Halflings to feed your increased needs for more Lesser Eldritch Crystal?” I paused, cocking my head questioningly to the room as G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers surrounded me with their swords drawn. Their confusion was sort of funny. I hadn’t actually killed or threatened anyone so they didn’t quite know what to do with me as I continued with my impromptu speech, “Or, better yet, if you desire a better power source than that?” This time, I flung the desiccated corpse of a pureblooded Gnome onto the stone floor as

several of the nobles outright fainted at the sight. “Why, you start kidnapping and slaughtering high-ranking nobles like Battle Mage Clolvuc Mylimdart to satisfy your greed!” My voice took on a mocking tone. “If a Halfling peasant’s life is worth a Lesser Eldritch Crystal, then what would a high-level Gnome noble give you?”

“Don’t listen to this low-level Halfling, milord!” Arcane Magus Givunkuss shrieked in utter fury as she threateningly pointed a finger at me. “These accusations are all lies!”

“Lies?” My bark of laughter echoed around the room as the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers nervously glanced at their Sub-Leaders for directions. Pulling out a Lesser and Greater Eldritch Crystal, I held both up for everyone in the room to see while shouting, “Look at the results for yourself!”

The utter horror in Viscount Hollysharp’s eyes was clear to see as the old Gnome whirled on the female Gnome beside him. Whatever Arcane Magus Givunkuss saw in his eyes must have terrified her to the bone. Drawing dual wands from the sheaths at her waist, she held them defensively before her as she slowly backed away from the male Gnome.

“Is this true?” Viscount Hollysharp demanded as he threateningly strode after the female Gnome with his heavy steel cane leading the way.

“This ignorant Halfling is not adequately explaining the full context of how we’ve created these Lesser Eldritch Crystals,” Arcane Magus Givunkuss anxiously blabbed out in a rush of words, “We had to fine-tune the process and might have taken a few liberties-”

“This ignorant Halfling, as you so succinctly put it, is Overlord Ironwolf and a Battle Mage in his own right,” Viscount Hollysharp’s gruff voice reminded me of granite as he paused to hold up a hand to stop the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers from arresting the female Gnome. Dropping the stub of his cigar to the ground, he silently crushed it out under a steel-toed boot, before coldly continuing, “I didn’t ask you for excuses. I asked you if what he said was true!”

I was impressed and slightly concerned that Viscount Hollysharp knew of my new Class. It was a curious thing. The only way he could’ve known that was to have run an Identify on me. That was something I had to remember that trainers and higher-level people of The World could do. A frown came to my lips as I thought back to the Gnome Scribes around the city gates and Priestess Ines back in Delonshire. I’d simply assumed at the

time that they'd had a way to know of my reputation.

"The Azure Skulls of the Academy of Technomancy in Tulduroc have offered you a way to bring peace and prosperity to the entire Nordic Region under the direct leadership of the Kingdom of Cadarea," Arcane Magus Givunkuss's stringent voice rang throughout the great room, "And you dare to accuse me of impropriety! Would you throw all of that good away for the cost of a few dirty Halflings' lives?"

Seeing Viscount Hollysharp pause at Arcane Magus Givunkuss's words, a frown came to my lips. It was hard to argue against a proposition like that. People's greed and desire for power had started how many atrocities on Earth? Each and every one of them had been supposedly started for the so-called "greater good," but in the end, it had always been for the benefit of a few powerful people who thought they were better than everyone else.

"I doubt it was at the cost of a few Halflings' lives." A pensive look came to Viscount Hollysharp's stern face as he glanced at the corpse of Clolvuc Mylimdart. "More likely than not, a great many noble Gnomes have been silenced along with many others to keep your dirty secrets." He nodded to the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers behind the female Gnome. "Arrest Arcane Magus Givunkuss on my command and take her to the dungeons. I'll question her after the feast."

"Yes, milord," one of the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers snapped. Thumping a fist against his armored chest, he motioned for the others to take her.

"I will not be captured by you ignorant fools!" Arcane Magus Givunkuss let out an anguished scream as she held up her wands toward the Viscount.

Immediately, all of the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers in the great hall reacted to the threat. Surging forward, the nearest thrust their blades at the female Gnome's back while others threw themselves in front of the Viscount to block any of her attacks with their armored bodies. To make matters even more confusing, nobles began to anxiously back away from the violence while others fled for the exit.

Instead of casting an Arcane attack, a glowing purple orb appeared around her body. Before anyone could strike her, she disappeared in an explosion of mana. My ears rang from the loud clap of displaced air as the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers' weapons stabbed and slashed at empty air. As

everyone looked around in confusion to see where she'd gone, Phoenix exclaimed behind me.

"Did she just use a teleport spell?"

"The World has no teleportation spells," Töten protested as he looked around in confusion.

"Then, what the hell do you call that?" Zeven demanded as we all glanced at our resident Closed Beta Player.

"I ... um ... got nothing," Töten admitted as the guards around the great room started shouting out orders to secure the keep and find the runaway mage.

"Seal off the exits!"

"Make sure there are no illusions hiding her presence!"

"Keep the Viscount surrounded at all times!"

"She's gone from here!" I heard Viscount Hollysharp angrily storm. "Put the Highborn Quarters on alert and send messengers to the gate!"

Moving slowly, I bent down and unobtrusively collected the corpse of Clolvuc Mylimdart. As I stood back up and turned around to gather the Gnomeling corpse, the sound of approaching booted feet made me pause in consternation. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Viscount Hollysharp and his guard of G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers heading directly toward me. Scooping up the body, I stood up to stuff the corpse into my Magi-Weaved Traveler's Backpack as the guards surrounded me and my friends.

'Is it time now?' Helgath asked as she dropped into a half crouch and warily glared at the guards.

'Not unless they attack first,' I warned as Viscount Hollysharp came to a stop in front of me.

"I think we need to have a talk, Ironwolf," Viscount Hollysharp spat while I stuffed the Gnomeling away.

"That might be for the best, Hollysharp," I replied in the same distasteful tone, purposely leaving off any honorifics.

"Overlord Ironwolf is not accustomed to the proper etiquette of the court, Viscount Hollysharp," Lady Tuin'Dyrr hurriedly called out as she delicately pushed one of the guard's blades aside to ease closer to us, "so please excuse his direct speak. If you'll allow me to-"

"A private talk," Viscount Hollysharp clarified as a look of distaste flashed across his face at the female Dark Elf's reassuring words.

"That might be for the best," I agreed as a murderous look came to

both my girl's faces.

'We'll make them pay if we must, but there is no way we're fighting our way out of this mess,' I warned, while pointedly eyeing the numerous high-level G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers surrounding us, 'For now, simply stay alert and be ready for anything.'

'Yes, War Leader,' they both mumbled as I caught the rest of the team's eyes with a jerk of my chin.

"It's fine, Lady Tuin'Dyrr," I assured the female assassin while flashing her a quick smile, "Remember, this is why you asked me to come tonight." A pout came to her full lips as she reluctantly stepped back from the crossed blades blocking her way with a slight nod. Catching my friends' eyes, a wry grin came to my lips, "Nothing's changed but the venue, so stick to the plan, enjoy a few of the delicacies, and we'll be back in a jiffy."

"Uh-huh," Töten wordlessly grunted as Zeven arched an eyebrow at my words.

"The sooner the better," Phoenix agreed.

"In a jiffy?" Viscount Hollysharp asked in a droll tone as I turned back to him and thumped the cane against the stone floor.

"It's a newfar measurement of time," I replied with a shrug as he thoughtfully eyed the cane in my hands. Ignoring the growing frown on his lips, I swept an arm out toward the rest of the keep, "If you'll lead the way-"

"Where did you get that cane from?" Viscount Hollysharp demanded in barely contained outrage as he looked into my eyes.

Around us, I noticed the merchants and nobles that were listening to our conversation intently suddenly perk up at that accusation. As the excited muttering grew around us, I held up the cane for everyone to see.

"Oh, this old thing? Believe it or not, I purchased it from a second-hand store down in Old Town," I barked out in laughter while calmly meeting the Gnome's furious gaze, "Why do you ask?"

"Because ... it is ... my cane," Viscount Hollysharp declared, biting each of the words off as the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers tensed around us.

"That's funny, because it doesn't say Hollysharp's Runemaster Arc Cane anywhere on it," I mused, curiously turning the cane over in my hands, "It's actually named Prustine's Runemaster Arc Cane." As the male Gnome sputtered in outrage at my words, I obliviously leaned in closer to

him while holding the glittering handle of the cane next to my frock coat, “While it goes perfectly with my new suit, I just happen to have a young Gnomeling female Runemaster named Prustine that I want to gift this too.”

“You’re planning on giving Prustine back her staff?” Viscount Hollysharp demanded in disbelief as a “Ooh” of shock ran through the listening crowd.

“Why not?” I laughed while standing up straight and planting the cane on the floor in front of me with a loud thump. “She’s just finished constructing a rune-powered ship to sail the Strait of Icelus for me and I needed an appropriate reward for such an accomplishment.”

“Are you a raving lunatic?” Viscount Hollysharp roared as he lunged forward to snag the cane from my hands. “There’s not a mana accumulation crystal large enough to run an entire rune ship with!”

“There doesn’t need to be,” I laughed while moving the cane to the side just enough that his hand closed on empty air. As he began wildly snatching for the cane, I kept it dancing just out of his reach while taunting him, “The process is a bit complicated if you’re not a runemaster-”

“I am a runemaster too!” Viscount Hollysharp bellowed as I pulled the cane out of his reach again.

“But the gist is that she’s setting up a circuit to power the ship using a bunch of mana accumulation crystals all at once,” I continued as we danced around the circle of G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers with him trying to rip the cane from my grasp.

“That’s impossible!” Viscount Hollysharp furiously shouted as I yanked the cane away once again.

“And yet she’s doing it,” I chortled while playfully flipping the cane to be parallel to the ground at about neck height and singing-song out, “Up high!” As the male Gnome leaped in the air after the cane, I dropped it to waist level as his hand whooshed through nothing, “Down low!” Again, his opposite hand shot out to grasp the cane as I pulled it away at the last minute and shouted out in triumph, “Too slow!”

“Are you making fun of my height?” Viscount Hollysharp demanded in a cold voice as he came to a panting stop to glare up at me.

“Not at all,” I guffawed in amusement while letting the point of the cane drop to the floor with a resounding metallic thud, “I’m making fun of how slow you are!” As the nobles around the room dropped silent at that statement, I shook my head in good-natured fun, “You really need to start

training up your Agility if a low-level mage such as myself can out-dodge you.”

“Why would I do that?” Viscount Hollysharp demanded as if I were an idiot, “I’m a Gearhead and Rune Master!”

“Because you were ballsy enough to try and steal what is mine,” I barked as his face turned beet red.

“I am Fendano Hollysharp the Fourth, Viscount of Haldale and General of the kingdom’s Golem Magic-Tech Assault Force!” the Gnome roared at the top of his lungs, “You will address me with proper respect!”

“And I’m Startum Ironwolf, Lord of BrokenFang Hold and War Leader of the House of Kayden, Overlord of the kingdoms of Tak’Ula’Kastadar and Kader, Protector of the Kingdom of Kader and the Royal Forces defending the Isolde Line!” I roared back with the same intensity while glaring into his eyes, “Until you address me with the respect I deserve, you can shove that title up your ass!”

For a long moment, we stayed frozen like that staring into each other’s enraged eyes. All around us were the sounds of uncomfortable shifting and nervous coughs as the group of nobles and my friends wished to be anywhere else but here. The nobles were probably concerned with being present when Viscount Hollysharp was being disrespected, while my friends were trading nervous glances at the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers that had us surrounded with their weapons drawn.

While it was true that dying and losing all of my experience would suck balls, I wasn’t about to be spoken to like a misbehaving child. And who knows, I thought with a laugh, if I could raise enough Ghouls, maybe we could escape the city without losing our built-up XP. Even if we couldn’t, I’d be damned before I allowed anyone to speak down at me; especially not an asshole like Prustine’s father of all people!

Looking around, Viscount Hollysharp took notice of the crowd of nobles watching our exchange. Letting out an explosive breath, he lifted his head and stood to his full height as if mentally reviewing the exchange between us. As his face screwed up like he’d bitten into something distasteful, he gave me a courteous nod.

“If you’ll please follow me, Overlord Ironwolf,” Viscount Hollysharp professionally said as his face froze into a mask, “We have much to discuss in private.”

“Lead on, Viscount Hollysharp,” I coolly replied, nodding for him

to lead on.

The muttering of the crowd began to grow around us again as Viscount Hollysharp led the way to the far side of the great room. Ahead of us, the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers politely but professionally cleared a path through the guests. We'd nearly reached what I assumed was our destination, when a familiar noble that had been standing with Viscount Hollysharp and Arcane Magus Givunkuss raised his voice.

"Viscount Hollysharp, before you demean yourself further by speaking with this Halfling Overlord, I insist on an explanation for your assault against Arcane Magus Givunkuss!" the pompous Gnome demanded in a sulfurating voice as the guards held him back.

"Before I demean myself further, Baron Flebbramel," Viscount Hollysharp sneered as he stopped before the door a servant had opened for us, "Wasn't it you who brought Arcane Magus Givunkuss's new Eldritch Crystals first to my attention?"

"Yes, it was me," Baron Flebbramel proudly agreed, straightening his shoulders.

"I assume from your dismissive reaction that you were aware of the fact that Arcane Magus Givunkuss and her Azure Skulls were kidnapping and slaughtering the people of the Kingdom of Cadarea to produce these new wonders."

"What of it? I've spoken with your wife, Lady Hollysharp, about this many times over the years. She's in full agreement that Halflings are nothing but a plague on our fine kingdom," Baron Flebbramel pontificated with an indignant look on his arrogant face. "She even pointed out that you exiled your own Halfling daughter for being a grave disappointment. Now, at least, they will be of some use to their betters by propelling the--"

"I did not exile Prustine because she was a disappointment," Viscount Hollysharp hauntingly snapped as his face turned gray, "I temporarily exiled her so that she would give up on her ridiculous belief that she could solve Klekadam's Postulate!" His fierce green eyes scanned the crowd looking back at him. "You know as well as I do that with wealth, power, and prestige comes great responsibility. As nobles, it is our duty to protect the peasants, commoners, and merchants on our lands. It is our obligation to make a better life for those that have sworn their lives to us."

I had to silently admit that I was shocked at Viscount Hollysharp's words on honor and duty. From everything I'd ever heard about him from

Prustine, he was a raging pompous ass. And while that might be true to an extent, he was the first noble that I'd heard talk about a lord's responsibility to their subjects. From the scathing looks on many of the nobles' faces, his interpretation of a noble's duty was not shared by everyone present.

"You dare tell us how we should treat our servants and peasants!" Baron Flebbramel demanded in outrage.

"If you're not upholding your duty and responsibility that you swore upon as a noble of the Kingdom of Cadera," Viscount Hollysharp snapped back without any hesitation, "I will personally press the king to strip the titles of each and every last one of you guilty of slaughtering your vassals and commoners for the sake of creating these Eldritch Crystals!" With that, he whirled around and continued into the room as the guards waved for me to follow.

There was a click as the door was closed behind us. Silently looking around, I was surprised to see we were inside a small office of sorts. There was an ornate wooden desk on the far side of the room with a plush, leather-backed chair. There were two seats in front of the desk along with a small sitting area to the side that consisted of two leather sofas, another leather-backed chair, and a coffee table with crystalline glasses and a bottle filled with amber fluid. Along the walls were swords and shields of various types along with heavy wool drapes and tapestries.

To my surprise, Viscount Hollysharp waved me toward the pair of sofas as he strode for the leather-back chair on the far side of the table. As I sat down in the plush leather, the male Gnome poured two glasses of amber fluid. Silently handing me one of the glasses, he took the other and sat down across from me in the leather-back chair. For a long moment, he stared across the table at me deep in thought, before holding up the glass between us as if to offer me a toast.

"You are not what I expected for an upstart War Lord when I first heard that you'd taken my daughter as a vassal," Viscount Hollysharp prompted, before taking a drink.

"I'll take that as a compliment," I smirked, holding my glass aloft in a salute, "You, on the other hand, are everything I'd expected you'd be after talking with Prustine about her past. At least, until your little speech about noblesse oblige."

"Touché," Viscount Hollysharp grunted as I took a sip of the amber fluid.

The fiery liquid burned a path down my throat until it hit my stomach. It tasted of smoke with a hint of cherries and oak. Taking a wheezing breath, I felt the warmth of the liquid spreading throughout my body as a smile came to my lips.

“Smooth,” I gasped as the male Gnome chuckled at my reaction.

“Not bad for two-hundred-year-old scotch,” Viscount Hollysharp agreed with a smirk at the slight widening of my eyes. As I was trying to wrap my mind around that bit of information and what it meant in Earth terms, the Gnome continued pensively, “I fear little will be done to censure Baron Flebbramel and Arcane Magus Givunkuss.” Seeing me suck in a breath to protest, he spoke first, “Without a copious amount of political power and gold, it’s rare for a noble to get more than a stern talking to for kidnapping and slaughtering commoners, especially if they’re Halflings.”

“And if they’re someone like Battle Mage Mylimdart?” I asked, curious as to his thoughts on the topic.

“That’s a bit trickier,” Viscount Hollysharp admitted, “If their case can be proven in the royal court, I expect the Azure Skull faction of the Academy of Technomancy will be liable for compensate to the Mylimdart family.” A conflicted look came to the male Gnome’s stern face. “But that will not stop the drive for producing more of the Eldritch Crystals. Their mana storage is too essential for our mana-tech-driven society.”

“You do understand the atrocities those Eldritch Crystals will lead to?” I asked as a grave look came to my face.

“The slaughtering of the prisoners in the dungeons. The nobility requiring harsher punishments for the simplest of infractions. The scouring of the poor sectors of our cities to remove those that are deemed useless or unwanted.” A faraway look came to Viscount Hollysharp’s deep-set eyes. “That says nothing of what the other kingdoms will do to get their hands on the easy gold. I have no doubts that removing poor Halflings from the streets and turning them into a profit will be agreed upon as the best course of action by nearly all the nobles within the Nordic Region.”

“It will be the beginning of a culling that will never end,” I warned, thinking of how bad the industrial revolution would’ve been if it took the lives of the poor and downtrodden to power the new magic-tech revolution. “All lives but the noblest would be used to feed the ever-growing need for new Eldritch Crystals.”

“Even if I were the King,” Viscount Hollysharp admitted with a

look of horror on his face from my words, “I fear there would be little I could do to stop this coming nightmare.”

“Unless there were another way to get the same amount of stored mana as these new Eldritch Crystals,” I countered after taking another sip of the aged whisky, “especially if they could be recharged and used the same way by miners, shippers, gem cutters, and merchants.”

“Now you sound like Prustine,” Viscount Hollysharp irritably snapped as a scornful look flared in his eyes, “Wishful thinking won’t change the facts of the matter.”

“Funny you should say that,” I barked in amusement at the sour look that came to the old Gnome’s face, “since it was Prustine who figured out how to create a cluster of mana accumulation crystals to power rune machines for extended operations.”

“Is Prustine still pushing that ridiculous theory of hers that she’s solved Klekadam’s Postulate?” Viscount Hollysharp’s lips curled in scorn. I could tell in that split moment the Gnome had instantly lost all respect for me. “I was going to demand that you expel my daughter from your service so that she’s forced to admit her ignorance, but now I’m half tempted to let her remain so that your prideful attitude can be taken down a notch or two!”

“That’s more than acceptable,” I smirked, unconcerned about being laughed at. Even if she pissed me off regularly, Prustine had my respect and confidence to take this gamble on her no matter what her father thought of her theories, “As long as that means you’ll approve my purchase of farming G.O.A.L.M.s and G.O.A.H.L.M.s?”

“Why would I do that?” Viscount Hollysharp demanded. Throwing an arm over the back of his chair, he threw back the last of his whisky and looked me in the eyes, “I may as well take your gold since you’re just going to throw it away on my prideful daughter. The sooner you fail the sooner she’ll be forced to crawl back to me on her hands and knees to beg for forgiveness!”

“If you’re so sure about that,” I mused while doing my best to ignore the clenching of my guts as this asshole tried to rob me. I had to play this right or he’d just take my gold and screw me over without a second thought, “How about an official wager?”

“An official wager?” Viscount Hollysharp asked in surprise.

“Yeah, one stamped with your signature and seal,” I explained while setting down my drink and swinging my Magi-Weaved Traveler’s

Backpack into my lap. Pulling out the Greater Eldritch Crystal again, I held it up as bait.

“What’s the wager you’re proposing?” Viscount Hollysharp asked, casually sitting back in his chair as if he were humoring me.

“In two days, Prustine is supposed to pick me and my friends up in the HollyTerror from the port city of Dolurn,” I explained as a frown came to the old Gnome’s lips.

“The HollyTerror?”

“It’s a large magic-tech ship that I’ve requested Prustine to build for me. It runs solely on mana accumulation crystals working in a cluster,” I explained as the look of scorn returned to his stern face, “The wager is pretty simple. If it works, you pay up by approving my purchases and I’ll give you the rights to use the runes that she’s created for a price.” I shrug trying to keep the excitement out of my voice. “If it doesn’t, I’ll give up this Greater Eldritch Crystal and expel Prustine from my service.”

“You’ll give me the runes she’s created for a price?” Viscount Hollysharp asked with his eyes locked on the glittering crystal in my hand. No matter how cool he tried to play it, I could tell he wanted the crystal badly.

What I found humorous was that the old Gnome didn’t seem to care about the HollyTerror ship one way or another. It was obvious he didn’t believe the ship would function, or if it did, it would be a primitive design that was unworthy of his attention. The sneer on his lips reminded me of the first time I’d told Prustine about my blueprints for my semi-automatic crossbows. She’d thought it ridiculous that a Half-Elf could’ve designed anything of interest. Surprisingly enough, the concept of paying for a rune formula did perk his interest and keep it.

“The concept is called a patent in my world,” I explained while trying not to give away any tells as to my own building excitement. If I could pull this off, I’d be rolling in gold by the end of next month, “Basically, you’ll be given approval to use the rune configuration that allows multiple mana accumulation crystals to work together in a cluster for a small fee each and every time the runes are used.”

“A small fee?” Viscount Hollysharp scoffed as if I’d suggested something ridiculous, “How would that even be possible to manage if anyone can copy the runes?”

“The fee would be five percent of the total worth of the mana-

powered creation,” I laid out, asking for a higher amount up front so that the crafting Gnome could talk me down to a more reasonable amount, “As for how that would be managed, I’d suggest creating a patent office for that.” Seeing his lips press together at the unfamiliar word, I helpfully explained the concept.

“The patent office would give out an official license and a stamp that would be placed on the back of any mana-powered creations using the rune configuration. If anyone is caught using the rune configuration without an official license and stamp, the city guards would be responsible for assessing them a fine that would be paid to the kingdom’s coffers and they would be required to pay or have their mana-powered creation confiscated.”

“What would we do if the builder doesn’t have the gold to pay the required fee?” Viscount Hollysharp asked out loud as he sat up straight in his leather-backed chair to consider my proposal.

“Have a sale for the confiscated mana-powered creations at the end of every month or deconstruct the items back into their base components,” I helpfully offered as the old Gnome’s eyes lit up at the prospect of all the gold that could be made just in fees and licensing alone. “I’ll take my cut from the total worth of the mechanical creation or the worth of the base components.”

“That could work,” Viscount Hollysharp harrumphed thoughtfully as I shut up and sipped on my whisky.

The old Gnome’s eyes never left the Greater Eldritch Crystal as he considered my proposal. His lips moved while he calculated how much gold the office could demand from the Gearheads and Engineers within the kingdom if this did work out. Better yet, I overheard him mutter under his breath, it would only cost him the amount of opening an office and the personnel needed to run it. As I took another sip of my whisky, the crafty Gnome settled back in his leather-backed chair and eyed me thoughtfully.

“Maybe you’re not the complete fool I thought you were at first,” Viscount Hollysharp admitted after a moment. Sitting his glass down on the coffee table, a smirk curved up the corners of his lips as he sat back in his chair to eye me thoughtfully. “While what you say could work, five percent is simply too much gold for such a request.” He dismissively waved a ring-covered hand. “I’d agree to one percent if I were to make this agreement.”

I’m in like Flynn, I silently chortled to myself, understanding this was where I needed to bargain. Letting out an amused laugh, I drained my

glass and grinned, "There's no possible way I could accept anything less than four and a half percent."

That started a flurry of bargaining as we went back and forth like two grandmothers trying to get the best price from the butcher for a haunch of meat. I complimented him on such a rich, well-run city and his obvious wealth, stating that a fledgling country lord needed the money to build up his lands while the old fox complained about the high costs of land in the city and the cost of good help to make this new-fangled licensing concept work.

When he'd driven me down to three percent, I refused to budge further. Viscount Hollysharp badgered me relentlessly and got quite heated when I stopped playing the game of give and take. To finally get him over the hump, I spun the Greater Eldritch Crystal in my hand while getting down to the meat of the matter.

"I don't know why you're being so stubborn," I countered after his last refusal to budge over two and a half percent, "You do realize that this is a win for you either way, right?"

"So, you admit my erstwhile daughter can't do what she's promised?" Viscount Hollysharp scoffed at my words.

"Not at all," I laughed, noting his eyes never left the glowing purple crystal, "If you win, you get all of the gold for my purchases--"

"Which amounts to not even pocket change," Viscount Hollysharp flippantly cut in as I nodded in agreement at his point.

"And my agreement to revoke your daughter from my service," I continued as if he'd said nothing.

"So, what's your point?" Viscount Hollysharp confidently asked.

"First, your daughter will have solved Klekadam's Postulate and bring renown to the House of Hollysharp," I held up another finger, "Second, you'll be famous for having the forethought to usher in a new magic-tech revolution for the Kingdom of Cadarea without the atrocious slaughter of the poor and downtrodden." Holding up a third finger, I grinned, "Lastly, you'll make a killing in fees and taxes." I dropped my hand. "At no time will you have lost anything with either of the deals I'm offering you."

"That's true, boy, except for gaining that lovely Greater Eldritch Crystal of yours," Viscount Hollysharp guffawed in agreement, "Deals like this are more about winning than anything else." Settling down after a

moment, he eyed the stubborn set of my face, before letting out an exasperated sigh. “If that’s the worst of the risk I’m passing up, I can agree to lose half of a percent if somehow you and Prustine make the impossible happen.” That point seemed to amuse him to no end as he pulled at his white beard. “What are the parameters for the conclusion of this bet?”

“We need to be in Dolurn in two days to meet the HollyTerror,” I began explaining the planned schedule, “To make sure the deal is honored by both parties, you’ll need to send a representative that speaks with your authority along with a squad of cavalry to escort my wagons to Dolurn.”

“You expect me to give you an armed escort to Dolurn!” Viscount Hollysharp sputtered in disbelief.

“If that’s a problem,” I gave an indifferent shrug while slowly spinning the Greater Eldritch Crystal in my hand to bait him on, “You could always just approve my purchase and let me go about my way.”

“It’s way too late for that,” Viscount Hollysharp admitted with his eyes glued on the prize in my hand, “You have something I want!”

“Then, it’s a small investment to ensure the terms of our bet are being met,” I outwardly laughed while internally seething. Prustine better not fuck this up, I silently swore to myself, or I was gonna take this out on her ass! Doing my best not to let my thoughts show on my face, I held the old Gnome’s gaze, “The conditions will have been met when the HollyTerror arrives at the dock being powered by a cluster of mana accumulation crystals.”

“And if she doesn’t show in Dolurn’s harbor by midnight in two days,” Viscount Hollysharp pronounced with a stern nod.

“I never actually gave her a time limit,” I tried to counter, “Having the bet end by midnight of the fourth day would make more sense-”

“From what I’ve gathered of your personality, Overlord Ironwolf,” Viscount Hollysharp overrode my protests, “You’ll have given her a specific deadline for her arrival.” As my mouth gaped open at the truth of his words, the old Gnome continued with a knowing nod, “So if Prustine hasn’t arrived by midnight in two days, you’ll have lost the bet. Meaning that you’ll hand over my Greater Eldritch Crystal and I’ll keep all of your purchase along with the gold.”

Before I could argue further, the old goat began swiping at unseen windows in front of his face. It was a bit shocking since he reminded me of a boomer player trying to deal with The World’s virtual interface. A part of

me wanted to laugh when a system window popped open before my eyes a moment later.

New Digital Contract! A bet between Overlord Startum Ironwolf and Viscount Fendano Hollysharp the Fourth!

Parameters: Prustine Hollysharp will arrive in the port of Dolurn by midnight in two days with the HollyTerror powered by a cluster of mana accumulation crystals. If she doesn't arrive in time or the magic-tech ship isn't being powered by a cluster of mana accumulation crystals, the bet is considered a loss. If both qualifiers are met, the bet is considered a win.

Loss: Startum Ironwolf will be required to pay Viscount Fendano Hollysharp the Fourth a Greater Eldritch Crystal, forfeit his gold for the purchase of farming goods and food in Haldale, and expel Prustine Hollysharp from her service as a vassal.

Win: Viscount Fendano Hollysharp the Fourth will approve the purchase of Startum Ironwolf's G.O.A.L.M.s and G.O.A.H.L.M.s, the rest of the farming equipment and food will be delivered safely to the port of Dolurn at no extra charge by the House of Hollysharp, Prustine Hollysharp will share the rune formula for using mana accumulation crystals in a cluster, she'll also receive recognition for her accomplishment by the Academy of Technomancy in Tulduroc and have her exiled status for the House of Hollysharp revoked, and Startum Ironwolf will be paid three percent of the worth of any mechanical creations created with this new rune formula or the base cost of the worth of the deconstructed components. This gold will be paid out to Startum Ironwolf to his Auction House account once a month.

Do you accept the terms of the bet?

Yes/No

Go big, or go home, I grudgingly thought, while mentally selecting "Yes." As I tucked the Greater Eldritch Crystal back into my Magi-Weaved Traveler's Backpack, the old Gnome rose to his feet.

"It's a pleasure doing business with you," Viscount Hollysharp guffawed while holding out his ring-covered hand.

"May the best male win," I replied as we shook.

"As you pointed out, I win either way," Viscount Hollysharp corrected as he waved me toward the door.

"Touché," I grunted while heading for the door as the old fox

roared in laughter.

“You’re sparky, I’ll give you that,” Viscount Hollysharp jovially said as a G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavalier opened the door to the great room at our approach, “No wonder Prustine agreed to be your vassal.” He stopped me with a hand before we exited the private room. “The plan’s the same. My House of Hollysharp Cavalry will meet you outside the eastern gate at seven in the morning sharp.”

“Wonderful,” I managed to grit out while doing my best to outwardly remain cool. Seeing the room of pissed-off nobles and merchants, I continued in a low voice, “If we’re done here, I’d like to inform Lady Tuin’Dyrr that our purchase has been partially approved and return to my inn along with the rest of my party.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Viscount Hollysharp agreed, stopping me once again with a hand on my forearm, “If you don’t mind handing over the body of Battle Mage Mylimdart first.” Seeing the surprised look on my face, he continued in a low voice, “The House of Mylimdart will want his body returned so he can be buried with honor.”

“Sure,” I replied and quickly removed the corpse from my backpack.

“I’ll have Marshal Sillbiss meet you at the entrance to escort you from the Highborn Quarter,” Viscount Hollysharp said while he tucked the body away into an ornate pouch at his waist.

That was odd, I silently thought, studying the pouch’s odd design as I hit it with an Identify. How had he managed to squeeze the corpse into such a small bag? A moment later, the name Krognoff’s Superior Gearhead Pouch appeared over the bag. I’d have to see if I could find something like that later.

“Enjoy your evening, Overlord Ironwolf,” Viscount Hollysharp finished as I went to step out the door.

“And you, Viscount Hollysharp,” I genially replied, giving him a salute with the mana accumulation handle of Prustine’s Runemaster Arc Cane.

As the old Gnome’s mouth dropped open, I could see the dawning realization that he’d completely forgotten about recovering his daughter’s cane. Abruptly turning around, I began striding through the crowd toward my friends. Thumping the cane on the ground with each step, I couldn’t help the smirk that came to my face at the reaction of the other guests upon

seeing it was still in my possession. At least, I'd gotten that over on him.

'Are we killing anyone?' Helgath asked as soon as she caught sight of me.

'No one seems to be following him,' Neysa's commented a half-second later, "but that old Gnome looks sort of pissed off.'

'We're good,' I assured them while hoping the old Gnome wouldn't try to renege on our deal.

If Viscount Hollysharp did try anything, I silently promised right then and there, that he'd regret doing it in front of his guests. There would be no backroom this time. That might be like big talk on my side, but I was done with being pushed around. Besides, I didn't see myself getting a better deal than what I'd already managed to get. Not that I didn't breathe easier with each step I took away from the old Gnome.

"You seem to enjoy making dangerous enemies, Overlord Ironwolf," Lady Tuin'Dyrr dryly commented as I walked up.

"Yeah, Star sort of has a unique ability with that," Phoenix chimed in as the rest of my friends nodded in agreement.

"A unique ability with what?" Lady Tuin'Dyrr asked, giving the Barbarian an odd look.

"With pissing people off," Töten explained as Ezio let out an explosive bark.

"He does have a point," Ezio grunted, giving his boss an apologetic look.

"At least, we still have our heads," Zeven nervously added while glancing around to make sure no guards were headed our way. Seeing the conflicted look that flashed across my face, the Badger Kin frowned, "Or did I speak too soon."

"Naw, we're good, Mr. Melodramatic," I joked while glancing around for a quick double-check.

"Right," Töten and Phoenix chorused as they gave me the eye.

"Not that it wouldn't be best if we got out of here while the getting is good," I admitted with a meaningful head jerk back the way I'd come, "The old Gnome sort of forgot about adding Prustine's cane into our gentleman's bet until after I took my leave."

"Gentleman's bet?" Zeven asked, pressing his lips together at the odd term as Töten and Phoenix traded an amused look and busted out laughing.

“What did you guys bet on?” Lady Tuin’Dyrr pressed as she stepped closer with a curious Ezio a half-step behind her.

“I’ve gotten us tentative approval for purchasing the farming equipment and an armed escort to Dolurn,” I explained in a low whisper.

“All of it?” the Dark Elf demanded.

“Tentatively,” I grimace, knowing that sounded bad.

“Armed escort?” Töten questioned as Phoenix and Zeven nervously nodded in agreement.

“If the conditions for our bet are met, we’re be allowed to sail away with everything, free and clear,” I explained in a hushed voice, “If not, I’ll lose everything and be forced to part with my Greater Eldritch Crystal, besides expulsing Prustine from my service as a vassal.”

“You’d really do all of that?” Töten demanded in an incredulous hiss.

“What do you think?” I gave the big man a deadpan look.

“More likely than not, you’d use the players we’re picking up to take what you wanted by force whether they agree or not,” Phoenix hazard a guess, “and take the hit to your reputation.”

“Okay, that makes a bit more sense,” Töten scoffed as I innocently arched my eyebrows at the pair.

“I swear,” Zeven grunted, shaking his furry head, “it’s almost like you enjoy collecting enemies or something.”

“All of you are acting like I’m going to lose or go back on my word,” I complained while heading for the exit, “Come on, let’s finish this conversation on the way back to the inn.”

“We’ve been forbidden to leave until the guards have determined if Arcane Magus Givunkuss is still on the premises or not,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr huffed as I waved for her to follow.

“It’s not a problem,” I assured her as I turned around and began walking backward, “My party has been given the disposition to leave.”

“I’d rather we were considered temporary business partners to any outside observers and not a part of the same group,” Lady Tuin’Dyrr politely demurred my invitation as she stayed planted where she was standing, “If there’s a possibility you might renege on your gentleman’s debt with the Viscount, I’d rather not have to deal with that possible fallout.”

“As long as that doesn’t affect our business arrangement for the

morning,” I shrugged, not wanting to press the point. While her objection didn’t sit well with me, I couldn’t exactly blame her either. Snapping my heels together, I offered her a gentlemanly bow, “I hope the two of you enjoy the festivities this evening.”

With that, I turned around and began striding toward the exit as my friends fell in behind me. It wasn’t like I’d agreed with Phoenix’s guess or not. While what the Barbarian said was a possibility, I wasn’t planning on renegeing on our bet even if I lost. I was working too hard to raise my reputation for the “noble high side” of The World to blow it on something like this. A frown came to my lips. Even if Viscount Hollysharp had unfairly blackmailed me to get what he wanted.

There was another loud murmuring that came from the crowd in the great room as the Herald and the guards at the door allowed our party to exit. Ignoring the commotion, I continued striding toward the exit with my cane leading the way while my friends discussed the situation in hushed voices. The biggest question amongst them seemed to be why I’d agreed to the unfair bet in the first place.

In this way, the high-level game of Kings and Queens was pretty screwed up. Due to my people’s need for food, seeds, and farming equipment to kickstart my fledgling kingdom’s food production, it was possible to pressure me into agreeing and doing things I’d rather not do. The whole “not getting Viscount Hollysharp’s approval” first for the G.O.A.L.M.s and G.O.A.H.L.M.s had put me in an even worse position. That meant the old Gnome was in the right to fine me for not following the law. Thankfully, he hadn’t hit me with increasing the purchase price due to Lady Tuin’Dyrr’s five-finger discount or I’d have been royally screwed.

“Steward Sillbiss!” A snobby female voice suddenly screeched, interrupting my thoughts as I looked ahead. “Who allowed these disgusting Halflings to enter my home?”

“Who the fuck does she think she is?” I heard Phoenix swear under her breath behind me.

“A Karen who thinks she’s special,” Töten grunted from behind the Barbarian as I hit the pair with an Identify.

“Why aren’t you on you bowing before us?” the younger male Gnome demanded at our dumbstruck faces.

“My apologies, Lady Hollysharp,” Steward Sillbiss called out in an alarmed tone as he came rushing down the corridor while the name Lady

Gnukwomut Hollysharp, Level 38 Gnome, Entertainer appeared over the female Gnome's head and Homwart Hollysharp, Level 23 Gnome, Frost/Arcane Mage appeared over the younger male Gnome at her side, "These Halflings are here at the behest of Viscount Hollysharp."

"I don't care why these dirty Halflings are here," Homwart contemptuously spat as he pointed a pudgy finger at me, "but they will prostrate themselves before their betters or I'll order the house guard to drag them to the dungeon!"

"Dude!" Phoenix exclaimed in a hushed whisper, "Are these igits really Prustine's stepmother and brother?"

"Oh, joy," Töten grunted as he unlimbered the massive hammer from his back and rolled his shoulders, "Looks like we're gonna get exiled from the Kingdom of Cadarea."

"Can we just pass these two idiots by and not get into a fight for a change," Zeven asked in a worried tone as all of the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers up and down the hall turned to eye us warily.

"L-lord H-homwart, I d-don't think you u-understand," Steward Slillbiss anxiously began to stammer, "T-this is Overlord Ironwolf and his party!"

"Overlord Ironwolf?" Lady Hollysharp's voice cracked as her face turned white as a sheet upon realizing their social faux pas, "And his party?"

"Lady Ironwolf, Mistress Ironwolf, Lord Al'Zaric, Lord Feinde, and Dame Sonata!" Steward Slillbiss explained in a hushed voice as I casually rested my hand on the hilt of my sword while Helgath eagerly did the same with her daggers.

"What does any of that matter?" Homwart whined in confusion at seeing the fear on his mother's face.

"Shut your mouth and bow!" Lady Hollysharp angrily hissed, before dragging him forward as she curtsied, "Overlord Ironwolf, it's a pleasure to-"

"Mother! They're just Halflings-" Homwart protested, when she suddenly cuffed him, "Ow!"

"Now bow and shut your damn mouth!" Lady Hollysharp shrieked into his ear through gritted teeth. Clenching his hand, she forced him to bow as a sickly smile came to her dry lips, "It's a pleasure to meet all of you." Before any of us could reply, Lady Hollysharp quickly turned away and

began hurrying down the corridor in the direction of the great room while dragging her son along behind her.

“My apologies,” Steward Slillbiss seconded with a respectful bow, before hurrying after the pair as the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers up and down the corridor continued to watch us closely.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” I growled and began striding toward the exit once again with Helgath and Neysa following in my wake.

“What the hell was that all about?” Phoenix demanded as she hurriedly caught up to us with Töten and Zeven.

“That’s a perfect example of the high-level game of Kings and Queens,” Töten spat under his breath.

“Yeah,” Zeven grunted as he nervously glanced over his shoulder back down the corridor, “That’s not really my kind of fun.”

“It doesn’t look like I’m gonna have much of a choice with my Overlord title,” I huffed feeling like biting red ants were crawling all over my skin, “I might not have had much of a choice in the matter this time around, but I swear, once my base is self-sufficient, I’m gonna stick my foot up the next noble’s ass that tries to blackmail me!”

“Dude, what the fuck went down back there?” Phoenix demanded as she traded nervous looks with Zeven and Töten.

“I’ll tell you once we’re out of here,” I replied still pissed as hell.

“That’s probably for the best,” Töten seconded as all of us fell silent.

As my friends began whispering to one another in hushed voices, I did my best to mentally calm myself down. The problem was that I was exhausted as hell and needed a good night’s sleep, but if I logged out all keyed up, I knew I’d be laying in bed and staring up at the ceiling again. Hence, why I wanted to get back to the inn so I could relax with some ales before calling it a night. As we exited the keep’s outer doors, I was starting to feel slightly better, when I saw Marshal Slangneedon and his squad of G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers waiting for us in the courtyard.

“Marshal Slangneedon,” I greeted the stern-faced Gnome with a harsh croak.

“Overlord Ironwolf,” Marshal Slangneedon replied with a curt nod as the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers’ silently watched us behind their full helms.

“They’re not here to assassinate us or something, are they?” Zeven nervously asked as my friends spread out to recall their mounts.

“Why would you think that?” Phoenix asked as she whistled for her Palnisdale Horse.

“Why?” Zeven hissed, glancing around at the silent G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers watching us, “Because we’re the “only ones,” he made air quotes with his black claws, “allowed to leave. This feels more like we’re being led away to dig our own graves like you’d see in a gangster movie!”

“BBBRRRAAA!” Bright Claw roared as he appeared with a roar. While it sounded impressive without my helm, I silently bet that the Grizhawk was bitching up a storm for being stored away for the party.

“We’re not discussing this here,” Zeven swore under his breath as Bright Claw continued with his Chewbacca-like wailing.

While all that was going on, Phoenix climbed into her saddle and urged her mount forward just as Töten’s Nightmare, Lilin, appeared in a whoosh of flames. My friends helpfully created a semi-wall of privacy for my girls and did their best to keep everyone’s eyes on them. As Neysa’s form shimmered and her dress and boots simply dropped to the stone floor, Helgath bent down to scoop up her clothing. There was another shimmering blur as a Silver Dire Wolf suddenly appeared at the back of the group. Before anyone was the wiser, the Half-Orc mounted up as the pair trotted over to my side.

“Lead on, Marshal,” I said after a quick glance at my friends to make sure everyone was ready to go.

Wordlessly, the Marshal headed off as two of the G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers fell in behind him while the last two took up the rear. This time, no one said a word as we made our way back to the main gate of the Highborn Quarter. The silence of the night and having Helgath in my arms helped the rest of my tension slowly bleed away. It also was nice to see that my friends were keeping a close eye out for any surprise attacks.

I wasn’t sure what the Azure Skull Cult’s next move was going to be. While it was possible Arcane Magus Givunkuss would try to take a potshot at us, my bet was that she was too busy trying to get a hand on the social bomb I’d dropped back in the Pipe-Wolf Driveshaft Keep with Viscount Hollysharp. Until she was able to contact her superiors at Azure Skull Headquarters in Tulduroc for new orders, I figured we were relatively safe for tonight.

To my surprise, the Marshal and his squad led us out through the main gate and continued across the killing field to the Upper City. That

made me feel safer in a way as Zeven's words about digging our own graves came back to me. Wouldn't that just be the icing on the cake after everything we'd been through today? I silently thought as we rode past the Slaifaddwuck's Grill where we'd eaten breakfast earlier this morning. As we neared the archway to Mid City, the Marshal trotted to a stop and turned around.

"Overlord Ironwolf," Marshal Slangneedon said as he turned to face me, "You and your party should be able to make your way back to your inn from here."

"What?" Phoenix protested as she reined in her mount and looked around in disappointment, "We're not getting escorted all the way back to the Prancing Pony?"

"It's probably for the best," Töten grunted as he came to a stop on my other side.

"Appreciate the escort," I replied while dismounting.

As I stepped forward toward the Marshal and his G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers, Zeven came to a stop behind the girls as Bright Claw turned sideways to block the view of the guards behind us. This time I didn't watch as Neysa transformed again and quickly got dressed with Helgath's help. By the time my friends had dismounted and dismissed their mounts, they'd silently sidled up next to me with Bright Claw and Zeven.

"We do our duty," Marshal Slangneedon replied with a polite nod. I notice him eyeing my girls thoughtfully, before turning his mount back toward the Highborn Quarter, "Enjoy your evening." As the Marshal and his squad rode off, I noticed the city guard knights trade silent glances as we turned around and strode through the archway to Mid City.

"So, you want to let us in on why you were so pissed earlier?" Phoenix asked as we began making our way through the crowded streets.

"Yeah, man," Töten agreed, "you were fit to be tied."

"That happens to me when I get blackmailed!" I let out an explosive breath.

Seeing everyone's surprised looks, I quickly explained everything that went down in the back room with Viscount Hollysharp. Not just what was said, but why I felt like I'd had to accept the screwed-up bet. When I came to the end of my spiel, I saw the looks of concern on their faces.

"Dude, are you sure Prustine is gonna make it by Friday's deadline?" Phoenix was the first to speak as she gave me a sideways look.

“If I remember correctly, she never said one way or another when she’d actually have the ship built.”

“We sort of talked about this when I assigned her the project,” I admitted feeling a sinking sensation in my stomach, “She’d thought it would take her a week or two tops.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Töten scoffed as we made our way through the crowded street toward our inn, “You basically bet the farm that she’d have this magic ship of yours finished by Friday.”

“Yeah, man, that’s just” A look of pity came to Zeven’s face as he shook his head. “That’s just all kinds of bad.”

“Especially if you don’t want to screw up your reputation with the noble factions of the kingdoms,” Töten agreed.

“Hey, are we eating at the inn?” Zeven interrupted as I went to speak, “Or should we grab something from Piddigyc’s?”

“The inn,” Phoenix and Töten both chorused, before the Barbarian continued, “They’re supposed to have a Bard playing in the main room tonight.”

“Not to mention,” Töten excitedly added, “The Prancing Pony is pretty famous around these parts for their homebrew spiced ale and the beef brisket amongst the Closed Beta teams.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I grunted while glancing back at the Badger Kin.

“Works for me,” Zeven agreed as he jerked his chin toward the inn in the distance, “More likely than not, Nahi is waiting for me to return before eating dinner.”

“That, or she and Neri have already eaten with those Halflings and are planning to join us for drinking,” Phoenix countered as the Badger Kin gave an indifferent shrug.

“Works either way.”

“Yo, Pat!” a Dwarf shouted from the sparing rings as we approached the inn, “Are you guys gonna spar tonight?”

“Doubtful, Hyglak,” I hollered back to the German End of Silence player, “We had a pretty busy day! The plan right now is grabbing dinner and listening to the live music!”

“Awe, man, that blows,” Hyglak shouted back as his two buddies, Jens and Alaric, standing behind him traded disappointed looks, “We wanted to challenge Neysa to a duel!”

“That would be a blast,” Neysa enthusiastically yelled back while waving at the trio, “Maybe next time we can give it a try!”

“It’s a date!” Hyglak cheerfully agreed as I pulled open the door.

“A date?” Phoenix playfully scoffed at the Silver Dire Wolf girl while we piled through the door.

“That’s his words, not mine.” Neysa dismissed as we began heading toward the crowded main room.

“I think Phoenix is jealous the guys are paying more attention to you than they are to her,” I teased the Barbarian.

“Dude, I’m not gay,” Phoenix protested in exasperation, “I’m just laughing that they’re trying to pick up your Combat Mount.”

“Thou doth protest too much, me thinks,” I teased as she flipped me off.

“Naw,” Töten snorted and elbowed me in the ribs, “she just doesn’t like not being the center of attention.”

“Truth!” I chortled as we high-fived while the Badger Kin gave her a frown.

“Get off my clit,” Phoenix groused unhappily.

“Get off my clit?” Zeven exclaimed in shock.

“It’s like, get off my dick,” Phoenix explained like the joke was obvious, “but, you know, for us girls.”

“Us, girls,” I let out a strangled cry.

“I can’t breathe!” Töten gasped while colliding with me as he cracked up.

“Fuck you both,” Phoenix replied as we entered the packed main room still howling in laughter.

As we pushed our way further into the room, I was shocked to see there were no tables free. It looked to be standing room only and even that seemed tight. How in the hell were we going to enjoy the evening drinking and eating like this? Even more annoying, there were a bunch of non-Gnome players everywhere making it nearly impossible to see who was sitting at the tables.

“Töten! Zeven!” I heard Neristhana’s voice excitedly cry out over the roar of conversation around us. “We have a table over here!”

“Coming!” Töten shouted back with a wave of his armored hand. Turning back to the rest of us, he motioned toward the front of the main room, “They’re up near the stage with a big group of people.”

“Do they have any seats free?” Phoenix asked as we began making our way through the crowd with Zeven and Töten leading the way.

“Naw, they’re full up,” Zeven shouted back, “At least, we can meet up and figure out what we’re going to do from there.”

As we neared the tables, I noticed a large portion of the group were my new vassals, cough, former prisoners. Ignoring the distasteful glares from Ebrika and Fraddak as they stood up with the other Halflings at our approach, Neristhana and Nahimana rose from their seats with them while waving us over. I didn’t catch what our companions said to them, but the entire group began to leave as we reached them.

“Go ahead and sit down!” Neristhana hollered over the roar around us.

“What about everyone else?” I asked as the Halflings gave me a sour “Milord” before heading away. Obviously, they weren’t too thrilled to see me.

“They’ve already eaten,” Nahimana assured us as Zeven plopped down beside her.

“We just asked them to hang out until you returned so we didn’t have to fight over not giving up the empty seats,” Neristhana explained as she motioned for us to sit down. As I scooted around the backside of the tables to take the chair against the inn’s back wall, I noticed a familiar Dark Elf Bounty Hunter from the night before as she eagerly jumped to her feet.

“Oh, great, you guys are here,” Andúne cheerfully said as she caught the Gnomeling’s eye next to me, “Can you keep an eye on our seats, Neri? I’m gonna go grab the rest of our friends who are standing at the bar!”

“Sure, no problem,” Neristhana said, waving her away, “Just be quick about it.” Seeing my raised eyebrows as the female player rushed off through the crowd, she gave me an apologetic shrug, “They sort of invited themselves to join us once I explained the three of you would be joining us later tonight.”

“Did you tell them what we were doing?” I asked in a concerned tone as Helgath sat down on my other side with curious Neysa on her opposite side.

“I just explained all of you were knocking out your training really quick,” Neristhana reassured me, before setting down her empty mug with a thunk, “So how did your meeting with Viscount Hollysharp go?” She

flashed me a toothy grin. “It must’ve worked out alright since all of you aren’t spending the night in the local dungeon.”

“It didn’t work out all that good either,” I shook my head angrily. Seeing the look of surprise she gave me, I quickly explained how the old Gnome had blackmailed me. As I came to the end of my spiel, she held up a hand to stop me as she jumped to her feet and waved at a passing barmaid, “A round of ale for the table!”

“Right away!” the tiny Gnome cheerfully called out as she did a quick headcount while gliding past before disappearing back into the crowd.

“I don’t know if I’d actually call that blackmail or not,” Neristhana proffered as she sat down and looped an arm over the back of the chair thoughtfully, “It’s more like you came up with the only possible win you could for a losing proposition.”

“Ha, stop being so nice to him. Star screwed up and you know it,” Phoenix scoffed, giving the Gnomeling a hard clap on the back, “It’s called throwing good coins after bad!”

“Yeah, it doesn’t sound like Prustine is gonna have this special “magic ship,” Töten said doing air quotes, “of his ready to go any time soon.”

“If at all,” Zeven agreed, joining in on dogpiling me about my “magic ship.”

“I don’t know if I’d say that,” Neristhana disagreed while cocking her head to the side in thought, “If anyone could pull it off, it would be Prustine.” Turning back to the Barbarian, she thoughtfully continued, “I don’t know if I’d call that throwing good coins after bad. Running out of food for a large community is no joke and the Viscount knows Star’s gonna have to do whatever needs to be done to save his people.” She looked into Zeven’s, Töten’s, and Phoenix’s before continuing, “If anything, he’s counting on Star to renege on the bet to not lose the food and seeds he’s already purchased in the hopes that he’ll suffer a big loss to his reputation amongst the nobility of the Nordic Regions.”

“Why would he push so hard to do that?” Zeven asked, pressing his lips together at not being able to follow the logic.

“Overlord Pimp here,” Neristhana gave me a wink as the rest of the team laughed at her teasing, “has a lot of authority compared to most of the nobles within the kingdoms. If he can get Star to take a major hit to his

reputation, he might be able to get Queen Isolde and Naeris to revoke their allegiance to him and get him demoted.”

“They’d do that even if Star only broke his word to feed his people?” Phoenix asked in stunned amazement. She glanced around the table with a disbelieving look on her face, “That’s pretty fucked up.”

“It’s all part of the game of Kings and Queens,” Töten harrumphed as a group of players began reaching for the empty chairs next to us.

“Hey, do you mind us grabbing these empty chairs?” the Warrior asked without waiting for an answer.

“Those chairs are taken,” Neristhana shouted as the group froze in surprise, “They were waiting at the bar and will be here any sec-”

“Hey, those are our chairs!” Andúne hollered as she came hurrying over with a bunch of players.

Glancing toward the shout, I was surprised to see a group of twenty or so players pushing their way through the crowd. I swear, it was like she’d emptied the entire bar. Most were from the German guild End of Silence or so I assumed, but I saw the familiar faces of the Canadian guild Les Enfants Terribles intermixed amongst them too.

“Uh, sure, no problem,” the player stammered quickly releasing the back of the chair as if it were a hot potato. Several other groups of players that were hurrying over to grab the remaining empty tables and chairs froze midstep behind the large group at those words, “We thought they were free.”

“No problem,” Arija, the red-headed Human Fire Mage, assured them. Waving her full mug toward the bar, she continued in a friendly tone, “There should be plenty of seats at the bar if you hurry.”

“Thanks,” the player replied with a nod of thanks as they hurried away while everyone began sitting down.

“I think the Bard is going back on stage again,” Askai, a Dark Elf Arcane Mage, excitedly called out as she sat down.

“He’s the best,” Headripper, a Human Guardian Priest, giddily said as he eagerly flipped his seat around to face the raised platform.

“Eh, he’s alright,” Adelya, the Tiger Kin female, dismissively said as she sat down next to Neysa, “It’s not anything close to the troop Dark Star Rising we heard at the Bard Spring Festival back in Londshos.”

“Yeah, they rocked,” PixelBomb, a Dark Elf Essence Shaman, enthusiastically agreed. I saw him trade a wink with his guildmates as he

jerked his chin toward me to get my attention, “Hey, Pat, you wouldn’t believe it. They have this whole series of songs that they sync with illusions. It’s like watching the best music video you’ve ever seen.”

“I actually caught one of their songs being performed on VTube,” I said, trying to not act weirded out at talking about my own people.

The last thing I needed was for anyone to figure out who I was. It wasn’t worth the risk of getting another angry mob hunting us down again, especially not since we were going to be leaving the city in the morning. Sitting back in my chair, I tried to force myself to relax while keenly being aware that I hadn’t renewed my Incognito spell. All that I could do was hope no one decided to run an Identify on me for a second time.

“A buddy of mine sent me the video the other morning,” I truthfully explained not batting an eye, “It looked like they kicked ass on that song!”

“The craziest part is all of the Halflings and Demi-Humans that were in the troop,” Assen agreed while covering his mouth with a hand as if he were trying not to laugh, “Whoever came up with the idea of a River Dancing Centaur and a Half-Orc playing the cowbell was a genius!”

“Oh, yeah, I saw that video too!” Hyglak, a Dwarf DPS Warrior, excitedly called out while slapping the palm of his hand on the table with a loud clap, “It’s the most whacked thing you’ve ever seen but haunting at the same time!” Shaking his head, he energetically thumped his armored chest. “It hits you right here!”

“Are we screwed?” Phoenix silently mouthed at me as she held up a hand so that none of our new “friends” could read her lips.

Seeing her other hand grip the hilt of her sword under the table, I gave a slight shake of my head as Helgath and Neysa stopped talking to nervously glance in my direction. There was no sense in starting a fight here before we knew for sure how everyone was going to react. Besides, no one had accused us of anything as of yet. Unless things turned ugly, I wasn’t going to go looking for trouble. Getting the message from our soul link, they both relaxed somewhat as the Barbarian slightly slid her chair back from the table.

“They were awarded first place for their performance,” Solivann explained, his eyes never leaving mine as he eased back in his chair with his mug casually held in his hand for another pull, “Crazier yet, their performance made the forums explode in controversy.”

“It was actually bigger than that,” PixelBomb added in an amused tone as the Dark Elf Rogue took a drink, “Last I heard, their performance went viral on VTube!”

“That’s crazy,” Zeven exclaimed in amazement as Nahimana eagerly sat forward in her chair while listening to the conversation, “Why would a troupe of people of The World cause that kind of a ruckus on the internet?”

“What?” Andúne asked with an agreeable laugh, “Do you not keep up with the server forums?”

“Not really,” I shrugged, playing ignorant, “I’m usually too busy playing to bother following the stupid shit being said on the forums.”

“Yeah, keeping up with all that bullshit would be like having a second job,” Zarbo, a Dark Elf DPS Warrior, readily agreed, “Seriously, who has time for that?”

“It was a big deal because the illusions from the songs called into question a video that went viral from one of the big PVP Guilds,” Nikina, a Dark Elf Priest, explained in a tone of suppressed excitement.

“Huh, you don’t say?” Töten grunted, shaking his head beside the Barbarian, “I still don’t know why everyone would take the word of a PKer Guild.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve been saying whenever any of our guildmates bring it up,” Zarbo sourly agreed, “It’s usually best not to get mixed up in other guilds’ drama unless you want to be blacklisted and targeted by both sides.”

“Eh, sometimes it’s by accident,” Assen, a Dark Elf Guardian Priest, admitted as looks of embarrassment flashed across all of the Canadian Guild players’ faces, “We just sort of thought that Startum Ironwolf character was another PKer group like the Chaos Storm Alliance.”

“I blame PixelBomb and Solivann,” Adelya laughingly accused her guildmates while letting out a loud cat-like “Rowel” that made Neysa’s fur visibly stand on end. As my eyes were unconsciously drawn to her large breasts nearly spilling out of her low-cut robe, I saw her catch my gaze as she continued with a twinkle in her eyes, “But they were so focused on the video’s destruction of Telrain that they never listened when Nikina and I told them the video was highly edited.”

“So, what did you do?” Phoenix challenged, pulling the Canadian Guild’s focus, “Finally check out that guy’s original video stream or

something?”

“Yeah,” Solivann agreed, letting out an explosive breath as he embarrassedly rubbed the back of his neck, “It was a big eye-opener.”

“I think a lot of other players did the same thing after seeing those performances,” PixelBomb added with a chagrined shake of his head, “Which is what’s causing all the ruckus on the forums.”

“It’s more than that,” Arija interrupted as all eyes around the pushed-together tables turned toward her in surprise, “The problem is that most people can’t admit when they’re wrong. So, no matter how many of you tell them to check the unedited video stream, it’s too embarrassing to admit that they were duped.”

“That’s all kinds of messed up,” Zeven sighed as mutters of agreement echoing his sentiment came from around the table.

“So, does that mean you guys are cool with that Starfire player now?” Phoenix asked as I gave her a dubious look.

At that moment, I was pissed at my Barbarian friend. I didn’t feel comfortable dancing around my identity this closely after everything that went down in Lodenburg. While it would be nice to know where we stood with our, cough ... cough, new friends, it wasn’t worth causing another riot and getting kicked out of the Kingdom of Cadarea. Even if I’d basically gotten everything I wanted quest-wise, I really just wanted to relax and enjoy myself for a change, before passing out for the night. Before anyone could answer her question, a brusque female voice suddenly interrupted our conversation.

“Who’s getting these spiced ales?”

“Those are for us,” Töten said as he quickly turned around.

I nearly laughed at the humorous sight of the three-and-a-half-foot tall Gnome holding an immense tray laden with ale-filled mugs. All combined they were larger than she was tall. It took everything I had not to make a snarky comment as she disappeared behind the foaming mugs while holding the tray out for the big guy to pass around to the rest of us. Sometimes the character attributes being equal no matter your size made for odd-looking situations.

“Can we order dinner too?” I asked as Töten removed the last mug from her tray.

“Sure,” the female Gnome professionally said while sliding her oversized tray under an arm to critically look us over, “We have the

kitchen's special and-"

"We all want kitchen's special," Zeven hurriedly said while wiping the foam from his silver-black fur with the back of his hand.

"Eight braised briskets with all the fixings?" the barmaid asked doing a quick head count.

"Just six," Neristhana quickly corrected as she nodded toward Nahimana, "The Badger Kin female and I have already eaten."

"Six it is," the Gnome agreed with a firm nod, "That'll be a silver for the ales and another three for the meal."

"Money bags here is paying," Phoenix laughed and pointed her thumb at me over Neristhana's head as I rolled my eyes.

"Money bags, huh?" the barmaid laughed while looking me up and down.

"Ah, she's just jealous," I winked while handing over five silvers. Seeing the surprised widening of her eyes at the extra silver, I smoothly continued, "Keep the change."

"Thanks, money bags," the female Gnome playfully teased as she made a show of sliding the coins into a coin pouch tucked away between her impressive breasts. With her low-cut peasant top, the motion made for quite the sight as she stuck her hip out in a flirty pose, "The name's Uprali."

"Nice to meet you, Uprali," I gave her an appreciative once-over as she turned around and looked over her shoulder.

"If you're interested in anything else, just ask!" Uprali gave me a meaningful look, before strutting off toward the kitchen.

"Look at Mr. Studly trying to pick up the Gnome maidens!" Headripper joked with an incredulous shake of his head.

"You're just jealous the barmaids aren't giving you the same play!" Andúne teased the Human Guardian Priest.

"Looks like someone needs to up their game!" Arija agreed with a laugh while Töten removed his helm and settled back in his chair with his mug of ale.

"You know what they say," Adelya called out in a toothy yowl, "Cause every girl crazy 'bout a sharp-dressed man!"

"Calm down there, ZZ Top," Nikina barked in laughter as Alocer gave the Tiger Kin female a good-natured shove.

Before anyone could add a snarky comment to that, a loud cheering started up from the crowd as two Gnomes climbed up onto the stage next to

our tables. One was a handsome, well-dressed male with a lute, while the female carried a drum and had a wooden flute sheathed at her waist. Holding their hands up, they finally got the crowd to settle down as all of us stopped talking to listen to the show.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” the male Gnome called out to the crowd as he let out a happy laugh, “I take it that means you’re ready for another performance by the traveling Hevirick and Adliwit bards!”

“Due to a special visitor tonight in the Prancing Pony,” Adliwit, the female Gnome, enthusiastically announced as the pair began arranging themselves on the stage for their next performance, “Our next vignette will be the top three songs from the winners of the Spring Festival in Tulduroc!”

“How are they increasing the volume of their voices like that?” Zeven hissed under his breath to the rest of us, “It sounds like they’re speaking through a microphone.”

“This unique troupe came out of nowhere and did a performance that every troupe on the circuit will be trying to best for the next five years!” Hevirick smoothly picked up where the female Gnome left off. “We’re going to do our best to do the songs justice.”

“It’s part of a Bard’s ability to create Illusions,” Töten whispered back.

“I don’t get that. How can Illusion magic act like a microphone?” Zeven loudly demanded as the German and Canadian players hushed him.

“The troupe is named Dark Star Rising!” Adliwit explained as the crowd began cheering even more enthusiastically. “For those of you who haven’t seen them on stage, you’re in for an amazing performance!”

“It’s called magic,” Töten sarcastically mouthed as Zeven rolled his eyes at the cliché.

“Wait, isn’t that the Brat Packs troupe’s name?” Phoenix asked, giving me a wide-eyed look of alarm as I froze in my chair.

“That can’t be the Brat Pack,” Neristhana scoffed, looking at the Barbarian like she was talking crazy, “Only Zinn is a Bard and they were heading to BrokenFang Hold. There’s no way they’d be in Tulduroc winning the Bard’s Spring Festival.”

“The first song is called the Battle for BrokenFang Hold!” Hevirick announced while Töten’s and Neristhana’s heads jerked around to stare at me in shock. From the uncomprehending looks on both Zeven’s and Nahimana’s faces, they didn’t understand the meaning of the song’s name

as the two bards glanced at one another to synchronize their count. When their heads nodded three times, they started playing their lute and drums.

I have to admit, the rhythm of the song was enchanting with the odd drum that Adliwit was beating. The rhythmic staccato of the drums went perfectly with the thrumming of the lute as the song took off with a haunting melody. As the beat built to a crescendo, the female Gnome began singing in a clear voice about a lone Half-Elf that bravely headed off into a blizzard to drive the Goblin tribes from his people's home. Ignoring the goose pimples running down my forearms, I leaned closer to my friends.

"I, um, found out about that yesterday morning," I explained in a whisper so as not to interrupt the performance.

"What?" Neristhana demanded in a completely floored tone, "You knew the Brat Pack were in Tulduroc?"

"No, I'd heard that they were in Londshos," I differed as a flash of annoyance crossed my face, "From what I can tell, the Brat Pack along with Ayda and Norrid are doing their best to tell my story to the Nordic Region by using the Bard's Spring Festival."

"Why would they do that?" Neristhana asked out loud as a faraway look came to her eyes. My frown grew as I noticed the Les Enfants Terribles were intently watching our discussion when the female Gnomeling's eyes lit up in understanding, "They must've thought you'd be denied access to the cities in the Kingdom of Cadarea because you're a Halfling without realizing that I could get you in without too much of a problem." An impressed look came to her face as her lips twisted in a wry grin. "From the sounds of it, they're putting on quite a show."

"It was pretty impressive," I agreed as a ghost of a smile played across my lips.

"Are you saying you have your very own marketing group?" Zeven snorted in disbelief like I was making the story up.

"Looks that way to me," Töten grunted as he pointedly glanced around the main room and the players listening intently to the song.

"It's not like it was my idea," I frowned, feeling conflicted at their efforts.

While what they were doing could be helpful in the long term, for the short term, a part of me wished they'd simply returned to BrokenFang Hold along with everyone else. Our run from Darom to Domenic's Ironheart Stronghold had taught me how big of an advantage a Bard made

and I wanted that force multiplier back where it could do the most good. Without holding our home, everything else wouldn't amount to a hill of beans.

That might sound a bit hypocritical since I was in the Kingdom of Cadarea right now preparing for the future. This detour might have been happenstance, but I was going to get everything out of it that I could. That meant finishing my Battle Mage quest, finding a way to feed my people, and giving me the chance to aid the allies that chose to give us a hand against the Chaos Storm Alliance. And who knows, if they were open to the idea, I might be able to sweet-talk the lot of them into coming back with us to BrokenFang Hold to help with the invasion.

"I wonder how much all of this is actually helping your reputation with the other players?" Phoenix mused as Zeven opened his mouth to make a snarky comment and froze.

Seeing the Badger Kin wordlessly shut his maw without saying a word, I held up my mug of spiced ale and took a deep pull of the warm drink. Okay, that wasn't exactly what I was expecting, I harrumphed to myself while mulling over the taste. Setting the mug down, I smacked my lips thoughtfully while listening to the song. While the brew wasn't any honey mead, it wasn't half bad, I thought, taking another sip. Setting down the mug again, I decided it wasn't half bad.

To my surprise, the first song was nearly thirty minutes long which seemed long to me. I guess it made sense to a point. Taking back BrokenFang Hold had taken several days to complete and being able to compress the action into a thirty-minute song was pretty impressive.

During that time, Uprali came back with our food on a large platter. After silently passing the large platters of food around to each of us, she promised in a low whisper to bring another round of ale as soon as she finished serving everyone else their food. Since this wasn't fine dining, we simply dug into the food while enjoying the music. Although the food was tasty, I barely took note of its taste as the players around us began stomping and clapping when they got to our crazy race down the hill to Delonshire with the horde of Goblins and Worgs chasing after us.

When the Syndicate Guild and their allies entered the fight, the crowd's boos momentarily drowned out the music. Unperturbed, the Gnomes played on as Adliwit sang out over the ruckus in a sad tone while the city guards of Delonshire did their best to fight off the newfar with Lord

Ironwolf's and his friends' help. When she got to the part where the Goblin horde arrived and began slaughtering the Syndicate Guild, the walls shook from the crowd's emotional cheer.

Watching the performance and the players' reactions to the song, I could only shake my head unbelievably. Somehow the Bards were enhancing the feeling of the crowd in a way that I'd never expected. It was the difference between hearing a song on the radio and being in the middle of a concert. As the song came to an end, everyone sitting with us shot to their feet to join in on applause.

"That was incredible!" Andúne shouted as she glanced back at the rest of us with a look of barely contained excitement.

"It wasn't bad," Solivann replied, chuckling at her reaction as the rest of the Canadian Guild nodded in agreement.

"We want more!" Headripper shouted while cupping his hands to his mouth.

"What do you mean it wasn't bad?" Andúne demanded as her enthusiasm faded somewhat.

"The original performance we caught back in Londshos was like ten times better than this," PixelBomb explained with an apologetic shrug.

"It was still a kick-ass performance, right Pat?" Adelya asked as she glanced back at me for support.

"Hard to say," I laughed at the looks Andúne and the Canadians gave me, "Seeing the song on VTube isn't anything like seeing it live."

"While they did a decent rendition," Assen said with a shake of his head, "they're not even in the same ballpark as Dark Star Rising."

"Dammit," Askai swore while shaking her strawberry-blonde locks, "Now I'm gonna have to hunt down the original performance."

"It's worth it," Adelya promised as everyone with chairs began sitting back down, "And made me want to look up the original fight it's based on."

"Was it any good?" Zarbo asked as he scooped up next to his wife.

"What?" PixelBomb asked, "The fight the song's based on?"

"Yeah," both Zarbo and Askai chorused.

"It wasn't bad, but not nearly as good as the battles the other two songs are about," Solivann countered as the rest of his guildmates nodded in agreement.

"This next song is called, Lord Ironwolf's Battle in the Sea Elf's

Vortex!” Hevirick roared as the pair of them started up the next song.

As the song started up with a heavy beat, I dug back into my meal while listening intently to the lyrics. The crowd was already stamping along with the music as the Bards’ voice started singing the lyrics. While we listened, Uprali set down a fresh set of mugs, and took my money with another flirtatious wink, before taking our empties away along with our plates. When I settled back in my chair, Helgath leaned against me listening intently while Neysa scooped back to lay in her arms.

From the look on my soulmate’s face and the emotions we shared at a low level over our link, I could tell she was fascinated with the songs. They told the story of my life in The World before she met me. While they lacked the details of my memories, the song was catchy and the story entertaining. I found myself unconsciously singing along and listening in expectation of what I knew was to come.

A Bard’s song is quite different than watching the action of a video. The personality of the performers and their ability to get the crowd to join in on clapping or stomping at different parts of the song grabbed me in a way that surprised me. It went perfectly with the hot spicy ale we were drinking. When Adliwit began encouraging everyone to clap at the final fight with the Orc War Leader, I found myself clapping along with the crowd.

My cheeks flushed as we came to the kiss when Helgath forced the healing potion down my throat after I’d been smacked down by the Orc War Leader. The two Gnomes acted the part out on stage as they played while the crowd good-naturedly catcalled their simulated kiss. I stopped clapping when the Half-Orc in my arms silently gripped my hands and hugged them tightly to her chest. We didn’t need to say anything to appreciate the moment. While Neysa began clapping and stomping through the last of the battle with the rest of the crowd, the two of us silently held each other enjoying our closeness.

The Bards were sweating profusely when they finished the second song to the roaring of applause. It was deafening as everyone but Helgath and I shot to their feet again. It wasn’t that we were trying to be rude but neither of us wanted to move from our comfy position. Stifling a yawn, I noticed Adelya elbowing PixelBomb and Solivann, before motioning her chin at the two of us and whispering something as all three of them gave us a speculative glance.

A part of me was worried about what was being said as Andúne jerked around to stare at the trio in surprise. As the Dark Elf began whispering excitedly with the other three players, I did my best to simply enjoy the moment. This would either turn ugly very quickly and we'd have to fight our way out of the city, or my new "friends" would be cool and there wouldn't be an issue. I couldn't help the wry grin that came to my lips as Uprali dropped off another round of ale at our table.

Helgath and I quickly drained the last of our ale and swapped our empties for fresh mugs as Phoenix, Zeven, and Töten motioned toward me when she held out her hand for payment. Rolling my eyes as she skittered around the table to me, I paid for the ale and tipped another silver on top of that. As she took my silver, a curious look came to her face as she eyed the two of us thoughtfully, before giving me a polite nod and heading off again.

Ignoring the commotion going on amongst the German and Canadian players at our shared tables, we picked up our mugs as the Bards started the last song of their vignette, which I immediately recognized as the Fall of Darom. This was the same song I'd seen on the video link that John had sent me. As Adliwit started playing her wooden flute and Hevirick took over the drumming, I did my best to enjoy my warm buzz and the show.

The players we'd gotten to know yesterday evening and again tonight found themselves torn between watching the performance and glancing back at our group as they whispered amongst themselves. Due to the performance and packed room, there was no way for me to make out what was being said. Nonetheless, from the expressions on their faces and their body language, there didn't seem to be any seething hatred being directed toward us. If anything, I'd have said they seemed to be excited about us in a good way.

Really, there was no way to know for sure how everything would ultimately turn out. While I tended to hope for the best as a general rule, I was a firm believer in preparing for the worst. With that thought in mind, I began casting battle buffs on me and my friends while doing my best to enjoy the performance. As Helgath silently joined me in the preparations, I realized something curious about the Bards' Illusion magic that I hadn't noticed before now. They were using it to enhance the show.

In the background, I could clearly hear the sounds of a snare drum, a fiddle, and the low roar of an electric guitar. With that and their flute,

drumming, and singing, they came reasonably close to matching the performance of my vassals. Even more curious was that their magic gave you the feeling of the sarcasm behind the lyrics of the song. Even without the Illusions of the battle to counter the words of the song, an understanding was communicated via some underlying current that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"Why the hell are you giving us battle buffs?" Phoenix slurred as she leaned over Neristhana to shout in my ear.

"Gah, get off of me you slobbering cow!" Neristhana grouched as she pushed Barbarian between her and the table, "And don't you dare spill my ale!"

"Slobbering cow!" Phoenix angrily protested while the Gnomeling tried to shove her away.

"I think our new friends are figuring out who we are," I explained in a low voice while continuing my buffs.

"Bbbrrraaa," Phoenix let an impressive belch rip as sour spiced ale wafted across my face. As I waved the stench away, the Barbarian reassuringly patted my cheek before letting herself be pushed away, "If they get stupid, we'll kill them all."

"Good to know," I snorted in derision as she drunkenly flounced back in her chair while spilling spiced ale on Neristhana and Töten.

"Dammit, Phoenix!" Töten swore, shoving her off of him with his shoulder.

"By the dark," Neristhana berated as she shoved the Barbarian's mug away, "I'm gonna have the barmaid cut you off!"

"You wouldn't dare," Phoenix protested while hugging her half-empty mug in both arms tightly to her chest.

"Yeah, she's toast," Töten assured me, letting out his own belch as she glared at him through blurry eyes.

"Like you're any better," Phoenix indignantly sniffed as she took hold of the mug with two hands and drained it in one long pull. Slamming the empty mug down hard on the table, she let out another loud belch, before falling face-forward onto the table.

"Is she alright?" I demanded as the big guy guffawed and elbowed the two Badger Kin sitting next to him.

"She's fine," Neristhana assured me as she shook her head, before taking another draw from her mug.

“It’s the hot spiced ale,” Töten explained as his demonic cat eyes gleamed in amusement, “The heat and high sugar content make the alcohol go directly to your head if you’re slamming it like honey mead.”

“Aren’t both drinks basically the same?” I asked, not really seeing why we could down the honey mead so much easier than the spiced ale.

“Spiced ale is about quadruple the alcohol content,” Töten laughed as Nahimana drunkenly sagged against Zeven with her eyes rolling back into her head, “Didn’t you say you wanted to go to bed early tonight?” Seeing the surprised look on my face, the big guy snorted and proudly held up his mug, “This is one of the quickest ways to do it.”

“And you newfar were carrying on about drinking all night,” Neristhana scoffed at the rest of us as she plopped her mug down onto the table, “You’ve gotta build up your tolerance if you expect to drink like a Gnomeling!”

“Rrriightt,” I rolled my eyes as she let out a high-pitched laugh sounding like Prustine.

Ignoring my Gnomeling companion, I turned back to watch the Germans draining their mugs like they were guzzling water and silently shook my head at the glassy look in most of their eyes. If I were a betting man, I’d put down some serious gold that a good half of them were gonna be joining Phoenix in passing out on the table at any moment. To my surprise, the only players that didn’t look completely wasted were the Canadians.

My contemplation was interrupted as the Bards’ song died away. As soon as the last notes ended, everyone in the pub who wasn’t already passed out shot to their feet. Hooting and hollering echoed off the inn’s walls as the pair of Gnomes gripped one another’s hands and bowed to the room. Since this was the vignette, I unwrapped my arms from around Helgath and motioned for her to stand up as we both rose from our chairs.

“Wwhooooa!” I gasped as the room started to spin.

‘I’ve gotcha,’ Helgath’s thought echoed through my mind as she backed up a step to hook her arm around my waist.

‘You’re not drunk?’ I asked in surprise while doing my best to not lose my balance and remind myself not to close my eyes. If I did that, I’d be puking for sure.

I’d only been drunk like this once before in my life. It had occurred when I’d downed a bunch of Hurricanes in a two-hour period at Shooters

upon my twenty-first birthday. I'd learned the hard way not to trust Hefe and drinking. Luckily, Mike and Domenic hadn't drunk too much and they'd been able to drive me home after I'd vomited my guts out everywhere.

That's when I learned the horrors of drinking too much. After they'd delivered my drunken ass back to my apartment and tossed me onto the bed, I'd assured them I was fine and told them to go back to the party. As soon as I closed my eyes, I immediately learned my next mistake of things to never do when you were drunk. Always keep at least one foot on the ground and keep a puke bucket by the bed.

Somehow, I made it to the master bath before my first blast of projectile vomit. It had only gotten worse from there as I'd been forced to crawl through puke to the toilet. When I awoke ten hours later wrapped around the base of the toilet covered in puke, I'd sworn up and down that I was never going to do that again, ever, in my life. A promise I'd managed to keep until tonight.

'Orc alcohol is much stronger than this sweat-tasting swill,' Helgath assured me in amusement as she tasted my thoughts.

'Swill?' I asked as a third of the German players collapsed into a heap onto the floor.

'I'm more used to drinking Rotgut,' Helgath admitted as I glanced down at her in surprise. I had a feeling Orc Rotgut was much worse than the Earth version, 'Though, the Honey Mead wasn't bad, I don't really consider that alcohol.'

'Point,' I agreed while rolling my eyes.

Glancing around the room, I noticed that a number of players had keeled over as soon as they'd stood up. So, it wasn't just us, I thought with a laugh as friends and group mates began hauling their friends to their feet while the bartender assigned several barbacks to start dragging players outside or up to their rooms if they were a customer. As soon the Bards finished their second bow, they turned to look directly at me as a cold shiver ran down my spine.

"Rarely do we get the chance to meet the hero of our songs," Hevirick eagerly announced to the room, "But tonight we had a special spectator watching our performance."

"Please let me introduce Overlord Startum Ironwolf of BrokenFang Hold and his brave companions!" Adliwit roared as everyone in the main

room turned toward me with looks of surprise on their faces, “And his companions we sang about, Helgath and Neysa Ironwolf, Phoenix Sonata, and Töten Feinde!”

All of us froze where stood as we suddenly found ourselves the center of attention. A part of me was waiting to have the crowd suddenly pull their weapons and attack us when the entire room suddenly began cheering at us. My mouth fell open in utter shock as the nearest players eagerly began to high-five us and pat us on the back while saying “Good game!” and “Kick-Ass!” along with other such compliments. As the clapping and cheering began to die down, Hevirick caught my eye.

“I hope our rendition of your heroic accomplishments was acceptable!”

“We did our best to emulate the incredible performance of Dark Star Rising in Londshos!” Adliwit said, before offering me a respectful bow that was followed by her partner.

“It was a truly incredible show,” I said, offering them a bow as my voice cracked with emotions, “This is actually the first time I’ve seen any of the ballads about our adventures performed live so I thank you for sharing such a wonderful performance with me.”

“We are honored to have been of service to you, Overlord Ironwolf,” the Bards replied in unison, before turning to the crowd, “For anyone who’d like to see our performance again, tomorrow will be our last night in Haldale!”

“Our first vignette will start at four o’clock in the evening,” Adliwit continued with a broad smile, “And like tonight, we’ll be playing all night long!”

“I’m Hevirick Riwuknem,” Hevirick bowed to the crowd.

“And I’m Adliwit Gnommimis,” Adliwit finished with a flourish as she bowed too.

“And just a reminder,” Hevirick said as he took off his hat and jumped down from the stage.

“Any tips would be greatly appreciated,” Adliwit finished as she removed a small sack from her belt and hopped down to join her partner.

With that, the two Bards began passing amongst the players in the slightly less crowded main room as silver coins were tossed into their hat and bag. When they reached me, I gave each of them two golds as they passed by and received another thank you from them. To my surprise, the

German and Canadian players all chipped in a handful of coins each before the pair moved on. They were raking in the silver, I silently thought, before plopping down in my chair. As I reached for my mug, I was surprised to suddenly find a sexy Tiger Kin girl settling into my lap and looping her furry arms around my neck.

“What’s up with introducing yourself as Pat Strokes?” Adelya asked while pointedly looking me in the eyes while the rest of her guild watched on in amusement.

“Yeah, man,” PixelBomb added from across the table, “I thought we were all cool after our duel.”

“Sorry about that,” I apologized, giving them an embarrassed shrug, “But after being run out of Lodenburg by a bunch of players when we stopped for the night, I decided to hide my name here so we didn’t run into any more trouble when I was knocking out a major quest in Tulduroc.”

“How did you manage to temporarily change your name?” PixelBomb demanded from across the table.

“Yeah, you were named Terry Jenkins when you headed off this morning,” Solivann pointed out as the big guy busted out laughing.

“How do you know Startum Ironwolf isn’t another one of his “borrowed” names?” Töten chortled as the Canadians shook their heads.

“Don’t even try that shit,” Nikina indignantly scoffed.

“We caught you red-handed, aye?” Alocer seconded.

“I didn’t say anything,” I laughed while innocently holding up my hands.

“Hey, I’m just saying,” Töten protested while holding his hands up and laughing, “Who knows what’s possible.”

“Yeah, right,” Andúne dismissively said from further down the table. She was sitting with Askai while the rest of her guild carried their guildmates to their rooms, “I can’t see the admins allowing you to steal someone else’s name.”

“Well, when I was a beta player,” Töten proudly stated as I groaned and rolled my eyes while the players around us eyes grew wide, “I heard something like that might actually be possible if you’re a higher-level assassin.”

“So, what?” Askai demanded after catching her girlfriend’s eye, “Are you trying to say that this Startum Ironwolf character is an Assassin and not a Necromancer?”

“Not at all,” Töten laughed as he gave me a wink, “but you never know what extra skills you can pick up with the right scroll or reputation.”

“I don’t care what you say,” Solivann grouched while looking me up and down, “There’s no way that’s not Startum Ironwolf with his Half-Orc soulmate.”

“And Silver Dire Wolf companion,” PixelBomb readily agreed.

“That’s supposedly his mount,” Assen pointed out as everyone speculatively eyed Neysa.

“Mount smount,” Adelya teasingly said with a sexy laugh as she buried my face into her cleavage and ground her crotch on my leg, “I Just wanna know more about the man behind the avatar.” I felt her sharp fangs as she pressed her lips against my ear. “Just so you know, I’m a man in real life.”

“Funny that,” I nonchalantly replied without hesitation. Sliding my hands up between us, I pushed her back and gave her furry breasts a solid squeeze, “It feels like you’re all female to me.”

I heard Zeven blow out a mouthful of spiced ale and Töten let out a strangled laugh as everyone at our pressed-together tables humorously watched Adelya hop off my lap with an indignant yowl. With her tail whipping side to side, she gave me an unhappy glare. Returning to her seat, she plopped into her own chair as her guildmates began teasing her relentlessly.

“Looks like someone caught a tiger by their tail!” Solivann guffawed.

“What’s wrong, Adelya?” PixelBomb teased, “Was he more man than you could handle?”

“Startum does have a point, Tigress!” Alocer hooted in agreement.

“Don’t be offering to play if you can’t handle the heat,” Nikina chortled while nearly falling out of her seat at the expression on the Tiger Kin’s face.

“He’s most definitely not a gentleman,” Adelya disgruntledly harrumphed while defensively crossing her arms over her chest.

“A lady wouldn’t have been grinding herself on my lap and shoving her tits into my face in public,” I diffidently commented before taking another pull of my spiced ale while everyone howled in laughter.

‘I thought you didn’t go for she-males like that,’ Helgath smirked as she glanced up at me with a raised eyebrow.

‘I don’t,’ I assured her while suppressing a laugh as Adelya was picked on by everyone at our shared tables, ‘but sometimes you have to know how to handle other players when they’re playing games like that.’

‘Playing games?’ Neysa asked with a confused look on her furry face.

‘Let’s just say that I’m getting the impression Les Enfants Terribles might have a number of gay players in their ranks,’ I explained while PixelBomb teased that having a female avatar wasn’t the same as cross-dressing in the real world, ‘From the games I’ve seen many of my gay friends play on their straight friends in bars, there was an easy way to shut down their teasing if you were smart.’

‘By grabbing their tits?’ Neysa incredulously asked as Helgath busted out laughing.

‘Not exactly,’ I chuckled while setting my mug down, ‘More like not batting an eye at their games and taking their passes with a grain of salt.’ Remembering my last visit to Roosters, I shook my head as a smirk came to my lips. ‘It shuts them down easily enough while letting everyone know you’re cool and where you stand.’

‘So, then, why did Adelya get so upset?’ Neysa pressed not understanding why the Tiger Kin was so upset.

‘Because he really is a female when he’s in The World,’ I chortled, remembering the look of utter shock on her face when I’d copped a feel, ‘And wasn’t expecting that of all things.’

‘I guess that’s funny,’ Neysa slowly said as she speculatively glanced back at the Tiger Kin female talking smack to the players teasing her relentlessly.

‘It is,’ Helgath assured the Silver Dire Wolf girl as we joined back into the conversation going on around us.

It was a pretty interesting conversation. The Canadians explained how they’d first heard Dark Star Rising at the festival. When asked why they’d decided to travel all the way to the Kingdom of Cadarea, they explained their issues with the Triple A guild. They’d hoped it would be possible to level up here in peace but were having problems finding a dedicated area to level up in.

To my surprise, Andúne had explained that End of Silence had experienced a similar problem. They’d decided to come to the Gnome area but had been having constant problems with a guild called the Goon Squad.

While the assholes weren't high-level, they seemed to be everywhere and it was difficult to grind for levels because the assholes would ambush you if they thought they could get away with it. The nonstop PVP was making it difficult for them to level and they were trying to decide where else they could go.

I was tempted to invite them with me back to BrokenFang Hold but they were really too low of a level to take on the Hobgoblins. That and I really wanted to know more about them before inviting them into my home base. As both guilds were complaining about the bullshit they'd been dealing with, I perked up as an idea suddenly hit me.

"I might have a place for you to grind levels and make some phat coin," I suddenly announced as Neristhana gave me an odd look, "with possibly a big payout and raid in the end if you're interested."

"You have a place where we can grind levels and not get constantly ganked?" Andúne eyes narrowed as she traded a wordless look with the Les Enfants Terribles guild leader.

"A place that would work for all of us?" Solivann disbelievingly asked after giving the End of Silence guild officer an agreeable shrug as they both turned back to me.

"It would probably be best if you were working together," I admitted, before going into detail about the level 30 to 50 area.

I explained to them that, as long as they skirted the higher-level area and focused on looting or capturing the unique monsters that I was interested in acquiring, they'd have no problems leveling up. Additionally, I explained there were several higher-level areas they could explore if they were interested. One of them was skirting the area around Darom. That created a number of questions.

With a nod from me, Neristhana joined the conversation. She went into detail about what materials of each monster we were interested in purchasing and how they could be looted. It was a bit gory, but no one seemed to mind all that much as we ordered another round of spiced ale.

"You want us to what?" Solivann asked as he traded a conflicted look with Andúne, "Play round them up cowboy?"

"While that's not exactly pure grinding," Andúne frowned as she considered the request, "That could still be fun."

"Oh, don't you worry about it too much," Töten roared in laughter at the looks on everyone's faces, "There is plenty of slaughtering to do there

even with your numbers. If you're careful, the biggest problem you'll face is capturing those buggers alive without killing them."

"At five golds a head, it's more than worth the trouble," Adelya stated as she eagerly sat forward with her tail swishing behind her, "And it sounds like the perfect leveling spot for us."

"It is," I readily agreed with a nod.

"I still don't get how you're going to pick all of them up," Arija complained as she tried to wrap her head around the request, "We're not going to be near any cities."

"If you can keep this on the downlow except for people you trust and can keep their mouths shut," I lowered my voice and sat forward while looking around to make sure no one was listening in on our discussion, "I'll let you in on the bonus plan I was hinting at earlier."

"Alright," Solivann grunted as his guildmates bobbed their heads in agreement.

"My lips are sealed," Andúne promised as the remaining German players nodded enthusiastically.

"I'm gonna be landing with all of my troopers and friends east of Palnisdale to break the Orc Horde's siege. Anyone who wishes to be a part of this raid will get a shit ton of money, XP, and," I explained in a non-sense tone meeting each of their eyes, "will get first dibs on the abandoned Nightmare strongholds that we're going to clear out afterward to restore the Isolde Line."

"Wait," PixelBomb demanded not believing his ears, "You're simply going to give everyone their own Nightmare stronghold?"

"Why not?" I asked, raising my eyebrow at the Dark Elf. Seeing his mouth wordlessly open and close, I continued with a smile, "If we're all friends, we can even form an alliance for mutual support."

"You'd do this for free?" Askai asked not quite believing her ears, "And not demand Danegeld?"

"Dane-geld?" Adelya asked not understanding the term.

"It's another word for blackmail and protection money," Headripper let out a chuckle of amusement as he sat down between Arija and Askai, "The poem's most famous quote is, once you have paid him the Danegeld, you never get rid of the Dane."

"Nope, no danegeld," I laughed while shaking my head, "but you'll have to deal with whatever V-MMORG requires you to do to be the owner

of a Nightmare tree.”

“Gah, I don’t know if I wanna deal with seventy-five percent realism,” Andúne groaned as a panicked look came to her face.

“I don’t know what the big deal is Andúne. We’re already at fifty percent now,” Askai snorted as her eyes scanned the other Advanced Start players at the table, “How bad can seventy-five percent really be?”

“Bad enough,” I said not holding back, “I ain’t gonna lie. That extra twenty-five percent can really suck at times.”

“Especially when you’re being burned alive,” Töten cut in while letting out an explosive breath, “That’s the main reason I decided to choose a half-Fire Giant.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Assen scoffed, giving us a look as if we were being melodramatic.

“Trust me when I say,” Zeven slurred, drunkenly sloshing his mug around to take in as Nahimana tried to catch his arm, “It ain’t no ice cream social.”

“Good to know,” Solivann laughed as Zeven nearly fell out of his chair.

“Why don’t you take him up to your room?” I suggested, catching the female Badger Kin’s eye.

“That’s probably for the best,” Nahimana agreed as Zeven nearly fell over backward emptying the dregs of his mug. Standing up, she hauled him to his feet, “Come on, it’s time to hit the sack.”

“Is that time aalrready?” Zeven slurred as he precariously wobbled on his clawed feet.

“Looks like you’re gonna need a hand with him,” Töten said as he rose on unsteady legs to his feet to catch Zeven before he dragged Nahimana to the ground.

“That might be for the best,” Nahimana agreed as they both steadied him.

“Give me a second to grab Phoenix,” Töten said as soon as Nahimana got one of Zeven’s arms over her shoulders, “And then we can head up.”

“You calling it a night?” I asked as the big guy tried to haul the Barbarian up out of her chair.

“If I don’t call it now, you’re gonna have to carry both of our drunk asses up to our room,” Töten muttered as he dragged the Barbarian out of

her chair while it tipped over onto the floor.

“You need a hand or ... um,” I waved at hand weakly at Phoenix, “something?”

“I’ve got this,” Töten slurred as he nearly lost his own balance.

Bracing his feet, Töten caught himself as Phoenix sagged in his grip. She was really out hard, I silently thought with a shake of my head. It was like her body was wet noodle as he gripped both of her hands in his and hauled her up towards the ceiling. Bending low, he dragged her across his shoulder and rose back to his feet. As he hopped to adjust her weight on his shoulder, her breasts sort of flopped out of her Red Coral armor top.

“Töten!” I exclaimed as he turned back to Nahimana and Zeven, “You can’t leave her like that!”

“Dude, I don’t care what you say,” Töten indignantly muttered as he looped Zeven’s arm over his other shoulder, “There’s no way I’m manhandling her sweater puppies!”

“I’ve gotta get a screenshot of that!” I heard Adelya say from the other side of the table as I covered my eyes with a hand while peeking through my fingers.

“I’ve got her,” Nahimana grunted as she one-handedly tucked those cantaloupes away. This time I did close my eyes, but not before that inappropriate visual was seared into my mind as she warned, “Just don’t bounce her again or they’ll come right back out.”

“Um,” I managed to squeak while forcing myself to turn back to my German and Canadian audience, “You don’t need to decide now, but if you’re down, just shoot me a message and-”

“We’re down,” Andúne instantly assured me without hesitation along with her guildmates nodding enthusiastically.

“There’s no way we’re gonna miss out on joining in on one of your adventures,” Headripper readily agreed as he traded high-fives with Arija and Askai.

“We second that,” Solivann laughed with an incredulous shake of his head, “The shit you’ve been involved in has been off the hook!” Seeing my raised eyebrow, he glanced at his guildmates and smiled, “Aye, guys?”

“We’re down,” PixelBomb didn’t hesitate.

“Especially for a shot at those Orcs,” Assen agreed.

“And most especially the gold,” Adelya confirmed while the rest of the guild called out “Aye!” Catching my eyes, she gave me a hard look,

“Five gold each for as many as we can gather, right?”

“You betcha,” I laughed as the Tiger Kin excitedly leaped to her feet to high-five her friends. As she was doing that, I caught both of the guild leaders’ eyes, “Just make sure you shoot me your email addresses so I have a way to contact you when we’re getting close.”

“Ah, yeah,” Solivann said, nodding in understanding, “We’re not gonna be around any cities, are we?”

“Nope,” Andúne knowingly agreed having already realized that. Before she could say anything further, a shout from behind interrupted our conversation.

“Goddammit, Star!” Turning around in my chair, I saw a furious Tyhra stomping toward me through the crowded pub. “Where have you been all fucking day?”

“Watch out!” Headripper warned as everyone turned around in surprise, “Pissed off girlfriend at twelve o’clock!”

“You should really let your significant other know ahead of time what you’re doing,” Andúne admonished while giving me a disappointed look.

“Yeah, that’s pretty uncool, aye?” Solivann chastised as the rest of the Canadian’s nodded in agreement.

“What the hell are you guys going on about?” Tyhra demanded as she fiercely glared at faces looking back at her and blurted, “He’s not my boyfriend!”

“In that case,” Nikina commented in a condescending tone while giving the angry Dark Elf-Human female a once over, “I take it that means you’re in a situationship?”

“What?” Tyhra exclaimed completely flabbergasted, “No!”

“Then, close friends or something like that?” Andúne questioned in a strained tone.

“She’s my hair stylist,” I explained while covering my eyes with a hand in exasperation.

“Hairstylist?” Tyhra demanded in an insulted tone as my new friends chorused the word in disbelief.

“What else should I call you?” I asked while letting my hand drop to stare up at her scrunched-up face, “Sales Halfling?”

“I’m a Thief!” Tyhra exploded at me in indignation.

“They all fit,” I laughed, giving her an unconcerned shrug as my

new friends curiously traded glances. I could see it written on their faces that they felt like there was more to this story than what either one of us was saying. However, what that was, was obviously open to interpretation as I sat back in my chair and dismissively continued, “What I am not is my sister’s keeper.”

“Sister?” Andúne mouthed to her German guildmates as they gave her an “I don’t know” shrug back.

“Duke Dukey’s Dark Fist took the children earlier this morning!” Tyhra roared as if it were my fault, “By now, they’re probably halfway back to Thoronjhi!”

‘Deress has been kidnapped!’ Neysa’s alarmed cry rang pierced my skull as she anxiously sat forward in her chair.

‘Sounds that way,’ Helgath assured the Silver Dire Wolf girl as they both gave me a worried glance.

“What children are you talking about?” Andúne demanded as the players around me traded confused looks with one another.

‘Of course, they were kidnapped,’ I snapped as an annoyed frown came to my lips.

“Who’s this Duke Dukey guy?” Solivann asked as his face scrunched up in confusion.

‘They’ll be fed to those horrible Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines!’ Neysa realized in a flash as her golden eyes gave me a pleading look. ‘We have to help them!’

‘Maybe,’ I frowned, giving them both a warning look. As Tyhra began explaining who the Dark Elf Lord was and why she’d run off with the surviving children, I held both of my girls’ eyes, ‘We’ll help, but only if Tyhra agrees to my requirements.’

‘Your requirements?’ Neysa demanded as Helgath put a calming hand on the Silver Dire Wolf girl’s arm to settle her down.

‘Keep cool,’ I admonished once more as Tyhra came to the end of her quick spiel. Turning back to the anxious Halfling, I coolly met her gaze, “So, after I warned you not to hang around your shop, you idiots stayed at the Thrifty Harbor instead of making a run for it after being discovered?”

“All of my stuff was there!” Tyhra snarled as she flung her arms in the air in frustration, “If we’d left immediately, there’s no way I’d been able to keep on feeding them without packing up my-”

“Ill-gotten loot?” I asked as the table busted out laughing at the

enraged look that flared in the Thief's blue eyes. As she yanked at her ponytail angrily, I held up my hands to stop whatever she was going to say next, "You told me plain as day you didn't need any of my help."

"B-but t-that w-was b-before-" Tyhra angrily sputtered as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Before what? Figuring out that you did need his help?" Solivann helpfully asked as a stubborn look crossed Tyhra's face.

"Oh," Andúne grunted as she traded a frown with her guildmates, "It's like that."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Tyhra demanded as she gave the other female an unhappy glare.

"Nothing at all," Andúne primly said as her face pinched to hide her emotions.

"I think we'll leave this to the two of you to discuss alone," Solivann hurriedly added while sharing a silent nod with the rest of his guildmates as they stood up as one, "while we call this a night."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Andúne agreed as she rose to her feet along with her three remaining guildmates. She jerked her chin at Solivann as they began sliding their tables back into place around the front of the stage, "Let's plan on finishing up our local quests tomorrow so we can head out the day after." As the Canadian guild leader nodded, she gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder, "I'll send you a message with my email so we can discuss the details offline."

"That works for me," Solivann said with an agreeable nod and stepped away from the table with a parting wave, "We'll be in touch."

"What is your guestimate as to when you'll be ready for us?" Andúne asked as the Canadian's paused at her question.

"I'm thinking around two to three weeks," I said while thinking over the rough timeline if the Hobgoblin invasion was pushed back successfully.

"Works for us," Andúne agreed after a quick check with her guildmates. As they followed after the Canadians, I heard her say, "If it's okay, I'll write up a quick plan and you can tweak what works best for your guild from there."

"Sounds good," Solivann readily agreed as they disappeared into the slowly thinning crowd.

"What the hell was all that about?" Tyhra heatedly demanded as she

turned back to me.

“Probably that they don’t want another set of quests or problems,” I chuckled while draining the last of my spiced ale. It was starting to cool down which changed the flavor into what amounted to alcoholic room-temperature coffee. As she silently fumed at me, I sat the empty mug down and met her gaze head-on, “If you want my help getting the children back from Duke Dookie and his butt buddies, you’re gonna have to agree to an alliance.”

“An alliance!” Tyhra demanded in outrage, “Why would I need to do that?”

Looking into her furious red-rimmed eyes, I could tell that she’d been burning the candle hard at both ends. The black circles under her eyes made that plain enough to see. The craziest part was that even with the insane hours we’d been putting into playing *The World*, none of us had bags under our avatars’ eyes. Hell, I hadn’t even known that was possible.

That meant Tyhra had to be exhausted as hell. Possibly, she’d even been going a little psycho about trying to keep the kids out of Duke Dookie’s hands. Not that I particularly blamed her, especially not after finding out what they were doing to the Halflings that were being captured. If I had to worry about losing Helgath, Neysa, or Fylreh like that, I would’ve been just as on edge as she obviously was if not more.

A scowl came to my lips at that ugly thought. That was why I felt like I had to step in and give her a hand. I liked the children and respected everything she’d done to help them, but truth be told, none of it had been enough to keep them safe. Not that my current situation with an invasion of Hobgoblins trying to take over my lands and slaughter all of my people was all that much better.

Tyhra could call me an asshole for doing this, but I wasn’t going to waste any further time helping her unless we reached a more permanent arrangement to keep them safe. If she couldn’t handle that, I’d leave her out of the equation and save them for myself. Hell, it would probably be a lot easier if I simply did it that way and was done with it. Suppressing my desire to just get up and leave, I took a deep breath and tried again.

“Because I refuse to help without making sure the children won’t just be captured again or be struggling to get enough food to eat and have a place to sleep,” I stated in a no-nonsense tone that brought her up short.

“You want to take my children away from me!” Tyhra demanded in

outrage as her hands threateningly went to the hilts of her daggers.

‘Should I kill her?’ Helgath asked as she appeared as if by magic behind the Thief’s back with her daggers drawn and ready to strike along with Neristhana.

“What the hell?” Tyhra yiped while freezing in place.

‘Uh,’ Neysa stammered with a look of concern on her furry face as she eyed the three of us worriedly, ‘Is she now an enemy?’

‘Not yet,’ I assured them both while catching both Neristhana’s and Helgath’s eyes, “I think she’s gotten the point of your warnings.”

‘She’d better have,’ Helgath grumbled while sheathing her blades and sliding back into the chair on my opposite side.

“Let’s hope so,” Neristhana grunted as she took her seat again.

“I didn’t do nothing,” Tyhra muttered under her breath as I tried to get a handle on the tense situation.

“Right now, you have no children,” I stated somewhat unkindly as a guilty look flashed across her face. As she sucked in a breath to explode, I calmly continued, “What we’re doing is discussing ways to work together to get them back and keep them safe in the future.”

“I don’t know anything about you,” Tyhra snarled as she leaned in close while literally shaking in barely controlled rage, “and now you’re talking about forming an alliance together after threatening my life!”

“Eh, I didn’t threaten your life. That was Helgath and Neristhana,” I deflected with an apologetic laugh as she scowled at me, “They’re very protective when people threaten me harm.”

“I didn’t threaten you,” Tyhra protested as if I were crazy.

“You sort of did,” Neristhana interrupted as she nodded toward the Thief’s sheathed daggers.

“If you think that was threatening,” Tyhra growled as she began to stand, “I’ll fucking show you what threatening really means!”

“Please don’t,” I unworriedly said, giving her a deadpan look, “Unless you feel like making a quick run back from the nearest graveyard.”

Whatever Tyhra saw in Neristhana’s, Helgath’s, and Neysa’s eyes made her hesitate. I didn’t see what my girls were doing, but whatever it was, she’d gotten the point. Giving me a scathing look, the Thief slowly settled back in her chair as a pleasant smile split my lips.

“Look, Tyhra, you haven’t slept in how many days now?” I asked, trying to calm the situation down. “In all of this time, you’ve barely been

able to take care of your charges and keep your head above water.”

“If I hadn’t lost my Nightmare stronghold, things would’ve been different,” Tyhra angrily muttered under her breath as she hunched her shoulders defensively.

“Well, you did, and now they’ve been kidnapped again,” I calmly pointed out. Pulling a purple crystal from my pouch, I held it up so she could see it clearly, “From what I uncovered in Tulduroc, now they’re going to have their life essence sucked from their bodies to create these Lesser Eldritch Crystals.”

“Look asshole,” Tyhra huffed with tears in her eyes, “I’ve lost nearly everything I had saving those children from those assholes.” She began ticking off the points on her fingers. “I gave them a home, I fed and clothed them, and now I have some random asshole acting like he can do a better job than I have!”

“Really?” I asked her not mincing words, “Then, why did you come to me for help?”

“Because I thought you might be a decent human being and not a complete asshole,” Tyhra spat at me as she angrily pushed herself up from her chair to storm away.

“Hold up,” I said, stopping her with a hand on her forearm, “I didn’t say I wouldn’t help. I said that I would only help if we worked together as alliance partners to keep them safe.” As she paused in confusion, I let go of her arm and flashed her a friendly grin. “That’ll help give you a break from all of the bullshit you’ve been going through and give them a better situation in a community of fellow Halflings.”

“I don’t need no charity!” Tyhra fiercely protested.

“I’m not offering you charity. I’m offering to be a friend and work together for a common goal,” I said, giving her an earnest look, “I have an entire city where there’s a bunch of Halfling children that can play and grow up together.” I shook my head. “Not that it’s safe, because nowhere is particularly safe in The World.” Seeing her hesitate, I offered her a wry grin.

“We have a group of players that have come together to help each other out. In my opinion, they’re pretty cool and we have a lot of fun together,” I shrugged, “And who knows, maybe we can help you get back your Thief Nightmare quest.”

“Right,” Tyhra scoffed, “like you could take on the entire Thieves

Guild.”

“I probably could if I wanted to,” I admitted while tipping my mug over to frown at the lack of spiced ale, “Better yet, I have a buddy who’s gotten a good foothold on the Assassin Guild questline. He’s currently working on taking over the entire Nordic Region.” A grinned again at the stunned look on her face. “Might not be a bad idea to team up and take over both guilds. Who knows what we could accomplish working together.”

“Who the hell are you?” Tyhra muttered while giving me an incredulous look and shaking her head.

“Startum Ironwolf at your service,” I said, offering her a hand and formal introductions for the first time.

“God, you’re such a dork,” Tyhra laughed for the first time. Shaking her head at me, she grudgingly took my hand, “Tyhra Wulf.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said as she snorted at my formality.

“You’re gonna have to loosen up if we’re gonna be friends,” Tyhra grumbled while sagging in her chair as the tension left her body.

“Let’s do it this way,” I said, setting down my mug and meeting her red-rimmed eyes, “I’m meeting everyone heading out with me tomorrow at seven o’clock sharp directly outside the eastern gate. If you want to be friends and work together to get the children back, you know my requirements.”

“To come back with you to your lands with the children and be your ally,” Tyhra glumly repeated as she gave me a sullen glare.

“Why not log out for the night, think about my proposal, and get some rest,” I said, rising to my feet and giving her a friendly clap on the back. As Neysa and Helgath joined me, I began walking away saying, “Enjoy your evening, Ms. Wulf.”

“It’s Tyhra,” Tyhra corrected, before calling after me, “Why are you willing to help me out and add me to your,” she waved her hand in the air dismissively, “little group of friends?”

“Because the kids trust you,” I replied, giving her a parting two-fingered salute.

To my surprise, a number of players called out “Good job!” and “You’re the man!” along with other encouraging words as we passed through the main room. This was the first time since I’d started that random players were actually being nice to me. Not that I expected it to continue, per se, since players’ attention span tended to be short as they focused on

the newest winners and trends.

As we approached the stairwell, I glanced back to see Tyhra still sitting at the table as she stared off into space. I hope she agreed to my requirements, but if not, I'd already made the decision to go after the children one way or another. Not that I was going to rub her face at being extraneous to the situation at this point.

While I loved the idea of adding another Nightmare Start player to my rolls, I held no illusions that she was trustworthy. I remember reading that the difference between taking in a beaten dog and a human was that the dog would never betray you, while the human would more than likely stab you in the back for your kindness without a second thought. Hell, depending on their lack of honor and personal delusions, they might reason you were deserving of their betrayal for being too nice.

"See you bright and early at six in the morning," Neristhana said as she unlocked her door.

"Good night, Short Stack," I replied as we entered our room.

A frown turned down the corners of my lips as the girls continued chatting to one another about the evening. As I began stripping off my gear to get ready for bed, I chewed over the decision I'd made tonight. Was offering her to be an ally worth the risk? That was always the question when courting a new friend in an MMO like *The World*. While what you could do together was always more than what you could do alone, there was always the risk of either being betrayed or one party not being willing to put in an equal amount of effort.

Although I didn't know Tyhra, what she'd done to help the children had impressed me on a multitude of levels. If she could work together with the rest of us to build up our community, she'd be a great asset to have in our guild. That, I had no doubt. I would just have to trust the reason I'd decided to take a chance on her in the first place. Not that I wouldn't make it a point to keep an eye on her until she'd earned my trust and this mission to recover the children would be a good start for us to get to know each other better.

'You're assuming she'll decide to join us,' Helgath interrupted my thoughts as she came up behind me and started wiping down my back with a wet cloth.

'She really doesn't have much of a choice,' I countered while taking the damp cloth from her clawed fingers to clean below the waist.

‘So, the question will be what will she do after you rescue the children,’ Helgath sent as I rinsed out the cloth and twirled my finger for her to turn around.

‘Basically,’ I agreed while being silently thankful for the chill in the room that kept my manly reaction to her nudity in check.

‘Are you going to let her steal the children away?’ Neysa worriedly cut in as she released the magic of her amulet and poofed back to her natural Silver Dire Wolf form.

‘That’s a good question,’ I sighed as Helgath began drying me off with a fluffy towel. As she finished rubbing me down, I took it from her hands and started working her over while putting my thoughts to words, ‘I won’t force the issue, but I think they’ll be willing to join us of their own accord if you run the idea past them first.’

‘You mean, have them swear to you as vassals?’ Neysa asked as she plopped down on the floor next to the bed and laid her oversized head atop the blankets.

‘That could work,’ I admitted while climbing into bed, ‘But having them swear as my vassals isn’t exactly necessary.’

‘I think it would be better to have them bound to you and clearly under your protection,’ Helgath disagreed as she cuddled up next to me and laid her head in the crook of my arm, ‘That will force the Thief to respect the alliance you’ve made.’

‘True,’ I grunted while thinking over the situation as Neysa propped her head on my chest, ‘Or, it could piss Tyhra off to the point that she’s an enemy for life.’

‘Not if you keep your word,’ Helgath countered as I began running my fingers through the Silver Dire Wolf’s thick fur, ‘but if she can’t see how that’s better for the children, then maybe that’s for the best.’

‘Maybe,’ I differed with a yawn, feeling my eyes growing heavy from the long night and even busier day, ‘I’m gonna call it a night.’

Thankful that the weirdness between us seemed to have passed, I silently thought while giving them both a one-arm hug and triggering the log-out sequence. As my consciousness returned to my body, the egg’s lid opened to the dancing lights of my red lava lamps. Taking off my helm, I immediately drowned the oversized cup of water on the desk upon realizing my CamelBak was empty. While I didn’t feel hungry per se, my stomach felt completely empty. Although it was no substitute for solid food, the

protein powder had done its job to keep away my hunger pains.

A yawn forced its way out as I stretched for all I was worth and nearly got a Charlie Horse cramp. Pulling up my toes, I forced it away, before climbing out the egg and heading for the bathroom. I didn't need to remove my suit to know I'd filled the waste bladder. The inner pouch rested on the back of my thighs and felt like I was wearing a full diaper. I could tell that cleaning my suit out tonight was going to be a joy.

I didn't bother stripping off the suit until after I'd climbed in the guest shower. Running the water at full blast, I peeled away the suit and let everything wash down the drain while continuously yawning. Sitting down on the side of the tub to clean out the bladders, I woke up a short time later as the water started turning cold.

Dammit, I was tired. Forcing myself to climb back to my feet, I finished washing myself down and hung my suit over the curtain rod, before climbing out and drying off. There was no question in my mind that I was on a time limit. Topping off my water glass, I grabbed a bag of BBQ pistachios from my office and headed for the master bedroom while chomping down a few handfuls of nuts. While that wouldn't count as a meal, the protein and fat would help me not wake up starving like Marvin. Besides I was too tired to do anything more than that.

There were so many things that I should've done before crashing in bed, but I simply didn't have it in me. Feeling like a slacker, I drained my plastic cup, set my alarm for four forty-five, and laid back in bed. A part of me was worried I'd be too tired to sleep after not getting anywhere near enough sleep the night before. I shouldn't have worried, because I was out like a light as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Chapter Four

(Wednesday, May 14th / Day 24 of The World.)

(Dracul Apep in the city of Lonsalindel.)

“Once again, that was Dark Star Rising!” The announcer’s voice echoed across the park’s mini-amphitheater and the row of restaurants behind it as the audience whistled and shouted their approval.

“I still don’t understand how you figured out they’d be here and not Purus-thal,” Squish Bean huffed as the troupe started gathering up their gear to clear the stage.

“That’s because their focus is not on winning the Spring Music Festival,” Dracul cockily answered before carefully draining the last of his glass of blood wine. Drinking with the heavy veil over his face when they were in town was a major pain in the ass.

“Oh, please,” Squish Bean protested as she gave him an annoyed look while he set the long-stemmed glass down, “You don’t come up with an entire performance like that not to win!”

“Look at all of the songs in their vignette,” Dracul countered, sticking out a finger as he listed each title, “The Fall of Darom, The Battle for BrokenFang Hold, and Lord Ironwolf’s Battle in the Sea Elf Vortex.”

“What of it?” Squish Bean asked in a mocking tone, “All of the songs being sung in the Spring Festival are about famous historical battles and their heroes. That’s what Bards usually sing about.”

“That’s not the point,” Dracul pressed while confidently leaning back to drape an arm over the back of his chair, “They’re the only group singing about a player’s recent accomplishments.” Seeing the disbelief in her eyes, he gave her a knowing smirk. “That’s why I was so sure they’d go through Lonsalindel on their way to Purus-thal.”

“What is it that you always say? Correlation does not imply causation?” Squish Bean snarked, rapping her glass of blood wine against his chest, “Face it, you just got lucky.”

“Lucky?” Dracul dramatically exclaimed while lifting his chin as if he’d been offended, “My dear, that was a purely logical deduction and most

definitely not a guess.”

“Pure logic my ass,” Squish Bean argued with a loud sniff, “I double-checked with the harbor master before we left Tulduroc. It was basically a thirty to seventy percent chance they’d end up here. Meaning, there was no logic in making the bet at all.”

“Does that mean you want to double down for the next one?” Dracul playfully asked as his wife took a dainty sip from her glass.

“Why should I bet any more period?” Squish Bean taunted. Tapping his chest again with her glass, her lips twisted into a smirk, “If I do nothing, you still have a half-month of laundry duty.”

“Sounds like you’re afraid of losing another bet to me,” Dracul blustered as his wife rolled her eyes,

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Squish Bean taunted, thoroughly enjoying the back and forth, “If you keep this up, you’re going to be doing laundry for the rest of the month.”

“Uh-huh, keep it up, short stuff,” Dracul playfully threatened, when the group of Wolf Kins they’d been watching suddenly started beelining in the direction of the stage. Jumping to his feet, he dropped a handful of coppers onto the table while motioning toward the group with his chin, “Come on, it’s game time!”

“Calm down, Hon,” Squish Bean chastised him as she drained the last of her blood wine. Unhurriedly setting the glass down, she gracefully rose like a cat getting ready to stalk their prey, “Being a Dhampir is all about attitude.” Seeing the pained look on his face, she gave him a haughty look as she flipped her straight black hair over an armored shoulder. “It’s all part of the mystique.”

“That’s so much more important than missing out on the chance we’ve been angling for,” Dracul sighed as he held out his arm.

“Well, we would’ve had plenty of time if you just let me use my Blood Domination on them,” Squish Bean complained as they begin elegantly making their way after the RabidClaw Troupe arm in arm.

“Yeah, because that Startum Ironwolf guy wouldn’t mind us mentally enslaving his companions and vassals at all,” Dracul sarcastically teased as his wife silently glowered at him, “That will definitely make him want to trust us as allies.”

“I’m sure he’d understand once we explained everything to him,”

Squish Bean tried to defend herself, before letting out a sigh of exasperation, “Or not.”

“Let’s go with the, or not, on this one,” Dracul laughed while shaking his head. While his wife was a skilled gamer and a highly intelligent woman, sometimes she missed out on normal social cues if it interfered with what she wanted or was excited about. Then again, she was like any other nerd in that way. He snorted at that while eyeing her oversexualized avatar, even if she didn’t look the part.

“Don’t make me rough you up when we log out for the night,” Squish Bean growled as she glanced up sharply at him.

“Ooh, why don’t you threaten me with a good time some more,” Dracul joked as he let his hand drop low to squeeze her leather-encased ass.

“Gah, sometimes you’re such a dick,” Squish Bean snapped as she batted his hand away from the goods.

“That’s your dick, Hon,” Dracul taunted as his eyes flicked to the top left to check the time on his HUD, “Huh, that’s strange.” He hadn’t realized it while they’d been drinking, but a half hour had nearly gone by since she’d last whammied the group, “Isn’t your Charming Mez only supposed to last for fifteen minutes outside of combat?”

“That’s what I’d thought too before I messed with those thugs last night,” Squish Bean explained in a hushed whisper as Telaris Paletooth, the lead Bard, began shouting out threats to the other troupe.

“We don’t want your kind here in Lonsalindel!”

“Our kind?” Ayda, the older Half-Elf Bard in Dark Star Rising, hollered back in disbelief, “We’re both Halflings!”

“We’re Wolf Kin from the Shadowbite Clan!” Telaris roared as his troupe of eleven spread out to surround the smaller group, “Not dirty Halflings and Demi-Humans trying to steal other’s prize pouches!”

“And you think that’s the reason why the gang jumped the city guards?” Dracul asked, ignoring the shouting going on in front of them as he thought back to the weird fight.

The gang deciding to attack the patrol of city guards as they’d passed by had stunned them both. Not that the fight had lasted all that long. It had only taken a minute or two for the gang to be tied up and hauled away to prison.

“Yeah, I’d suggested that they attack the city guard patrol when it

passed through their territory next just to fuck with them,” Squish Bean continued in a whisper as he noticed the Dark Star Rising troupe were starting to glance at each other nervously. Even with their protection detail beelining to them from the far side of the amphitheater, it was obvious that the troupe didn’t want to get into a brawl inside a Beast Kin city. Any experienced traveler knew there were always issues of preferential treatment toward the local populace when dealing out justice in comparison to strangers, especially when it came to one of the city’s favorite local Bard troupes as his wife continued thoughtfully, “I think the suggestion sticks a lot longer than the default time if I’m suggesting something that the target wanted to do in the first place.”

“Huh,” Dracul grunted, giving her a stunned look, “How long would something like that even last?”

“Give us your money and your gear,” Telaris snarled as the rest of his troupe surrounded the Dark Star Rising Bard.

“And leave the Kingdom of Ocilimma before we demand your life!” another of the RabidClaw Bards gruffly added.

“No clue without experimenting with the effect more,” Squish Bean admitted as she motioned with her chin towards the growing altercation, “but obviously Telaris and his troupe were wanting to kick them out of Lonsalindel before they could show them up too much.”

“Are you mentally ill or possibly in need of healing?” Alanah, the young Bard, asked in a concerned tone as the entire group came to a stop.

“Alanah, dear girl, you’re a sweetheart,” Ayda raised her voice as she stepped in front of Telaris without batting an eye, “These males are not in need of any more help than simply practicing their craft would bring them.”

“That’s some good advice that I’d personally suggest you boys take,” Norrid, the Dwarven Bard, guffawed as he stepped up beside Ayda.

“From their words, I take it that they don’t particularly like anyone who’s not a Beast Kin much either,” Dracul drolly said as they strolled up behind Telaris, “I wonder if that means they’ll still attack you on sight for having used Charming Mez on them?”

“Hence why Blood Domination is so much better to use,” Squish Bean frowned as she let out a sigh of exasperation.

“Which is the one thing we can’t start doing until after we complete our secondary Nightmare quest,” Dracul added just as the other half of the

Dark Star Rising troupe of guards reached them.

“Step away from our comrades and go about your business!” The Gnome leading the mixed group of Beast Kin furiously bellowed as she came to a stop with her glowing fists held at the ready. “Or we’ll smash your heads in and raise your flea-bitten hides as Zombies!”

“What the hell?” Squish Bean hissed in his ear as she clutched his arm in a death grip, “This isn’t going down like it’s supposed to!”

“Fuck me,” Dracul growled under his breath.

What the hell were they doing? They weren’t supposed to fight back! How could either one of them have guessed a troupe of lower-level Bards would act so aggressively when confronted by a troupe of much higher-level Bards? These idiots should’ve just complied or tried to call for the city guards! Their larger numbers didn’t make a hill of beans different when facing off against a group that was fifteen to twenty levels higher. If they didn’t quickly step in to redirect the RabidClaw troupe’s ire, Dracul had no doubt this was going to go south quicker than shit. Even worse, if all of them died here, that would entirely ruin their plans for being introduced to Startum Ironwolf as a friend and getting into his good graces!

“Let me handle this,” Dracul hissed to his wife as he let go of her arm and stepped in front to block her with his body.

“Boys, ge-” Telaris began to roar and reach for his weapons.

“Excuse me, Telaris of the RabidClaw troupe,” Dracul suavely interrupted as the entire troupe of level 48 to 53 Wolf Kin froze in mid-motion at his shout, “You might want to stop accosting my new friends here.” He waved a blood-red gloved hand to take in the entire group. “I’ve already called for the city guards and they’re on their way.”

“What of it, Halfling?” Telaris growled as he turned to face him while drawing his dual short swords, “Even the city guards of Lonsalindel are wise enough to think twice before attempting to confront a troupe of angry Bards on the warpath!” Taking in their levels at a glance, he sneered as his black lips pulled back from his fangs, “This bit of information only means we’ll have more lowbie Halflings to rob and kick out of the city!”

“Us lowbie Halfling Bards might just have a bigger bite than you can imagine,” Dracul warned as a grim smile came to his lips. Facing the Wolf Kin in a t-stance, he unobtrusively adjusted the sheath of the massive two-handed sword strapped to his back for drawing it easier and prepared to

recall his Blood Armor, “I’d personally suggest just stepping away with your warning and let the lot of us leave Lonsalindel unmolested in peace.”

“You really think the RabidClaw troupe can’t rip apart twenty-nine lowbie Halflings without more than getting a little blood on our fur?” Telaris guffawed along with the rest of his Wolf Kin. With a swipe of his clawed hand, he yanked off the semi-transparent veil hanging over Dracul’s eyes along with the dark gray top hat it was attached to while taunting, “Maybe you need to remove your girly veil and take another look before I yank your head off along with your spine, girly boy!”

“Ahh shit,” Squish Bean cursed under her breath as a horrified gasp rang out from both groups of Bards upon seeing his grizzled monstrous face, long fangs, and burning purple eyes. As his top hat tumbled to a stop, she self-consciously added, “I guess I lost this bet too!”

Dracul had warned her that this plan was shit from the get-go! He’d been planning a snippy response to get them out of this mess when the furry idiot had to go and piss him the fuck off. That level of disrespect deserved only death as far as he was concerned. Not that his Charisma wasn’t so low, even with his Nightmare Start stats, that they wouldn’t attack him on sight.

Out of the corner of his eye, he took note that the Bards of Dark Star Rising were silently repositioning themselves for battle, while their guards began pulling out what looked to be purple crystals from their pouches and began casting spells under their breath. He immediately recognized the significance of what they were doing from watching Startum’s Twitch Stream. Even if the sun was still out, if he could buy them some time, they might have a chance to take these assholes down together if they could get their Zombies raised in time. Before he could think up a suave one-liner to throw off the coming attack, his wife pushed him aside and stepped in front of the Lead Bard.

“Telaris, look into my eyes!” Squish Bean haughtily commanded as her purple eyes began to glow with a light of their own.

“Freaking A, Squish!” Dracul swore under his breath as the level 53 Wolf Kin staggered from the force of her will that hit him. While he understood what she was trying to do, she’d just screwed up big time, “They’re too close together!”

“That Halfling Dhampir is trying to bewitch you, Telaris!” Mikain, the troupe’s second in command, roared as if to prove his point.

“W-what d-did you just s-say?” Telaris stammered in confusion as he shook his cloudy head free of the Charming Mez spell. As his eyes refocused on the tiny sexy Dhampir standing in front of him, his furry face screwed up in a rage, “Kill them all!”

Even before the words had left his mouth, Dracul was moving as Mikain charged his wife while the rest of the RabidClaw troupe threw their heads back and howled as one. Neither he nor Squish had seen the Wolf Kin’s previous performance, but their Bard magic immediately kicked in as the eleven Bards suddenly turned into a horde of a hundred-ten. Even worse, they were both rocked with major debuffs to all their stats as all hell broke loose around them.

Ignoring the heaviness weighing down his limbs, Dracul ripped the Night Blade of Lord Sanguinarian from its sheath as his entire body was suddenly covered in solid plates of blood-red mail and leather armor. He’d designed the blood armor to easily fit over his social clothing so that it would give him the added bonuses from both. Even so, the dual enchantments were barely enough to partly counter the Bard’s magic and the debuffs he automatically received from fighting in full daylight as he swept his wife aside and parried the two-handed battle axe that was about to take off her head.

“Everyone make a defensive circle while fourth squad keeps on casting,” the Gnome screamed as glowing tattoos appeared over her face. Leaping into the air, her fists began pummeling the nearest Wolf Kin in front of her. As the Dark Star Rising Bards began singing their own battle songs, she let out a high-pitched battle cry and sprang at the next nearest illusion while screaming, “Then we’ll slaughter every last one of them!”

Dracul didn’t know what the hell those weird runic symbols were glowing on the Gnome’s enraged face, but their aura seemed to physically punch him in the metaphysical gut. Add that to the debuffs he was now getting from the Dark Star Rising Bards’ songs and he barely managed to batter the two-handed battle axe aside. Staggering from the blow, he instacast Vampiric Aura and Blood Infection, before being backhanded away hard enough to ring his bell.

“I’ll rip your head off and shit down your throat!” Mikain roared as he strode forward like an unstoppable train to strike again, while five other mirror images of Wolf Kin illusions joined in with their own attacks.

The only thing that saved Dracul was that he knew Mikain was the closest Wolf Kin to him as he stepped forward to ram his shoulder into the Bard's chest. Even though the bodycheck barely rocked him a half step back, it was enough to lessen the strike from his battle axe. Grunting as his ribs snapped, Dracul managed to slash the Bard in the face with his claws, before being headbutted away with a savage growl.

"You're scratching me like a little bitch!" Mikain bellowed as he struck again in a nearly impossible blur.

Now that he had the Bard marked, Dracul ignored the illusion attacks coming from the mirror images now that he had a bead on the blood flowing into him from Mikain's open wound. He breathed a sigh of relief as Squish Bean's music began to partly counteract one of the debuffs weighing down his arms as his two-handed sword barely battered the next chopping strike away. Ignoring the numbness in his gauntleted hands, he knew they just needed to weather the blows until his wife could start tagging their enemies with her own debuffs. That and he needed time for his own special attacks to do their magic.

As black shadowy bolts began slamming through the non-illusion Wolf Kin in front of him, Dracul weathered the beating Mikain was giving him. Fighting an enemy that was twenty-one levels higher than you was no joke in an MMO. Add on to that the double debuffs that were still affecting him and it was amazing he was keeping up with the higher-level Bard even with his Nightmare Start stats. He just needed more open wounds from the other fights going on around them to leech more health and temporary stats from and then he'd be mostly good to go so long as the bastard didn't get a one-shot on him.

"Die Dhampir!" Telaris bellowed as he charged into the scrum a moment later. Thankfully, the illusions around him began wavering in and out of view as the Dark Star Rising Bards partly managed to counteract the RabidClaw troupe's magic.

"Rawh!" Dracul screamed as his oversized red blade swept through multiple illusions. Unfortunately, his oversized red blade swept through empty air forcing him to stumble and overextend due to the miss. Before he could recover, pain lanced through him as the Lead Bard's blade pierced his chest to take out a large chunk of his health, "Aaeiii!"

Swinging the Night Blade of Lord Sanguinarian around in a whirlwind

attack, Dracul forced the blades out of his body and parried Mikain's battle axe aside as a black shimmering arrow pierced Telaris between his rage-filled eyes. As the Lead Bard yelped in shock, he stomped onto the bastard's clawed feet with a blood-plated boot as Telaris punched him in the face. Weathering the abuse, a savage smile split his bloody lips.

With Squish Bean's successful attack, Dracul was now able to properly identify which of the Telaris were illusions. That and his hit points were already nearly fully recovered from all of the blood mist leeching back into him. Ignoring the illusionary blades coming at him, he parried Telaris's blades and backhanded him in the muzzle while planting the Night Blade of Lord Sanguinarian into the ground to block Mikain's slashing strike.

Grinning like a fiend at the shocked looks on both Wolf Kins' faces, Dracul kicked the battle axe's shaft away, before spinning in close and slamming his elbow into Mikain's muzzle while black arrows from Squish Bean pelted the pair. Ignoring the illusionary blades striking at him, he ducked under the Lead Bard's lunge and rammed the pommel of his two-handed sword into the surprised Wolf Kin's face. As Telaris staggered a step back in pain, he spun around to face Mikain just as the blade of the oversized battle axe hacked into his back.

"I'm gonna fuck you up blood-sack!" Dracul bellowed in rage as he slashed the Night Blade of Lord Sanguinarian up with all his might to drive Mikain back. Before he could recover, his eyes widened in alarm as Telaris faked a lunge at him, before spinning around and charging his wife. Unable to turn around as Mikain's battle axe slammed into his collarbone, he yelled out over his shoulder in warning, "Squish Bean, I lost aggro!"

Knocking the battle axe away with the flat of his two-handed sword, Dracul spun around and lunged after the Lead Bard only to see his wife dancing backward like a ballerina. She was using her Nightmare Fiddle that was currently transformed into its bow form to block the flurry of blows raining down on her. If not for her special Dash ability and super high Agility, she would've already been overwhelmed.

'Fuck!' Dracul raged as Mikain's axe ripped through his backplate. Shrugging off the attack, he swung the Night Blade of Lord Sanguinarian back, ready to stab it straight through the Lead Bard's back, when a clawed fist grabbed the mangy beastkin by the scruff of his neck. While desperately trying to batter Mikain away in a vain attempt to help his wife, he roared,

“Bring him back this way!”

“I’ve got this!” Squish Bean yelled as she suddenly dropped her bow and stepped in close to the Lead Bard while holding up the razor sharp Mortalitas Blade-Lyre of Sanguinarian to block the blow.

“No!” Dracul roared as he saw Telaris’s swinging arm hook the blade around to trap her against his chest.

There was no way Dracul could reach her in time with Mikain shaking him like a ragdoll and slamming his battle axe into his side again and again. As it was, he’d already be dead if not for his constant leeching from his Vampiric Aura and Blood Infection abilities. Without Squish Bean to keep debuffing the RabidClaw troupe, this was going to be a quick trip to the graveyard for both of them, besides getting the Dark Star Rising troupe slaughtered in the process.

“Aaeiii!” Telaris’s sharp cry of agony made all of the Wolf Kin freeze in shock as the Lead Bard dropped to the ground and shouted, “My arm! My arm!” Mikain watched in horror as his brother held up his spurting stump screaming, “She cut off my fucking arm!”

“It wouldn’t have happened if the lot of you weren’t being a bunch of wannabe thugs!” Squish Bean shrieked in fury as she kicked him in the face to send him sprawling onto his back. Straddling the Lead Bard, she angrily stomped down on his flailing arm and raised the Mortalitas Blade-Lyre of Sanguinarian up to his neck screaming out, “Stop fighting now or I take off his head!”

“Why should we stop now,” Mikain shouted back as the rest of the RabidClaw troupe froze where they stood and the fighting came to a stop around them, “You’ve already ruined him as a Bard!”

“Where there is life, there is hope. Isn’t that what they say?” Dracul demanded, trying to think of something to say to stop the rest of them from continuing the fight, “He might not be able to play but he still has his life and his voice!” He looked back to catch Mikain’s eye. “That should count for something!”

“Or do you all want to die!” Squish Bean screamed at the rest of them while doing her best to sound tough.

If you ignored her high-pitched squeaky voice and the fact that she was barely over five feet tall, Dracul had to say she pulled off the whole tough Dhampir look pretty well. It helped that she still had the warm blood

dripping off the razor-sharp wire blade of her Mortalitas Blade-Lyre of Sanguinarian and was prepared to behead the Lead Bard. Nonetheless, it took nearly everything he had to not bust out laughing as she viciously glared at the troupe of higher-level Wolf Kin males staring back at her in shock.

There was no way this was going to work, Dracul thought as he saw the tension in the RabidClaw troupe as they argued in their private group chat. Carefully taking ahold of his Night Blade of Lord Sanguinarian like a staff, he prepared to break Mikain's grip on his neck, when the tension was broken by a soft voice.

"If you give your word to leave us alone and let us go about our way," Alanah said from behind the defensive ring of Dark Star Rising Bards and guards, "I can reattach your arm."

"You're a Priest?" Mikain demanded as a hopeful look came to Telaris's face.

"And a Bard," Alanah explained with a self-deprecating grin as she patted the Gnome and a pair of Beast Kin to let her out. She cocked her head to the side eyeing Squish Bean and the Lead Bard thoughtfully, "I'm still low level but I have enough skill to get the job done."

"If you can heal my brother," Mikain stated after another quick discussion, "We'll give our leave to let you go about your business unmolested in Lonsalindel by our clan."

"Then we have an accord," Norrid growled as five level 45 Orc Warrior Zombies suddenly rose up out of the ground. Ignoring the alarmed looks that the Wolf Kin Bards gave them, he motioned Alanah toward the Lead Bard, "Get to work so we can get out of here before the city guard gets involved!"

"I'll be quick about it," Alanah promised as he nodded for the small Gnome and a Wolf and Bear Kin to go with her.

"Stay back here with us, son," Norrid grunted at Tavon as he tried to follow after the Half-Elf. Seeing the young Centaur's glare, he continued softly, "It's for the best until this is resolved."

"What?" Mikain demanded as Alanah hurried past to his brother, "You don't trust our word?"

"I don't know you from squat," Norrid spat as he wiped away the blood running down the side of his face, "Only that you attacked us for

performing a good set of songs.” He looked Mikain in the eyes and flashed the male an ugly smile. “After doing that, explain to me why you think I should trust your word?”

“Shut your mouth Dwarf!” one of the other Wolf Kin growled, “You’re the ones trying to push us out of our own city!”

“How?” Norrid roared, “By outperforming your sorry asses?”

“That’s enough,” Ayda interrupted the Dwarf as she gave his shoulder a squeeze of warning. As Alanah got to work, she swept her gaze across the Wolf Kin Bards, “We’re only here for a quick performance before heading on our way.” Seeing the look of disbelief that flashed across their furry faces, her stern face softened a bit, “It’s more about the message we’re trying to get out about Lord Ironwolf than any monetary compensation.”

Seeing the golden glow of healing come from Alanah’s hands, Mikain’s ire seemed to lessen. Releasing the back of Dracul’s armor, the Wolf Kin roughly shoved him away as his brother sat up with a groan. Before any of them could speak, a shout came from the row of pubs and restaurants behind them.

“Stand down in the name of the City Guard of Lonsalindel!”

“Sheath your weapons unless you don’t wanna spend the night in the city’s dungeon,” the Gnome snapped to RabidClaw troupe’s Bards. As everyone began sheathing their weapons in a hurry, she jerked her chin to the large black and gray furred Wolf Kin standing beside her, “Think you can do something to get us out of trouble, Zane?”

“Sure thing, Blolnat,” Zane winked, before catching the other troupe’s eyes, “All of us were just working on a new skit, right?”

“Right?” Blolnat snapped, kicking the Lead Bard in the shin when he didn’t immediately answer.

“A skit,” Telaris grunted in agreement as Zane headed off to speak with the city guards.

“Do you mind giving him a hand up?” Alanah asked Dracul as she glanced up at him and his wife.

“U-uh, s-sure,” Dracul stuttered, surprised that the young female Half-Elf was willing to speak to him. She was the first person he’d met in The World, other than his wife, who hadn’t seemed bothered by his Dhampir heritage.

“Here, let me help you up too,” Squish Bean offered as she stepped

forward to give the girl a hand.

“What are you doing? They’re half Dhampir!” Blolnat hissed as the guard’s squad leader let out a shout.

“Your troupes were practicing a skit together!”

“Just get your stink away from me, Halflings,” Telaris snarled under his breath as he yanked back his hand upon standing up.

“Yeah, that’s exactly how you should do it,” Dracul loudly congratulated as he stepped back from the Wolf Kin male nodding, “We really want the audience to get a feel for your idiotic hate.”

“W-what?” Telaris stammered in confusion when it suddenly dawned on him that the Dhampir was mocking him, “Come on,” He jerked his chin toward the rest of his troupe and snarled, “Let’s get out of here!”

“What of the guards?” Mikain worriedly asked as they began hurrying away.

“They know better than to fuck with us,” Telaris snarled as the five Orc Zombies were suddenly dismissed.

“Are you guys okay?” the squad leader asks as they stomped past.

“We’re fine,” Telaris snapped without stopping.

“Uh, sure, Telaris,” the squad leader nervously stammered as he glanced around at the crowd of onlookers that seemed to be slowly breaking up, “Why does everyone look like they’ve been in a fight?”

“We’re working on our realism,” Zane assured the squad leader as he fished out two gold pieces, “As a thank you for your diligence, how about a little something something so you can enjoy a few drinks on us at the end of your shift and we’ll be on our way.”

“Well, if no one was hurt,” the squad leader slowly agreed as he took the coins while glancing over his shoulder at the RabidClaw troupe. Seeing that they weren’t going to say anything, he finally grunted in agreement, “All right, just make sure you don’t disturb the peace anymore tonight whether you’re practicing a skit or not.”

“Of course, officer,” Zane readily agreed as he began walking back toward them, “Sorry for accidentally triggering a false alarm.”

“Thank you for your help with those Wolf Kin,” Alanah said, offering him and Squish Bean a polite bow, “We would’ve been hard-pressed to have-”

“What are you doing?” Blolnat hissed as she tried to pull the young

Half-Elf away, “I already told you they’re Dhampir Halflings!”

“So, what?” Alanah hissed as she yanked her arm free to glare down at the small female Gnome, “All of us are Halflings.” Seeing the conflicting emotions flashing across Blolnat’s face, she put a hand on the Gnome’s shoulder, “Wouldn’t that have been the same thing you would’ve said about me two weeks ago?”

“But that’s, uh ...” Blolnat self-consciously hesitated as she gave the Half-Elf girl a conflicted look, “different.”

“They came to our aid against a much higher-level troupe of Wolf Kin in a foreign city,” Alanah pressed as Squish Bean transformed her bow back into a fiddle while the female Gnome let out an exasperated breath, “The very least we can do-”

“Is offer them dinner and a thank you,” Ayda said as she walked up with the rest of their people.

“U-uh, sure thing, um, that would, um, be great,” Squish Bean gave him a wide-eyed look for him to say something.

“My wife is being too humble,” Dracul quickly interrupted as he dismissed his armor to look less threatening, “We were actually wanting to congratulate you on a wonderful performance and ask for some tips on improving our own show. Those detailed illusions were truly amazing.” As he glanced around to take in the whole group, he silently cursed himself for being an idiot as he noticed most of them flinching at his monstrous face. Dammit, where was his top hat? Clearing his throat, he tried not to worry about that as he continued in his best suave tone, “It was just happenstance that we were on hand to offer you a bit of assistance with those thugs.”

“I think this is what you were looking for, son,” Norrid said under his breath as he subtly passed over the top hat he’d lost while everyone else tried to act oblivious.

“Uh, thank you, Sir Dwarf,” Dracul gave the smaller male a polite bow as he quickly donned his hat and got the veil in place. “Not everyone is so,” he politely coughed into his gloved hand, “accepting of my mixed heritage.”

“That ain’t a problem,” Norrid chucked back at him, “It’s not like I’m looking to take you back to me room.”

“Good to know,” Dracul smirked as the Dwarf gave him a hearty clap on the back.

“The name is Norrid, Norrid Silvercoat.”

“I’m Dracul Apep,” Dracul replied as he motioned to his side, “And this is my wife, Squish Bean.”

“Nice to meet you,” Squish Bean said, shaking the Dwarf’s hand.

“Are you sure you don’t have a bit of Dwarf in yea?” Norrid asked as he leaned close while giving her an appreciative once over.

“Nope, I’m normally this tall,” Squish Bean politely replied while pointedly ignoring the Dwarf’s eyeballs nearly popping out of his skull as he got a good look down her cleavage.

“I don’t mind helping you out with that we lit bit of a problem then,” Norrid jokingly offered as he released her hand.

“While I appreciate the offer,” Squish Bean snorted at the Dwarf’s audacity as she looped her arms into Dracul, “It sounds like my man has a much larger tool to get the job done.”

“You wound me, Squish,” Norrid guffawed as the rest of Dark Star Rising busted out laughing. Looking up at him, the Dwarf gave him an appreciate nod, “You’ve got quite the missus there.”

“I’ve always thought so,” Dracul snorted, finding it hard to feel insulted by the bawdy Dwarf even if he’d just propositioned his wife in front of him.

With that icebreaker out of the way, the rest of the troupe and guards introduced themselves. While Dracul and his wife recognized all of the Bards, the rest they’d never seen on the Twitch Streams. As the last Beast Kin introduced themselves, Alanah spoke up again.

“If you happen to know a good place for dinner, please let us know.”

“Not really, this is our first night here too,” Dracul smoothly lied as his wife jumped into the conversation.

“We’re on our way to Purus-thal for the Bard’s Spring Festival,” Squish Bean explained, “but this was the closest port we could get when sailing out of Tulduroc.”

“Oh, then maybe we could travel together,” Alanah exclaimed while trading a happy glance with Zinnaemita, “I can’t help much with illusions, but I’m sure Zinn, Ayda, and Norrid can give you some tips on improving your technique.”

“That would be appreciated,” Squish Bean gushed as she sidled up with the female Bards and began walking in the direction of the pubs and

restaurants, “I can’t believe how realistic that whole battle scene for Darom came out!”

“Come on, Dracul,” Norrid said, stepping up beside him as they followed the three chatting females, “This looks like it’s gonna be a fun night.”

“I guess that means we’re gonna have to find some honey mead,” Dracul chuckled as his wife glanced back over her shoulder and gave him a knowing wink. He could only shake his head at that and laugh. It most definitely looked like they now had an in.

Chapter Five

(Wednesday, May 14th / Day 24 of The World.)

(Sarka Dazed and friends leaving Myathlune.)

“That’s one of the best parts about The World,” Tinyr slurred as he stumbled out of the pub with an arm slung around his wife’s waist.

“What’s that?” Yun asked as he unsteadily clutched at the railing.

“You can get shitfaced and eat to your heart’s contentment?” Unalia asked, giving her man a glassy-eyed wink.

“Whoa!” Yun exclaimed as he tripped over his own feet and slid down to the ground. Catching himself on the railing, he wobbled in place while adding, “And you’re not hungover the next morning for work.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m gonna be guiding your drunken asses around with me every night,” Sarka complained as she turned to glare at the trio with her hands on her hips.

“Hey, don’t be like that,” Tinyr complained as he helped to steady Yun so the Priest could stand on his own two feet, “This is the first time we could really let loose after all that fighting.”

“You said it yourself,” Unalia protested as Sarka crossed her arms and playfully arched an eyebrow, “Going for dinner and drinks is the best way to end a day of splurging in the shopping district!”

“Yeah, it’s not bad,” Sarka admitted as all of them shared a laugh.

“Are you sure you don’t wanna come to bed and cuddle?” Yun asked, staggering over to wrap her up in his arms.

“Aww,” Tinyr whispered to his wife as they shared a kiss.

“If we do that,” Sarka let out a throaty laugh, “You won’t wake up in time for work.”

“Gah,” Yun groaned as he stepped back to loosely hold her in his arms, “I can’t be sick anymore this month or my boss will blow a gasket.”

“A quicky is always good,” Tinyr argued as his wife bashfully covered his mouth with a hand.

“We’re hot logging and putting you on follow,” Unalia not so innocently smirked as she gave them a wave, “See you tomorrow evening.”

“Um, I’ve gotta go!” Tinyr apologetically said as his wife’s avatar

took on a dull look. Hurriedly playing with his invisible interface, he gave Sarka a nod, "I've got you on follow, night!"

"That was quick," Sarka laughed as both avatars stood blankly with their hands at their sides.

"Sometimes you have to move fast if you want to get in a quicky before bed," Yun snorted as he nuzzled her neck.

"Yeah, yeah," Sarka snorted as they kissed again. As they came up for air, she poked him in the chest, "You better go now if you're gonna."

"Can't you just come to bed and take us to Amyalneas in the morning while we're at work?" Yun whined in her ear as he groped her butt and tits.

"Don't be making any promises that you can't keep," Sarka protested as she playfully batted his hands away. It wasn't that she was upset that he was getting handsy. She just didn't want to get all worked up only to have him log out. Pushing him away at arm's length, she snorted, "Go to bed or you'll be blaming me for being written up by your boss."

"We'll talk about this more when I get home from work tomorrow," Yun threatened as he gave her a final kiss and stepped back to log out.

"Promises, promises," Sarka smirked as his face suddenly went blank. It was the default expression an avatar took when players hot-logged. Patting her husband's slack-jawed cheek, she turned around and began walking for the main gate while calling over her shoulder in group chat, "Everyone follow me."

Unalia, Tinyr, and Yun fell into a line behind Sarka as she began winding her way through the still-busy shopping district. She tried to clear a path through the crowds of players filling the streets, but there were so many players and NPCs, that they just filled in behind her as soon as she passed. That left her charges randomly bumping into other groups of players and NPCs.

"What the is wrong with you?" a gruff voice demanded as Sarka turned around while continuing to walk backward to see a Light Elf Warrior glaring angrily at the back of her husband's avatar. His face screwed up in fury as the line of her teammates obliviously continued walking on past, "Are you too good to fucking say excuse me or something?"

"Hey, let him go!" Sarka shouted as the male player grabbed Yun's shoulder and angrily spun him around. As her husband's avatar numbly stumbled and gave him a blank look, the Warrior's head whipped around to

glare at her, “He’s Hot Logged Out and on follow!”

“H-he’s w-what?” the Light Elf stammered in confusion as his teammates settled down at her words.

“He’s being controlled by the limited AI,” Sarka repeated as a look of understanding came to the other player’s eyes. It disappeared a second later as his face turned flush in embarrassment.

“How was I supposed to know that?” the male demanded.

“You’re not,” Sarka hollered back, “That’s why I’m letting you know so you don’t get your panties in a knot.” As the Light Elf hesitated unsure of how to respond, she flung her arm at him, “Trust me, if he was here and logged in, he’d be sorry. Now, can you let him go so I can get all of them away from these crowded streets?”

“Seriously!” the Warrior irritably demanded, “What’s with the attitude?”

“It’s cool, KillerTank,” the Ranger beside him urgently hissed as he tried to drag him away, “Come on, let’s go.”

“Dude,” KillerTank protested, “She’s being a sarcastic bitch!”

“That sarcastic bitch is a level 53 Warrior!” the Ranger hissed loud enough for Sarka to hear as she angrily folded her arms across her chest in response, “And her boy there is a level 53 Priest.”

“What?” KillerTank jolted in place as his eyes widened in horror.

“Fucking hurry up and let go of him before he kills you with an auto-attack!”

“Um, sorry,” KillerTank stammered in confusion as he quickly let go. Without saying a word, Yun’s avatar simply turned away from the low-level Warrior and began shuffling after her.

“Thaaannk yyouuu,” Sarka sarcastically drug out the words, before turning around and continuing to walk away while muttering under her breath, “Prick!”

Luckily, no one else stopped to give Sarka any more problems as she led her train out of the district. The crowds finally thinned out when they reached the kill zone before the outer walls. Even so, it took another five for them to reach the main gate.

Sarka eyed the city guards as they watched her stride under the archway and the metal portcullis. None seemed to glance at her twice. That was a good thing. She hadn’t really felt like dealing with any idiots about her Dark Magic skill. Supposedly, they wouldn’t mess with her if she had

her Ghouls out due to her status as an axillary of the Royal Army. Not that she was going to test it when she was alone unless she had to.

The squad of twenty city guards silently watched them as she stopped just outside the city gates. A few of the low-level players coming back from questing curiously glanced at her party. Those looks became more intense as she took out her whistle and blew for her mount as she ordered the others to call their Palnisdale Horses and mount up.

“I told you they had to be higher-level with armor like that!” Sarka heard one of the players hiss to their teammates.

“Does that mean they’re level 50?” another player asked.

“Uh, depends,” another voice spoke up, “Depending on the mount, they could be level 40 and up.”

“Damn,” chorused around her as Sarka climbed into the saddle.

“Follow,” Sarka ordered to the others as she clicked her heels to her mount’s flanks.

The muffled sounds of hooves on the ground made their group momentarily the center of attention of all the lower-level players questing outside the city’s walls. Sarka swore that everyone within a mile stopped fighting to watch them galloping by. She couldn’t help the proud smirk that came to her lips at being one of the few players high enough to have their own mount this early on in the game.

Coming to the first crossroads, Sarka took the road heading south. Seeing that there was no one in the immediate area, she slowed her mount to a fast trot and took in the beautiful night. All the snow had melted away and the first signs of spring were in the air. She could see new growths of grass and flowers already filling the fields to either side of the road. Not only that, but most of the trees were growing back their leaves. It was amazing what a month on the edge of spring could do to a woodland forest. Seeing a few low-level monsters on either side of the road, an idea hit her.

“Freya, come to me!” Sarka called out to the night sky while focusing on a spot just in front of her mount’s saddle.

A moment later, there was a swirl of magic as a baby Fanged Tarpan Strider appeared at her call. Gathering up the baby into her arms, Sarka happily cooed to her Combat Pet while stroking its furry head. The small beast gladly rubbed its head into her hand thrilled to see her.

“Sorry for not taking you out sooner, Hon, but the monsters were too high-level earlier,” Sarka explained in a baby-like voice. Gathering up

the little girl in her arms, she showed her the forest they were riding through, “Feel like running along beside my mount? We can always slow down if you see something you want to hunt.”

“Meek, meek,” the Fanged Tarpan Strider excitedly called out, before licking her fingers to be let down.

“If any higher-level mobs show up, you’ll have to promise to let me handle them,” Sarka warned her baby as she slowed her mount down enough to let Freya leap down onto the ground.

Instead of speeding back up, Sarka kept the pace slower as the little Fanged Tarpan Strider began racing ahead. A second later, she dove at a level 3 Clawed Squirrel and began trying to rip it apart. Even though it was two levels higher than her baby, her low-level healing kept her baby alive. A moment later, Freya ripped out its throat and crowed to the sky in triumph.

“That was an excellent hunt, Freya,” Sarka congratulated the little monster as she glowed with a level-up.

Without hesitation, the little Fanged Tarpan Strider raced down the road in search of more prey. Following behind her baby, Sarka checked the time on her HUD and decided that she could slow down every half hour for five minutes to let her baby hunt and level up. A wicked grin came to her lips. Yun, Tinyr, and Unalia would be so jealous when they saw that she’d managed to level up her Combat Pet.

Once Freya had reached level 3, Sarka gathered her girl up into her arms and clicked her heels to get her mount back into a fast trot. They followed the road like that for the next half hour before she slowed down again to let her little monster hunt some more. The low-level monsters along the side of the road here were level 5 Razor Hogs that sort of looked like viscous Hedge Hogs the size of a medium dog.

Again, Sarka let Freya down to hunt and kept her alive with her weak low-level heal. She’d been annoyed as hell at Star browbeating her to get the skill in the first place, but she had to admit, it was sure as hell useful for leveling up her baby. Once her Combat Pet reached level 5, she called her back and urged her mount into a trot again.

The time went pretty fast this way and Sarka didn’t mind having the trip take longer if it meant she could play with her Combat Pet. Sarka was happily humming to herself and eagerly watching the time on her HUD for their next hunting break when she came to a fork in the road with a

stone signpost that read, Southmore Village 5 Miles. Reining in her mount, she checked her map seeing that the left fork followed the main road that bypassed the village while the right went directly through the town.

Momentarily switching off her Darkvision, Sarka eyed the path ahead seeing the outlines of a fortress on the top of a hill up ahead in the moonlight. The map had a symbol for ruins roughly matching the position of the fortress on the road ahead of her. Figuring it was for some low-level quest, she shrugged and decided to skip the village and take the route that bypassed the ruins so she could keep leveling up her baby.

Coming out the edge of the forest, Sarka was surprised to see that the hill was atop a rocky mound that was much higher than the village of Southmore. There were a handful of sturdy wooden bridges over the worst of the ravines and gulches. Going this way had been the better decision. The climb down into the valley and up the other side would've taken them much longer than simply staying on the main road.

Seeing a number of Giant Forest Rats in the level 7 and 8 range, Sarka double-checked the time on her HUD. It was two minutes before her next planned stop for Freya to hunt and these beasties were just the right size for her baby to easily take down. Taking a moment to eye the ruins of Watch Hill's fortress, she figured the dungeon was far enough away not to be a problem for her baby and slowed her mount down.

"Meek, meek!" Freya excitedly cried out as she hit the rocky ground running.

"Just try not to aggro too many of them all at once," Sarka called out in warning as the Fanged Tarpan Strider lunged at the nearest Giant Forest Rat.

As her scaly maw closed around the much larger monster's neck, Freya used the momentum from her dive to sweep the enemy into the air and slam it into the rocky ground. The attack left her on top of her momentarily stunned opponent. Immediately, Sarka watched her four limbs begin shredding the soft underbelly.

Shaking off the stun, the Giant Forest Rat let out a piercing shriek as it went berserk trying to dominate the smaller monster. While its jaws couldn't crush the Fanged Tarpan Strider's neck, its own claws began ripping into the soft scales of its attacker. As the pair rolled across the ground in a savage shrieking ball of hate, Sarka was already casting her low-level Heal spell.

“Star knew what he was talking about,” Sarka commented to herself as the golden glow surrounded Freya to keep her in the fight.

Even though she’d seen Star do incredible feats using Healing magic to make him much tougher to take down, Sarka had never truly been interested in playing a Mage or Priest. That was never how she envisioned herself. Ever since she’d first been drawn to fantasy and sci-fi, she’d always wanted to be a Warrior who got up in the face of her enemies. There was nothing like beating an enemy opponent to death with her sword or protecting her team with a shield.

Sometimes, Sarka thought she should’ve been born a man. Maybe, that was because no one expected anything like that from her in the real world. Most people she met focused on her huge knockers and pretty face, thinking that was everything to her. Not one of them could imagine that she enjoyed playing a tough-as-nails Defensive Tank in a FIVR MMO and slaughtered monsters with brutal efficiency.

That thought brought a smile to Sarka’s face. Nevertheless, she believed in learning whatever was necessary to make sure she won. She’d never be helpless again by a pack of PKing bullies trying to cop a feel. As Star had shown her, there were a lot of different ways to make sure you came out on top in a fight. His advice ranged from improving your crafting abilities to creating better weapons and armor to learning whatever extra skills were possible to give you an edge in combat. As he liked to say, if you were fighting fair or on equal footing, then you weren’t working hard enough to win.

A wicked grin curved up her lips. Star didn’t mean she should cheat. He meant that she should always be striving to learn or do whatever was needed to win. And, if you couldn’t win. Then it was your mission to hurt the enemy as much as possible so when you came charging back into the fight, you got the win.

If that meant learning a bit of Healing Magic or First Aid to keep you in the fight, then you learned everything possible. If that meant learning Dark Magic for a few Ghoul pets as backup or Dark Lances to weaken a horde of Orcs before getting into melee range, you learned a bit of Dark Mage magic. That included more mundane topics like basic one-on-one and group strategies. The gist being that you learned whatever you could to ensure the win.

Sarka’s girlfriends always gave her a disturbed look as if she’d

grown a second head whenever they'd talk about The World. She'd never admit it to Jill's, Krystal's, or Kenzie's faces, but gamer girls were different than the other women in her life. Talking about DPS, aka Damage Per Second, or strategizing on how best to tank a certain group of monsters were simply topics they weren't interested in. Just like she'd never been interested in going shopping for new shoes or whatever the hottest newest fashion trend was that was popular.

"Meek, meek!" Freya's alarmed cries snapped Sarka out of her thoughts.

Searching the field for her baby, Sarka caught sight of the Fanged Tarpan Strider racing away from a trio of Giant Forest Rats. She immediately understood what had happened. The low-level monsters had aggroed at the first monster's cry of alarm. Now Freya was barely keeping ahead of the trio that was trying to eat her. Her low-level heals wouldn't be enough to keep ahead of the damage her baby would take from fighting three Giant Forest Rats at once so she needed to balance out the field a bit.

"Run to me!" Sarka shouted while trying to target one of the disgusting hunters with an Enhanced Shadow Bolt.

Unfortunately, Freya was too excited to listen to her commands. That's if she even understood what she was saying. Instead of running toward her, the small Fanged Tarpan Strider raced away, heading toward the ruins in the distance with the trio of Giant Forest Rats giving chase.

"Fuck!" Sarka loudly swore as her first purplish-black bolt missed the first monster that she'd targeted. It just pissed her off all the more when the following second, third, and fourth shots did too. Shaking her head, she stared up at the dual moons overhead thinking about how irritating this was.

"Stay here and wait for my return," Sarka ordered to the rest of her group as she swung down from her mount. Before taking off after her baby, she growled in group chat, "And kill anyone who's stupid enough to get within five yards of any of you!"

"Yes, Sarka," chorused from the trio as she ran after Freya. As her Combat Pet zipped around the rocky field in front of the old fortress, Sarka clucked her tongue wondering if she were being a bitch. A part of her felt like that last order had been a bit over the line, while the other part of her thought, fuck it. If an idiot rando player wanted to mess around with her teammates, they find their dumbasses smoked for their trouble.

"Freya honey," Sarka called out as calmly as she could while

jogging after the growing group of Giant Forest Rats chasing after her baby, “Come back to Momma so she can slaughter all the bad monsters.”

Squatting down, Sarka lined up and released another instant-cast Enhanced Shadow Bolt to blow one of the trailing Giant Forest Rats away. A flurry of shots took down another three leaving only five left chasing after her baby. Instead of returning back to her, the small Fanged Tarpan Strider sprinted for the dark maw of the old fortress as even more Giant Forest Rats aggroed onto the group.

Feeling like a digital exterminator, Sarka ran all out after Freya. It took only a minute to catch up to the group as she slid to a stop and began laying waste while alternating blasts with both hands. In fifteen seconds, she’d slaughtered ten of the disgusting monsters, when Freya looped back around to tackle the last pursuer.

“You better not have done that on purpose,” Sarka growled under her breath as she switched over to healing.

The last fight quickly turned into a furball of blood and scales as the two monsters went after one another in savage fury. If they weren’t such low levels, it would’ve been an epic fight, Sarka proudly thought, as her little baby shredded the Giant Forest Rat with everything she had. The last heal pushed the little monster into the lead. As the bloody monster collapsed on the rocky ground, her Combat Pet ripped its throat out.

“Meeekk!” Freya roared to the night sky in her adorable fury as she proudly posed on top of the defeated enemy.

“Yes, yes, you’re Momma’s vicious little killer,” Sarka approvingly singsonged as she scooped her Combat Pet into her arms.

Ignoring the blood that stained her new armor, Sarka hugged Freya to her chest and cooed under her breath how brave and strong the little Fanged Tarpan Strider was. As the little monster’s blue eyes lovingly looked up at her, its scaley head pushed against her chin and neck as it happily purred in her ear. Letting out a satisfied sigh, she closed her eyes and let out a happy sigh.

Sarka had always thought Star was being a sappy idiot whenever he was dealing with Neysa. He’d let her get away with bloody murder and bought her expensive meals whenever they’d eat at the White Unicorn Inn. Even when she was just a baby pup, the little Silver Dire Wolf had him wrapped around her finger.

Now though, Sarka understood the why of it all. She could feel the

emotions of love and happiness coming from her baby Combat Pet as she hugged her to her chest. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. Hell, she couldn't even be mad at the little monster, because she could tell from their primitive soul link that Freya had done that so she'd have to share in the hunt with her.

"I'm sorry, Freya," Sarka cooed as she rocked the little monster back and forth, "Leveling you up like this is only going to work if you hunt on your own." Feeling the sadness radiating out from her baby's core at her words, she clucked her tongue reprovingly, "If you level up enough during the trip, then we can hunt together when we stop for the night in Amyalneas."

"Meek?" Freya asked and stopped nuzzling to look her in the eyes.

"I'll pick up some level 1 Fire Mage spells and we can level up our skills together," Sarka assured the little monster in an encouraging tone. As Freya cocked her head to the side and said, "Meek!" a blood-curdling scream coming from the front of the ruined fortress's entrance made them both start.

"Aaaiiiee!" Sarka's head whipped up to see a naked red-haired Light Elf female come racing out from the archway of the old fortress.

The Light Elf was covered in bloody whip marks with leather straps tied tightly across her body to hold her arms snugly behind her back. It seriously looked like she'd just stepped out of a horror BDSM porno. Sarka was trying to figure out what the hell was going on when six Goblins came pelting out of the fortresses behind her.

Five of the scarred muscle-bound green bastards were a solid six feet tall while the obvious Mini-Boss was pushing nearly seven. On top of that, they were all naked and unarmed except for what looked to be jagged whips and flaying daggers. After her adventures in the Delonshire Mine, Sarka immediately realized she was looking at a group of high-level Goblin Slavers!

Sarka was still trying to wrap her mind around what exactly it was that she was seeing. As she hit the Mini-Boss with an Identify, a crazed look came into the Light Elf's wide eyes upon seeing the pursers behind her. Turning around, the red-haired female lurched into a run heading for the rocky ravines and freedom while letting out another blood-curdling scream of terror.

As the name Haheasb Fleshkeeper, level 37 Goblin, Slave Master

appeared over the largest Goblin's head, Sarka saw the nearest Goblin stomp on the leather leash trailing behind the fleeing player. His stomp snapped the Light Elf taut, stopping her in place. Watching the female momentarily strain against her bindings with an evil leer, he suddenly raised his clawed foot to send the player sprawling across the rocky ground with a wicked guffaw.

Sarka froze at the horrific sight as the nearest Goblin Assistant Slaver evilly chortled, before starting to whip the naked player on the ground while bellowing.

“Ég trúi því ekki að við höfum ekki þegar brotið heimskulega rifuna!”

“Það er engin leið að veikur Ljósálfur eins og hún geti tekið miklu meira af þessu,” another Goblin Assistant Slaver gruffly added while hungrily fingering his flaying knife.

“Hættu kjaftæði þínu og dragðu heimsku rifuna aftur að stökkunum hennar,” Haheasb Fleshkeeper angrily growled to his subordinates as Sarka watched dumbfounded while he snatched the poor female by a fistful of her red mane of hair and held her up like a rag doll.

“Hvað er þessi lágkúrudýr að gera hér?” one of the other Goblin Assistant Slavers shouted in excitement as it pointed to Freya as she raced around the sobbing Light Elf's feet to run away from this newest threat.

“Sjáið til strákar,” the rear-most Goblin Assistant Slaver eagerly shouted as it hungrily pointed directly at Sarka, “Við erum með annan lágstigs kjötbíta okkur til skemmtunar!”

“Run for your life!” the player urgently screamed to Sarka as soon the female Light Elf saw her aghast face, “Or they'll capture you like they did me!”

Seeing the group of naked Goblins suddenly start charging directly at her snapped something deep inside Sarka's soul. She'd endured the bullshit of being assaulted by the Syndicate Players when she was a lowbie player. She'd seen the horrors of the Delonshire Mine and what the Demi-Humans had done to the Light Elves and Gnomes that survived the initial attack. She'd even felt that way with the Meer-Lizards, the Orc Horde, and the horrendous torture the PKer groups had done the NPCs.

While it had all been horrible, Sarka had sort of expected it due to this being an MMO. She'd never fully shared Star's outrage for the lives of the digital artificial intelligence that made up The World. The NPCs in

MMO and RPG games normally lived lives that were miserable and filled with tragedy. That was as much a part of the virtual world's experience as much as the trope of the player becoming the hero of the story.

This, on the other hand, was something else entirely, Sarka savagely thought as her blood began to boil. With a low growl, she slid her shield off her shoulder and drew her new Long Sword of Searing to fight. This was another player who was suffering from the in-game horrors. How she'd been dragged into the NPCs storyline, Sarka didn't know, but she had to find out. That sole thought became even more urgent to her as the female cried for her to run away and save herself!

There was no fear as Sarka thrust her Long Sword of Searing through the leering Goblin's chest. A grim smile came to her lips as his body shook uncontrollably from the proc of the blade's Lightning Effect. Yanking her blade free, she Shield Bashed the second Assistant Slaver in the face. As the first Goblin fell to his knees, she took his head off with an overpowered slash that gutted the third Assistant Slaver who was bodily leaping at her as she triggered Fortify.

The third Goblin slammed into Sarka as if he'd dove head-first into a brick wall. As the Assistant Slaver collapsed at her feet stunned, she chopped down, taking his head off too as the Execute of her blade triggered a second time. Star wasn't the only one with a fancy new blade that could behead stunned enemies, she smugly thought as she shot forward to slam the edge of her shield into the fourth Goblin's neck while stabbing the fifth Assistant Slaver through the throat.

Sarka could see the Mini-Boss's red-beady eyes widen in shock as she slammed the Goblin into the ground with bone-crunching force while ripping half of the fifth Assistant Slaver's throat open with a flick of her wrist. As the gurgling Goblin urgently tried to hold its head onto its shoulders, she spun around with her shield held flat like a blade at head height, decapitating the male in a fountain of blood that was similar to a finishing move from a game of Mortal Combat.

Coming out of her pose, Sarka slammed her blade down as the fourth Goblin wobbly climbed to his hands and knees. Her new blade removed his bloody head with a clean snick of metal as the Mini-Boss's eyes goggled at her in shock. As she whipped her blade to the side to flick off the blood, she gracefully rose to her feet as the Slave Master held his claws to the female Light Elf's bare neck.

“Throw your sword and shield to the ground, Light Elf,” Haheasb Fleshkeeper threateningly snarled in barely understandable Common, “or I’ll slaughter this used meat before your eyes!”

“You think that will save your life?” Sarka snarled while stalking toward the pair with death in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” the female player sobbed in terror as Sarka tossed aside her sword and shield, “You can’t stand against him!”

“Lokaðu gagnslausu gatinu þínu!” Haheasb Fleshkeeper roared as he slammed the female player face-first into the ground and faced Sarka. Eagerly flexing his oversized hands, he towered over Sarka while leering and licking his dark green lips, “Mmm, fresh meat!”

Sarka didn’t understand why the low-level Mini-Boss hadn’t realized that she was sixteen levels higher. Maybe, that was because he had thought she was the same level as her Combat Pet, or possibly, it was because he thought she was helpless now that she was unarmed. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter to her as she cracked her neck and lunged for the Slave Master.

Playing as a Warrior inside The World had ignited something deep in Sarka’s chest. She’d relished beating monsters and players to death. It was the most fun that she’d had as a gamer in her life! Now, she was going to fight in a way like she’d never done before. As the Goblin punched at her face, she squeezed her eyes shut and head-butted his fist with all her might!

“Raahhh!” Haheasb Fleshkeeper bellowed in agony as every bone in his hand shattered. An alarmed look of fear appeared in his beady-red eyes as she shrugged off the blow without any issues.

“I’m gonna enjoy beating you to death,” Sarka snarled as her fist thudded into his ribs with the cracking sounds of breaking bones while her other hand caught his wrist to hold him tight.

“Deyja!” Haheasb Fleshkeeper roared, biting for her face with his mouth wide open.

“Rraahh!” Sarka roared, head-butting his open-fanged maw with her forehead.

“Gah!” Haheasb Fleshkeeper cried out again as most of the fangs in his oversized maw were smashed in from the blow. Whipping his head back, fear flashed across the Slave Master’s green face as he anxiously demanded, “Hvað ... hvað ertu!”

Sarka didn’t know what the Mini-Boss was saying nor did she care.

Ignoring the blood running down into her eyes, she began pounding her fist into the Goblin for all she was worth. Each powerful blow seemed to break bones and make the monstrous Demi-Human howl in agony.

Giving up on any attack, Haheasb Fleshkeeper tried to run back into the Watch Hill's fortress to escape, but she wasn't about to let the Slave Master go. Hanging on to the now broken wrist, she tackled the large Goblin to the ground and snapped its arm as it tried to bat her away. Straddling its half-crushed chest, she began working over its hideous face.

The sickening crunches brought a grim smile to Sarka's lips as she slowly pummeled the Mini-Boss to death. She didn't know how long it took, but after she broke the Slave Master's second arm, its flailing did little to stop her from beating the Demi-Human to death. It wasn't until her gauntleted fist smashed the Goblin's head like an overripe pumpkin and a system window flashed across her vision saying that Haheasb Fleshkeeper was dead that she stopped hitting the Slave Master.

Gasping for breath, Sarka rose to her feet while spitting the blood from her mouth in disgust as she glared down at the corpse. Even though her buzz was completely gone, the aggravation that had been building up over the last few days from not being able to fight anything on the ships had all but left her. If anything, she felt pretty damn good. Maybe, she'd have to swing by any nearby dungeons along the way to work off her boredom, she thought with a smirk, when her eyes fell on the female player eyeing her in shock.

"Um, high there, my name is Sarka Dazed," Sarka innocently waved, before trying to wipe away the blood from her eyes and offering a bloody grin, "It looked like you needed some help."

"Ah, um, somewhat," the female Light Elf admitted staring at her with wide eyes, "Uh, how did you, uh, do that?"

"I'm a bit higher level than that loser," Sarka snorted as she cast a heal. As the golden glow momentarily surrounded the female player, she lightly asked, "What's your name?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, I didn't mean to be rude," the female player stammered, "I'm S-Scarlett, Scarlett Trenton."

"MEEK! MEEK!" Freya cried out in alarm nearby while trying to keep away from a small horde of Giant Forest Rats.

"Then get your ass over here!" Sarka hollered to the terrified baby Fanged Tarpan Strider.

“MEEK!” Freya cried out in terror as she darted toward her master.

Without hesitation, Sarka began punching Enhanced Shadow Bolts out her fists toward the monsters. The purplish-black bolts were so powerful they disintegrated the low-level garbage monsters into black ash. By the time Freya was close enough to leap into her arms, she’d taken out the last Giant Forest Rat of the mini-horde.

“I told you to stay close or you’d draw more aggro,” Sarka gently chastised the Combat Pet in her arms while stroking the scales of its leathery head, “That and those little scrub monsters are too fast for me to easily target at range.”

“Meek, meek,” Freya complained in her arms.

Sarka still didn’t understand exactly what the little monster was saying. Nonetheless, she had the impression the not-so-little Fanged Tarpan Strider was fussing about her taking so long to come to her aid. The little darling had quite the scare, she thought, when the female player exclaimed behind her.

“You have a Combat Pet?”

“Yeah, meet Freya,” Sarka beamed like a proud parent, “She’s only level sev-um, eight.” She flashed the Light Elf a shit-eating grin, “I think she’s why those Goblin Slavers thought I was low-level.”

“What, um, level are you?” Scarlett asked in a bemused tone, “All that I get with my Identify is a red skull.”

“I’m a bit higher level,” Sarka dismissively said with a wave of her hand as she walked over to the other woman. “Do you need a hand,” she arched an eyebrow at the leather bindings biting into her pale skin, “or is this some sort of weird roleplaying shit that you’re-”

“Please untie me,” Scarlett nearly sobbed as she blushed to her ears and looked away. She partly explained in a low voice, “The PUG that I was playing with aggroed a bunch of Goblins. Half of the team fought to the last while the other half left the group and ran away.”

“I hate PUGs,” Sarka snorted in disgust as she cut the bindings holding the female player’s arms behind her back. Pressing the iron dagger into the Light Elf’s hands, she waved at the rest of the leather binding her, “Nothing personal, but you can do the rest yourself.”

“Uh, thank you,” Scarlet sniveled as she embarrassedly scrubbed the dried tears from her eyes and cheeks, “I sort of got in over my head.”

“Understatement of the year,” Sarka openly scoffed at the other

player. Her face screwed up in disgust as she waved a hand at the leather bindings being cut away, “How did you even get in that position?”

“I screwed up!” Scarlett snuffed as if she were about to burst into tears again, “What more is there to say?”

“Look, I’m not trying to be a bitch or anything,” Sarka sighed, feeling like a total heel. It must be from hanging around Star and his friends so much, “But couldn’t you have just respawned at the local graveyard or something?” Fishing around in her new Backpack of Holding, she tossed the Light Elf one of the extra cloaks she’d bought earlier that night and shook her head. “I thought there were systems in place that stopped,” she waved her hands unable to actually say the word rape out loud as the Light Elf self-consciously wrapped the cloak around her bare shoulders, “shit like this from happening to players!”

“I dismissed the warnings,” Scarlett half-shrieked as she folded onto the ground in a shivering mass of blubbering tears. Her next words came out in hoarse sobs, “I thought they’d just throw me in a cage and I could escape to recover my gear once they left!”

“Meek?” Freya quietly asked while looking up at her questioninglly.

“Meek,” Sarka grunted in agreement while rolling her eyes. Lowering her head to the Fanged Tarpan Strider’s ears, she whispered, “Let’s see if we can cheer her up?”

“Meek!” Freya crooned as she leaped down to the ground and began nuzzling the Light Elf’s ear.

“What did you think?” Sarka knelt down next to the other woman and began gently stroking her back. “A Goblin Slaver’s dungeon would be a virtual Fifty Shades of Grey?”

“I thought I’d escape like Gord the Rogue or the intro for Elders Scrolls Online,” Scarlett bawled between her choking cries, “Not be put in stockades and ...”

As the Light Elf’s voice faded away, an uncontrollable shiver ran down Sarka’s spine at what hadn’t been said. Her thoughts went back to those first few hours in The World. How those Syndicate Players had kept fucking with her and her husband while spawn camping them. How they could’ve just said fuck it and left all of their gear on the ground and left the area, but didn’t because neither of them wanted to throw in the towel due to a couple of punks.

Those thoughts helped Sarka better understand what might have

been going through the other woman's head as a frown came to her lips. There was no doubt in her mind that this female Light Elf was an actual woman in real life. She shook her head trying to wrap her mind around the situation. If it had only been her when she'd first started The World, would she have dismissed the warnings thinking that she could handle whatever a FIVR MMO could throw at her? Would she have continued even if the situation turned into something like this?

Sarka's mind went back to the horror that they'd seen in the Slaver Master's portion of the dungeon inside the Delonshire Mine. She clearly remembered how Miya Faelwen had been brutalized and was being hauled naked in chains to be eaten and tortured alive when they'd rescued her and the other Light Elves. If she hadn't seen that shitshow with her own eyes, would she have believed something like that was even possible inside a modern-day MMO?

How many players had read the warnings and simply selected okay? How many warnings had she digitally signed saying that she accepted all the responsibilities for her own actions and decisions? She'd even laughed out loud at the prospect!

A part of her wanted to be angry at the developers of The World for making an MMO like this. Wanted to whine at being held responsible for the evil other players and in-game monsters could do. Was it their fault if she dismissed all the warnings and continued playing, refusing to leave the ugly situation?

A snort came from Sarka's lips at that thought. In truth, that danger was what made the MMO so addicting and fun. Who wanted to be handheld through an unchallenging game? Where was the sense of accomplishment or excitement by being handed everything without a challenge? Up until the release of The World, MMOs were all but dead. Stroking Scarlett's red hair, she let out a heavy sigh.

"BDSM play is not the same as rape," Sarka explained in a low voice, "Those that are in the community play to pleasure each other and keep them on edge." She cleared her throat uncomfortably as the woman's sobs began to somewhat subside. "They don't do it to actually hurt their partners."

"What do you know about it?" Scarlett demanded as she sat up on her knees to eye Sarka while wiping the tears from her eyes.

"I have a few friends that are into that," Sarka waved her hands in

the air as she shrugged, “and I asked questions. It’s sort of like a trainwreck.”

“Trainwreck?” Scarlett asked in a hoarse voice.

“You want to see what happened even though you don’t want to look,” Sarka sighed to herself remembering finding out way more about the community than she’d ever wanted to know. She jerked her chin toward the fortress, “I assume you went through all of that because you didn’t want to lose your gear?”

“My gravestone would’ve been inside the Goblin Slave Master’s portion of the dungeon behind closed doors,” Scarlett complained as she closed her eyes and shook her head, “I’d never be able to recover my new magic gear after that.” She waved her hand at herself. “What PUG would’ve accepted me into their group like this?”

“I don’t know,” Sarka smirked while refusing to meet the other female gamer’s eyes, “probably a lot of them.”

“Great, I can see it now,” Scarlett angrily snarled under her breath, “Naked Lvl 33 Rogue LFG for Slave Master run!”

“I’m just saying you’d have a lot of volunteers,” Sarka protested, holding up her hands to ward off the other woman’s glare.

“What are you?” Scarlett growled, giving her a look of disgust as she pulled her cloak tighter, “A man playing a woman?”

“No, I’m a real-life woman,” Sarka snapped back in the same tone. Letting out an exasperated sigh, she held a hand out to calm the player, “Come on, let’s get your gear back.”

“I’m not a charity case,” Scarlett snarled as she glared at the proffered hand as if it were a poisonous snake.

“Right now, you are,” Sarka disagreed as she ignored the woman’s offended expression, “Besides, it’s not like I was doing anything particularly important.”

“What do you mean?” Scarlett asked as she let herself be hauled to her feet.

“The rest of my party is on follow while we travel to Amyalneas,” Sarka shrugged as she pointed her thumb over her shoulder at the line of mounted players by the road. Motioning with her chin toward the Fanged Tarpan Strider, she continued in a friendly tone, “Freya got in trouble and ran the wrong way when we were riding past the dungeon which forced me to dismount and give her a hand.”

“Why is she such a low level anyway?” Scarlett asked as she dragged her eyes away from the high-level mounted group.

“I got her as a baby last week,” Sarka shrugged as the Fanged Tarpan Strider began stalking another Giant Forest Rat, “but everything was too high a level in the area for her to fight.”

“Uh,” Scarlett grunted as she shifted uncomfortably on her feet, “I guess that makes sense.” Sarka took note of the dark shadow that passed over the other woman’s face as she eyed the dungeon and continued softly, “I’m still trying to decide if I want to play this shitty MMO or not.”

“How about we get your gear back first?” Sarka asked, looking her in the eyes, “Then you can better decide what you want to do.”

“You want me to play after everything that just happened to me!” Scarlett hotly demanded.

“And what, you think it’s better to log out while hurt and upset?” Sarka countered, trying to not be an insensitive bitch. It was a bit hard for her because the woman had done this to herself, “Staring at the walls alone in your room isn’t going to help make anything better!”

The truth of the matter was that Scarlett could’ve escaped her ordeal any time that she’d wanted to. Instead, she’d chosen to stay because she didn’t want to lose her gear. While she agreed that had probably been a factor in the other woman’s decision, Sarka would’ve bet a handful of gold that it hadn’t been the ultimate reason. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be so many romance novels focusing on bondage and domination.

“How do you know I live alone?” Scarlett angrily huffed with a hurt look on her face.

“I don’t, but if you were with someone,” Sarka emphasized the last two words with air quotes, “you wouldn’t have been in this situation. Now, would you?” Seeing Scarlett’s face turn splotchy red at her words, she held up her hands to stop the coming outburst, “That was not meant as an insult. I’m just saying that it’s not easy to find the right partner,” she offered an apologetic shrug, “let alone a group of good friends you enjoy playing with that can match your gaming schedule.”

“What would you know of that?” Scarlett brusquely snapped as she motioned with her chin toward the rest of Sarka’s group.

“Why do you think they’re on follow and I’m playing alone?” Sarka pointedly asked as the other woman frowned, “If I don’t drag them around with me on follow during the weekdays, I’ll have no one available

to play with that's my level."

"That's, um," Scarlett grunted after an uncomfortable moment, "sort of messed up,"

"But worth it when we can play together," Sarka admitted. Seeing the conflicting emotions flickering across the other woman's face, she offered the other woman a weak smile, "Look, I'm sort of just hanging around right now with nothing major to do. So, why not team up together and get your stuff back." She shrugged. "It'll be fun. You can practice with a bow while I tank."

"My, um, primary weapons are dual short swords," Scarlett stammered while thoughtfully eyeing the iron dagger in her hand. Letting out an explosive breath, she seemed to come to a decision and gave Sarka a weak smile, "But I don't mind learning how to use the bow too."

"That's the spirit," Sarka cheerfully agreed while pulling out one of the high-level Orc bows and a quiver of jagged iron-tipped arrows, "You can use these." As the Light Elf shouldered the quiver and strapped the dagger to her thigh with some of the cut leather bindings, she continued while handing over the bow, "My guild leader is always going on about being flexible in combat and how it's best to be skilled in as many weapons and fighting styles as possible."

"Is that why you can cast Dark magic and Healing?" Scarlett quietly asked as she thoughtfully eyed Sarka and her gear.

"Yep, no matter how much I hate playing anything other than a Warrior," Sarka admitted with a snort of mock disgust that made the other woman smile. Jerking her chin toward the ruins of the old fortress, she winked, "Now accept my group invite so we can get moving?"

"Uh, o-okay," Scarlett stammered as she accepted the invite. As Sarka began gathering up her dropped sword and shield, she continued in a low voice, "I mostly solo whenever I play." Seeing her raised eyebrow, the woman coughed into her hand and shrugged, "I work the night shift and can only log in once I get home. Also, my days off are Thursday and Friday and I work weekends."

"So, it's almost impossible to line up your gaming time with any of your other friends," Sarka knowingly said as the other woman nodded.

"I'd have to completely change my sleeping schedule if I wanted to even catch them for an hour," Scarlett said in clear frustration.

"And an hour isn't enough time to do anything," Sarka agreed,

understanding exactly where she was coming from. Catching the Fanged Tarpan Strider's eye, she pitched her voice as if she were talking with a small child, "Freya dear, you need to hang back with Scarlett and let Mommy do all the fighting. Otherwise, I'm going to have to dismiss you for this next part."

"Meek, meek," Freya sullenly complained.

"Once we're finished helping Scarlett, we'll get back to leveling," Sarka promised, as she knelt down to stroke her scaled head and feathered mane. Rising back to her feet, she began striding toward the fortress's entrance, "Let's do this!"

"Do you think she understands what you're saying?" Scarlett asked while eyeing the little monster thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure if there's a level that consciousness comes or not," Sarka admitted, "but my guild leader's Combat Mount seemed to become aware around level 20."

"Become aware?" Scarlett scoffed.

"Well, as aware as any other NPC in The World," Sarka explained as a conflicted look flashed across her face. Seeing a Goblin patrol heading toward them, she raised her sword and shield, before triggering her Charge Attack.

Sarka's Shield Bash blasted the lead Goblin Warrior off its clawed feet and sent him flying into the rest of the patrol. Before any of them could react, she stomped amongst their downed bodies while chopping and slashing like a berserker. While the first Goblin went down due to her Execute proc, the rest hadn't been stunned, so she was forced to work the rest of them over.

Stabbing the second Goblin in the back of the head, Sarka slammed the Warrior headfirst into the wall of the fortress while kneeling the third in the head to keep him down. As the fourth scrambled to his feet, she hammered the edge of her shield into the side of the green bastard's head, sending him tumbling over the fifth one who looked like a Shaman.

As she turned back to the downed Goblins, Sarka saw Scarlett was already targeting them with her arrows. Backstabbing the second Goblin scrambling to its feet, she left the rest to the Rogue as she spun back to face the last pair. Barely catching the Enhanced Pyroblast with her shield, she stomped the Shaman in the face, sending him sprawling on the stone floor. A quick Execute and she moved on to the Elite Warrior. With a furious

frenzy of strikes, she hacked the Goblin to death.

“Behind you, Sarka!” Scarlett’s shout was just in time for her to block a slash at her back.

Spinning around to face the trio of half-dead Goblins, Sarka went to town hacking and slashing while Scarlett continued targeting their vulnerable backs. In less than a minute, the two of them had slaughtered the group. Giving the Rogue a nod, she turned around and began stalking deeper into the fortress.

“Oh, let me share my quests with you,” Scarlett suddenly said as they approached an intersection with another group.

“Thanks,” Sarka grunted, simply accepting each of the quests as they popped open before her eyes.

“Innbrotspjófar!” a guttural shout came from the next group as Sarka sprinted down the corridor toward them.

“Raawww!” Sarka bellowed, taking the Enhanced Pyroblast on her Black Coral Iron-reinforced Defender. Slamming into the patrol’s Shield Wall like a wrecking ball, she sent the lower-level Goblins flying as another wash of flame whooshed out around her like a flame thrower. Not slowing her charge down, she Shield Bashed the Shaman at a full run to slam him into the back wall with enough force to stun the green bastard.

A quick Execute to the bone-pierced Goblin and Sarka was whaling on the remaining four Goblin Warriors. While she ruthlessly bashed the Demi-Humans, Scarlett did her best to pummel them with arrows from behind. A minute later, they’d finished and were moving past a player’s gravestone to head down the corridor the Rogue had said was where she’d been kept.

Another Goblin Patrol was savagely cut down along the way as easily as the last group. Coming to a closed door, Sarka kicked it off the ancient hinges to be greeted with a chamber, not unlike the one she’d run into in the Delonshire Mine dungeon. The main difference was the stockades and torture devices that had been strewn around the space along with the armor, weapons, and gear that Scarlett had been wearing.

Further back in the chamber, Sarka saw the three cages holding a total of thirteen female Light Elves. All of them looked to have endured the same brutality that Scarlett had been through. As her eyes took in the mound of clothing and gear discarded in the corner, it was obvious that many more had been captured than what she was seeing.

More likely than not, Sarka realized as her lips pressed together in horror, they'd all been eaten by the Goblins.

"Get geared up while I release the other prisoners," Sarka gruffly ordered, before lowering her voice to a whisper and motioning with her chin toward the cages, "Try to see what else you can recover for the others to wear."

"Why?" Scarlett grunted in confusion, "Is there an escort quest that I didn't know about?"

"Were you just going to leave all of them to their fates?" Sarka asked the white-faced Rogue.

"I, uh, d-don't k-know," Scarlett stammered as she eyed the stockade near the door. Letting out a ragged breath, her panicked eyes flickered to Sarka's as she sobbed out, "I j-just w-wanted to leave this ... nightmare behind!"

"We're taking the other victims with us," Sarka firmly said while tightly gripping the other woman's shoulder. She was afraid to do more than that due to everything she'd already been through. Gently pushing her in the direction of her gear, she softly whispered in her ear, "Go, get your gear!"

Sarka found the key to the cages near the Slavers' armor that had been tossed aside for, what she assumed, was some sort of breeding session. It didn't take a genius to understand what had happened to the females here. As she moved toward the nearest cage, a frown came to her lips as she remembered reading something about the Goblin Slave Master. It took only a second to call up the quest.

Completed! Defeat the invading Goblin Slave Master, Haheasb Fleshkeeper, in the old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill's ruins!

Out of all of the Goblin Clan's leaders, Slave Master Haheasb Fleshkeeper is the one assigned to kidnap Humanoids in the region. Slave Masters kidnap Humanoids for food and breeding to expand the Goblins' numbers within the region. If he is not slaughtered, the Goblins' numbers will continue to expand within the region.

Objective 1: Slaughter Slave Master Haheasb Fleshkeeper.

Difficulty: Hard.

Reward: Gold, gear, experience, and Reputation with the Kingdom of Larethien and the village of Southmore!

Great, the Goblins were now purposely breeding captured females.

She frowned at that wondering why the evil green bastards hadn't done that in the Delonshire Mine when questing before it caught her eyes.

New Regional Quest! Slaughter the invading Goblins that have taken over the old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill's ruins!

Goblin Clans from the north have expanded their invasion into the Kingdom of Larethien. One of the advanced footholds they have taken to fortify their gains in the region is by taking over the old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill's ruins. If the Goblins invaders are not pushed back, their influence over the region will continue to grow until they threaten the safety of the entire kingdom. To fully drive out the Goblin invaders, all infestations within the Kingdom of Larethien must be removed or a new War Leader will push back into this area.

Objective 1: Slaughter all the Goblins in the Watch Hill's ruins.

Difficulty: Very Difficult.

Reward: Gold, gear, experience, and Reputation with the Kingdom of Larethien and the village of Southmore!

Sarka's eyes widened in shock. Was all of this because those idiots in Delonshire hadn't wanted to lose their local dungeon? Swallowing the sour taste in her mouth, she quickly unlocked the door and waved to the female Light Elves.

"Come, you're free now," Sarka said in a gruff voice, "We'll get you back to ..." It took her a second to remember the name on the sign of the town that she'd just passed by, "Southmore Village."

"When they learn we carry Goblin spawn in our bellies," the nearest female Light Elf tearfully choked as she clutched at her abdomen, "They'll kill us all!"

"Is this a Halfling thing or a—" Sarka demanded as a cold fist of fury gripped her chest.

"No!" the females chorus of protest cut her off.

"They are monstrous Demi-Human!" another Light Elf sobbed with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Kill me!" the first Light Elf screamed as she launched herself at Sarka.

"Whoaaaa!" Sarka shouted while sheathing her blade and shrugging her shield onto her back. Catching the bawling female in her arms, she tried to calm the distraught Light Elves down, "Look, I know of a

place that will accept you and help to raise your children-”

“Why would I want to bear a monster?” the female in her arms demanded with crazed eyes.

“Who says they’ll be a monster?” Sarka shouted back unsure of what else to do, “Overlord Ironwolf has many mixed Humanoids and Demi-Humans on his lands that have sworn themselves to him.” Her eyes scanned the cages as she spoke. “They’ve been honorable and have even fought off the Northern Tribes with the Royal Army on the Isolde Line!”

“There are monstrous Demi-Humans serving with the Royal Army?” the Light Elf in her arms demanded in shock.

“Is he a Light Elf?” another Light Elf suddenly asked.

“He’s a Half-Elf that even now fights to hold hordes of Hobgoblins back from the Plains of Atoll,” Sarka hurriedly explained, trying to get a handle on the craziness, “With Humanoids, Beast Kin, and Demi-Humans in his service!”

“And he would take us as vassals?” a Light Elf in another cage asked as Sarka hurried and unlocked the door.

“He fought to save all of the survivors of Darom and Telrain before the cities fell,” Sarka explained as she hurriedly unlocked the last cage, “And he brought all of them back to his lands as his vassals.”

“Come and get dressed,” Sarka encouraged as she began casting heals on all of them, starting with the most injured first, “You have my word that he’ll take you in as his vassals and treat you fairly.”

Sarka’s face tightened at the glimmer of hope she now saw in their eyes as they began carefully climbing out of the cages. She couldn’t even imagine what they’d been through with no hope of escaping alive. It sounded weird to say, but she had to admit, it made her proud to know that she could offer these female Light Elves a place to live. All of which made her more impressed with what Star had accomplished.

That’s one of the things that blew her mind, Sarka thought as she finished healing them while Scarlett helped to get them geared up. When she’d first met Star, she’d thought him a nice guy but ultimately a fool to a point. Maybe it was the difference between an MMO and real-time strategy player focus. Most MMO players would’ve focused on using their resources to level up as quickly as possible and then focus on building up their guild’s holdings. Instead, Star had spread out his effort to include building up his lands, helping his NPCs grow more power, and acquiring more of both to

bring under his banner.

From what Sarka could see of the results so far, it had been the right call to make. On top of that, instead of leaving these female Light Elves to their sorry-ass fate, she had the ability to add them to their guild's overall strength. It gave her a sense of pride and was a flexibility of choice that she'd never had before in any other MMO.

"Overlord Ironwolf?" Scarlett asked in a low whisper, "Is that the Startum Ironwolf player everyone has been going on about?"

"Yeah," Sarka grunted, giving the other woman a wary glance, "What about it?"

"I just thought he seemed pretty cool," Scarlett replied with a conflicted look on her face, "And wondered how I might team up with him to get in on his adventures."

"By not being a PKing asshole," Sarka barked, before turning contemplative.

Sarka wasn't an idiot. Not unlike these Light Elves that she was helping, this woman had messed up badly and was struggling to deal with the trauma from her mistake. Add to that they needed all the help they could get and recruiting her suddenly became a good idea. It would help to mentally distract her from the ordeal she'd gone through, help her make new friends to team up with, and might even help her work through any other issues she was dealing with. Besides, in her experience, most gamers tended to work through their various real-life traumas by slaughtering copious amounts of monsters.

"Actually, if you'd like to meet him and his friends," Sarka continued in a friendly tone, "Now would be the perfect time."

"What, now?" Scarlett asked, glancing around the room in confusion.

"Not, now, now," Sarka did her best not to visibly roll her eyes, "I mean, while our lands are being invaded by Hobgoblins." Seeing the other woman's eyes widen at her words, she hurriedly continued, "All of us are hurrying back to his lands after helping his buddy Domenic escape a large group of PKers. Any help would be appreciated, besides being the best way to get your foot in the door, so to speak."

"Ah, I, um," Scarlett eyes widened in shock, "Wait, you're Sarka Dazed!"

"Uh, yeaah," Sarka replied somewhat taken aback, "That's me."

“Ooh, I can’t believe it,” the Rogue became even more excitable, “And the others on their mounts. Is that-”

“My husband Yun along with our friends Tinyr and Unalia,” Sarka replied, feeling conflicted between pride and embarrassment at being recognized like this. If this was a good interaction, what was it like for Star when so many players on the server hated him? That thought sent a shiver down her spine.

“That’s cool,” Scarlett continued in a wishful voice as the tension around her eyes seemed to lessen, “I always wanted to join up with a pro-level guild like yours.”

“So, why not give it a try?” Sarka repeated, flashing the other woman a grin, “We can finish up here really quick, turn in the quest, and then you can hang out with me until we meet up with everyone else.”

“If there’s an invasion going on back at your stronghold,” Scarlett frowned as a wary look came to her eyes, “then why were you heading past Southmore village?”

“Star asked us to check out some information in the Great Library in Amyalneas,” Sarka replied as her eyes twinkled in excitement.

“What kind of information?” Scarlett asked with a frown, “Even if I wanted to head out with you, how could I possibly keep up with all of you if you’re on mounts?”

“Maybe, I can pick up a cart in Southmore village,” Sarka said as she motioned toward the female Light Elves, “That would be the easiest way to let everyone travel with us while staying on our schedule.”

“Schedule?” Scarlett cocked her head to the side.

“We’re supposed to meet up with our house of Kayden Troopers and the other players by tomorrow night in Delonshire, but we don’t really have to be there until Friday morning when they leave for BrokenFang Hold” Sarka explained with a shrug, “So, are you interested?”

“Yeah,” Scarlett agreed after pulling her long hair together and tying it into a ponytail, “I’d like that.”

“Then, let’s knock out these last two bosses and see if Southmore has a wagon or two for me to buy,” Sarka called out to the group while heading to the door and drawing her sword.

“You know, that’s gonna cost more than a little gold,” one of the stronger-looking Light Elves warned. She was wearing a chainmail vest, a plain long sword, and a battered shield and as they turned to face her, she

introduced herself, “Southmore Guard Yrathea Oricaryn.”

“Scarlett Trenton,” Scarlett introduced herself loud enough for the entire group of females to hear.

“Sarka Dazed,” Sarka replied next as she eyed the other Light Elf, “Is that gonna be a problem when we turn in the quests?”

“No, ma’am,” Yrathea snapped with hooded eyes, “except for losing my chainmail shirt.”

“That won’t be a problem once we reach our destination,” Sarka confidently assured the guardswoman, speaking loud enough for the entire group to hear her words, “And I have more than enough coins to purchase what’s needed for our transportation.”

“We’re talking five hundred golds at the very least!” another of the rescued females snapped as if Sarka was crazy.

“Not to mention coins needed for food and rooms,” the Light Elf standing next to her added, “which ain’t cheap for Amyalneas.”

“Names and Classes?” Sarka requested as she turned to the females.

“Siraye Magqen, Tinker,” the first replied.

“Halanaestra Fafaren, Spice Trader,” the second chimed in.

Spice Trader, Sarka silently smirked as her mind went to Spice Traders from Dune. Out loud, she assured the group, “I have more than enough to cover the costs as needed for wagons, food, and lodging. What’s important is getting all of you safely to BrokenFang Hold.” Getting nods from everyone, she continued toward the door, “Now, let’s move!”

As they moved past the dead Goblins, a number of the Light Elves grabbed the Goblins’ unlooted armor and weapons. Instead of heading for the exit, Sarka went straight, heading to what she hoped was the next mini-boss. While not all dungeons were the same, a race’s strongholds and fortifications tended to have a similar layout.

“I’ve got this,” Sarka snarled, seeing a Goblin patrol heading in their direction.

As she charged forward, Sarka heard Scarlett warning the other fighters in the group to stay back and only help if necessary. She didn’t hear more than that as the lead Goblins cried out an alarm. As they stopped to brace their shields, she bodily slammed into their iron-reinforced shields to send them flying into the Goblins behind him.

Not slowing down, Sarka brutally stomped her Black Coral Boots

into the downed Goblins' faces while hacking at the flailing Warrior's neck on the right while Shield Bashing the one on the left into the Shaman in the rear. As the pair went down in a tangle of arms and legs, she ripped her Long Sword of Searing out from the electrocuted Warrior's neck and struck again as her Execute proced.

Spinning around, Sarka leaped into the air to bring her shield slamming down on the back of the second Goblin's head as he tried to climb to his feet. As his face was slammed into the stone floor, she used the momentum and weight of her body to bring her Long Sword of Searing down on the back of the first Warrior's neck, beheading him cleanly.

As she turned back around, a fiery explosion slammed against her Black Coral Iron-reinforced Defender as the Shaman rolled free. Ignoring the flames crackling around her, Sarka launched herself at the savage Goblin just as another ball of fire launched at her face. Taking the explosion on her shield once again, the Goblin Warrior next to her shrieked in agony as she dropped to her knees and slid to drive her Long Sword of Searing into the bellowing Shaman's roaring face.

Using the edge of her shield and her blade, Sarka pummeled the Shaman into a bloody chunk of meat, before taking off his head. As a blade skittered off her armored back, she leaped to her feet just as the fourth Goblin was Backstabbed by Yrathea and another similarly dressed Light Elf.

"Thanks for the help," Sarka nodded as a look of resolve came to both their faces.

"It's the least we could do," Yrathea growled as the other female nodded in agreement.

"I'm Irhaal Ludithas," the Light Elf said at Sarka's questioning look, "a guard of Southmore too."

"Just take care how close you get with the Goblin bosses," Sarka warned as Scarlett and the others walked up. She waved a bare blade at the corpses, "Loot the dead and take what you can use." As nods went around the group, she knelt down and ripped the Shaman's necklace of finger bones from around its neck and continued stalking toward the door at the end of the corridor.

"I, uh, don't know how much help the rest of us will be with this Shaman Boss," Scarlett warned in a harsh whisper as she matched paces with her.

“That’s not a problem,” Sarka assured her. Glancing over her shoulder, she leaned in close to the other woman, “And it would probably be best if you kept those girls back at the doorway and out of the range of any AOE’s.” Catching Freya’s eye, she growled a warning at the little Fanged Tarpan Strider, “That means you too!”

“Meek,” Freya unhappily complained while a look of alarm came to her new friend’s face.

“Calm down,” Sarka said, giving the Rogue a cocky wink, “I’m level 53 and the boss is what, level 39?”

“You’re level 53!” Scarlett squeaked as her head jerked back in shock.

“Yeah, and I have a number of tricks up my sleeves,” Sarka assured her as she came to a stop before the large door.

Quickly, Sarka began casting the buffs that she’d learned over the last few weeks, figuring it might be worth the extra protection for what she assumed was going to be the Shaman Mini-Boss fight. The shortlist of buffs was Enhanced Fortify, Enhanced Sturdiness, Body of Bronze, Bone Shield, Bone Fangs, Mage Armor, and Arcane Speed. While not much, it was better than nothing and should give her a little bit of protection from the first few spells thrown her way.

“Even if it’s a room full of Shamans and their boss?” Scarlett demanded as she cast one spell after another, “Because my bow isn’t going to help all that much!”

“Facing off against a bunch of casters is gonna suck, but still more than doable even for a Defensive Warrior like me” Sarka thoughtfully harrumph, “Still, a bit of backup to soak up damage and distract the adds wouldn’t be amiss.”

Ignoring the “what the fuck are you talking about” look that Scarlett gave her, Sarka decided now might be the best time to try out one of the new spells that she’d recently acquired. Yanking two finger bones from the Goblin necklace that she’d snagged, she shoved the rest into her pouch, before starting her first cast of Raise Skeleton Warrior. From what Yun and Tinyr were telling her, it was a surprisingly awesome spell for a melee-focused caster.

The first Skeleton Warrior made the group of Light Elves back away fearfully when it rose up from the ground at her feet. Its armor, shield, and sword looked to be based on her own gear. That and it didn’t look like

any skeleton that she'd ever seen before. No wonder the boys called them Skeleton Lords. Sarka could only shake her head as she started the next cast.

"You're a wielder of Dark Magic?" a Warrior-looking Light Elf gruffly demanded as the other Light Elves traded concerned looks.

"Yes, I am," Sarka announced as a second identical Skeleton Warrior rose up beside the first, "amongst other skills."

"Take care not to show that ability anywhere around Amyalneas," another Light Elf wearing dark leather armor warned, "Or the city guards will arrest you on sight."

"If they did, they'd be breaking their oaths with the Royal Army and other Kingdoms," Sarka spat at the ridiculous rule, "Not that I'm planning on raising any pets near the capital."

"Dark Magic is allowed by the other kingdoms?" the Warrior-looking Light Elf asked in shock.

"From how it was recently explained to me when we docked in Myathlune," Sarka growled, "It's only outlawed here in the Kingdom of Larethien if you're a Light Elf who's not associated with the Royal Army." She sighed, "But I'd like to keep this on the down-low so we don't have any issues during our travels." Getting nods from everyone, she jerked her chin at the two outspoken females, "What's your names and classes?"

"Ciradyl Vabella, Warrior," the first Light Elf answered.

"Ealirel Kelsys, Rogue," the other female replied smartly.

"Nice to meet you both," Sarka said, before addressing the group, "Is everyone ready?" Getting nervous nods from the others, she caught Scarlett's eye. As the other woman held up her bow with a knocked arrow, she squared off with the closed door as the Skeleton Warriors stepped up behind her. Cracking her neck, she gripped her sword and shield tightly, before carefully opening the door as silently as possible.

Taking the room in at a glance, Sarka saw that there were three separate groups spread out throughout the room. Two groups of five Shamans were near the entrance picking through piles of bones and a third was obviously the Mini-Boss. That was easy enough to figure out since the Goblin was slightly larger in size than the Slave Master as he focused on some sort of magic circle with a series of bones laid out on the stone floor before him.

"I'll focus on taking the Goblin Shamans out near the door first,"

Sarka hissed to Scarlett as she ordered the Skeleton Warriors close to her, “Just make sure you give me a heads-up if you see any changes with the Mini-Boss.”

“You got it,” Scarlett grunted as the rest of the group nodded in agreement. As all of them nervously eyed the roomful of Shamans, the other player hissed in confusion, “Why aren’t they attacking us?”

“We haven’t entered the room yet,” Sarka replied, thinking back to Star’s lessons from the Delonshire Mine dungeon, “The real question is whether or not the Mini-Boss will aggro as soon as I step into the room or after I take out his subordinates?”

“T-that would be bad,” Scarlett stammered in fear.

“Not at all,” Sarka braggartly assured her with a winning smile, before nodding toward the Shamans, “I’m going in.”

Before anyone could say anything else, Sarka launched herself into motion. As soon as she charged through the archway, the two nearest groups of Shamans leaped to their clawed feet at the intrusion. There was a moment of alarm and confusion as their heads whipped around to see her charging directly for them in an all-out sprint with her Skeleton Warriors at her back.

In the three seconds it took for her to clear the distance between them, a wave of fireballs and lightning bolts slammed into Sarka’s Black Coral Iron-reinforced Defender at nearly point-blank range. It was a calculated move and the only real option for a Defensive Warrior like her to get into range. Her triple magic shields went up in a burst of glowing sparkles as the leftover searing heat washed over her bare face while the muscles of her body momentarily locked up. Gritting her teeth through the agony, she redirected the explosive backblast into the Shamans’ faces.

As a guttural chorus of agony ripped from the Goblins’ throats, Sarka threw herself into the scrum like a berserker. Dodging to the side, she Shield Bashed the Shaman on the left into the three behind him. Ducking back to the right, a slash from her Long Sword of Searing chopped through the next Shaman’s wrist as he thrust his arm out to blast her in the face.

Taking advantage of the backlash from his spell failing, Sarka followed up with another Shield Bash to his face as another bolt of Lightning slammed into her side. Luckily, her momentum allowed her to power through the pain and locked muscles as she barreled into the fifth Shaman. Ignoring the clawed hands ripping down her face, she rammed her

forehead into the green bastard's hate-filled face to shatter his nose. As the Goblin shoved himself away, she followed up with a knee to the nuts.

The battle became confusing after that as Sarka began hacking at the bent-over Shaman's neck. Once, twice, three times, his head hit the ground with a splat as another pair of fireballs slammed into her. Spinning around as fire washed over her, she began hacking at the trio of Shamans trying to climb to their feet. Arms and hands went flying as she bashed and chopped while repeatedly screaming for them to "Die!" at the top of her lungs.

Sarka's hit points were down by five hundred points when she finished hacking the trio to death. As she swung around in search of the last Goblin, she saw Scarlett and the other armed Light Elves were already cutting down the last Shaman. Looking toward the other group of Shamans, she saw her Skeleton Warriors tearing into the last pair even as their bones burned beneath their armor.

Not that the flames seemed to be hurting them in the least. If anything, it was giving the Shamans an even more gruesome death. As her undead pets finished off the last Shaman, an anxious shout came from the doorway, "Watch out, Glulsolx Rotlung is casting a spell!"

"Everyone down!" Sarka roared as she commanded her Skeleton Warriors to charge the Mini-Boss.

As Scarlett and the Light Elves behind her dropped to the ground, Sarka roared while swinging her Black Coral Iron-reinforced Defender up. Bracing herself, she triggered her special Defensive Warrior ability, Enhanced Fortress as a massive bolt of Lightning slammed into her.

"Ggaahhh!" Sarka screamed as the electricity coursed through her body.

Even with Sarka's new Elemental Resistance rings and Advanced Start pain threshold, the agony was incredible. Flame attacks she could mostly block with her armor and shield. Lightning Strikes were another story altogether. No matter what resistance or armor she used to defend herself, electricity would still course through her entire body. It was such bullshit!

"Ffuuuck," Sarka cursed as the blinding light finally cut off.

Falling to her hands and knees, Sarka ignored the wisps of electricity still passing up and down her body. She eyed her hit points while groaning in pain, grimacing that the Mini-Boss had managed to take her

down a quarter with that special attack. As the sounds of battle came back to her ears, she looked up to see her Skeleton Warriors hammering at the shocked Goblin Shaman who was getting his ass beaten down.

“Beinagrind stríðsmenn ættu ekki að vera svona öflugir!” the Shaman Mini-Boss roared as he tried to bat away the Skeleton Warriors hacking into him with rune-powered leg bone clubs.

“Is everyone alright?” Sarka asked as she anxiously looked back at the Light Elves behind her.

“How are you barely hurt?” Scarlett demanded as the other females gave her wide-eyed looks.

“I bought a shit tone of Elemental Resistance rings when I was in Myathlune,” Sarka chortled as she held up her gauntleted shield hand and waved her fingers at her audience, “One for each finger.”

“Aren’t those like four thousand gold each!” Scarlett exclaimed in shock.

“Something like that,” Sarka frowned not wanting to admit just how much the rings had cost.

They’d actually been a little more than five thousand each and were the most expensive items that Sarka had bought on her little shopping spree. While that had been a massive amount of gold to spend, as far as she was concerned, it was money well spent. A seventy-five percent Elemental Magic Resistance was no joke and would make her nearly unstoppable against most Mages she ran across in battle. Even if it had, she privately admitted, mostly broken her bank and that of her husband.

“Alrighty, then,” Sarka snarked as she climbed to her feet, “Let me finish this skinny bastard off so we can take out the big boss.”

Glulsolx Rotlung, if Sarka remembered his name correctly from the quest she’d gotten from Scarlett, didn’t have much time left amongst the living. The sickly-looking goblin was already half dead as her Skeleton Warriors slashed and stabbed him for all they were worth. Air Blade Storms, Rock Devils, and Lightning-style knockback spells barely had any effect on her undead pets. Most of the Goblin Shaman’s magic seemed to pass through the skeletons causing little to no damage. If not for the rune-engraved leg bones he was using as maces, he wouldn’t have been doing any damage to her pets.

Gripping her shield and sword tightly, Sarka sprinted forward to join the fight as the Mini-Boss roared in outrage and fury.

“Shut your mouth!” Sarka roared as she Shield Bashed the skinny bastard off his feet.

As the Mini-Boss slammed into the back wall of the chamber, Sarka began hacking and slashing the Goblin for all she was worth. Every time the disgusting fucker tried to cast a spell, she’d slam her foot or shield into the Mini-Boss to disrupt its cast while her pets continued hacking the Shaman to death. Thirty seconds later, the Shaman Mini-Boss crumpled dead to the ground.

Congratulations! You have completed the quest, Defeat the invading Goblin Air Shaman, Glulsolx Rotlung, in the old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill’s ruins!

“Loot up anything useful and let’s move out,” Sarka shouted to the stunned Light Elves looking back at her. Seeing none of them move, she loudly clanked the flat of her sword against her shield, “This ain’t no ice cream social. Now, get your asses moving!”

“This ain’t no ice cream social?” Scarlett commented as the female Light Elves began hurriedly moving between the downed Shaman corpses to loot what was useable.

“What?” Sarka demanded with a bark of laughter, “You’ve never seen any Red vs Blue?”

“Red vs Blue?” Scarlett arched her eyebrow not getting the reference.

“Only their first episodes are truly good,” Sarka laughed as she thought back to her inspiration, “But they have some great one-liners that every gamer should know and love.”

“I guess, I’ll have to put that on my watch list,” Scarlett snorted as Sarka waved for her to follow with her Skeleton Warriors trailing behind her.

“It’s worth it for a few episodes,” Sarka assured the other woman. As they reached the door to the corridor, she let out an unconscious yawn, “We’ll knock out the boss, head back to Southmore, and then get moving.”

“I still can’t believe you just took down a level 39 Mini-Boss without breaking a sweat,” Scarlett said with a shake of her head.

“Being fourteen levels higher with high-end gear makes the difference,” Sarka agreed with a nod to her two undead pets, “Not that these guys didn’t also make a big difference.” She let out a bark of amusement.

“Between my armor, magic resistances, and pets, I’m built to take or dish out a beating.”

“So, the only thing you need to worry about, is not getting enough sleep?” Scarlett joked as she yawned again.

“Oh, I’m fine for a few hours yet,” Sarka waved off the other woman’s concern, “Besides, there’s no way I could sleep when there is so much yet to do.” She gave the Rogue a smirk. “Truthfully, I kind of like being able to smack these guys around like they’re chumps.”

“No shit,” Scarlett grunted with a wide-eyed nod of agreement.

“We’re ready,” Yrathea reported as the female Light Elves formed up in the corridor behind them.

“Then, let’s move out,” Sarka said in a friendly tone as she began making her way down the corridor again without looking back.

It was a move that Sarka had learned from Star. The man had a quiet competency that made you want to follow him. It was the weirdest thing ever. Most players that she’d ever met in MMOs as team, raid, and guild leaders had cocky attitudes that drove her up the wall and pissed her off to no end. She frowned trying to put her finger on the difference. She smirked to herself because saying that Star wasn’t cocky wasn’t right either. The man was cocky as hell. Everyone listened and followed his lead simply because he was that good. He knew his shit and was able to strategize on the spot like gangbusters.

Partly, Sarka realized as she rushed the next Goblin patrol, that was because he jumped feet-first into whatever was going on inside the game. Star didn’t tell others to do anything that he wasn’t willing to do himself. Between that and the underlying personal respect he naturally offered made you want to follow him, she thought, while cutting down the patrol’s Shaman as her Skeleton Warriors finished off the other Goblins. If she could do half as good as that, she’d be on the right track.

There was another group of ten Goblin guards that had to be slaughtered when they reached the foyer before the large double doors that led to the Boss room. Again, this wasn’t an issue for Sarka and her undead pets to take on. She sent her Skeleton Warriors after the Shamans while diving head-first into the scrum.

What did surprise her was that Scarlett had led the other female Light Elves into the room to give her a hand. While she kept the Goblin Warriors’ attention, the others ganked them from behind in a perfect panzer

attack. And then, once her Skeleton Warriors had finished off the Shamans, they closed in from behind on the opposite side. Within five minutes, the roomful of Goblins had been cut down to the last.

“I-I c-can’t believe h-how e-easy that w-was,” a mousy-looking Light Elf stammered as she stared at the blade of her dagger in amazement. A quick Identify identified the female as Rosanhi Aezumin, level 31 Light Elf, Potter.

“With a good tank and the right strategy, everything is easier,” Sarka explained as she waved her naked blade toward the corpses at their feet, “Which is why all of you should equip whatever gear and weapons are available. A couple of extra attacks can add up to a lot of damage in the right situation.” She flashed the other females an encouraging smile. “And is something all of you will be learning in the very near future.”

“But I’m a Herbalist, not a Warrior or Hunter,” another tanned and weathered Light Elf said in confusion.

“While being a crafter is good,” Sarka said as her eyes swept the group, “All of you will be learning how to defend yourselves in a fight. It’s all part of Overlord Ironwolf’s requirements for vassals. You’ll be able to craft as part of the community, but in emergencies, you’ll be trained and expected to assist in the defense when needed.”

“He expects us to pay for training?” an elegant-looking Light Elf demanded in shock as Sarka hit her with an Identify.

“No, all defensive combat training will be offered freely,” Sarka assured the female as the name Keya Uriquirelle, level 22 Light Elf, Tailor appeared over her head.

That bit of information had the Light Elves whispering amongst themselves as Sarka dismissed her Skeleton Warriors, before pulling two more bones from the necklace to recast her spells. Since the skeletons didn’t have a way to feed from the bodies of the dead to refresh their health, she figured it was simply easier to re-raise them so they were back to full health for the final Boss battle. The last thing she wanted to do was be in the middle of a massive fight and have her backup go down. Not that she wouldn’t still be fine but why take an ass beating if she didn’t have to?

“While it’s nice to knock out these quests,” Scarlett said in a low voice as Sarka focused on casting her spell, “I wouldn’t have complained if we just headed back.”

“The main problem with skipping out on finishing off these quests

is that it will leave this evil to spread and grow,” Sarka countered with a sour look on her face as the first Skeleton Warrior rose before them.

“What do you mean?” Scarlett asked, giving her an odd look, “Isn’t that how an MMO is supposed to work?”

“Not this one,” Sarka grunted as she began her second Raise Skeleton Warrior spell. It took some serious concentration to be able to talk and cast at the same time. “These Goblins are spreading throughout the kingdom of Larethien because the players in Delonshire are being dumbasses.”

“What do you mean?” Scarlett asked as her face screwed up in confusion.

“Remember the quest you shared with me? The one named, Defeat the invading Goblin War Leader, Stirk BoneSplitter, in the old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill’s ruins?” Sarka asked as the other woman nodded, “The Goblin invader’s influence is growing in the region because the Delonshire players wouldn’t allow the quest for the Delonshire Mine to be finished.” Seeing the confused look on her face, she explained further, “After our team had driven out the Goblin invaders, the players were given a quest to help the Delonshire town retake ownership of the mine.”

“Uh, okay,” Scarlett harrumphed, not getting her point.

“Well, instead of completing the quest,” Sarka explained, “the local players stopped the Delonshire Guards from retaking ownership of the mine, which allowed the Goblins to come back and recreate the dungeon.”

“Why would they do-” Scarlett asked when a surprised look came to her face, “Oh, oohhh! They didn’t want to lose their static dungeon!”

“Yep, you got it on the first try,” Sarka shook her head as the second Skeleton Warrior rose up before them, “No one wanted to wait to find out where the new dungeon was going to be formed so they forced the old one to come back.”

“But, that’s ...” Scarlett’s voice died away as she shook her head.

“Making things worse in the region,” Sarka finished for her as the other females silently listened in on their conversation. She met the Rogue’s thoughtful eyes, “That makes things more exciting for players in the region but-”

“How would the quests have evolved if they’d simply allowed the region to be secured?” Scarlett countered, understanding Sarka’s point. Her eyes grew wide, “So, are we going to knock out this Delonshire Mine quest

and then help Delonshire retake the mine?”

“Maybe, in the future,” Sarka shrugged as she began recasting her battle buffs and sharing what she could with the others, “Right now, stopping the Hobgoblin invasion coming from the Plains of Atoll is the main concern.”

“That’s insane,” Scarlett commented under her breath, “Talk about your actions having consequences.”

“I know, right?” Sarka laughed as she finished up her quick buffing and started moving toward the double doors. They sort of reminded her of the entrance to the great room in BrokenFang Hold, “Listen up, everyone. I’m going to have my Skeleton Warriors go after the boss while I take on whatever Goblin troopers are guarding him. If you could give me a hand taking those adds down, I would greatly appreciate the help. Also, doing so will mean we can finish this off quickly and be on our way.” Her gaze softened as her eyes swept the group of female Light Elves. “Think you can do that for me, ladies?”

“I’ll fight with you,” Yrathea grunted.

“You have my blade,” Irhaal agreed as she stepped up with the other guard.

“Mine too,” another Warrior looking female Light Elf said stepping forward with the Rogue Ealirel.

“I’ll do my best,” Keya said with a death grip on the sword that she’d looted from one of the dead Goblins.

“Me too,” Rosanhi squeaked, quaking even as she stepped up with the Tailor.

Those last two seemed to give courage to the other crafters. Within moments, the entire group of female Light Elf crafters chorused in agreement as they joined the line clutching their looted weapons. It might not look like much, but it was a good start, Sarka proudly thought, giving the rescued females a firm nod. That was a good start to help them begin healing from the ordeal they’d been through.

Anyone who watched her stream later would probably think she was being a hard-ass bitch, Sarka silently thought, as she turned back toward the double door. That would only be because they hadn’t endured what she had in her life. A sick abusive older brother and mother that allowed the abuse because he was her baby! She gritted her teeth in fury as the old pain briefly weighed down her heart.

Sarka savagely pushed those feelings of guilt and helplessness away. She would never allow herself to be a victim like that again. She would beat to death anyone who tried to hurt her or her family. Letting out an explosive breath, she glanced back to Scarlett and flashed her a grin. It was her way of letting the other woman know she wasn't alone as she silently promised to help her deal with the trauma of what she'd been through.

In her opinion, Sarka believed it was best to be taught to be strong and fight back. To make sure you never allow yourself to be a victim again. As Yun had explained to her so many years ago, it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman. Anyone could be a victim and many people were throughout their lives. It was up to her to fight back any way she could, and in that way, never to allow herself to be broken.

“Raahhh!” Sarka roared as she booted open the doors and charged inside.

Maybe she should've peeked into the door first, Sarka belatedly thought as the double doors boomed open to a roomful of Goblin Warriors sitting at long tables. This was just like the main great room inside of BrokenFang Hold, while at the same time, a scene directly out of the mess hall from the Delonshire Mine. There had to be twenty Goblin Warriors feasting on the butchered bodies of Light Elves in various states of being eaten, while at the far end of the room was an immense scarred Goblin on a decaying throne ruled over it all.

There was that moment of shock as heads snapped around to stare at her and her raid mates in utter shock as the guttural shouting and laughing in the room died down to silence. The looks on the Goblins' faces went from the spectrum of disbelief to glee as they took in the Light Elf females as if they'd called for takeout. As the Boss rose up on his throne to point at them, the name Stirk BoneSplitter, level 41 Goblin, War Leader appeared over his head.

“Handtaka þá alla og koma með þá til mín!” the Boss roared as Sarka bellowed at the same time, “Slaughter him!”

Like bats out of hell, the Skeleton Warriors charged into the room. The nearest Goblins threw back their bench seats to face the attack only to have the undead pets leap atop the tables to race for their target. As the confused Goblin Warriors spun back around in confusion toward Sarka and her raid mates, she targeted the nearest corpses and began casting Corpse

Explosion.

KABOOM, KABOOM, KABOOM

“Gaahhh!” the center table of Goblin Warriors screamed in agony as bone shards and Dark Magic exploded in their midst. As the other Goblins turned toward the ruckus in confusion, Sarka turned her focus toward the next table of corpses.

KABOOM, KABOOM, KABOOM

As Goblin Warriors screamed in fear and pain, the rest of the room scooped up their weapons and rushed to the doorway. Unhurried, Sarka targeted the next table and the Light Elf corpses atop casting another trio of Corpse Explosions.

KABOOM, KABOOM, KABOOM

Sarka got all three off before the closest Goblins reached her. Triggering Shield Wall and Enhanced Fortress, magic shields began flaring up in a five-yard radius across the archway as she stabbed and slashed at the incoming wave of Goblins for all she was worth. Claws reached to capture her shield as she severed wrists and fingers with every slash while swords, axes, and flails tried to get past her defenses.

For fifteen seconds, Sarka was a deadly one-woman wall of slaughter. Arrows from Scarlett flew past her head as the other woman fired into the mini-horde at point-blank range. The other combat Light Elves stabbed and hacked into the Goblins with everything they had.

“You shall not pass!” Sarka screamed to the savage hate-filled Goblins who tried to take her down.

This was what it meant to be a Defensive Warrior, Sarka excitedly thought as the adrenaline flooded through her veins. Mentally visualizing Gandalf facing off against the Balrog in Moria, she bore the brunt of the attack as she held her ground. While she was level 53, facing off against twenty level 38 Goblins Warriors was no joke.

Counting down the seconds, Sarka began Shield Bashing the Goblins in front of her away as soon as her Enhanced Fortress timed out. Even as swaths of Goblin Warriors were blasted off their feet, the others drove in to stab and hack at her wherever they could. Headbutting, slashing, stabbing, and smashing her shield again and again with her superior strength wasn't enough to stop the wave of Goblins leaping on top of her.

Even as they died, more and more of the green bastards threw themselves on top of her as they strove to drag her to the ground. It took

every ounce of willpower to weather the attack as black claws ripped down her face and tried to take away her weapons. Ignoring the pain, she blindly hacked and slashed for her life while wordlessly screaming at the top of her lungs.

Sarka was sure she was going to die right then and there. Her hit points were dropping below half and there was no end in sight. No matter how many she slaughtered another Goblin took its place. How she was still on her feet, she'd never know as she bit a Goblin's nose. Someone else tore the green bastard away as she tore the flesh off its face with only her teeth.

To Sarka's shock, the attack ended as quickly as it had come. As the last few Goblins were yanked from her head, she saw a wide-eyed Scarlett tackle the savage Demi-Human to the ground. The Rogue began stabbing it in the back and head for all she was worth as other hands yanked away the Goblins holding onto her arms before hacking them to death. Yanking her sword arm free, she began hacking the Goblins clutching at her legs to death. A system window popped open before her eyes as the sounds of battle died around her.

Congratulations! You have completed the quest, Defeat the invading Goblin War Leader, Stirk BoneSplitter, in the old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill's ruins!

Congratulations! You have completed the quest, Slaughter the invading Goblins that have taken over the old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill's ruins!

The Watch Hill Ruins have been cleansed of the Goblin infestation! Return to Southmore Village for your reward!

"Holy shit," Scarlett cursed as she slowly climbed to her feet and looked around in shock, "We won?"

"L-looks that way," Sarka stammered for a moment, before getting her cocky attitude back as she smirked and jerked her chin toward the throne, "I guess Stirk BoneSplitter couldn't handle my Skeleton Warriors." Flicking the blood from her blade, she smoothly sheathed her sword and shouldered her shield onto her back, "I told you taking that asshole down wouldn't be a problem."

"Rrrright!" Scarlett laughed with tears in her eyes as she shook her head incredulously at Sarka. "Because that was so easy."

“That was incredible,” Irhaal exclaimed in a dumbfounded tone.

“I can’t believe we won,” Yrathea said with a stunned look in her eyes as she stared at the roomful of corpses.

“How didn’t we die?” Keya agreed beside the ex-Guardswoman.

“We did it working together as a team,” Sarka stated to her raid mates while clapping the other woman on the shoulder. Before anyone could say anything, a loud “Meek!” made everyone turn around as a large dog-sized Fanged Tarpan Strider leaped into her arms.

“Meek, Meek!” Freya cried out as she began excitedly licking the blood from her face.

“Gah! I’m fine!” Sarka sputtered as she did her best to hold the little beast out at arm’s length, before chastising, “Keep your tongue out of my mouth!”

That seemed to break the stunned silence of the others as the female Light Elves began to slowly move around the room with looks of horror on their faces. Getting the little baby calmed down, Sarka sadly watched the looks of sorrow and horror on the faces of those around her. The bones and bloody hunks of meat left on the tables were the half-eaten corpses of their loved ones, travel companions, and fellow villagers.

“There’s nothing we can do for our loved ones and friends that were killed except to make sure this evil is driven out of the kingdom of Larethien,” Sarka said as everyone looked back at her with tears in their eyes, “We’ll loot the Goblins and pile the dead atop the corpses of our enemies and burn it all.” She shook her head sadly. “They should find peace now that they’ve been avenged.”

As the female Light Elves went to work, Sarka and Scarlett made their way to the Boss and her Skeleton Warriors. It took a bit of mental focus, but she sent the pair of Skeletons to assist in dragging the tables, benches, and Goblins into a pile towards the back of the room. When she focused back on the Boss, she saw Scarlett holding up the loot from the corpse for her to take.

“This is yours-” Scarlett began to say.

“Take it all,” Sarka said, cutting the other woman off, “I need none of this.” Meeting the Rogue’s blue eyes, she smiled, “Use all of this to grow stronger.”

“I-I c-can’t take t-this,” Scarlett stammered.

“I’ve gotten a cut of the coins which is all I can really use,” Sarka

assured her with a smile, “Not to sound like an ass, but all of this is too low of a level to be of any use to me.”

“I can’t use this Axe of Severing or two-handed Brutal Blade of Bloodletting,” Scarlett said, shaking her head as she held up the items.

“Then, sell it for something you can use,” Sarka shrugged unconcerned, “With the Auction House being in Amyalneas, I bet there will be a few good items to pick up for your class.”

“Are you sure,” Scarlett hesitantly asked as she swung her backpack off to stuff the items inside.

“I’m sure,” Sarka flashed her a smile, before motioning toward the rest of their companions with her chin, “I’m gonna go give the girls a hand so we can get moving.”

The work went a lot quicker than Sarka had thought it would. Mostly because there wasn’t any way to really figure out who was who amongst the dead. The bodies were so destroyed that only their skulls frozen in horror could be readily identified. Stacking them on the pile of dead Goblins, she said a few kind words for them in a little ceremony, before setting the remains on fire with some lantern oil.

They ran into no problems on their way out of the fortress’s ruins. There were a number of surprised exclamations from the female Light Elves at the rest of her party sitting atop their mounts. To Sarka’s surprise, there were several gravestones where some team had decided to attack them along with a patrol of low-level Goblins which was sort of funny. Whoever had tried to PK them had basically been killed by the computer’s auto attack just like the Demi-Humans.

Instead of climbing onto her own mount, Sarka held the reins and led her Palnisdale Horse so she could walk next to Scarlett. It was a relatively short trip back to Southmore Village. Coming into town, they went to the Tasty Grotto to turn in their quests.

Except for some odd looks and comments from the Barmade when Sarka asked about purchasing wagons and mounts, the whole process went off without a hitch. She did take note of the embarrassed flush that had come to Scarlett’s face when the older female had come out of the kitchen. Reading the quest’s details, Sarka had no doubts that it was in regard to the quest’s warning about the Goblins taking females for breeding.

Luckily, except for that, there were no other problems. Yrathea and Irhaal made sure to keep their hoods pulled down over their faces while the

other females did their best to keep them away from the villagers. Except for some sideways looks, none of the villagers spoke to the female Light Elves that were traveling with Sarka. She'd simply explained that their small group had just arrived in Myathlune and were on their way to Amyalneas.

Except for Sarka's new recruits for the House of Kayden, it was basically true. As Star always said, it was best to go with as much of the truth as possible. It stopped you from having to remember too many lies and was easier not to slip up by an overheard comment.

A half-hour later, Sarka was the proud owner of two wagons and Aconcagua Horses to pull them. After a quick lesson, Scarlett took over driving the first wagon while a Light Elf named Halanaestra took over the second. She was a Spice Trader and was used to driving her trade goods to market before being captured by Goblins.

"I can't believe how everything can change in just a few hours," Scarlett said in a hollow voice as they crested the hill heading out of the valley which merged with the main road.

"Tell me about it," Sarka said, giving her a playful wink, "You finished that pain in the ass quest, made some coins, joined a new guild, and now have a new group to play with. All of that sounds pretty good in my book."

"And that stuff that happened to me in the dungeon," Scarlett pressed as a mixture of conflicting emotions passed over her face.

"All of that happened to your avatar, not you," Sarka explained in a firm voice, "If you really think about it, it's not too different than watching a horror movie. Those things can stick with you for a few days and rear their ugly head when you try to sleep or are alone with your thoughts, but after that, those nightmares fade away in a day or two."

"You think it'll be as simple as that?" Scarlett asked as if she were trying to wrap her mind around what Sarka was saying.

"It can be if you want it to be," Sarka shrugged as they merged with the main road to Amyalneas at a slow trot while Freya began hunting trash mobs again, "It's best to focus on the good things we did today and the fun we'll have together in the future." Her cheeks momentarily flushed as she met Scarlett's serious blue eyes, "Besides, I was really looking forward to finding a friend who wants to hang out when everyone else has gone to bed."

“I think, I’d like that,” Scarlett replied, flashing her a brittle smile.

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Chapter Six

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Startum Ironwolf waking up in the morning.)

BEEP ... BEEP ... BEEP

The annoying sound brought me out of a deep sleep with a groan as I flailed around in my blanket confused for a moment. Waking up enough to remember that I'd set up a new alarm tone, I groaned and sat up on the side of my bed, while silencing my smartphone. Grabbing the glass of water next to my bed, I swiped the screen to check for updates while gulping down the water.

Fuck me running, I mentally swore at seeing all of the email messages that I'd missed from the day before. It was obvious at a glance that the Hobgoblins had reached BrokenFang Hold yesterday morning and I'd completely missed it. Now, everyone was wondering what happened to me and why I wasn't answering any emails. Hell, there was even a note from Thomas suggesting that I'd better get a hold of Ashley and Kyarina as soon as possible. Shaking my head, I stood up and dragged my ass into the bathroom.

Sometimes, keeping to a hard gaming schedule felt like a full-time job, I sighed to myself while emptying my bowels. Cleaning up, I leaned over the sink and splashed hot water on my face, before checking myself in the mirror. With the dark circles under my eyes and my sallow skin, I looked like something dead the cat had drug in and left in their owner's shoe.

I snorted at that thought and got down to shaving. A four-to-five-hour sleep schedule was normally no problem for me. Skip a night of sleep due to being busy or stressed out and then I became a basket case. Sleeping a few extra hours longer didn't cancel that out either. It just took about a week of regular sleep for the body to catch up and then I'd be fine, but until then, I was going to be hurting for the next few mornings.

Climbing into the shower, I leaned my forehead against the plexiglass and let the hot water beat the exhaustion out of my body. Except for a cup of Cuban coffee, it was about the best medicine to get me ready to

face the day. Five minutes later, I felt like I'd once again joined the realm of the living. Drying off, I slid on a pair of baggy shorts and stalked barefoot to the coffee table in the living room with my phone and oversized plastic red cup.

"Let's see," I grunted under my breath while opening my laptop. Pulling up VTube, I went to the Mixes tabs and selected the first mix on the list that looked interesting. As Viva La Dirt League's "What Does The Drone Say" started to play, I chuckled to myself at the old-school gamer song and headed to the kitchen to get some food in my stomach.

Six eggs, bacon, a thick slice of ham, onion, tomato, mushrooms, jalapenos, cheese, milk, bread, strawberry jam, and butter, I silently listed off as I packed everything onto the countertop next to the cutting board. Even if I had a lot of stuff that I needed to review and reply to today, I needed to get some real food in my stomach. While protein powder was helpful, it only went so far to keep the worst of the hunger pains away. If I wanted to be at the top of my game, I needed real food to keep my body and mind going.

Bebopping to the song's chorus of high-trilling sounds, I turned the frying pan on high, laid in six slices of apple-smoked bacon, and began cracking eggs into a bowl. Mixing everything up with some milk, I began the long process of dicing everything up as quickly as possible while keeping an eye on the sizzling bacon. Flipping over the bacon, I started humming to the next song on the list, MAD/AMV's Aircraft while I threw the bread in the toaster and got the coffee machine heating up.

The beat got my blood pumping as I hummed along with the tune feeling better by the second. There was something about good music with a fast beat that got my adrenaline pumping at just the right level to get me moving in the morning. Snaking out a nearly cooked piece of bacon, I carefully stuffed it in my mouth while scooping the rest of the pieces out onto my plate.

So tasty, I happily thought as a satisfied grin came to my face. Tossing everything from the cutting board into the bacon fat, I added a little coffee to the sugar in my cup and got it mixed together into a fine foam. Sliding the cup back under the coffee maker, I buttered and jammed my toast between stirring the mixture in the pan so it didn't burn while AMV's Hero started playing.

"I need a heee-rrro," I sang while mixing the eggs into the frying

pan, “to save me now.” Cleaning up the coffee machine and cutting board, I got everything ready on my plate, before turning back to the eggs so they didn’t burn while still singing the chorus.

While I loved singing loudly, I’d never have forced someone else to listen to my tone-deaf self. That would be considered cruel and unusual punishment if not a direct war crime. I laughed at my own thoughts. Part of being true to yourself was recognizing the truth of what you were good and not good at. Sometimes even my tone-deaf self could hear just how bad my singing truly was.

As the eggs finished up, I scrapped everything onto my plate, switched off the coffee machine, and quickly cleaned the pan. Gathering everything up, I began carrying everything to the coffee table in the living room as AMV’s Rumors started playing, “Da dumm dummm da dumm short skirt and a jacket ... her body is just fantastic-”

RING ... RING ... RING

That can’t be good, I silently thought, frowning at the display. Domenic never called me this early in the morning about anything good. Did I really want to answer this? Glancing at my breakfast, I rolled my eyes and paused the song, before answering the call on speakerphone.

“Morning, Dom,” I greeted before stuffing a slice of bacon in my mouth.

“The hell are you playing at, Jay!” Domenic annoyed voice came from the phone, “I thought we were all supposed to have the same level of authority in our guild!”

“That’s how it’s supposed to work for the most part, but The World functions a little bit differently than most MMOs,” I explained while digging into the scrambled eggs on my plate, “Why, what happened?”

“What happened? The NPC you left in charge threatened to leave me and my people when we arrived in Myathlune!” Domenic roared into the phone, “When I challenged him on it, he said you ordered him specifically to ignore my orders!”

“I take it you’re talking about General Dell?” I asked with a forkful of food halfway to my mouth as my frown deepened.

“Of course, I’m talking about that stupid NPC!” Domenic hotly continued, “Dude, he didn’t just refuse my orders. He began talking a bunch of shit about how I should be feeding my people and buying them upgrades with my gold!”

Doing my best to remain calm, I let him bitch up a storm while I continued to eat. A part of me wanted to tell him just to shut the fuck up and stop being such a big baby, but I stopped myself for the moment. Being a good guild leader sometimes meant letting people bitch and get things off their chest. Although, in this case, I was going to let him have it since I knew he wasn't telling me the whole story. That and he was trying to fuck with my lands.

"He told us that you ordered him to ignore our orders!" Domenic finished in a huff.

"That was not my order to General Dell," I calmly explained while scooping up the last of the eggs with my toast and fork, "I ordered him to ignore any commands that would slow down his arrival to BrokenFang Hold."

"Funny, that's not what he said to us," Domenic spat without hesitation, "And you didn't offer any excuse for his attitude toward me."

"Huh, I find that extremely odd," I grunted thoughtfully while pushing my plate aside and pulling my laptop closer, "Let me bring up your Twitch Channel so I can see exactly what he said to you."

"What? You don't trust me or something now?" Domenic demanded as his voice took on a nasty edge, "I already told you what he said!"

"Why are you acting so strange?" I asked as my keyboard began to clatter while I called up his Twitch account. I wasn't sure at first, but the more Domenic talked, the more what he was saying didn't sound right, "Besides, how else can I understand what's going on unless I see exactly what was said and why?"

"There's nothing to understand," Domenic roared through the phone as I brought up the steam of everyone's arrival in Myathlune and increased the speed by four, "You just need to demote that cocky-ass NPC and make sure you let everyone know who the bosses are for The Revenants!"

"General Dell is well aware of who the boss is for the House of Kayden and the lands of BrokenFang Hold," I stated in a stone-cold tone after finding the part of the video where General Dell was reading the riot act to Domenic, "Which, of course, is me."

"The hell, Jay?" Domenic demanded in an outraged voice, "You're not the boss of the entire guild-"

“Just like you’re the boss everyone in Ironheart Stronghold, I’m the boss of my own lands and people, neither of which falls underneath the preview of The Revenants,” I calmly stated while doing my best to keep any anger out of my tone, “Why did you order General Dell to hang out while you went shopping in Myathlune?”

“Seriously, Jay,” Domenic tried to protest, “You couldn’t just take my word-”

“Domenic, you’re the one that called me demanding an explanation about events I wasn’t a part of so I pulled up your own video of the incident to better understand what happened,” I unapologetically overrode his excuses, “Only to find out that all of you were demanding that General Dell hang out in front of the city with all of my troopers and people while everyone went shopping and partying.” The line was noticeably silent as I demanded in a huff. “Dude, this was something we all agreed had priority over everything else. That’s because it’s currently the only semi-safe place we have to fall back to.”

“You’re overreacting a bit-” Domenic tried to counter as I continued heatedly.

“Overreacting?” I said in a strangled voice, “This is just like a team StarCraft match. If my lands get overrun, I’ll have lost everything I’ve been working to build and you’ll have nowhere safe to drop your stronghold to rebuild.”

“Aren’t your lands currently in the process of being overrun by Hobgoblins?” Domenic asked in a snarky tone.

“Which is why everyone is falling back to my lands after traveling across the starting area to evac your sorry ass,” I scornfully shot back.

“Dude, it’s not my fault your crazy ex is causing us all of these-” Domenic protested.

“Dom,” I overrode him again while trying to break this down enough for his pea-sized brain to comprehend, “If we get wiped out here and now, that’ll put our entire guild back to square one. We’ll lose our top of the chart ranking-”

“Woohoo, big deal,” Domenic chortled as if I were being ridiculous.

“Which means we’ll lose all the money we’re making on Twitch!” I finished as his mocking laughter suddenly cut off.

“W-wait, w-what?” Domenic stammered in confusion as my words

finally got through to him.

“What part of that didn’t you get?” I scoffed at his stunned reaction. It was like I could hear the hamster wheel start spinning inside his head, “You think we’ll have everyone following our Twitch feed if we lose everything and fall flat on our faces?”

“Uh, I guess not,” Domenic grudgingly admitted after a moment of thought.

“Exactly my point,” I let out an explosive breath while wondering why he was acting like such a dense asshole, “Do you want to go back to doing side jobs and stressing about money?”

“No,” Domenic sullenly admitted.

“Then, why are you fighting me on this?” I earnestly asked, trying to understand where he was coming from.

“I-I d-don’t know,” Domenic grudgingly admitted, “It’s just that I’m so sick and tired of always coming in second place.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” I mockingly laughed, catching him by surprise as his voice caught, “If anything, I’d say Mike’s in second place.”

“Mike!” Domenic exclaimed in a shocked tone.

“Yeah, so I’d say that puts you solidly in third place,” I teased as the phone went silent for a moment.

“You’re such an asshole,” Domenic swore into the phone.

“Really?” I asked, turning suddenly serious, “What else should I have said, Dom?”

“What do you mean?” Domenic snarled in surprise at my question.

“One of my two best friends calls me up first thing in the morning. Not to say hi. Not to ask how I’m doing, or to shoot the shit. No, he simply starts bitching me out. Why?” I demanded without waiting for an answer, “Because the NPC who I left in charge of my forces didn’t let him screw up the plans we made ahead of time to stop from being overrun in our last standing defensive stronghold. Now, suddenly, I’m the asshole. So, tell me, Dom, what else should I have said?”

“You could’ve stroked me a little bit more before shutting me down,” Domenic snorted, realizing he was being an asshole. Letting out an uncomfortable cough, he continued halfheartedly, “What can I say, Jay? You’re always THE asshole.”

“True,” I chuckled, catching a glimpse of my friend. As he let out

an explosive breath, I continued in a more normal tone, “Dude, what the hell was that all about?”

“Uh, sorry man, you’re right,” Domenic said in an embarrassed tone, “I’ve just been so wound up from all of the racist shit for being a Halfling. Then, all of the shit that went down with Julie.” I could visualize the nervous tick he had of running his hand through his hair as his voice filled with self-loathing. “Having to pack up my stronghold and run for my life didn’t help any either. And then, I get ganked by a gang of Rat Kin players as soon as I step off the ship in Myathlune.”

“Dude! Are you okay?” I exclaimed in surprise. Quickly, I started going over the Twitch stream video to see what he was talking about, “How did that-”

I choked back the second question as the video came to his angrily blowing up on the docks. It showed him stalking away after General Dell chastised him for being greedy and a bad leader. While I could understand the dressing down and agree with it on principle, I knew Domenic well enough to know that the dressing down had probably gone right over his head.

“I’m just so sick and tired of PKing assholes,” Domenic continued as if to prove my point, “I swear, it makes me seriously want to find a way to track these jackoffs down in real life and break some legs!”

“The fallacies of modern sensibilities,” I half-joked understanding where he was coming from. How many wrongs in society could be improved by a simple punch in the face? Watching the sped-up video of Domenic entering the open sewers, I grunted, “Life is full of assholes which is why every game has them.”

My eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets as I watched him nearly lose his stronghold. It took nearly all of my willpower to not curse him out for being a dumbass. If he’d lost his stronghold after everything I’d done to evac his stubborn ass, I’d ... Unclenching my teeth, I reminded myself that getting on his ass about what had already happened wouldn’t help when he was being a little bitch as I neutrally continued, “Looks like you dealt with them in the end.”

“Yeah, I smashed those idiots really good,” Domenic darkly barked as the tension seemed to leave his voice, “They had no clue who the hell they were messing with!”

A lucky idiot? I was tempted to ask. Instead, I focused on the Rat

Kin helping to save his dumb ass, “Who’s the Rat Kin guy that was giving you a hand?”

“Oh, that was some lowbie that those PKers were spawn camping,” Domenic explained in a dismissive tone, “I decided to be a nice guy and help him get his gear back.”

“Uh-huh,” I grunted while slowing the video down enough to listen to the guy begging Domenic not to spawn camp them back. I had to agree with the Rat Kin guy’s logic. There were enough of those assholes around to dogpile his dumb ass if he wasn’t careful. Instead of saying it looked more like he’s helping you not to get your clock cleaned, I went with, “That Plague magic tree he has looks pretty interesting.”

“Eh, the acid abilities he has aren’t too bad, but you could counter most of his Plague magic with an Antidote Potion or spell,” Domenic dismissed as if the Nightmare Tree wasn’t anything special, “The guy said something about wanting to meet with you.”

“Meet with me?” I asked in surprise while speeding through the video.

“Yeah, I told him you’d be arriving in Myathlune around Sunday or Monday.”

“Huh, did he say what he wanted,” I asked while plugging in my earbuds to the laptop to better hear his conversation with Domenic.

“Naw, just that he wanted to chat with you, if possible,” Domenic repeated even as I heard the guy say he wanted to join up with our guild, “His name was Gnager something.”

Gnager Nezume, I silently noted as they split up to head their separate ways. Rolling my eyes at Domenic’s games, I made a mental note to send him a message when I logged in. There was no doubt in my mind that Domenic had left this for me to deal with. He hated taking the time to deal with new players wanting to join our guild unless he really liked them.

“He was a decent enough guy for a lowbie player,” Domenic continued in the same vein.

“I’ll have to see if he’s interested in maybe joining the guild,” I suggested with an edge of sarcasm to my tone.

“Yeah, you do that,” Domenic said with an indifferent grunt.

“So, are we cool now?” I asked now that he’d calmed down, “You’re not gonna continue giving me shit because I want my troopers back in BrokenFang Hold ASAP for the Hobgoblin invasion.”

“Eh, I wouldn’t say that,” Domenic scoffed as I silently rolled my eyes, “but I’ll get off your ass about it.” There was a ruffling sound. “Hey, I need to get ready and logged in, because your General Dell,” he stressed the Half-Elf’s name as if he were making air quotes, “wants to get everyone marching first thing in the morning.”

“It’s probably for the best,” I neutrally agreed while trying to keep the snippiness out of my tone, “Any idea when he thinks they’ll reach Delonshire?”

“Tomorrow evening at the earliest because those refugees you have are slow as hell on the march,” Domenic said, before adding in a more serious tone. “If getting your troopers back to BrokenFang Hold is so important, I’d suggest ordering that NPC of yours to leave those guys behind. There’s enough of them that they should be more or less fine. If you want, I’ll pass that order along to your guy?”

“Naw, it’s cool,” I dismissed his offer without hesitation. Domenic was known in real-time strategy games for sending his non-combat troops into unknown territory and getting them slaughtered, “Getting the troopers back in time is important but so are the refugees.” My lips twisted in annoyance. “Otherwise, they’ll probably get ganked by a group of PKers and everything I’ve done to build up this future resource will be lost.”

“It’s your Nightmare start on the line, not mine,” Domenic warned, before switching gears, “Alright, man, I’ll catch up with you later. Maybe, we can meet up Friday night for dinner or something with the crew?”

“Maybe, I’ll just have to see how everything is going in-game before I can commit to anything,” I differed not knowing how everything was going to go down in Dolurn. If we made it to the ship, Mike and I could probably meet up with everyone without too much trouble.

“And, um, sorry about-” Domenic went to apologize.

“Ah, it’s cool, man, all of us have those days,” I assured him while finishing up the last of my cold coffee, “Later, man.”

“See you Friday, Jay,” Domenic offered as the line went dead.

“Fucking Dom!” I cursed under my breath while dropping my smartphone on the sofa. Running a frustrated hand through my hair, I checked the time and sat forward to catch up on my emails.

The first one was from Thomas, giving me a rundown as to what happened with everyone when they landed in Myathlune. It was disconcerting to hear about the corruption with the nobles of the city.

Luckily, I was able to call up Thomas's Twitch stream to get a better idea of what was going on, but it was obvious we'd need to be ready for a fight if anyone got any stupid ideas.

General Dell cutting down the Half-Orc Harbor Master was pretty damn badass. I'd really lucked out finding him as a slave and taking him into my ranks. Not that he didn't leave me with a bit of a mess to deal with when we landed in Myathlune. I snorted at that. While it was better to have them worried and on edge as to what I might do, it left me playing the pompous over-the-top nobleman again.

Thomas's email ended with a warning about my friends acting like dumbasses and asking if everything was alright. His people back in BrokenFang Hold hadn't heard from me ever since the beginning of the Hobgoblins' attack. Even though there wasn't much I could do while being so far away from the action, he suggested I check out Ashley's and Jodi's Twitch streams to get an idea of how bad the situation was back home, before adding that they should be able to make it back before the walls could be overrun.

I gave him a quick rundown of what was happening, explaining that I'd managed to get us enough supplies to feed everyone and had completed the Battle Mage quest. Lastly, I apologized for being AFK, or away from keyboard, explaining that Helgath and I had been dealing with a private issue related to her past. There was no reason to go into specifics so I simply assured him that I'd be available as needed going forward.

My next email was a quick message to Dazed and Yun. I gave them a quick rundown about what we'd found on teleporters in the Great Library of Tulduroc, before warning them that we'd been jumped due to triggering an alarm by the research. While I didn't know if they'd run into something similar or not in Amyalneas, I figured a heads-up couldn't hurt and hit send after thanking them again for making the side trip.

Rearranging my windows, I called up Jodi Tempest's Twitch stream of the day before opening Kyarina's email next. The latest one was about how they hadn't been able to hold back the Hobgoblins' advance once they turned their focus to them and that they'd been pushed out of the Sulfur Springs. From the sounds of it, they had a rough time but were bringing the Dread Herd with them as allies to help hold BrokenFang Hold.

If there'd been time, I'd have searched through Orion Prakoli's Twitch streams to see how he'd managed to communicate with the

monstrous creatures. It was pretty amazing that he'd managed to pull that off without being able to speak with them. Making a mental note to research that later, I popped open Kyarina's newest email.

"Where the fuck are you?" was the subject line of Kyarina's newest email. Shaking my head at the sass, I continued reading while watching the Hobgoblins' first attack on the new fortifications. It had gone pretty much the same way as Domenic's defenses had against the Orc Horde. They'd ripped through all the deadly traps that had been set up before the walls in a matter of minutes as hundreds of the Demi-Humans and Shadow Worgs had died in the opening assault.

The main difference between the Orcs and Hobgoblins attacks was how the Hobgoblins had been hidden under an invisibility cloaking spell. If not for the traps and the undead Skeletons on the wall, the defenders wouldn't have even known they were under attack. The Hobgoblins would've scaled the walls and been amongst the defenders before any of them would've known they were under attack. How many of them would've been cut down in those first few minutes of the battle?

Watching the intense action as Jodi and the Zeppy's Heroes fought off the invaders with grit, undead pets, and determination was insane. Even then, they'd almost been overwhelmed by the suddenness of the attack. It took all of the construction workers calling up their Zombies and counter-attacking to drive the Hobgoblins off the wall. From what Kyarina's email was saying, they'd been caught flatfooted by the Shadow Worg Raiders' ability to scale the defenses so quickly.

Since then, they'd been under nearly constant attack. Even as night had fallen, the assaults had continued. If not for the Skeleton Archers and Mages that I'd somehow managed to add to the Dark magic tree, Kyarina assured me that they would've burnt through a fifth of their supply of arrows. That was a terrifying thought since this was only the start of the second day of the invasion.

What sent a chill down my spine was Kyarina's assurance that this was only the vanguard of the Hobgoblin's invading army. She had no idea what would happen once the main force arrived with their siege engines. Right now, she was making it a priority to collect as many of the soul stones from the dead on the field as possible and was working with the crafters to prioritize the weapon concepts that I'd come up with. That and making as many bolts for the BAMFs as quickly as possible.

All of which was a smart call. A Necromancer's primary power came from using their enemies' own dead against them. Meaning, as the enemy grew weaker, the Necromancer grew stronger or, at least, didn't get any weaker. It was a tried-and-true strategy for the class. Because of that, it made me doubt that it would work in this situation.

I know that didn't make much sense at first glance, but it was exactly because the Necromancer strategy was expected that made it suspect to me. It was like the traditional defenses Domenic, Kyarina, and I had all first focused on crafting for our defenses. The traps and pits that would've made a typical earth force hesitate to just throw their troops' lives away didn't make the Demi-Humans bat an eye. They would send hundreds if not thousands of their troops to their deaths if it allowed them to overwhelm their enemy's defenses and get the win.

If my people were going to weather the Hobgoblin's invasion and win, I needed to be smarter than that. If there were too many of the enemy for traditional defenses to hold back for any extended period of time, I needed another way to win or force the Hobgoblins to withdraw. I know that sounded a lot easier said than done. And while I had no idea what that might be, if I didn't figure something out, this was going to turn ugly really quick with possibly no end in sight.

Making a mental note to run ideas past Helgath, I began typing out a quick email congratulating Kyarina and everyone else for holding the line. As for my new weapon designs, if they worked, I warned that they should be held in reserve and only used in emergencies to counteract siege engines at range or to maybe offset a hard push that was going to overwhelm the defenses. Adding that General Dell should be arriving within two days with several thousand level 50 plus troopers to add to the defense of BrokenFang Hold. Along with them were the Uten Syn guild, Domenic and his Dwarves, and the rest of my friends, which should nearly triple the number of players that she currently had available.

Lastly, I apologized for being AFK the day before, explaining that I'd been dealing with a personal issue and hadn't had time to check emails. Not that I was about to tell the old female gamer why I'd been a basket case the night before. I couldn't exactly see her being very understanding of my odd situation with Helgath and didn't feel like receiving an email explaining how stupid it was to be emotionally involved with a digital personality inside an MMO. It sounded ridiculous when I said it like that,

but what can I say, relationships can be complicated at times.

I was just adding a quick PS explaining that I hoped to reach BrokenFang Hold by Monday or Tuesday with hopefully another couple hundred players to add to the defense when my smartphone began ringing beside me. Completing my message, I hit send and glanced at the screen.

“Jill?” I muttered to myself in surprise, “What the hell does she want this early in the morning?” Checking the time, I mentally noted that I had ten minutes left before needing to log in as I clicked accept, “Dominos Pizza, would you like to hear our daily specials?”

“Dominos Pizza, huh!” Jill repeated in a snarky tone, “Excellent, I’ll have a large pie of why the fuck did your General Dell guy tell me to fuck off with an extra topping of you’re not my boss?”

“So, let me get this straight,” I sarcastically asked in my best Cable Guy voice, “You want a large pie of I wasted half a day pimping my armor with my girlfriends with a side of why wouldn’t General Dell wait around for another half day while we went drinking and shopping even though we were supposed to be hurrying our asses back to your lands to help stop them from being overrun?”

“I didn’t realize Jim Carrey had an Asian accent,” Jill busted out laughing at my crappy imitation.

“Eh, after getting Jon Pinette’s angry Asian all-you-can-eat buffet voice down, I haven’t been able to do any other decent imitations since.”

“That guy was crazy good when we saw him at the Comedy Corner,” Jill commented not upset in the least, “So, who sold us out on our shenanigans?”

“Well, I have a few new friends traveling with you guys that are nice enough to send me regular updates about how everything is going,” I gave a meaningful cough, “so I know you’re mostly on schedule.”

“So, either the Devil Dogs or Uten Syn guild sold us out,” Jill snorted, trying to figure out who’d been keeping me informed.

“That and I just got off the phone with a pissy Dom about the same thing,” I dryly countered.

“Gah, that must’ve sucked,” Jill gagged in commiseration, “Not to be a bitch or anything-”

“Cause you’re never that,” I snorted.

“Be nice,” Jill snapped, before returning to her joking tone, “But I swear Dom has been on the rag this whole week.”

“He’s kind of the wrong sex for that,” I joked, “Not that I’m disagreeing, per se.”

“Ha, don’t make me laugh,” Jill gruffly chortled, “just because men don’t bleed doesn’t mean they don’t get on the rag.”

“Well, it would be a little disconcerting if we bled,” I shivered at the mental image that brought up while wishing I had a less creative mind.

“Of course, I’m talking about you,” Jill shouted in response to someone near her that I couldn’t hear, “Don’t give me that shit, I’d swear you’re on the rag at least once a week!”

“Should I hang up while you’re whispering sweet nothings to each other?” I joked as AJ’s muffled voice shouted something that the receiver barely picked up.

“Now shut it so I can finish bitching out Jay!” Jill shouted back, before replying to me in a put-out tone, “Our bedroom talk is a lot raunchier than that, Jay.”

“TMI ... TMI,” I hurriedly interrupted before Jill could get going. It was best to cut her off before she started giving me too much information about their extracurricular activities as I went back to our previous topic, “Seriously though, I don’t know what’s crawled up Dom’s ass and died lately. I swear, every time we talk, he’s ready to read me the riot act.”

“Eh, Julie sort of has the effect on everyone,” Jill said as I let out an exasperated sigh, “Not that it’s your fault.”

“Dom obviously thinks so,” I grunted while shaking my head.

“We were all friends with her in high school and thought she was cool until she suddenly wasn’t,” Jill said turning suddenly serious, “Unless you’re somehow guilty of fucking her crazy?”

“Fucking her crazy?” I repeated with a choking bark of laughter, “Isn’t that supposed to be don’t stick your dick into crazy?”

“We’re not talking about Hefe and his usual dates,” Jill joked, before letting out an exasperated sigh, “Look, we were all hanging out and having fun together when she just suddenly went off the deep end. As I turned silent, she pushed the point she was trying to make, “She just decided using people was the best way to get what she wanted and was pissed when we didn’t fall in line. Is that any of our faults?”

“Nope, Julie played all of us,” I agreed in a strained voice, “And then promised to never stop making me pay for turning her down.”

“Eh, she didn’t just mean you with that threat,” Jill disagreed as an

edge came to her voice, “She meant all of us. So, why is it any more your fault than the rest of us?” As I grew silent again, she pressed on, “So, don’t let Dom get your goat. He’s just pissy that he’s never beaten you in a fair match, and the Julie drama is just a good way to make you feel guilty about it.”

“Well, it’s working,” I unhappily grunted while eyeing the paused first-person view of Domenic entering the main shopping district of Myathlune.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Jill’s tone turned suddenly earnest, “but all of us want to beat you.”

“Big time!” I heard Krystal shout loud enough to be picked up by the receiver.

“We just want it fair and square,” Jill continued with a friendly laugh, “and not in an MMO like this.”

“Yeah, here we’re a team,” AJ shouted next to be heard.

“Stop walking around naked and get dressed!” Jill shouted without even muffling the phone. “We need to log into the game in five minutes.”

“TMI!” I shouted again while smirking at their back and forth despite my desire to not hear any of their personal life.

“We got to go because your General Dell guy runs a taut command,” Jill explained as there was a ruffling of clothing.

“You could just sleep in and catch up with your mounts,” I offered while closing my laptop and gathering up my mess.

“And what, possibly not be on hand to help out if some players get stupid?” Jill scoffed as I loaded everything into the dishwasher, “That wouldn’t be pulling our weight in the guild, would it?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” I agreed, feeling better as I headed for the guest bathroom where my gaming suit hung.

“Who knows, maybe we can swing by that arena in Tulduroc sometime,” Jill offered as I began getting on my suit, “and whale on each other sometime.”

“Only as long as Jay doesn’t use any of his gay Dark magic powers,” AJ shouted in the background.

“Yeah, no undead!” Krystal readily agreed.

“I promise,” I laughed out loud while nearly falling over as I got dressed.

“Okay, I think that’s enough shit-talking,” Jill said as she started

speaking into the phone again, “We’ll keep Dom from being stupid while you focus on getting your ass back here to help us.”

“You got it, boss,” I joked as AJ’s and Krystal’s muffled shouts of “bosses” came to my ear.

“Talk to you later and thanks,” I said, hanging up after all three of them shouted “Later loser!”

Shaking my head, I hurriedly topped off my Camelbak with protein powder water and filled up my plastic cup. A minute later, I was sitting back in my Egg and putting my helmet on with a few minutes to spare. Feeling a lot better about everything, I closed the latch and triggered the log-in sequence.

Running Pod Diagnostic – Complete
Synchronizing controller units - Complete
Neuro Synchronization - Complete
Initializing virtual environment ...

“He’s here!” I heard Neysa shout of excitement as the room of the inn came into focus around me.

“You need to hurry up and get dressed!” Helgath called out as I sat up on the side of the bed.

“Hey, I’m two minutes early,” I argued while catching the pants that the Half-Orc tossed at me.

“We’re supposed to be meeting everyone outside the gates at seven,” Helgath reminded me while bringing over the rest of my gear as I groaned and began hurrying.

“After last night, it doesn’t matter if anyone sees me now in my regular form, does it?” A naked Neysa asked as she began quickly shoving her clothing in the Half-Orc’s Magi-Weaved Traveler’s Backpack that was sitting at the foot of the bed.

“Probably not,” I agreed while the Half-Orc helped me strap on my armor. After mostly wearing social clothing for the last few days, it was noticeably stiff and uncomfortable, “By the time anyone that cares tries to follow us, we’ll be well on our way to Thoronjhi.”

“Thoronjhi?” both my girls asked in confusion as I sat on the bed to put my boots on.

“Well, Splaet-Von Duekey and then Thoronjhi,” I reiterated while getting my left boot on while the Half-Orc knelt down to work on my right,

“That should give us something to do while everyone else is heading to Aeroch Nor.”

‘I hope Deress and the other children are alright,’ Neysa anxiously said as her shapely body shimmered and grew into her Silver Dire Wolf form.

“Come, we need to ride,” Helgath said, pushing me toward the door while helping me strap on the last of my gear.

“Is that allowed?” I asked as we hurried down the hall to the stairwell.

“Aeeiii!” I heard a player scream in fear as Neysa bounded down the step.

“Excuse us,” I apologetically called to the group of players that nearly fell out of the stairwell onto their asses in their rush to get away from the monstrous wolf that was the size of a large horse.

“Hey, is that you, Neysa?” Olli, one of the German players we’d run into the day before last, asked from the archway to the main room.

“What the hell?” one of the players on the floor swore.

“Is that your giant wolf?” another of the group demanded.

“Oh, hey, Star,” Jens, one of the two other German players standing next to him, greeted as I flew down the stairs right behind Neysa’s furry ass, “Are you guys planning on grabbing something to eat before heading out?”

“Yeah, maybe we can eat together?” Alarich, the third German player, asked as he glanced toward us while the group of players gawked at both our groups.

“I picked up breakfast for him earlier this morning,” Helgath explained from where she followed behind me while I headed for the exit.

“Sorry, guys,” I apologetically waved my hand walking backward, “we’d join you if we weren’t already late for meeting up with our teammates.”

“Aw, too bad,” Olli nodded in understanding as I threw open the door and Neysa leaped through the gap, “Next time, then?”

“You bet,” I agreed, following Helgath out.

“Was that that Ironwolf player?” I heard one of the players from the first group suddenly ask.

“You mean the one who rides that Silver Dire Wolf with the zombies?” another one of the players asked.

“Holy shit, that has to be him!” I heard the third player standing

with them exclaim as the door swung close behind us.

‘I thought we weren’t allowed to ride in town,’ I asked as the Half-Orc leaped from the top of the steps to Neysa’s back.

‘What are they going to do?’ Helgath challenged as she flashed me a toothy smirk, ‘Stop you from meeting up with Viscount Hollysharp’s troopers?’

‘True,’ I laughed while climbing up behind her. As Neysa took off at a trot, there was a shout from the training area.

“Hey Ironwolf,” Looking back, I saw the hot German player in bikini armor named Thiemo from the night before, “You owe me another go-around!”

“Next time I’m in town!” I shouted back with a wave of farewell. He must’ve been talking with Andúne, I thought with a snort of amusement as we galloped down the main avenue of Mid City.

“Make way for Lord Ironwolf!” Helgath hollered to the crowd ahead of us like Marshal Slangneedon had done the night before. To my surprise, the players and NPCs cleared the center of the street as she shouted, “Make way for Lord Ironwolf!”

‘Where’s Neristhana and everyone else?’ I asked as we raced past the Temple of Light’s Arboretum.

‘Eat,’ Helgath ordered as she pressed the wrapped breakfast sandwich into my hands, before turning around to shout again, “Make way for Lord Ironwolf!”

‘They headed out to meet up with everyone a half hour earlier since you’re always late,’ Neysa explained as I dug into the food with a gusto, ‘Neristhana said everything would be fine as long as one of us were there to meet up with Viscount Hollysharp’s and Lady Tuin’Dyrr’s representatives.’

‘Zeven, Nahimana, Phoenix, and Töten went with her in case there were any problems,’ Helgath explained between shouts.

Seeing that we were going to be out of the city in a moment, I quickly popped open my interface and began typing. If I didn’t do this now, I’d surely forget about doing it later. Besides, the Rat Kin player that helped Domenic had seemed pretty base.

Startum Ironwolf: Hey, Gnager. I just wanted to thank you for helping out my guildmate, Vengeance Burnslinger, when he was in Myathlune. Without your help, that could’ve turned pretty nasty.

Gnager Nezume: Oh, um, hey, um, no problem. I'm, um, glad I could help. Dom was, um, saying something about you being in Myathlune this weekend?

Startum Ironwolf: Yeah, that's the plan. Why, what's up?

Gnager Nezume: If it's alright with you. Maybe, we can, um, meet up and chat before you leave town? I, uh, was wanting to, um, offer you my ... services.

Startum Ironwolf: Sure, we could do that as long as you don't mind shooting me a reminder Sunday morning. So, um, what kind of services are you offering? A wash and vacuum with an oil change?

Gnager Nezume: Uh, no! I mean, I want to join your guild!

Startum Ironwolf: I was just joking, man. Dom called me earlier this morning, so I checked out the stream of your meet-up with Dom. From what I could see, it looked like you'd be a good fit for us.

Gnager Nezume: Other than being a lame-ass joke, that sounds cool.

Startum Ironwolf: Hence, why I'm focusing on being a Pro Gamer and not a stand-up comedian. Okay, let's plan on meeting up while everyone is unloading. If there are no issues, you can head back with us to BrokenFang Hold. Just plan on getting a mount for the trip. Otherwise, you'll miss out on all the fun of beating back the invasion.

Gnager Nezume: Um, sure, that shouldn't be too much of a problem.

Startum Ironwolf: Cool, then I'll see you this weekend. Later, man.

Gnager Nezume: Cya!

I finished up my sandwich and conversation just as we reached the kill zone before the outer wall. Neysa galloped across the cobblestones as she zigzagged between groups of players. As we neared the Eastern Gate, two squads of G.O.A.L.E.M.s rushed out of the guard barracks to block the gap, while the G.O.A.H.E.M. Knights to either side of the portal began drawing their oversized two-handed blades and raised their shields in preparation for battle. A ripple ran through both groups a moment later when Helgath's shout of "Make way for Lord Ironwolf!" echoed across the plaza. The city guards were still trying to figure out what they should about us galloping through the streets when we raced past them into the gate.

'See, I told you that would work fine,' Helgath let out a giddy

laugh before shouting one last time to the squad of city guards on the far side, “Make way for Lord Ironwolf!” To my surprise, the Scribe sitting at the desk just waved us through as the squad of city guards fell back to let us pass.

‘I guess they were expecting us,’ I grunted in surprise as the girls’ smirk of satisfaction came across our shared link.

Maybe, Nightmare players or anyone with a “lord” title had a little bit more power in such things than the average player. It was an interesting thought but not one that I wanted to particularly test in every city. As those thoughts passed through my mind, we cleared the line of players waiting to enter the city’s gate to see a group of familiar faces waiting for us up ahead at the crossroads along with the familiar hulking shape of a G.O.A.H.A.M. Spell Knight.

‘What the hell is Braid doing here?’ I asked as a frown came to my lips, ‘And how the hell did he get his new toy fixed up so quickly?’

‘No clue, but it looks combat-ready,’ Helgath offered while eyeing the magic-tech machine thoughtfully, ‘Did you invite him to travel with us when we were leaving Tulduroc?’

‘I don’t really remember,’ I harrumphed, trying to think back to the day before.

‘Yeah, you did when we were leaving,’ Neysa reminded me, ‘but he didn’t seem to be interested at the time.’

‘He must’ve changed his mind,’ Helgath offered.

‘Cool,’ I grunted, wondering what had changed his mind, ‘It’s not like we can’t use his help.’

Glancing toward the north, I saw a line of wagons heading along the base of the mountain ridge not a mile away. Even from this distance, I could easily make out Tethys and her colorful wagon at the tail end of the line of wagons full of my new vassals, food, and other farming supplies. Traveling along with them were a group of twenty G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers. It was a large and high enough level force to make most players think twice about attacking such a caravan. Feeling better about my people being safe for the trip, I turned back to the group waiting for us as Neysa trotted to a stop.

“Dude, are you ever on time?” Phoenix asked as Töten chimed in.

“Yeah, man, arriving late has become a habit at this point.”

“Says the puss-puss that passed out last night at the table and the

one that carried her back to her room to crash,” I scoffed at the pair as Zeven spoke up.

“You’re still nearly fifteen minutes late.”

“As I’ve stated before,” I said rolling my eyes at my friends’ intervention, “I do my best to be on time but sometimes I’ve got to deal with guild emergencies.”

“That sounds like a convenient excuse to me,” Töten playfully barked as he elbowed the Barbarian for support.

“It’s the same thing you’ve said nearly every morning since I joined your guild,” Phoenix agreed as Zeven smothered a laugh with a clawed hand.

“Have either of you been following the course of the Hobgoblin invasion hitting BrokenFang Hold?” I asked as the trio rolled their eyes at having me turn this into a serious discussion.

“That’s not the point-” Phoenix tried to say as I interrupted.

“Are either of you assisting in the defenses from several hundred miles away while trying to get thousands of troops and refugees safely across the Nordic Region with a bunch of prima donna players wanting to be constantly stroked whenever they get their feelies hurt?”

“Dude,” Töten exclaimed while holding up his hands, “Stop using all of this logic to smack us down when we’re just having fun giving you shit about being late.”

“Just take your medicine and apologize,” Phoenix added in the same vein.

“And at least lie that you’ll try not to do it again,” Zeven joked.

“Fine, I’m sorry,” I rolled my eyes at the trio, before nodding to our newest addition to the team, “Glad to see you decided to join the team, Braid. Any idea how far you want to travel with us?”

“I thought it might be fun to get my hands dirty with that Hobgoblin invasion you have going on back home,” Braid casually said as his G.O.A.H.A.M. Spell Knight twitched in a shrug, “And traveling through Thoronjhi and Aeroch Nor would allow me to set up some Mechanoids to watch the Auction Houses and repeat what I have going on Tulduroc.”

“Hell, if you do the same in Amyalneas,” Töten said, shaking his head, “You’ll be well on your way to controlling all the Auction Houses in the Nordic Region.”

“That’s the plan,” Braid proudly stated as he eagerly rubbed his

gauntleted hands together in anticipation.

“It’s always good to have a trader friend who’s good with the Auction House,” I commented while trading an appreciative glance with the Barbarian.

“You don’t say,” Phoenix snorted at my “What did I do?” look, “I’m starting to better understand why Dom is always bitching about your luck.”

“Eh, being the right kind of asshole helps a lot with that,” I offered, before motioning with my head toward the wagons and troopers in the distance, “By the way, thanks for getting everyone moving this morning.”

“It’s not like they needed to hang around waiting on your slow ass,” Töten joked as I rolled my eyes.

“Besides Marshal Slangneedon and his troopers just took it as a given since you’re an Overlord and all,” Phoenix smirked as she made air quotes when saying Overlord.

“Overlord my ass,” Tyhra cursed as she angrily glared at me with her arms crossed over her armored chest.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked, surprised at the attitude as the Cat Burglar Thief tried to bore holes through me using only her eyes, “We were all cool last night.”

“That was before she found out we were already planning to travel to Thoronjhi,” Töten explained as my lips formed an “O”.

“Yeah, she’s been like that ever since,” Phoenix added with an indifferent shrug.

“And thinks you tricked her to take the children for yourself,” Zeven offered as Braid looked between each of them while trying to follow the conversation.

“In that case, then why are you here,” I asked, before jerking my chin toward the Palnisdale Horse standing behind her, “And why did you borrow Neristhana’s mount?”

“Why’s that?” Tyhra snarled without hesitation, “Because you’re planning on traveling to Splaet-VonDuekey to get the children with or without me?”

“Uh, yeah, basically,” I agreed, giving her a shrug, “What about it?”

“Dude, really?” Töten hissed as I glanced toward him, “Could you sound like more of an asshole?”

“You sure know how to calm people down,” Phoenix chastised under her breath.

“We discussed this last night where you fully agreed to my terms and conditions,” I said in a no-nonsense tone while holding up a finger, “First, you haven’t been able to keep them safe even after fleeing from their village and the Kingdom of Thayjar. Second, you’ve had trouble trying to feed and clothe them in a place like Haldale.”

“Your lands are currently being invaded!” Tyhra protested as I continued unperturbed.

“Third, I can and will keep them safe with the rest of the children that I’ve already saved. Fourth, I’m rescuing them from the bastard that’s wanting to suck out their essence for gold. Fifth, I even agreed to let you be a part of their lives with the caveat that you agreed to swear an oath of fealty to me as an ally.” Dropping my hand, I looked her up and down with a frown on my lips. “So, what’s your problem?”

“My problem, asshole,” Tyhra sputtered in disbelief, “is that you could’ve simply given me a hand in getting them back!”

“Why should I?” I asked, before waving to the rest of my friends, “Why should any of us?”

“Because they’re children and you like them!” Tyhra roared as my friends gave me a sideways look.

“Hence, why I decided to help them,” I agreed while giving her a pointed look, “And my friends are complaining about the side quest.”

“So, unless you agree to work together,” Töten said in a harsh one, “Then, why would Star include you in the deal?”

“Because they’re my children!” Tyhra snarled as she glared around at us. Shaking her head in disgust, she ripped the backpack off her back and thrust it toward me, “If it’s about money, then fine, I’ll pay you all of my gold and gear!”

“Why bother with us, then?” Phoenix asked without looking twice at her backpack. She jerked her chin back toward Haldale, “Just get a PUG to help you and be done with it.”

“Do you know how hard it is to get a PUG in Haldale for a simple dungeon or quest within the local area?” Tyhra demanded in frustration, “Let alone one that won’t try to rob you of everything you have?” She pointed a shaking hand at me accusingly, “That’s the most fucked up part about all of this! All of you are already planning to travel to Thoronjhi and

Splaet-VonDuekey!”

“So, what you’re saying is that you can’t do this on your own,” I stated unapologetically as my eyes bore into her, “Which is why I agreed to take a shot at rescuing the children-”

“I could do it if you’d just take my damn money!” Tyhra interrupted with a roar.

“And if you want to be a part of this and keep them safe against future retribution,” I continued without batting an eye as she glared up at me, “That means you’ll swear an oath of fealty to me as an ally or give back my vassal’s horse so we can get on our way and stop wasting time.”

“Aren’t you being a little bit harsh,” Zeven asked under his breath as my cold glare swiveled to him. Rolling his eyes, he held up his hands and turned away in embarrassment, “Jeesh, man, forget I said anything.”

“What the hell was that about?” Tyhra sneered as she looked back and forth between us.

“We’ve helped Zeven out with several issues he’s had with his people in-game-” I began to say as Phoenix coughed out, “Repeatedly.”

“And so, he’s joined us because I have a vassal that might be able to help him rescue his people and because I offered to give him a safe place to set up his stronghold as an ally,” I finished explaining.

“So, he does this with everyone?” Tyhra demanded of my friends.

“Not everyone,” I protested with a frown.

“Basically,” Töten uncomfortably coughed as he looked away, “but usually he’s nicer about it.”

“You too!” Tyhra exclaimed, giving the Big Guy a shocked look.

“Only because you’re not as thick-headed as others,” Phoenix pointedly raised an eyebrow at the Badger Kin.

“I wasn’t that bad,” Zeven grumbled as he looked away.

“You weren’t?” I unsubtly coughed/said in my hand as Zeven flipped me off.

“We sort of helped each other out,” Töten continued somewhat embarrassingly while rubbing the back of his armored neck, “And he offered me help to rebuild.”

“Don’t tell me your part of this sad shitshow of losers too,” Tyhra demanded as she turned her glare on the Barbarian and the G.O.A.H.A.M. Spell Knight.

“Uh, kind of sort of,” Braid shrugged as if not understanding why

she was making such a big deal out of all of this, “All of them gave me a hand with some PKers that were messing with me and we started hanging out.”

“Nope, I sought out Star on my own accord to get in on all the action,” Phoenix let out a throaty guffaw as she leaned forward in her saddle to give the other female a cocky look. “And, so far, I haven’t been disappointed.”

“This is such bullshit,” Tyhra huffed as she looked down at her feet. It was obvious she was wrestling with the decision. Finally, she let out an explosive breath of exasperation and threw her arms up in the air, “Fine, you win. I’ll ally with your dumb ass and watch after the kids in case you’re a creep!”

“Greeeeaat,” I sarcastically replied while holding my hand out for her to shake.

“You back me into an impossible corner to force me to agree to your demands and then expect me to just shake your hand like everything is fine?” Tyhra demanded, giving me an incredulous look.

“No one is forcing you to do anything, Tyhra.” I calmly stated while doing my best to not react to her animosity. “I’m offering the friendship of a group of good players to assist in helping you reach your goals to build up a strong alliance. Right now, that help means rescuing the children and then keeping them safe. Later, I hope that’ll include reestablishing your bid for control over the Thieves Guild for your Nightmare Start quest so we can all grow more powerful.”

“That’s the same thing the other Nightmare Start Thieves Guild player said to me,” Tyhra snarled as her face screwed up in fury, “before stabbing me in the back and slaughtering all of my people!”

“And what of it?” I replied back with the same intensity as she flinched, “I’m not whoever that was and neither are my friends!” Seeing her suck in a breath to argue, I held up my hand to stop her outburst, “Look, I’m not forcing you to do anything. If you don’t want to be friends, then fine, go your own way and we’ll go about ours. Hell, if anything, it’s probably for the best if you do.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Tyhra demanded as her lips curled into a sneer, “One second, you’re offering me a place on your team, and the next, you’re trying to get me to go away! Which one is it?”

“God, this woman is dense,” Phoenix muttered under her breath as

Zeven and Töten shushed her.

“I’m saying, that I liked how you’ve played so far from everything I’ve seen. I’m saying, that I like how you’ve done your best to protect the children when you could’ve just left them to their fate or on the street to starve. I’m saying, that I think you could be a good ally to have in our team.” I held out my hand to her again. “It’s your decision if you want to take the chance or not.”

“I’m down,” Tyhra growled as she took my hand after a moment and held my gaze, “But, I swear, if you fuck me over or hurt those children, I’ll do everything in my power to make your life miserable!”

“Works for me,” I laughed, adding her to my Guild Tab interface as she let go of my hand with an incredulous look plastered on her face. Dismissing the system window, I motioned with my chin toward the Palnisdale Horse, “Now, get your ass in the saddle and start training so we can get moving. I’d like to try to log out at a decent time tonight if possible.”

Tyhra’s mouth opened and closed a few times as she caught up with what I said. Shaking her head, she climbed up into the saddle only to pitch off the other side to land on her ass. Looking around in a daze, she glared up at the rest of us.

“What the hell?” Tyhra swore as she lurched back to her feet, “I can ride in real life but not the game?”

“It’s all about building up the skill,” Phoenix explained from where she sat astride her own Palnisdale Horse, “If you know how to ride in real life, The World picks that up and you learn quicker to stay in the saddle.”

“But the start is always the same for everyone,” Töten commented with a snort of derision.

“Give between fifteen minutes to a half hour and you should be good to go enough to start riding,” Phoenix assured her.

“You’ll still be sore for the first few days,” Zeven warned as the female Halfling started clamoring onto the Palnisdale Horse’s back again.

“I’ll be good to go in a minute or two,” Tyhra assured us as she hooked her boots into the stirrups.

Wobbling on the mount’s back, she carefully gathered up the reins in both hands and gave us a cocky look that said, “See, that wasn’t bad.” Doing her best to stay balanced, Tyhra clicked the reins and started the Palnisdale Horse forward.

Tyhra seemed to be doing quite well at first. Pulling the reins to the right for a U-turn, she started sliding off sideways. She clenched her knees around the barrel-shaped chest but that just seemed to make her lose balance quicker. A second later, she crumbled onto the ground in a heap as the Palnisdale Horse trotted to a stop a few yards away.

“This is such bullshit,” Tyhra bitched as she climbed back to her feet to glare at the mount staring back at her.

“You can always ride on my shoulders if you like,” Braid offered as he clanked closer and bent down while pointing to his shoulder.

“I’m not a child,” Tyhra growled as she began stalking towards the Palnisdale Horse again, “There’s nothing you can do that I can’t!”

“Um, I can’t ride a mount either,” Braid offered as the female Halfling climbed back into the saddle again. He held out his arms as she turned back to stare at him with a “What the fuck?” look on her face, “That’s one of the reasons I drive G.O.L.E.M.s.”

“Seriously?” Tyhra asked as her scathing eyes swept across the rest of us.

“No clue,” Phoenix offered her a shrug, “I learned with a trainer in Palnisdale.” Her eyes twinkled in mirth. “Knocked out the first five levels in fifteen minutes.”

“This is such bullshit,” Tyhra grumbled as she clicked her reins again.

“It took Star a bit more time since he taught himself,” Phoenix helpfully offered as the female Halfling flipped him off.

That choice almost sent her reeling out of her saddle again. Barely managing to stay seated, Tyhra brought her mount around in a U-turn and began heading back toward us. As Töten and Phoenix moved closer with Zeven to offer her some riding tips, I pulled Helgath closer against me.

‘Hey, do you have any information for how we might defeat the Hobgoblin’s invasion force?’

‘Other than slaughtering all of them?’ Helgath asked as she laid her arms on top of mine.

‘Yeah, more or less.’ I mentally shared the mental image from the Twitch video of the first attack that I’d watched earlier this morning, ‘If that’s the invasion force’s vanguard, I doubt we’ll be able to hold out for long once the main force arrives. At least, not once we run out of arrows and bolts or if they come up with a trick to successfully breach the outer

walls. Have you ever heard any rumors, stories, or folklore from your time with the Orcs of Hobgoblins being forced to retreat while they still had the strength to fight?’

Chapter Seven

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Sarka Daze stopping at the Golden Griffen Inn of Meekwood Village just outside the city of Amyalneas.)

“You really should try eating,” Sarka pressed, trying to distract the distraught woman sitting across the table as she set her mug down, “It might look like a bowl of puke, but it’s actually quite tasty!”

“A bowl of puke?” Scarlett snorted in derision while giving her a pained look, “That’s not the best descriptor to make me want to try something new.”

“Eh, it’s your loss,” Sarka barked in laughter as she grabbed a hunk of freshly baked bread swathed in butter and dipped it in the bowl like a spoon, “But I have to admit, this combination is amazing.”

Ignoring the Rogue’s look of disbelief, Sarka scooped out a large portion of the creamy mixture and shoved it into her mouth. The mixed flavors of beans soaked in hambones and thickened up into a sauce that was exquisite. Add that to the buttery bread and it pushed the simple country-style meal into the realm of fine dining.

Sarka had to admit that she’d been less than impressed when she’d first read the Golden Griffen Inn’s menu of White Mountain Beans and Spike Boar Hocks for tonight’s dinner. It sounded like something you’d be served in the boonies of Alabama or Missouri and not a Light Elf inn just outside the capital city in a fantasy MMO. That said, she had to admit the meal was amazing as she continued using the hunk of bread as a spoon.

“Sorry,” Scarlett sighed as she halfheartedly poked at the beans and meat with a hunk of bread, “But I’m just not feeling all that hungry.”

“Good food and drink are always a good start to help make you feel better,” Sarka said with a mouthful of food. Taking a large gulp, she flashed her an encouraging smile before warning, “That and it won’t be half as good cold as it is piping hot.”

“That I can imagine being true,” Scarlett grumbled as she finally decided to taste the gruel-like mixture. As her face lit up in shock at the incredible taste, the grin on Sarka’s face grew wider.

“I told you it was good,” Sarka laughed as the Rogue began wolfing the bowl down.

“Lady Dazed,” Yrathea, the ex-guardswoman, respectfully said as she stepped up to their table with several of the other female Light Elves they’d saved, “We’re gonna grab a bath and head up to our rooms.”

“After everything we’ve been through,” Irhaal, the other ex-guardswoman, gruffly added, “It’ll be nice to wash off,” She waved a hand at her grime-encrusted body, “the stench of what we’ve been through.”

“That’s why I paid extra for the baths to be included in your rooms,” Sarka explained with a nod of understanding. She sadly understood many of the feelings they were going through all too well, “A delicious meal, hot bath, and good night’s sleep can do wonders to make you feel Huerr, Light Elf again.” Seeing the hollowed-eyed look they traded one another, she frowned and let out a deep breath, “Besides time and peace to deal with the trauma you’ve been through.”

“Being able to crush more of those disgusting Goblins would go a long way to making me feel better,” Cirady1 growled from the back of the group as several others nodded in agreement with the Swordswoman’s sentiment.

“Trust me, you’ll get enough of that too in the coming days,” Sarka assured the group as she tried to remain positive, “Just remember, you’ll have the rest of the night to bathe and sleep.” As she glanced at her HUD to check the time, the Rogue poked a hunk of bean-soaked bread at her.

“It’s officially already the next day,” Scarlett pointed out.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Sarka embarrassedly laughed as she looked around at the barren main room and shrugged, “Luckily, Master Iarsandoral was more than okay with giving us rooms and heating up last night’s dinner.”

“He’d better have been,” Ava, the Huntress, grunted with a sour shake of her head, “You paid him enough gold!”

“It was the only way to make sure all of you had a place to eat, clean up, and get some sleep at such a late hour,” Sarka sighed, not exactly thrilled with the money that she’d wasted.

Wasted wasn’t exactly the right word, Sarka disparagingly thought, doing her best to not let the displeasure she felt be reflected on her face. It was different once you took personal responsibility for someone else, especially those who had been brutalized by monsters like these female

Light Elves. Suddenly, all of the money and time that Star had been spending on the people that he'd rescued was making a lot more sense to her than it had before.

These survivors needed food, lodging, clothing, and basic traveling gear if Sarka was going to get them safely to BrokenFang Hold. What she was doing now was really the minimum to get them functional. Once she'd made the decision to offer them a place amongst their guild, she realized that meant going the whole nine yards. Besides it wasn't like they had anything left after being kidnapped and impregnated in a society that hated Halflings.

Maybe, it was the simple principle of living life in a way that you believed was right. The funny thing was that Star never tried to guilt the rest of them into doing more to help the people of The World than they'd volunteered to do on their own. He simply played the game the way he wanted and accepted the responsibilities that he chose to take on for himself. It was something that was weighing on her thoughts and made her question some of her core beliefs. Pushing those disturbed feelings away, her eyes swept over the group of female Light Elves standing around her table.

"Look, my plan is to lay down for five or six hours before running the errands that Star asked me to do. Those are swinging by the local Coat of Arms shop to get everyone back at BrokenFang Hold tabards along with picking up three banners, before heading to Great Library in Amyalneas," Sarka explained while calculating the hours it would take for them to reach Delonshire.

"Tabards and Banners make sense if you're in the middle of fighting off a Hobgoblin war party," Yrathea commented as she traded a questioning look with Irhaal, "But what would he need from the Great Library?"

"Star is supposedly tracking down information on an old magic device that was uncovered in BrokenFang Hold. From what he's been able to discover, the Great Library of every kingdom has parts of the puzzle for getting it working, so he asked me to look up what books they have and make a copy of anything useful," Sarka finished, taking note of the thoughtful looks on the faces around her. "As long as there are no problems, I should be back to Meekwood Village around noon to pick the rest of you up for our trip to BrokenFang Hold. During that time, I expect all of you to

have purchased new clothing, boots, eaten, and be ready to go.”

“As you command, Lady Dazed,” the group tiredly chorused.

“Good,” Sarka smiled as she stood up and began shooing them toward the stairwell at the far end of the main room, “Now, get moving before anyone passes out on their feet from exhaustion.”

Waiting until the last of the group had made it up the stairs, Sarka turned around and made her way back to the table. Sitting down next to the Rogue, she let out a heavy sigh as she wrapped her hands around her steaming mug of spiced ale and took another long pull.

“You said you’re off for the next two days,” Sarka arched her eyebrow at the other woman and flashed her a tight smile, “Wanna join me in the capital and keep a watch over my back?”

“Watch over your back?” Scarlett scoffed as she pushed her bowl to the side and wrapped her hands around her mug of hot ale, “You’re acting like you’re expecting to be jumped in the capital city!”

“That’s the part of the message I didn’t explain to the others,” Sarka grouched as she got a faraway look in her eyes, “Star was attacked by some sort of group calling themselves the Azure Skull Mages when he was in Tulduroc.”

“Ha, why would he think they’ll be in Amyalneas?” Scarlett snorted in derision, “We’re on the complete opposite side of the Starting Area!”

“Yeah, well, that’s Star for you,” Sarka shrugged, knowing it made him sound a little bit like a conspiracy theorist, “He’s always planning for things that are five steps ahead just to be ready if the shit hits the fan.”

The term Conspiracy Theorist was a strange one. It was actually a term coined by the FBI in order to discredit any individual or group that discovered they were running questionable or outright illegal programs. A simple word to the individual of these people’s bosses could get them outright fired or ridiculed in the mainstream media so as to stop their accusations from carrying any weight.

“That sounds a bit, um, extreme,” Scarlett delicately tried to say without outright saying he sounded like a crazy nut.

“It’s just Star trying to be careful,” Sarka waved away the Rogue’s distrustful look, “He’s going to let me know if he runs into any issues when he swings by the Great Library in Thoronjhi, but wanted me to be on the lookout just in case.”

“I guess that makes a bit more sense,” Scarlett agreed as she hunched her shoulders and ran a nervous hand through her ponytail, before seeming to fold in on herself, “I just don’t know if I’ll be logging in later today.” She added under her breath, “Or ever.”

“You wanna talk about it?” Sarka asked while keeping it to herself that she’d heard the last comment.

“What is there to talk about?” Scarlett suddenly stormed as her voice thundered around the empty room, “I fucked up and paid the consequences for being a dumbass!”

Scarlett’s mouth snapped closed after her emotional outburst. Hunching in her stool, she stared into her mug and seemed to watch the spices swirling around inside the cup as they sat there in silence. Instead of pushing for more, Sarka simply waited while taking small sips of ale. It wasn’t until the silence had grown uncomfortable that the Rogue finally continued in an emotion-filled voice full of contempt.

“I think the problem was that I’d thought the whole experience would be something more akin to the book, *Fifty Shades of Gray*,” Scarlett began, refusing to meet Sarka’s eyes as an invisible shiver seemed to run down her spine, “It was anything but that kind of consensual non-consensual type of play in the story.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of situations that are fun to roleplay with someone that you trust and who loves and cares about you,” Sarka carefully said in the renewed silence, “That’s a complete nightmare if done by someone who’s selfish, a narcissist, or loves to cause pain to others for their own enjoyment.” She shook her head. “Let alone Goblins that look at anyone else but themselves as food and derive their pleasure from hurting others.”

“How would you know anything about that?” Scarlett demanded with a haunted look in her red-rimmed eyes.

“We ran across a similar situation during our second day,” Sarka explained without looking away, “When we were running a quest in the Delonshire Mine, we saw the Goblins torturing, raping, and eating the Light Elves they’d captured. Males or females, it didn’t matter one bit to the horde of green bastards.” She shivered in spite of the heat from the nearby fireplace. “It was the most horrible thing I’ve ever seen.”

“How many are you talking about?” Scarlett unconsciously asked with a wide-eyed look, “What did you do?”

“There was like fifty of them in all within the large dining room,” Sarka explained as a faraway look came into her eyes, “And only five of us along with an additional ten or so Light Elf guards that we’d rescued from the Goblin Slave Master and his assistants.”

“Did you manage to save some of them?” Scarlett asked incredulously.

“Only those that were being transported to the dining room,” Sarka gagged even as she said the word, “And the surviving Mining Gnomes were being held in cages within the Slave Master’s chamber.”

“Were any of them put through the same thing that I was?” Scarlett asked in an embarrassed whisper.

“We didn’t exactly have any time to discuss what happened to them besides being tortured,” Sarka admitted while turning slightly green at the memory of what had happened to Neysa’s mother, “We were caught in the middle of the Slave Master torturing a pregnant Silver Dire Wolf during its pregnancy.” She missed the look of utter dread that had come to the Rogue’s eyes as she’d explained that. “Although, now that I’m thinking of it. The only thing close that I’ve ever heard to what you’ve endured was what had happened to Princess Isolde and the others we’d saved in the Strait of Icelus.”

“What happened?” Scarlett asked as she unconsciously leaned forward to listen to the story.

“The Sea Elves, their queen, Princess Isolde, the slaves in the bowels of the Orc slave ships, the sailors, and travelers on the ships that were captured. They all went through what it sounds like you did during your capture,” Sarka shook her head, “Those that didn’t survive were tortured and eaten.”

“That’s so fucked up,” Scarlett muttered in a low voice, “Why would anyone put something like this in an MMO?”

“As messed up as it might sound, taking down evil such as this sure as hell makes you feel like you’re making a change in The World for the better,” Sarka frowned, suddenly better understanding the base logic to The World, “There is really no middle ground. Either you support such horrible evil monsters or you’re against them. Anyone who’s willfully doing messed up shit like that needs to be cut down.” She let out an explosive breath. “And if you find yourself in the middle of something too ugly to deal with, unlike the people of The World, you have the option of removing yourself

and trying again with a respawn.”

“I get that,” Scarlett grudgingly admitted, before her face screwed up into a stubborn scowl, “I’m just not sure if I can deal with all of this right now.”

“That I can imagine,” Sarka sighed as she took another pull of ale. Setting her mug down, she looked the Rogue in the eye, “I’d wondered the same thing after my husband and I ran into an ugly situation with some PKers. We’d both decided to stay and fight against the assholes when we should’ve just allowed the system to spawn us further away and make a run for it.” She sagely shook her head. “I can be a stubborn bitch and Yun is not much better. If not for Star giving us a hand, the situation might have devolved into something much worse before either of us admitted to ourselves that we were in over our heads.”

“And you still decided to keep on playing?” Scarlett asked in a conflicted tone.

“The truth of the matter was that neither one of us could imagine playing another MMO after experiencing The World,” Seeing the conflicted look of panic flash in the other woman’s eyes, Sarka held up her hands to calm the other woman down, before admitting, “And Star’s help came just at the right time. Without that, who knows how I would’ve felt if the situation had gotten out of control.”

“I wonder how I would’ve felt about all of this if you’d arrived a few hours ago instead of when you did?” Scarlett sourly asked with a harsh shake of her head.

“We both know the answer to that question,” Sarka quietly said as she gave the Rogue a one-armed hug, “Just remember, you have the power here in The World to say no. You just have to use it.” As the other woman mutely nodded, she gently continued, “And having some friends you trust to have your back can make all the difference in the world.”

“After soloing for so long,” Scarlett choked out while doing her best to silently wipe away the tears running down her cheeks, “That would be nice.”

“So, if you want to join me tomorrow and keep a watch over my back, I plan to head out between eight and nine in the morning,” Sarka delicately offered, “Or you can catch up with me around noon.”

“I’ll think about it,” Scarlett promised between sobs.

“Come on,” Sarka said as she stood up and helped the other woman

up, "I'll walk you up to your room."

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Chapter Eight

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Ashley Duchenson in BrokenFang Hold fighting against the Hobgoblin vanguard's latest push.)

“We need reinforcements at section C!” Zeppy’s voice cried out in warning over the raid channel as the Ranger Assassin appeared crouched next to his gravestone, “The Hobgoblins are creating a foothold!”

“We already know that!” Ashley barked as she slammed her shield into the mass of Hobgoblins pouring out onto the rampart with the help of her Skeleton Warriors, while Killtet and Zyphonn along with their Skeleton Warriors ... err ... Rogues tore into the mass with their daggers flashing, “Get your ass geared back up and into the fight, old man!”

“On it,” Zeppy smartly snapped as he began yanking armor from his gravestone and getting dressed in a hurry while Multi-Shots and Enhanced Shadow Bolts flew over his head, “When did you guys log back in?”

“About ten minutes ago,” Killtet gritted out as he did his best to stem the flow of Hobgoblins by killing them as quickly as possible, “By the time we made it to your breach, the last of your guild was already being cut down!”

“Get ready!” Ashley warned her guildmates as she held her Corrupt Stone Spiked Heater with a white-knuckled grip. Neither man argued as they faded back behind the three tanks with their Skeleton Warriors. As the Hobgoblins surged forward to fill the gap, she Shield Bashed the front line with nearly identical attacks from her undead pets, sending them falling backward into their brethren. Before any of them could recover, she leaped into their midst while triggering her shield’s unique attack with a roar, “Corrupt Breath!”

Instantly, a sulfuric poisonous cloud spewed out of her shield in a five-yard radius in front of her. Roaring in rage, the Hobgoblins advanced through the poisonous cloud to recover the initiative. Instead of holding the line, Ashley fell back a couple of steps as her Skeleton Warriors advanced to join her. As the three of them reformed their Shield Wall across the

rampart, Killtet and Zyphonn went on the attack with their skellies.

“Aahhh!” Ashley’s head whipped around at the shout of rage ready to strike only to see a familiar half-naked Light Elf Troll appear behind Zeppy. Spinning around wide-eyed with daggers clenched in her long-fingered fists, Grody froze in stunned amazement at seeing the group of Devil Dogs surrounding her and her guild leader, “When did we get back up?”

“When you were being eaten by worms!” Ashley snapped as she turned back to the press of Hobgoblins trying to break out of the poisonous cloud while shouting over her shoulder, “Now, stop jaw-jacking and give us a hand!”

“Let me get geared up-” Grody began to reply when the Hobgoblins’ battle shout drowned out her words.

“Hold the line!” Ashley called out at the top of her lungs as the mass of Hobgoblins slammed into their shield wall.

Ignoring the disgusting feeling of her iron-shod boots sinking up to her knees in the bloody pile of corpses that she’d been fighting atop, Ashley triggered every special ability not on cooldown. Her shield was the linchpin to their push. If she went down now, there’s no question in her mind that the entire section would be overrun if not the entire wall.

“Die you pumpkin-headed mother fuckers!” Zyphonn bellowed next as he leaped off part of the curtain wall and slammed into the Hobgoblin’s right flank.

“Get off my wall you Jack o’lantern pieces of shit!” Killtet hollered from the other side while springing high off the back wall to hit the left flank.

As both Rogues triggered their Flurry of Blades, Ashley panicked wondering where the hell their Skeleton Warriors were when a wave of bony shapes climbed up her back and leapt off her head and shoulders. To her utter horror, she realized the boys had sent their undead pets into the middle of the packed mass of Hobgoblins. There was no way those weak-ass Rogue skellies were going last more than a few seconds in that freaking mess!

“Dammit, what the hell were you idiots thinking?” Ashley demanded even as the Skeleton Warriors jumped atop the closest Hobgoblins’ shoulders and began going to town like a pack of murderhobos in a training area, “We’re going to lose the entire wall because you two had

to go all Gung-ho Oorah with your skellies!”

“Don’t worry, it’s all good,” Zyphonn shouted back as the mass of Hobgoblins seemed to go berserk.

“Yeah, Ash, we’ve got this,” Killtet assured her in an easy tone as he began stabbing like a maniac while kneeling on the shoulders of the Hobgoblin he was attacking.

“No, it’s not freaking alright!” Ashley began cursing up a storm as she began to slide backward from all the blood and viscera beneath her feet, “This is fucking game over!”

Since neither of the assholes had bothered to comment further, Ashley gritted her teeth and craned her head up to see the shitshow over the top of her shield just in time to see both Rogues finish off the pair of Hobgoblins they’d been working over. To her shock, both simply rotated on the dead corpse they were perched on top of and began attacking the next nearest pair of Hobgoblins.

“What the hell?” Ashley swore under her breath as she saw the Skeleton Warriors using roughly the same tactic.

The Hobgoblins didn’t seem to be fighting back, Ashley realized in stunned amazement as they finished off the next pair of Hobgoblins and began crawling forward to work on the next pair. The press of bodies was so tight that the dead Hobgoblins were just going limp where they stood because there was no room for the corpses to fall down.

Not only that, but Ashley’s eyes also suddenly widened in understanding. The mass of Hobgoblins was packed so tightly together that they couldn’t fight off the boys and their skellies. It was like they were in one massive turkey shoot! If they could hold these orange bastards in place, they could possibly hold the invaders back until they retook the wall!

“Grody! Zeppy!” Ashley yelled as she tucked her head in and forcibly threw her shoulder into bracing her shield, “If you move quickly, we have a chance to push these fuckheads completely off the wall!”

“What the-” Zeppy’s voice died away as she assumed he caught sight of what the boys were up to. Another Skeleton Warrior climbed up her back to join in on the fun as the old man continued in a gruff voice, “We’re on it as soon as we get our skellies up!”

“Do we go with what we have now?” Grody asked with an anxious edge to his voice, “A minute or two is a long time in a fight like this!”

“Finish the casts you’re doing and go!” Ashley barked while

weighing the odds in her mind, “I’ll message the boys and girls on the other side about the plan!”

“I’m already on top of it,” Killtet hollered as he captured a Hobgoblin’s flailing arm and broke it, before proceeding to skull-rape the asshole with his blades, “Oh, and Austin and Allen have just logged in with Forrest and Connor.”

“All Devil Dogs get your asses to the wall ASAP!” Ashley roared in guild chat as she heard a commotion coming from the far side of the ramparts, “If we don’t get these pumpkin-headed bastards pushed back, we’re gonna lose the entire wall!”

“You’ll have the pleasure of my blade in but just a few moments, steel lady,” Austin singsonged out.

“We’ll light’em up good!” Allen gruffly cut in with a deep voice.

“You’d better double time it,” Ashley growled as she braced against her boots on a small lip in the rampart, “Because, this is going to be over within the next five minutes!”

“I just logged in,” Orion’s voice spoke up next as his name popped up in guild chat, “What’s going on?”

“Sup, guildies,” Blu3buck called out a half-second later as he appeared right after his battle buddy.

“Austin, can you coordinate?” Ashley snapped through gritted teeth as the Shield Wall felt like it was getting heavier by the second. That and she had no desire to deal with Blu3buck’s bullshit.

“Oh, hiya, Ash,” Blu3buck added in the same hopeful tone he always used when speaking to her.

“I’m on it,” Austin assured her, before asking, “What section of the wall are you at?”

“We’ve been overrun in C,” Ashley gasped as she felt more people climbing up over her back, “But we’re split between sections B and C to keep locking them down.”

“Excusy, excusy, Mrs. Ashley,” Zeppy playfully interrupted in an Italian accent as he braced his foot on the back of her equipment belt to climb up her back.

“Coming through!” Grody apologetically shouted as he grabbed onto the back of her breastplate after the pair of Skeleton Warriors had skittered up her back.

“And stop using me for a freaking ladder!” Ashley bellowed before

realizing she was still in guild chat. Mentally switching her interface to raid chat, she repeated her roar again as the Half-Troll's misshapen black-nailed foot stepped on her head, "Stop using me as a freaking ladder and jump up like real men!"

"Looks like they're figuring out what we're up to in the back!" Killtet's warning shout turned Ashley's blood cold.

"Let me know when we can drop the Shield Wall and we'll move up to assist!" Ashley growled as the sounds of battle increased around the curtain wall.

"Yeah, because there's not shit we can do like this!" Victor shouted from where he held the Hobgoblins in on the other side of the parapet.

"Does any Ranger have one of those BAMFs on hand?" Warduke interrupted with a shout as the sounds of fighting intensified, "That might be enough heavy support for all of you to drop your Shield Walls and move up."

"I grabbed one with Daiki!" Santaz suddenly cut in, "We're heading up the steps to section C now!"

"Marina and I are nearly to section B," Santaz chimed in smartly.

"As soon as you're both in place, give a shout!" Killtet ordered in a strained voice, "If we're lucky, the corpses dropping will throw the bastards off enough for all of you to set up at the gaps of the curtain wall where they're coming through!"

"Dammit, guys," Allen complained, "We're nearly there!"

"We're in place!" Santaz's voice sounded right behind Ashley as she started slightly.

"And we brought our BAMF too," Forrest snapped in the same pissy tone.

"Us too!" Marina shouted a moment later.

"No time, guys," Zyphonn apologized as the fighting grew even more intense, "If we don't go now, we'll be pushed back!"

"Is everyone ready?" Ashley asked as she eyed her available special abilities. All of the cooldowns were finished.

"Ready!" Victor snapped.

"Ready!" Marina and Santaz both chorused.

"Do it!" Zeppy shouted along with a slew of "Ready!" and "We're set!" from the other Zeppy's Heroes.

"Ready!" Zyphonn called out as her husband began chanting, "Go,

go, go!”

“You heard my man,” Ashley bellowed as she stepped back and dropped her shield while commanding her Skeleton Warriors to do the same, “Let’s go!”

It was like something out of a horror movie as the dead Hobgoblins collapsed outward like a flood of corpses. There were so many bodies pressed together within the space that the ones further in collapsed on top of each other, creating a waist-high carpet of death. At the center of the mass of bodies, Ashley saw Killtet, Zyphonn, Zeppy, and Grody pushing the wave of dead they were surfing toward the fresh Hobgoblin forces that were climbing up the outer wall and their own troops to get at them.

Scrambling over the corpses as quickly as possible to get into position, Ashley saw the mini-avalanche had sent the majority of the surviving rearmost Hobgoblins tumbling over the edge of the outer wall. Not only that, she realized as she got closer to the fighting, but in only a matter of a few seconds, the Hobgoblins had nearly lost their entire foothold on the wall.

“Form up your Shield Wall and get the BAMF setup while we hold the Hobs back!” Killtet roared as they ran up. He was holding back a group of five Hobgoblins alone along with his Skeleton Warriors as they ducked and dodged the incoming strikes in a coordinated dance while whittling down their attackers.

“On it!” Victor snapped as he took up a position in the middle of the gap on the left with his Skeleton Warriors on either side.

“The BAMFs can’t fire if all of you are in the way!” Ashley shouted as she took up a similar position on the right.

“We’ve got a plan,” Zeppy grunted in pain as he took a thrust to the belly and was slammed against the parapet by a spiked mace. As his Skeleton Warriors leaped onto the trio, Grody launched herself at the last Hobgoblin to give the old man a second to recover. Downing a Healing Potion, he launched himself at the mace-wielding Hobgoblin as it batted the Half Troll away shouting, “Just let us know when the BAMFs are set up!”

“We’re almost there!” Connor shouted as he worked with Forrest to hammer the iron spikes for the tripod between the blocks of stone.

“On our last spike!” Marina hollered as she took turns pounding on the iron spike with Santaz.

“They’re regaining their foothold!” Warduke warned as another

wave of Hobgoblins began climbing up over the edge behind the Demi-Humans they were fighting.

“Loading the cartridge now!” Forrest hollered as Ashley held back from releasing any Shadow Bolts into the scrum.

Their people were dodging around too quickly for any of them to offer covering fire. If they tried, Ashley had no doubt they’d be damaging their own people as much as the enemy. She had to trust the plan her husband and Zeppy had come up with as a shout came from behind her.

“We’re locked and loaded!” Santaz and Forrest both chorused at nearly the same time.

“Rogues, disengage from the enemy using your skellies on the count of three,” Killtet ordered as he was driven back with the other Rogues, “while everyone else but the Shield Wall prepares to volley Shadow Bolts!”

“Three!” Zeppy called out with Warduke as Ashley nervously gulped as more and more Hobgoblins began scrambling onto the parapet behind the ones that were holding the foothold. “Two!” All of the Rogues’ Skeleton Warriors leaped at the enemy line as their people suddenly turned around and raced directly at the Shield Wall. Ashley braced as Grody, Zyphonn, and Killtet dove over her head a moment before Zeppy followed them while shouting, “One!”

“Rraawww!” The Hobgoblin battle line roared as they scooped up the Skeleton Warriors stabbing at them and charged ahead thinking they’d won. Before any of them had taken more than a step, the BAMFs began firing arm-thick bolts into them center mass while the Rogues began blasting the Hobgoblins with their Shadow Bolt spell and the Rangers that had run up began pounding them with Multi-Shots.

“Shield Wall!” Ashley roared while triggering her special ability as she stopped the enemy’s advance with her Skeleton Warriors. As she stabbed and slashed the battle line for all she was worth, each chunking twang of the BAMF blasted entire rows of Hobgoblins out of the parapet. Not that the bolt killed them so much as the fall from the wall did. Within a matter of fifteen seconds, all of the massed Hobgoblins had been cleared out.

“Remove the grapples!” Killtet called out as he squeezed around the edge of the Shield Wall and began low-crawling up toward the edge of the parapet with the other Rogues.

Luckily, the boys were smart enough to hug the edges of the parapet and leave a firing path for the rest of them. As the Hobgoblins tried to scurry onto the parapet, they blasted them in the face with Multi-Shot arrows and Shadow Bolts as the BAMFs held their fire.

There was a little excitement as the Rogues reached the grapples. The Hobgoblins tried to stop the boys from cutting the cables loose, but with four of them working on each cable, they were able to get the job done. As the last grapple was cut, the Rogues scurried back to the rampart while the Zeppy's Heroes Rangers took over pummeling the field below with their Skeleton Archers.

"Thanks for the save," Zeppy sighed in relief, clapping both Ashley and Killtet on the shoulder as Grody traded high-fives with Zyphonn.

"That's just payback for the ass saving you gave us last night," Ashley waved off the old man's compliments.

"What the hell is going on?" Killtet grunted, frowning as his eyes studied the field below the walls, "They don't usually attack this early."

"No clue, but whoever is in charge of the vanguard is doing a good job of throwing us off our game," Zeppy grouched with a worried shake of his head, "Look at this mess." He waved around at the all-but-empty section of the rampart. "From what I understand. The Hobgoblins caught the night watch completely flatfooted with an early morning assault. Before Theric Farestrider could deploy everyone to the wall, entire sections were being overwhelmed."

"So much for having stupid enemies," Killtet grunted as he began raising replacement Skeleton Archers instead of the Skeleton Warriors and Skeleton Mages the rest of their guildmates were raising.

"Is this the only section of the wall that hasn't been retaken?" Ashley asked as she began studying the piles of dead around them. Seeing the bodies of dead Half-Elves, her eyes widened in alarm, "How many House of Kayden Troopers did they lose?"

"No clue, but I'd guess a couple hundred at the least" Zeppy grunted while waving a hand toward section B, "Sunny is working with a handful of other Priests to raise the dead." He let out an explosive breath. "But she thinks it'll be a solid hour before they get to everyone."

"And those troopers are going to need to be kept far away from the fighting for the next twenty-four hours if we don't want to lose them permanently," Grody huffed as he finished raising his last skelly.

“If this keeps up,” Warduke grimly chimed in as he joined the conversation, “there’s no way we’re going to be able to hold this wall for much longer.”

“We don’t need to,” Killtet disagreed as he finished raising his last Skeleton Archer.

“We just need to hold out until tomorrow evening and we’ll have a few thousand more House of Kayden Troopers on hand,” Ashley added as the three Zeppy’s Heroes players looked at her husband in confusion, “Thomas said they’ll be in Delonshire by this evening.”

“That means they should reach us no later than tomorrow night,” Zeppy harrumphed as his guildmates nodded in agreement.

“Thousands of NPCs!” Grody exclaimed while shaking her head, “I still say that’s some crazy ass shit for a player to pull off!”

“Eh, I wouldn’t compare yourself too much,” Warduke shrugged, waving the Half-Troll’s comment away with a laugh, “It’s probably something only Nightmare Start players can do.”

“Must,” Grody grunted as a frown came to Zeppy’s thoughtful face.

“All reserve forces to the main gate with your BAMFs!” Kyarina’s voice suddenly rang out in raid chat, “The Hobgoblins are trying to break through!”

“The main gate?” Santaz demanded, stopping his shooting while trading a confused look with Marina.

“Did they bring up a ram or something?” Forrest asked in the same tone as he began removing the iron cartridge while Connor worked on pulling up the tripod along with its iron bolts.

“Matt, Saiki, Shelly, and I redirecting to the gatehouse!” Orion called out in raid chat while the rest of them helped the Rangers pull up the tripods.

“We’re right behind you,” Ashley grunted as the iron spikes were forced from between the stone blocks. Looking around at the Devil Dogs around them, she barked, “Are we ready to move out?” As “Good to go!” and “Ready!” chorused around her, she hollered “Move out!” and began double-timing it down the rampart toward the main gate.

“Coming through!” Ashley called out ahead of her to the House of Kayden Troopers fighting and shooting out of the parapets as they ran past single file.

It took a lot of concentration not to wipe out as they ran. There

were pools of blood, viscera, and piles of Hobgoblin corpses lay intermixed with the fallen Half-Elf defenders everywhere waiting to be resurrected. Ashley was starting to think it would've been faster to have taken the stairs down and run along the base of the wall.

If that wasn't bad enough, there were still Hobgoblins coming over the wall in some spots. Holding up her Corrupt Stone Spiked Heater like a battering ram, Ashley bulled her way through the melee with a quick slash and thrust as she raced past. Her Skeleton Warriors following behind her mirrored her attacks. As the Hobgoblin Warriors whirled around to chase after them, the next Devil Dogs in line was already stabbing them in the back. By the time the last of them were running past, the last of the Hobgoblins had been taken out allowing the defenders to go back to blasting and shooting down at the field below.

Climbing the stairs to the upper rampart of the gatehouse, Ashley quickly took in the scene that greeted her eyes. Jodi, Thomas's little sister, was wielding a BAMF along with a group of six high-level Half-Elf Rangers. One she instantly recognized as Bialaer Holaynore, the House of Kayden's Ranger Assault Leader, while the others were supposedly new level 53+ specialized Rangers that had come with the last NPC Recruiter delivery. All of them were laying down an amazing amount of pain on the mass of Hobgoblins gathered before the gates.

If that wasn't enough heavy-range support all in one spot, Hiron Wynstina stood behind them beating on a hogshead-sized barrel drum. Ashley hadn't noticed the drumming earlier, but now it seemed to vibrate through her with every beat of the Bard's large fuzzy mallets while he belted out a song in a deep sonorous base. A glance at her HUD informed her that she was receiving a buff called the Battle Chant of Haste.

"Where in the hell are Kyarina and the other Valkyrie players?" Killtet demanded as he came to a stop beside her, "And where is this emergency?"

"Get your Rangers shooting and your BAMFs set up before they pull down the gates!" Ashley hollered at them when she overheard her husband's complaint. Pointing toward the inner stairwell leading down, she continued, "All melee classes should head down to the main assault group that's preparing to sally forth to break up the enemy's formation!"

"Pull down the gate?" Zyphonn asked as everyone gave him a shrug.

“All Rangers and Mages start hammering away at the enemy while the rest of us get those BAMFs set up!” Ashley ordered as she waved Santaz, Marina, Forrest, and Connor to follow her toward two of the open parapets.”

“It’s exactly what I said,” Jodi irritably snapped as she went back to firing down at the Hobgoblins with her Multi-Shot special attacks.

“Sally-forth?” Killtet asked, looking around at his guildmates for an explanation as they began getting the tripods set up.

“It means all of you are going to be charging out onto the field,” Forrest helpfully explained as Ashley leaped into the parapet to get a handle on what was happening.

“How does a ram pull down a gate?” Marina pressed as she hammered the iron spikes between the stones of the gatehouse.

“The fuck if I know,” Connor growled as he worked.

“Shit on me!” Ashley exclaimed as she peeked over the battlement.

“What’s going on?” Killtet demanded as he assisted Marina with the tripod.

“There’s a group of around five hundred Shadow Warg Riders down below that are gathering in front of the gate,” Ashley explained, beginning to blast at the Hobgoblins with her Shadow Bolt spells while Zyphonn did the same with his Flurry Blasts, “And they’re trying to pull the gates off their hinges!”

“How in the hell are they doing that?” Killtet demanded, trading confused looks with the other Devil Dogs even as many of their Skeleton Archers and Skeleton Mages joined her.

“No clue,” Ashley snapped as the BAMFs began to be fitted atop the tripod when a shout came from behind them.

“Sup guys!” Orion called out as he climbed up onto the gatehouse’s rampart with Shelly, Blu3buck, and Daiki following behind him with their line of skellies, “Where do you want us?”

“The next empty parapet over,” Forrest called out as Connor loaded the cartridge into his BAMF while their skellies crowded into another parapet to shoot down at the Hobgoblins.

“Do you know those idiots are going to sally forth onto the battlefield to break up the formation?” Blu3buck demanded as he trotted past with the BAMF in his arms.

“I’m starting to get a good understanding as to why they think it’s

needed,” Zyphonn replied over his shoulder from where he continuously pelted the enemy, “If something isn’t done soon, they’re gonna rip those ironwood gates right off their hinges.”

“Any of you melee classes that want to join in on the action had better start heading down now,” Orion said as he hurried over to the empty parapet where Daiki, Shelly, and Blu3buck were setting up the BAMF, “Kyarina wants me to hit the mass with my Dirt Devil for the start of the attack.”

“You guys good to go?” Killtet asked Forrest and Santaz as they both gave him a thumbs up. Glancing around at the rest of their guildmates, he jerked his chin toward the stairwell as Forrest’s and Santaz’s BAMFs started firing into the packed mass of Hobgoblins below, “Let’s do this!”

“Coming!” Ashley called out as she and Zyphonn began jogging after him.

“Hey, Connor,” Shelly called out while nodding toward the Devil Dog’s Wraith Hounds, “I can keep Gimpy loaded if you wanna join in on the fun with your boys.”

“You know, that sounds like a plan,” Connor agreed after Forrest waved for him to go. Whistling to his Wraith Hounds, he followed the rest of them while calling out, “Let’s go boys!”

They still had another flight to go when Ashley heard Kyarina shout in raid chat “Open the gates!” As the heavy chain for the ironwood doors of the gatehouse began being cranked open, she traded an alarmed look with Killtet. Realizing they were running out of time, she launched herself down the last stairwell in a nearly uncontrollable rush. Flying out of the stairwell, her eyes swept the area as she tried to understand what was going on.

“Pherala!” Kyarina’s shout came from inside the tunnel of the gatehouse, “Release the Barrage of Death!”

Coming to a stop with the rest of the Devil Dogs behind her, Ashley looked around in confusion at the massed Valkyrie players ready to charge out of the gates with their Ghouls. All of them were mounted with the Priestess at the lead with the familiar faces of Vardrid, Jorgen, Ultra, and Demonslayerz. Her eyes were pulled twenty yards behind them to a group of thirty Centaurs. As they released a glowing volley of arrows high over the gatehouse, the gates were flung open as many Shadow Worg Raiders were sent tumbling from their saddles.

Before the mass of Hobgoblins could react to the sudden change in the tactical situation, glowing arrows began raining down amongst them in a seventy-five-yard square radius in front of the gates. While the attack wouldn't kill any of the Hobgoblins outright, Ashley knew from her experience with Pherala how much hurt a barrage could lay down. Without hesitation, Kyarina and the other leaders of the Valkyrie Guild thrust their blades into the air and shouted, "Charge!"

"Mount up!" Ashley hollered to her people as the Battering Rams galloped out the gate.

"Release arrows!" Ashley heard Pherala shout again as another Barrage of Death arched over the gatehouse.

"They're cutting that friendly fire damn close," Zyphonn growled as they mounted up while what looked to be crafters began running through the gate.

"If they're playing this that tightly," Killtet grunted while watching the front wave of the charge slam into the wounded Hobgoblins just as the second volley died away. From what she could see, the Ghouls were spreading out to flank the invaders trying to scale the wall, "It might be best if we keep a close ear on the commands being given."

"Unless we wanna be pin-cushioned or left behind," Matt agreed as everyone traded warily nods.

"Stick together and be ready to pull back at a moment's notice," Ashley ordered as she unshouldered her shield and drew her sword, "Now, let's ride!"

Ashley's heels clicked to the side of her Battering Ram as it leaped into a gallop. Passing through the short tunnel of the gatehouse, they were momentarily joined by Pherala and the other Centaurs. As they cleared the tunnel, the Centaurs split off on the other side of the wall while packs of crafters began working on the full pit traps outside the gate as the rest of them sped for the massive scrum in the distance.

"What the hell is up with that?" Allen demanded as he glanced around in confusion.

"It looks like they're setting up a defensive screen," Austin grunted as the Centaurs formed into a line in front of the gatehouse.

"No, I mean what's up with all the civvies?" Allen spat in confusion as they galloped over the carpet of dead Hobgoblins to catch up with the Valkyrie players, "I'm getting notification of receiving coins all of

a sudden.”

“No clue,” Austin said in the same tone as he twisted around in his saddle, “Unless they’re trying to clean out the dead from the spike pits.”

“Could be,” Allen admitted as he traded a shrug with the DPS Warrior.

“Look sharp, Devil Dogs!” Ashley growled in warning as they neared the rear of the scrum, “On the count of three, we’re hitting the left flank!” Leaning forward on her Battering Ram, she gripped the mount’s heaving flanks with her thighs and leaned forward in her saddle. “Three ... two ... one,” she triggered her mount’s special attack while shouting, “Ramming Speed!”

As soon as Ashley mentally triggered the mount’s special attack, the Battering Ram lowered its horns and shot forward at an incredible speed over the last fifteen yards. It took all of her skill in riding not to be flung from the back of her mount as behind her the rest of the Devil Dogs followed hot on her tail. A split second later, the Shadow Worg Raiders’ entire left flank three rows deep went flying from their combined impact.

“Die you pumpkin-headed bastards!” Ashley shrieked from the back of her mount as she began laying into the Hobgoblins with her blade.

While their mounts clawed and chomped on the fallen enemies, Ashley hacked and slashed her wicked blade into the stunned Hobgoblins who were trying to deal with the bodies of their comrades crashing into their lines. Between that and suddenly finding themselves in the middle of the scrum, she managed to get in a number of good strikes, taking down several of the Demi-Humans before their higher-level enemies could effectively recover and begin to fight back.

Even when those in the fifth and sixth ranks began tightening up their lines and fighting back, the Devil Dogs’ Hobgoblin Ghouls joined the battle. Immediately, they began dragging the distracted Raiders from their saddles to rip and tear them apart while others focused on tackling the Worg to the ground. The combined assault allowed the rest of them to push deep into the Demi-Humans’ ranks as withering arrow fire from the walls behind them added to their efforts.

More than once, Ashley saw two or three Hobgoblin Raiders blasted from their saddles as a Multi-Shot from a BAMF slammed into them like wrecking balls. That left some tricky blade work to keep their Shadow Worgs back until her Ghouls could reach the downed riders.

To their right, the Valkyrie players were fighting tooth and nail to keep up with the Devil Dogs' wedge as it pushed deeper and deeper into the invaders' ranks. The Valkyrie Guild's main problem was the lack of Ghouls or Skeleton Warriors to help drag their enemies from their saddles. It meant each of them was forced to wear down their enemies with blades, axes, and spells from saddleback.

Not that Ashley was consciously aware of all of this. It was more in the back of her mind as she savagely fought side-by-side from saddleback with Killtet and Zyphonn. She was solely focused on the Hobgoblins' hate-filled faces and gnashing fangs lunging at her from every direction as their forward momentum slowed to a stop.

"Everyone fall back to the gate!" Kyarina's voice suddenly bellowed in raid chat.

"We can't retreat now!" Ashley roared in outrage as she parried and blocked the thrusts and slashes coming at her from five different Shadow Worg Raiders, "We've nearly wiped out this entire wave!"

"All of you can stay and die if you want," Kyarina roared even as the Valkyrie Guild began trying to fall back and disengage, "But the next wave is nearly on top of us and we're falling back to the wall!"

"Ggaahhh!" Ashley roared in helpless fury as more Hobgoblins began pressing in around them.

"Ash! Get your head out of your ass!" Killtet barked as she furiously turned to glare at him, "We're pulling back as planned!"

It took a few seconds for her husband's words to pierce the adrenaline-fueled haze that was clouding her thoughts. Shaking her head, Ashley took in the dire situation around them in a flash. All of their hit points were in the orange of severe damage while more and more Hobgoblins were boxing them in from all sides. If that wasn't alarming enough, she suddenly realized that the rolling thunder that she'd been ignoring was the massive wave of Shadow Worg Riders that was barreling upon them at a full-on gallop.

"Use your Ghouls to distract the enemy!" Ashley roared to her guildmates as she gave her husband a nod of thanks and reversed directions, "We're falling back now! Use your undead pets to tie up the enemy!"

"Falling back now!" echoed around her guildmates commanding their Ghouls to throw themselves at the press of Shadow Worg Raiders.

It was really the only option they had to buy themselves time to

withdraw. Not that it helped all that much, Ashley angrily admitted to herself as all of them fought to break out of the closing trap they were in. Unfortunately, the more they tried to pull back, the more the Hobgoblins pressed in around them to block their escape. She saw Matt, Allen, and Austin switch over to their backup shields and one-handed blades to help protect their guildmates, but it was quickly becoming obvious that they were in trouble.

Wiping away the blood running down her face with the back of a gloved hand, Ashley downed a Healing Potion and shook her head as she met her husband's furious gaze. They'd both been deep enough in the shit to know that they were screwed, blued, and tattooed. Meaning, there was no way they were going to fight their way free to join up with the Valkyrie guild before the fresh wave of Hobgoblins rolled over them.

Talk about a major fuckup, Ashley silently cursed at her singlemindedness! They were too far away from the wall and their Healers to make these pumpkin-headed bastards truly pay for their deaths and loss of gear. She'd just decided to hand over her unique Corrupt Stone Spiked Heater to one of her fellow guildmates and split their forces so at least some of them could escape when a battle shout behind them caught her by surprise.

"Make a hole for those jarheads and make it wide!" Kyarina roared from out of nowhere as her Valkyrie Guild's mounts charged back into the scrum.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ashley demanded, knowing the other woman was putting the entire defense of the wall in jeopardy, "There's no way you'll be able to break us free before the next wave arrives!"

"We're saving your asses!" Vardrid bellowed as he and the other Warriors of their guild drove their Battering Rams into the rear of the Shadow Worg Raider force that had them surrounded.

"Less bitching and more fighting!" Jorgen hollered as his Battering Ram's charge finally came to a stop and he began whaling at the enemy.

"Get the hell out of here!" Killtet angrily spat as the Hobgoblins around them redoubled their efforts to block their escape, "All you're doing is making sure we all die together!"

"Don't get your panties in a knot, Killer, we're not throwing any of our lives away in a useless gesture!" Demonslayerz hollered as he fought

with Ultra to clear a path for their escape, “Besides, we’ve got a couple of tricks up our sleeves in case this raid suddenly went south!”

“So, stop bitching and give us a hand!” Lady Death shouted as she worked with Laya, triggering every special ability and cooldown they did their best to slaughter the last few Hobgoblins blocking their escape.

“Cause we’re not leaving anyone behind!” Vardrid added, gritting his teeth as a wall of Hobgoblins pummeled him while doing their best to stop their breakout.

“You heard them, Devil Dogs,” Ashley howled to her guildmates even as a smile splayed across her lips, “These boys and girls are taking a page out of our own handbook!”

“Hoorah!” chorused from the throats of the Devil Dogs around her as they fought like berserkers to take down the handful of enemies left with the Valkyrie Rogues’ and Mages’ help.

Struggling under the beating she was taking; Ashley held the line even as she retreated with the rest of her guildmates. Even with the constant heals she was getting from Lorelai, Hannah, and Kyarina, it was going to be close. Her health looked like a yoyo going up and down as they barely kept her and the other Warriors alive. Gritting her teeth through the pain, she weathered the beating while doing her best to give as good as she got. Even so, for every Hobgoblin she took down, another three would instantly retake its place.

When they finally reached the Valkyrie players’ defensive line, both of their groups were nearly at the end of their rope. Though they’d managed to hold the Hobgoblins back, both of their guilds were beaten to hell. Even worse, their special abilities were either used up or on cooldown, besides their Priestesses being nearly out of mana. Between that and the ground shaking beneath their feet as the wave of Shadow Worg Raiders neared, she didn’t see how any of them were getting out of this mess alive.

“It was a good try,” Ashley gasped as Kyarina stepped up behind her, “But there’s no way we’re getting out of this mess alive.” She gave the other woman an apologetic look. “Sorry for ruining your run to save the gates. Maybe, we can make it back from the graveyard before they can take the walls.”

“It’s not over yet,” Kyarina assured her with a grim look of determination before raising her voice in a shout, “Paralytic Grenades!”

“Paralytic Grenades!” chorused back from the Valkyrie Rogues,

Mages, and Priestess around her as they each pulled a handful of large clay balls from their belt pouches. Ashley arched a questioning eyebrow at Kyarina even as the Valkyrie Warriors holding back the Hobgoblins worriedly glanced over their shoulders at their guildmates.

“Remember, these babies need to be at least ten yards away from our lines when they go off or it’s game over!” Kyarina hollered as the Devil Dogs traded “What the hell!” looks with one another. Before any of them could comment further, the Priestess continued, “Deploy grenades!”

Quick as a flash, the Valkyrie players began chucking the five clay balls in their hands over the defensive line’s head in quick succession. Ashley could see that each of them was doing their best to space their throws out and not get too close to their own lines as the clay balls came down into the mass of Hobgoblins.

Hearing the sounds of breaking pottery over the sounds of battle, Ashley and the rest of the Devil Dogs braced for an explosion or something equally as impressive. When nothing more seemed to happen, she turned to ask Kyarina if they’d thrown duds or forgotten a step before tossing them away just as a forty-yard swath of the Shadow Worg Raiders collapsed around them.

“What the hell was that?” Killtet demanded as they quickly finished off the handful of Hobgoblins and Worgs that hadn’t been caught in the blasts.

“Are they dead?” Zyphonn demanded in an alarmed tone.

“Napalm pots next!” Kyarina bellowed to her guildmates.

Ignoring their questions, all of the Valkyrie Rogues, Mages, and Priestesses began pulling out large clay jars from their backpacks. This time, instead of throwing them together, the Valkyrie players simply began chucking them onto the down mass of Hobgoblins as quickly as possible. Ashley and her guildmates traded more confused looks as the clay jars simply broke where they landed to splash the liquid-like gel inside of them in a roughly five-yard radius without exploding or catching on fire.

“What the hell crappy kind of Napalm was that?” Ashley sourly demanded, feeling like they’d been tricked.

“Back to the gates!” Kyarina shouted as the Valkyrie players yanked the reigns of their mounts around and began racing for the main gates and the Centaurs that were waiting for them.

“Was that it?” Killtet demanded as all of them traded confused

looks with one another.

“Guess so,” Ashley shrugged as the Shadow Worg Raiders neared to within a hundred yards. Yanking her mount, she followed after the Valkyrie players as she hollered over her shoulder, “Let’s ride!”

“Why the hell did they call them Napalm pots?” Zyphonn demanded as he fell in behind her.

“No clue,” Matt shrugged as he nervously looked back over his shoulder at the wall of enemies nearly on top of them, “But I wouldn’t mind having some of those Paralytic Grenades.”

“You’ll telling me,” Austin chuckled in agreement, “I wonder why we’re just seeing them now?”

“Because they have a limited supply?” Daiki asked as the rest of their guildmates grunted at the possibility.

“Heads up!” Killtet barked in warning while jerking his mount to the side to weave around an uncovered pit trap, “They cleared out the spike pits too!”

“I wondered why all of those crafters were looting the corpses,” Allen said in a stunned tone as he dodged another pit.

“Yeah,” Ashley grunted in sudden understanding, “The corpses won’t rot away in a few hours if they haven’t been looted.”

“Now, that makes sense,” Zyphonn exclaimed as Ashley watched Torlandro, the Fire Mage, and Kyarina rein their mounts next to the line of Centaurs while the rest of the Valkyrie players galloped through the gate, “I forgot that strange fact about The World.”

“What the hell is Kyarina up to now?” Killtet gruffly demanded as Pherala and the other Centaurides she was leading began releasing glowing arrows into their air.

“They’re Barrages of Death!” Zyphonn excitedly added as he twisted around in his saddle while following the arrows’ flight paths.

“Looks like they trying to bring the front rows down where they dropped the Napalm!” Matt noted as they approached the line of Centaurs releasing more glowing arrows into the air.

“Continue through the gates and get ready to do this again,” Ashley ordered as she began slowing down her mount with Killtet.

“You want us on the walls or stacked up near the gate?” Daiki asked as they rode past while an absolute deluge of arrows dropped across the front of the Shadow Worg Raiders’ front ranks.

“I’d focus on defending the walls for now but be ready to do another run if needed,” Ashley smartly answered while reining to a stop as Torlandro began sending out a series of Enhanced Pyroblasts back the way they’d come, “What are you trying to do?”

As massive series of explosions erupted behind them, Ashley whirled around in her saddle to stare in shock at the forty-yard-long swath of flames that had erupted behind them. It reminded her of a Napalm bomb being dropped. The loud clap, she realized, was due to the sudden displacement of air from the medieval Napalm ignited by the Fire Mage’s Enhanced Pyroblasts.

How had they come up with a weapon like this in an MMO? Ashley’s gibbering mind struggled to understand what she was seeing. There was a pile of burning Worgs and Hobgoblins that ran halfway across the front of the horde charging up the slope. While some were able to skirt around the edges of the massive dogpile, those that couldn’t were driven into the growing conflagration by the press of bodies moving forward behind them.

Napalm was designed to continue to burn and spread as long as there was fuel to feed the flames. And that’s what it did. Those Worgs and Hobgoblins on fire that weren’t paralyzed by grenades blindly fled screaming in every direction to crash into those Shadow Worg Raiders that were trying to go around their dying brethren. The results led to whole swaths of the charging ranks on either side wiping out and catching on fire as the mass behind them continued to push forward.

Within a minute, it looked to Ashley like the entire slope below the walls was on fire. The few hundred Shadow Worg Raiders that had escaped the spreading inferno were easily targeted by the BAMFs, Rangers, Mages, Skeleton Mages, and Skeleton Archers on the walls. The handful that survived were finished off by the line of Centaurides standing behind them.

“Good job, Pherala,” Kyarina said as the rear of the charging horde finally started to come to a stop, “I think that’s it for now.” As the line of Centaurides turned their heads to stare at the Light Elf, she flashed them a savage grin, “If I need your ladies’ help again, I’ll let you know.”

“Are those the weapons that Overlord Ironwolf asked to have designed for our defense?” Pherala asked in a stunned voice as the rest of the Centaurides seemed to hold their breath.

“We don’t have much of a supply,” Kyarina explained with

twinkling eyes as the Centaurides let out a gasp at her words, “But, yes, these are a few of the weapons he asked us to develop.”

Chapter Nine

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Startum Ironwolf and friends at Splaet-VonDuekey.)

“Why are we stopping here?” Tyhra demanded as we trotted to a stop at the top of a ridge overlooking the town of Splaet-VonDuekey, “The town is just down the road!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I snarked as Helgath leaped from Neysa’s back onto the tree we’d stopped beside. As she started shinning up the tree, I continued without looking back, “because we need to get eyes on the place we’re trying to break into.”

“Especially since it’s still daylight and some of us aren’t very stealthy,” Phoenix added as she pointedly eyed Töten and Zeven.

“Besides, we have no clue of where to even start looking for the children,” Zeven added, giving the Cat Burglar an annoyed look.

“Oh-my-gawd, Zeven! I thought you were ex-military!” Tyhra groused as she climbed up on her saddle to jump into the tree’s overhanging branches.

“I am,” Zeven snapped back.

“Does being ex-Gavy count as ex-military?” Pheonix cockily asked the Big Guy sitting next to her on his mount.

“More or less,” Töten agreed as they shared a laugh while Tyhra began climbing the trunk, “Although, I’d argue that the Coast Guard sees more action on a regular basis than the real Navy.”

“The Coast Guard!” Zeven exclaimed as he flipped them off, “They’re domestic only and hardly considered part of the military!”

“Don’t they actually share Basic Training with the Army?” Tyhra asked from above, “I thought I ran into a couple of girls who were planning on going into the Coast Guard when I was in Fort Leonard Wood.”

“That’s the Navy,” Zeven irritably disagreed, “The Coast Guard has their own Basic Training battalion in Cape May, New Jersey.”

“You’re shitting me!” Tyhra protested as she stopped climbing to eye the Badger Kin in disbelief. Seeing him suck in a breath to argue, she dismissively continued while climbing up the tree trunk, “Whatever, Gavy.”

“That joke was old before you were even born,” Zeven dismissed with a roll of his eyes.

It was funny listening to the various services slamming on the difficulty level of each other’s services. From my time hanging out with Thomas and his Devil Dogs, I’d gotten a basic understanding of the rankings amongst the inter-service rivalries. Basically, Marines picked on everyone else with the Army guys being second. The Navy was next with the Airforce being the butt of everyone else’s jokes even though everyone seemed to be jealous of their nine-to-five job treatment.

Although, after Zeven’s and Tyhra’s recent spat, it was starting to sound like the Coast Guard might be considered the lowest service on the military totem pole. That seemed a somewhat odd point if the service actually had the most action out of any of the others, I silently thought as Cat Burglar changed gears.

“I don’t know why you’re making a big deal of finding the children,” Tyhra brusquely continued in an exasperated tone, “All that we have to do is snatch a guard or two to get the answers we need. Once we know where they’re being held, it’s as easy as wham-bam-thank-you-mam to find out which building we need to sneak into.”

“Wham-bam-thank-you-mam?” I nearly choked at the old slang, “Are you seriously comparing kidnapping and torture to a one-night stand?”

“That sounds like something I would say,” Braid muttered out loud to himself. As I gave his oversized G.O.A.H.A.M. an odd look, he held up his armored hands, “I’m just saying.”

“I thought it sort of fit,” Tyhra disgruntledly spat from up above.

“What kind of one-night stands have you had, woman?” Phoenix barked in laughter.

“Probably more than any of us want to hear details about,” Töten hurriedly spoke up to cut her off.

“I’d be down with hearing about them,” Braid unhelpfully grunted as I had to choke back my laughter.

“And you think the guards are just going to tell you whatever you want to know,” Zeven angrily demanded with a furious shake of his head.

“I don’t see why the hell not,” Tyhra growled over her shoulder as she began climbing up the trunk after the Half-Orc, “With enough pain anyone will talk.”

“True,” I nodded in agreement.

“Dude, are you serious?” Zeven demanded in a huff while glaring at me, “We don’t torture prisoners!”

“Is it torture if I just have Töten’s mount sit on the sick child-murdering bastards?” Tyhra’s comment didn’t do anything to lessen the look of outrage on the Badger Kin’s face. Obviously, this was a major issue for him.

“Star would never think of torturing child-murdering fucktards,” Phoenix assured him in a sarcastic tone, “Or even imagine doing something as sick as breaking their kneecaps or threatening to kill them and resurrect them repeatedly.”

“Y-you ... h-he, d-did w-what?” Zeven stammered in disbelief.

“He broke some PKer’s kneecaps back in Darom,” Braid helpfully explained.

“Try offering a bit more context the next time you drop something like that,” I growled at the Gnome-Hogboon before turning to Zeven, “Look, I don’t mean to upset you but I don’t really have much in the way of a line.” Offering him an apologetic shrug, I continued earnestly. “As far as I’m concerned, if you’re an evil fucker doing terrible shit to innocent people,” My lips pressed together as I thought back to the crap the PKers had done to the people of Darom, “especially children, you deserve whatever you get.”

“So what?” Zeven snarled not liking my answer one bit, “Anything goes against anyone you perceive as your enemy?”

“Does that depend on the situation?” Braid asked in confusion.

“More or less,” I agreed, before returning Zeven’s glare, “It’s pretty simple to me. If you attack someone’s home with the goal of robbing, slaughtering, torturing, eating, or enslaving them, then you basically deserve whatever you get in my book.” The haunted look in my eyes seemed to take the fire out of the Badger Kin’s protest as I unapologetically continued, “And that goes double for anyone brutalizing children, my people, or my friends.”

“T-that’s, u-um,” Zeven stammered unsure of what to say at the vehemency of my words.

“Reasonable?” Braid helpfully offered as the Badger Kin’s lips turned down into a frown.

“Do you have any idea what kind of shitshow I ran into when I arrived in Darom?” I furiously demanded of Zeven in a huff, “The PKers

had nearly slaughtered everyone in the entire town and those that gave up were forced to craft as slaves without food or water while their children were slaughtered and discarded into a pile of corpses.”

“The PKers did that?” Zeven incredulously asked having trouble wrapping his mind around my words.

“While that shit was messed the hell up, I’m sure it’s nothing in compared to what’s happening right now with your people who were enslaved by the Orcs!” I continued with a sour shake of my head.

“What do you know about that?” Zeven demanded as his face turned white as a sheet.

“Orcs are typically brutal?” Braid asked as Phoenix shushed him.

“More than I wish I did,” I said, unconsciously shivering as my mind went back to the horror show of those lower decks, “I thought you understood that the Beast Kin along with the others I saved from the Orc Triremes were tortured, raped, and even eaten just for the hell of it. That’s not even talking about the horrible conditions they endured day after day while chained inside the bowels of a slave galley!” Lowering my voice, I pointed up toward the top of the tree. “All of that fucked up shit is nothing compared to the nightmare that Helgath endured throughout her harsh life as a slave amongst the Orc Tribes!”

“I’m, um, we’re used to, um, t-thinking in terms of the G-geneva Convention in the m-military,” Zeven managed to get out as conflicted feelings flashed across his face.

“Says the furball with players’ skulls hanging from his belt,” Phoenix barked in laughter as the Badger Kin looked like he’d bit into something sour.

“Isn’t that the Headhunter accomplishment?” Braid curiously asked.

“Yep,” Töten snorted in amusement, “which means our furry boy here chopped off his enemies’ heads and purposely shrank them down to hang from his belt.”

“Hey,” Zeven defensively protested as he glared at the rest of us, “that was a completely different situation. Those psychos slaughtered most of my people and then dishonored their bodies in sick-”

“Funny that,” I snarled at the hypocrisy, “It’s always different when it’s personal!”

“That’s pretty hardcore,” Braid said, giving an impressed whistle.

“You know what I find funny?” Töten chimed in on the topic, “Everyone talks about the Geneva Convention in war, but that goes out the window as soon as the other side chooses not to follow its guidelines which conveniently happens when most countries declare war.” He openly scoffed at the angry look the Badger Kin shot him. “And don’t even get me started on terrorist groups and how the media doesn’t-”

“This isn’t Earth, there’s no Geneva Convention here, and all of us have done some fucked up stuff in the defense of our people so let’s leave it at that!” I growled, overriding them both, “And as far as The World goes, remember it’s based on the Ages of Antiquity and the Dark Ages of Earth with magic and monsters thrown into the mix. So, one fuckup could mean that you lose everything.”

“What do you mean?” Zeven gruffly asked not understanding my point.

“Athens, Sparta, Egypt, Rome, and any other city-state at the time that you can think of only had one to a handful of cities to their culture and name,” I tried to explain how I looked at it, “One wrong decision or battle could, and many times did, mean their removal from history or predominance.”

“It’s worse than that here in The World,” Töten said in a strained voice as his helmed head rotated to look at us, “Take the Orc Horde sweeping over the Kingdom of Kader or the Hobgoblin invasion assaulting your lands. At any time, a wave of monsters or Demi-Humans could be triggered to attack your lands. If you’re not playing at the top of your game, everything you’ve built and created could be wiped out,” he snapped his fingers, “just like that.”

“That’s not very different than the waves of tribes fleeing from more powerful civilizations that would sweep across the various continents wiping out city-states and other weaker tribes in their path,” I pointed out, thinking back to my research on ancient history. Most of that had come from various fantasy novels I’d read in the past as a frown came to my lips, “Including the slaughtering, torturing, eating, and enslaving of anyone who lost.”

“More or less,” Töten agreed with a grunt.

What can I say, the history of Humanity was a savage and violent story. Every culture throughout time was guilty of horrendous crimes in today’s day and age. It was rare for a society to aim for something better,

like trying to end slavery. That really only happened from Western civilizations pushing for that change over the last two to three hundred years, and even in today's modern age, it was never completely stamped out.

"If The World is so horrible, then why are you even bothering to play this MMO?" Zeven demanded as he gave me an odd look.

"Because it's bloody awesome?" Braid asked in confusion.

"True," I agreed, unable to help the sudden grin that came to my lips, "And because no matter how dark and gritty The World is, I like living here. With all of the crazy-ass adventures we get into, I feel like the things I do here have meaning." My lips twisted in thought as I tried to better explain what I meant. "Like I can change things for the better and have fun doing it." With a helpless shrug, I waved at The World around us, "Not to mention making a pretty penny in the real world with my Twitch Streaming account while doing it."

"There is that," Töten laughed while raising his arms in a muscleman pose, "For me, I like having a healthy and functioning body."

"And friends I can play with," Braid quietly added.

"And this is much more fun than working a regular nine-to-five job," Phoenix agreed with a smile.

"Yeah, I guess that's more or less the same for me," Zeven traded a nod with the Big Guy while running a clawed hand through his mane. Motioning at me with his chin, he let out an explosive breath, "Maybe you could give me a few tips for how to get the Twitch Steaming part rolling so I can make some extra money on the side."

"Sure man, but I bet you're already getting more views just by hanging out with the rest of us," I offered not quite willing to add him to our Twitch channel at this point in time.

"I've already seen a boost in mine," Phoenix helpfully added.

"Me too," Töten chimed next.

"I'll have to check out my numbers when I log out," Zeven thoughtfully harrumphed as he considered our words while Braid was curiously silent.

"If we're done with all of that, can we get back to the discussion of torturing guards and stuff?" I asked, going back to our original topic as everyone groaned, "Look, skull-boy, all that I'm saying is that I won't do it just to do it. Just know, if it's needed to save those children, I'm not gonna

shy away from doing what's necessary." I held each of my friends' eyes before continuing. "Especially when we know what's gonna happen to them if we don't save them in time."

"Skull-boy!" Phoenix giggled as the Badger Kin rolled his eyes.

"The Headhunter," Töten agreed while high-fiving the Barbarian.

"Sheesh, enough already," Zeven unhappily held up his hands in surrender, "Look, I might not like shit like that, but as you so succinctly pointed out," He pressed his black lips together in frustration. "I shouldn't be throwing any stones in my glass house." With that said, he urged a silent Bright Claw toward the edge of the ridge that looked out over the valley.

"I'll talk with him," Töten said as he rode after the Badger Kin while the Barbarian stopped beside me.

"How did you find out about the stuff that happened with Helgath?" Phoenix asked in a low voice.

"We share thoughts and memories at times due to our soul mate connection," I whispered back not wanting to particularly get into our recent relationship issues, "And sometimes what happened to her in the past comes up at unexpected times."

"Damn, I bet," Phoenix exclaimed, giving me a wide-eyed look, "That can't be easy. No wonder you're so excitable at times."

"Yeah, I guess," I sighed, before flashing her a grin, "Although, it definitely adds to the immersion."

"Ha, I bet!" Phoenix guffawed at my joke as Braid's G.O.A.H.A.M. came to a stop on my other side.

'I'm high enough to see in the stronghold,' Helgath mentally interrupted as I held a hand up to stop the Barbarian from talking while mouthing Helgath.

'There is a large town outside the stronghold that seems to be half-full with a number of farmers out in the field.'

'Is there any way we can sneak close to the walls or maybe through the town?' I asked as she mentally shared what she was seeing.

'The fields closest to us don't seem to be being farmed,' Helgath explained as she mentally nudged me to focus on where she was discussing.

I immediately saw what she meant. The fields to either side of the road we'd been following were mostly overgrown with weeds and unkept all the way up to the edge of town where a rundown, standalone Inn stood. Those fields weren't the only ones that weren't being farmed. From what

the Half-Orc could see, it looked like most of the outer fields around the stronghold were in a similar condition while the ones closest to the outer walls and the town surrounding it were the only ones being worked.

‘Does the town wrap around the entire stronghold?’ I asked as our shared gaze shifted to the far side of the stronghold.

‘I can’t really tell for sure due to the height of the outer wall but it looks like it does,’ Helgath sent as she focused on the area I requested.

‘Can you see where they might be holding the children or how many troops they have inside the walls?’ I asked as the weird mental vision instantly shifted to the immense stronghold.

Why had Duke Dukey surrounded such an expanse of land behind a wall? Did he even have enough soldiers to guard the entire border? From the looks of it, there was an inner wall that was more of a regular-sized castle and keep that you’d expect to defend against invaders. Inside, there were several large barracks beside the keep with numerous guards patrolling the wall.

‘It’s almost like the rest of the walled-in area is a hunting preserve or training grounds,’ Helgath thoughts echoed my own as her eyes studied the large enclosed area. As her vision focused on some barely visible structures and gaps inside the wooden area, she suggested, ‘Do you think they’d suck the lives out of their victims in private or do you think they’d do it within the main keep?’

‘No clue,’ I frowned in annoyance. This was looking to be a much harder nut to crack than I’d originally thought, ‘But I don’t see us easily sneaking into the main keep and rescuing the children during the day with so many guards active.’

‘Night won’t be any easier,’ Helgath warned. Feeling my mental confusion at her statement, she reminded me, ‘We’re dealing with Dark Elves with Dark Vision, not Humans.’

‘Gah,’ I wordlessly grunted realizing my mistake.

‘So, what do you think?’ I asked, not seeing an easy answer, ‘Check to see if some of the wooded areas come close to the wall, and if not-’

‘We’ll have to run a Stealth mission inside the main keep,’ Helgath finished my thought for me.

‘In that case, we’ll probably have to make a detour to Thoronjhi and then swing back by to try to rescue them later on in the evening,’ I

suggested while shaking my head.

‘I don’t see your new vassal particularly being open to that delay,’ Helgath snorted in disdain as my mind went to Tyhra. She’d been giving me the cold shoulder and been being snappy ever since we’d left Haldale.

‘Me neither,’ I sighed, wishing for the hundredth time that there was a quest arrow pointing toward the general direction we needed to go. Not that such a thing would’ve worked in this scenario since this wasn’t an official game quest.

‘Any other ideas for finding out where the children might be being held?’ I asked when a sharp curse interrupted our mental conversation.

“There’s that mother fucking asshole!”

“What’s going on, Tyhra?” I urgently asked at the loud sound of cracking branches and muttered cursing suddenly coming from above.

“Is everything okay?” Töten asked as he swung his two-handed Warhammer off his back and began looking around.

“Did someone see you guys?” Phoenix asked with the same alarmed look on her face.

‘Can you see anything?’ I sent to Helgath when there was no immediate answer forthcoming.

‘Uh, no,’ Helgath replied as Tyhra dropped the last ten feet out of the tree to land on her mount’s back.

“Hyah!” Tyhra called out as she slapped her heels against her mount’s flanks, causing it to leap forward into a gallop.

“Hold up, Tyhra,” I shouted at her back as she sent her mount over the edge of the ridge, “We need to plan this together!”

“That’s not good,” Braid grunted while watching her go.

“What the hell is going on?” Töten demanded as he looked back and forth between us.

“Dammit, you’re going to blow the entire mission!” Phoenix roared at the Cat Burglar’s back as Zeven’s face scrunched up in alarm.

‘I don’t see anything,’ Helgath’s reply came a second later.

‘Get down here!’ I ordered as my teammates twisted around in their saddles to glare at me.

“Where the hell is she going?” Töten demanded as she began racing for the road.

“She’s going to blow this entire mission!” Phoenix furiously agreed just while Helgath came sliding down the trunk.

“We could always just leave her here and go about our way,” Zeven offered with an annoyed shake of his head.

‘We’re not going to leave the kids to die!’ Neysa’s outrage sounded in my head.

‘No, we’re not,’ I agreed with a roll of my eyes as Helgath dropped down in front of me onto Neysa’s back.

‘Ready,’ Helgath sent before she was properly braced.

“Try to keep a low profile,” I warned Braid. As Neysa leaped off the ridge, I called out, “Now, let’s go save Tyhra’s ass!”

“And get an explanation for what the hell she thinks she’s doing,” Töten groused while urging his mount after me.

“Dude,” Phoenix called out as she followed us down the slope with Zeven and Bright Claw clanking behind her, “You’re really going to have to do something about that crazy bitch if she keeps this shit up

“Give the woman a break,” Zeven protested in a put-off tone as Bright Claw ran next to Braid’s Spell Knight, “She’s obviously dealing with some major stress from having lost the children to these bastards.”

“Playing stupid isn’t gonna help get them back,” Töten snapped as we galloped down the road, “If anything, it’s just gonna make the situation worse.”

“Yeah, by making it impossible for us to help them,” Phoenix irritably added while I rolled my eyes.

It wasn’t that either of them was particularly wrong in their analysis of the current situation. Nonetheless, I couldn’t blame Tyhra for freaking out and taking off half-cocked. If I’d lost Neysa or Helgath in a similar way, I’d have been going crazy to get them back, especially if they didn’t have the ability to respawn like a player.

“Is anyone paying attention to our approach?” I asked while eyeing the farmers working their fields in the distance. It looked like a group of them were working together to move a particularly large rock a half-mile away.

“No one seems to be looking this way,” Braid helpfully offered.

“As long as we stop at the Inn,” Töten said with his head swiveling side-to-side like a turret, “I think we’re good.”

“If that’s where she’s even going,” Phoenix fumed all of us watched Tyhra galloping up to the Inn.

Seeing that she wasn’t slowing down in the least, a part of me

began to worry the Inn wasn't her planned destination. As we galloped, Helgath and I began buffing everyone up so that we'd be ready when the shit hit the fan. We were nearly finished when Tyhra reached the Inn. Instead of riding past, she steered her mount into the courtyard and angled her flight toward the front door of the inn, when I finally noticed the Dark Elf tying up his mount at the horse railing.

What surprised me the most when I saw the Dark Elf whirl around in alarm at the approaching sounds of pounding hooves was the male's reaction. Not only did he seem to instantly recognize who the Cat Burglar was, but it was obvious he wasn't all that surprised at her sudden appearance. In a flash, he began drawing his blades while shouting a warning toward the Inn, when Tyhra flung herself at the male from the back of her saddle.

It wasn't pretty or particularly coordinated since she'd just learned how to ride a few hours earlier that day but she was flying straight enough to hit her target. To my surprise, the Dark Elf easily parried her blades aside with one hand while using the other to throw her further over his head. Although the move was smooth as glass, Tyhra did something that caught him by surprise, or at least, that's what it looked like from this distance as she dragged the male along with her by the wrists.

The sudden turnaround sent her blades tumbling across the ground even as they both tumbled back onto the ground. Not hesitating in the least, both of them launched themselves at each other throats looking like two savage wolves. Kicking and punching at one another in a brutal series of blows, the Dark Elf managed to shove the Cat Burglar away from him. As they both scrambled to their feet, Tyhra launched herself at the male with new daggers in her hands while shrieking, "Where did you take the children, asshole?"

"Great," Töten growled in exasperation, "If this keeps up, the entire town is going to know we're here!"

"I think we're still good," Braid disagreed breathing heavily, "They're pretty far away."

"At least, there's that," Phoenix snarled as she drew her blades, "I'd still say it's better if we kill them quickly."

"No argument here," Braid agreed.

'Isn't that the same Shadow Swordsman we ran into back in Haldale?' Helgath asked as Dark Elves began pouring out the double doors

to the Inn with their blades drawn.

‘Looks that way,’ I mentally snarled, recognizing Vicnu Ranzeck’s thin mustache and rat-looking face as he fought with Tyhra. He was the Dark Fist Leader that we’d fought back in the Thrifty Harbor shop.

“Who are these guys anyway?” Zeven asked from behind.

“They’re the same group of assholes that kidnapped the children from Haldale!” I warned while Helgath and I drew our own weapons.

“It might be a good idea to keep the leader alive,” Zeven helpfully suggested as I grunted in agreement at the logic.

“I vote Star gets to explain that part to Tyhra!” Phoenix chortled in amusement as the Dark Elf and Halfling began going at each other in the courtyard with flashing blades.

“Tie her up,” I heard Ranzeck order to his troopers as he shoved her roughly away again. Before she could catch her balance, I saw Tyhra hesitate as a look of panic flashed in her eyes while the Dark Elf evilly mocked, “I’m curious to see what kind of Eldritch Crystal we can get from a Halfling newfar!”

It was in that split-second the troop of Dark Elves were launching themselves at the Cat Burglar that sounds of our galloping approach registered in their ears. As Ranzeck whirled around to face us in shock, a number of his troopers’ heads jerked up in alarm at the same time as our group came thundering into the courtyard. Seeing their comrades’ reaction to our approach, the rest of the Dark Elves spun around to face us just as Tyhra threw herself at the Dark Fist Leader’s back.

Even though I didn’t have any Ghouls up to even the odds, none of us hesitated to join the fight. As Ranzeck cried out in agony, Helgath sprung from the Silver Dire Wolf’s back, launching herself at the two nearest troopers with her blades leading the way. I immediately joined her by diving for the next pair of Dark Elves in the loose ring as Neysa slammed into the trio on our left.

As my Black Coral Breastplate deflected the Shadow Swordsmen’s thrusts, I punched my Dark Blade of Lord Kayden through the male’s chest on the right while bringing my Vicious Executioner’s Axe of Cruelty slamming down on the forehead of the Dark Elf on my left. The sudden impact mixed with the attack and the velocity of our charge allowed me to slam the pair roughly into the ground. Shoulder rolling over their bodies, I used the last of my momentum to yank my weapons free, before launching

myself at the stunned Dark Elves on the other side of the circle.

The half circle of ten Shadow Swordsmen were just raising their blades defensively across their chests when Töten came barreling through the left side of their line with his two-handed War Hammer crunching skulls. As I did my best to parry the wall of blades in front of me, Bright Claw crashed into the right side of the circle with Braid's G.O.A.H.A.M. while Zeven launched himself at the Dark Elves on my right with his polearm swinging.

At the same time, Phoenix slammed into the handful of Dark Elves on my left, leaving just the pair in front of me. Before I could lunge at the stunned Dark Elves, Neysa's mental shout rang in my head, 'Duck!'

I instantly dropped into a crouch not questioning my girl as a body flew through the space where I'd been standing a split-second later. Seeing the bloody Dark Elf slam into his comrades, I mentally called out 'You rock!' and launched myself at the trio as they were knocked to the ground.

In fights like this, the Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty was almost a cheat. Between the Dark Elves lower levels and the weapon's proc, I beheaded the male that Neysa had thrown with my first swing while stabbing the Shadow Swordsman on the right with my sword. That left the third Dark Elf to contend with. Before he could shove the corpse of his comrade away, I slammed my knee into his face with a crunch.

Yanking the hand axe back for another swing, I rose to my feet as the Shadow Swordsman on the right managed to shove the corpse onto his buddy and roll away while scrambling to his hands and knees. That was the wrong move, I savagely thought bringing the Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty chopping down on the back of the male's neck. Once again, the weapon proceed, taking the Dark Elf's head off at the base of his skull. Twisting around, I yanked the hand axe back while stabbing across my body to stab the last Shadow Swordsman in the face just as he pushed the corpse aside.

This wasn't a fight so much as a butchering, I thought as the Dark Elf cried out in agony. He tried to weakly batter the blade away, but it was stuck in the ground beneath his head. As my Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty came swinging down at his vulnerable neck, the Shadow Swordsman managed to block the blade with his forearms.

Kicking him in the head, I yanked my blades back and hacked down at him again and again. Between the difference in our levels and my

strength, the poor Dark Elf had no chance. Within a matter of seconds, his head was separated from his bloody corpse as I stood up to scan the courtyard and the rest of the battle.

Töten was just finishing off the pair of Shadow Swordsmen that his mount had trampled, while Helgath was finishing off the Dark Elves that I'd tackled to the ground on my initial charge. Neysa was busy fighting with another male. She had his entire head in her fang-filled maw as she did her best to rip his head from his shoulders, while Lilin, the fiery Nightmare, fought the third Dark Elf.

As I began hitting my teammates with Regeneration, I caught sight of Bright Claw and Braid taking down their groups of Shadow Swordsmen while Zeven fought against the pair they'd first knocked to the ground during their initial charge into the courtyard. The Badger Kin's polearm was hacking through Dark Elves' armor like a hot knife through butter while he kept them at range. As my eyes went to the last group still on their feet, I saw Phoenix was on the ball as I hit her with a Regeneration. She'd just finished off the pair she'd attacked in the backside of the circle and was spinning around to confront the ones her Palnisdale Horse had initially trampled over.

"Drielra!" I heard Ranzeck's fearful shout as he rolled on the ground with Tyhra, "Sound the alarm for the city guard!"

My eyes went to the front of the Inn where I saw a lean older-looking Dark Elf in an apron and rough spun clothing standing at the top of the steps. The first thought I had was to blast him before he could run away to call for the city guard. As I hung the hand axe from my belt and raised my free hand to blast him, I paused seeing the hate-filled look in his hard brown eyes.

"You're begging for my help now after kidnapping my wife and daughter for that dishonorable fat jackal you call a lord!" Drielra let out a dark bark of laughter as he crossed his lean arms over his chest and stood tall, "When just last night, I would've gladly given these Halflings all of my coins for just such a boon!" A shadow passed over his scarred face as his haunted eyes met mine. "Even if this means my death, you have my thanks, newfar!"

"You dishonorable dog!" Ranzeck's shriek of outrage suddenly turned into one of pain as Tyhra stabbed her dagger into his guts.

"We're not here to slaughter the innocents but to save the Halfling

children these rats kidnapped from Haldale,” I said while eyeing the Dark Elf thoughtfully, “If you’d be willing to help us, maybe we can save your wife and daughter too.”

“You believe they still yet live?” Drielra demanded, taking a half-step forward.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” I frowned as Tyhra managed to roll on top of the Dark Elf. Even though he grabbed at her wrists, she managed to get a few quick jabs into his ribs, before headbutting him in the face. Frowning at the Cat Burglar’s ferocity, I began stomping over to the pair while growling, “But first, we need answers from this asshat!”

“I’ll fucking rip your asshole out your throat if you don’t tell me what I want to know!” Tyhra shrieked as the Dark Elf’s head lolled to the side from being partly stunned by the impact. His hit points were nearly down to half as I hauled the woman up by the back of her collar, “Hold up, champ!”

“Don’t you dare try to protect this child-buggering asshole!” Tyhra screamed as she turned on me with her daggers cocked back to stab me. While my friends tensed around us at her violent reaction, no one attacked as she continued yelling, “This asshole is going to tell us where to find the children or I’m gonna cut his balls off and choke him to death with them!”

“I’m not gonna tell you Halfling freaks anything!” Ranzeck roared as he hurriedly tried to crab-walk away, before colliding into Helgath’s black leather-clad shins.

“Do you want me to strip him down and slow cook him over an open fire, War Leader?” Helgath asked as she flashed the Dark Elf a pointy tooth grin. Licking the leftover blood from one of her daggers, she continued excitedly, “The trick to grilling Humanoids is to cook’em slow.”

“Gah!” Ranzeck whimpered as he shrank away from the Half-Orc in horror. Scampering away on his hands and knees in another direction, he ran headfirst into the massive Silver Dire Wolf’s furry legs and froze as she let out a low rumbling growl.

“Neysa suggests letting her eat him slowly,” Helgath helpfully translated as he pissed himself in terror.

“I’m n-not telling you D-demi-Humans anything unless you p-promise to l-let me g-go,” Ranzeck stammered as stared up into the Silver Dire Wolf fang-filled maw.

“This is the little bitch that killed me in Haldale!” Tyhra snarled as

she ripped her collar out of my hand and began stomping over to the Dark Elf, "If anyone is going to kill him, it's going to be me!"

"Go ahead and kill him," I said with an unconcerned shrug. As the Dark Elf turned around to stare at me in dread, I flashed him a mirthless grin and hit him with a Regeneration spell, "Make sure it takes some time. Once you're done, I'll resurrect him again so that Helgath can grill us up some Dark Elf jerky."

"It's always best to keep'em alive as long as you can while grilling them," Helgath explained as her yellow cat-eyes nearly glowed in excitement, "The fear flavors the meat exceptionally!"

"You think that'll get me to talk?" Ranzeck blustered as Cat Burglar leaped on top of him and grabbed him by his throat.

"I don't care what you think!" Tyhra shrieked while stabbing her dagger into his skull, "I just want you to tell me where the children are and die!"

What happened next wasn't so much a fight as a prison yard brawl and execution nor was it much of a questioning session. Ranzeck tried to defend himself but Tyhra had his arms trapped under her legs at the start while she screamed for answers in his face with every thrust. By the time the Dark Elf managed to rip his arms free, he was nearly dead. By the time his hit points hit zero, she was drenched from head to toe in blood and panting like a bellows.

"If you're feeling better now," I said, crossing my arms over my chest, "Can we get back to making this jackass talk so we can save the children and get on our way?" As she looked up at me with wild eyes, I frowned in exasperation, "Daylight is burning and I still need to swing by the Great Library in Thoronjhi before meeting back up with the rest of our caravan."

"There won't be any better until I know the children are safe," Tyhra snarled at me as if all of this was my fault.

"Great, then we can get to work," I motioned to the Half-Orc with my chin, "Get him prepared for whatever you're planning to do while I resurrect him."

'I'm on it,' Helgath sent as she hurried forward and began stripping the Dark Elf of his gear and clothing, 'but this would go quicker if you could bring me that wooden pole from the horse railing.'

"I'm gonna go loot," Zeven grunted with a shiver at Helgath,

before heading toward the nearest group of corpses.

“Me too,” Phoenix agreed as she joined him while Braid’s hulking form kept watch behind me.

“I’m good,” Töten assured me with a quiet shake of his head as I ran an Identify while untying the Dark Elf’s mount so I could collect the wooden pole.

To my surprise, Drielra came down the steps to give me a hand tearing apart the horse railing. As the Dark Elf pulled out a hammer to work the dowels, a pop-up appeared over the black-coated horse.

Baernathrad Horse – A type of black-coated breed of horse sold within the Kingdom of Thayjar possesses a natural stealth in shadows and low light conditions. Additionally, the horses have naturally cushioned hooves, are highly resistant to heat, and are known for their high speeds on flat plains.

A second later, the mount disappeared as Helgath pulled out a whistle similar to what Neristhana had with her Palnisdale Horse. As she held up the black wooden whistle, the Half-Orc sent, ‘Do you want the mount?’

‘Give it to Tyhra,’ I unhappily grunted, deciding it might be a better fit for her. Seeing Half-Orc’s arched eyebrow, I shrugged, ‘And get Neristhana’s mount back from her.’

‘Just like that?’ Helgath pressed with a frown on her face.

‘Eh, she needs a mount and the stealth should work with her being a Cat Burglar and Thief,’ I replied with a shrug as the Bartender worked the wooden pole free and nodded for me to take it, ‘Besides, we really did get a steal on all of that social clothing.’

‘Even if she did manage to kill the Chofe-ka,’ Helgath replied with a frown as I handed her the pole, ‘That’s more than she deserves after rushing off like that.’

‘Sometimes, that’s the way it goes when you’re trying to acquire a new ally,’ I sighed not disagreeing one bit as the Half-Orc tossed the Cat Burglar the whistle.

“What’s this for?” Tyhra asked in confusion.

“Your new mount,” Helgath stated while holding her green hand out to the female, “If you’ll hand Neristhana’s mount whistle back.”

As I started the Resurrect spell, Helgath traded mount whistles with

the Cat Burglar and began tying the Dark Elf to the wooden pole. By the time I'd finished the cast and hit him with a Regeneration, Ranzeck was alive and clearly in a panic when he realized we hadn't been making idle threats. Ignoring his pleading cries to let him go for the information, the Half-Orc stood up and dusted her hands off.

"Grab the other end of the pole," Helgath ordered the Cat Burglar.

"What?" Tyhra asked in surprise, before giving the Half-Orc a glowering look, "Why?"

"If you want to find out where the children are being held," Helgath stated in a no-nonsense tone, "Then grab the other end of the pole and follow me."

"I'd do what she says," I helpfully suggested as the Cat Burglar offered me a glare.

'You want me to come too?' Neysa asked as the two females lifted the pole to their shoulders and began heading for the double doors to the Inn.

"The central fireplace should work fine if you remove the hog on the spit," Drielra darkly offered as the trio passed him, "And there's a skinning knife and cleaver there too." Seeing my raised eyebrow as I walked up to him, he gave me a shrug, "Whatever gets him to talk."

"It's appreciated," I nodded thoughtfully while wondering what I was going to do with the Dark Elf.

"There's no other patrons inside?" I asked, eyeing the Inn curiously.

"Naw, you killed everyone that was inside," Drielra explained as a shadow flashed over his face, "The rest of the townfolks are in the fields working." A frown came to his dry lips. "Not that any of those racist scum would sit in my taproom after Daksome and Vyrzie were taken."

"I take it, that's the names of your wife and daughter," I quietly asked as the Dark Elf's lips curled into a sneer.

"After the Dark Fist troopers beat and stripped them last night in this very courtyard," Drielra explained in a strained voice as tears welled up in his brown eyes, "The sick bastards dragged them away in chains like beasts while our neighbors catcalled them for being dirty Halflings."

"I-I'm s-sorry to hear that," I stammered unsure of what more to say at the clear pain in his words, "No one should have to see their loved ones endure something like that." As the seconds dragged on between us while we both ignored the screams coming from inside the Inn, I removed

my helm and looked him in the eyes, “Any information you might be able to offer that could help us out with getting inside Duke Dukey’s stronghold to save our people and possibly help your family as well would be greatly appreciated?”

“I’ll do you one even better,” Drielra offered with a calculating look, “If you’re not planning on killing me and will take me with you, I’ll sneak you and your friends inside Duke Dukey’s stronghold myself.” Seeing my hesitation, his lips pulled back from his teeth, “Besides, with all of you being Halflings, there’s no way you’ll be able to sneak through the town and inside the gate without causing a ruckus.”

“Good point,” I admitted, letting out an explosive breath as the screams suddenly cut off inside the Inn. This was getting more complicated by the minute. Studying the Bartender’s tear-streaked face, I pointedly asked, “What are your plans after that?”

“You mean if they’re alive or dead?” Drielra barked as he nervously wiped his sweaty palms on his coarse wool pants, “I don’t care if you’re a Bandit Boss or what. So long as you promise to help me save my Darksome’s and Vyrzie’s lives and protect them as one of your own,” Gulping loudly, he briefly looked away to wipe the tears from his eyes, before meeting my eyes again, “Or bury them in peace if they’re dead, I’ll swear to serve faithfully as your vassal.”

“That works for me,” I grunted, wondering if I really looked like a Bandit Boss. Shaking my head to dismiss the comment, I held out my hand, “I’m Startum Ironwolf.”

“Drielra Sedruc, the owner and bartender of the Grubbing Boar Inn,” Drielra introduced himself while shaking my hand, before eyeing me closely, “No Bandit Boss title to go with your name?”

“I’m no Bandit Boss nor am I one for lofty titles,” I assured him with a laugh, “Nonetheless, I’ll take the oath of fealty from you and yours if that’s what you wish, and will promise to treat all of you as my own.” Ignoring the look of disbelief that flashed across his face, I continued quickly, “Hell, I might even have the perfect gig for you when we return home.”

“Perfect gig?” Drielra asked, not understanding the term.

“It’s not exactly an Inn, per se,” I shrugged not wanting to explain more, “but if you enjoy such work, I think you’ll like managing the place.”

“I can, um, swear now if you want me to,” Drielra offered in an

unsure tone.

“Let’s wait until I’ve held up my end of the agreement and we find your family,” I waved his offer away. I didn’t want him to question his oath of fealty to me, “For now, how about we focus on your idea for sneaking us inside Duke Dukey’s stronghold?”

“We got the information for the location of the children,” Helgath interrupted as the double doors to the Inn slammed open. Striding out, she caught my eye as a pale-faced Tyhra followed her out, “All of the Halflings being fed to the Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines are chained in a pit inside the wooded area opposite the inner gate and keep.”

“I know the place,” Drielra snarled as his face took on a grim look. Seeing our questioning looks, he explained with a frown, “They sometimes have me run ale barrels out to the barracks with my wagons.”

“Ale barrels?” Phoenix asked with a thoughtful look on her face

“How big?” Töten asked, following her train of thought.

“And is there any way we can copy the orders so we can travel out there?” Braid added.

“Part of my job is delivering ale to the guard barracks inside the stronghold,” Drielra said as he began answering everyone’s questions, “The barrels are big enough to hold someone your size.” His eyes went to Braid’s G.O.A.H.A.M. next, “No way they’ll fit that monstrosity.”

“If I can hide my G.O.A.H.A.M. in the back of your Inn, I can go on foot if needed,” Braid assured the bartender.

“Or hang out here as an emergency cavalry in case the shit hits the fan,” I grunted when I noticed Gnome-Hogboon uncomfortably shift on his legs at my words. Realizing he didn’t want to be left behind, I added with a shrug, “Joining us on foot works fine too.”

“As far as needing orders or permission for the delivery,” Drielra continued as Braid and I finished, “None is needed for common areas like that outside the main keep.” A sour look came to his face. “Besides, what guard would complain about a delivery of ale to their barracks?”

“None,” Zeven agreed as the rest of us chuckled at that.

“How do you usually get the barrels delivered?” I asked as my mind churned over the problem.

“Come, I’ll show you,” Drielra said, waving for us to follow as he began striding toward the back of the Inn.

“Are you okay?” I heard Phoenix ask the Cat Burglar as we trooped

after the bartender.

“She choked him to death with his own balls!” I heard Tyhra hiss back in horror.

“Isn’t that what you threatened to do yourself?” Töten asked from behind her.

“I m-mean, y-yeah,” Tyhra stuttered as she waved her arms about excitedly, “But I wasn’t actually gonna do it.”

“Yeah,” Phoenix mewed in a low whisper, “Helgath isn’t one to make idle threats.”

I didn’t hear what else was said as Drielra threw open the barn doors. As I came to a stop behind him, he waved a hand at the two large wagons filled with massive barrels with a tarp over the top of them.

“These are still empty from my last trip,” Drielra explained as he walked up to the wagon and knocked on the empty barrel, “But I usually bring full ones in on these double wagons.” He waved toward the back of the barn. “And once I remove these wagons, your G.O.A.H.A.M. should fit inside no problem.”

“That works,” Braid grunted in agreement, before asking, “Do they usually check the barrels when you pass through the main gate?”

“Naw, that’s my job every week,” Drielra assured us.

“Let’s get er done,” I said in my best Larry the Cable Guy voice while walking into the barn as everyone but the bartender and Neysa chuckled at the joke.

Working together, we quickly manhandled the wagons out of the barn. While Drielra got the two Baernathrad Horse harnessed in the front, the rest of us popped off the lids to the barrels, except for Braid who was parking his G.O.A.H.A.M. inside. Eyeing the space, I figured the eight of us could squeeze into the five barrels without too much of a problem.

“Is that going to be enough room for all of us?” Braid worriedly asked as he walked over to join us.

“It shouldn’t be too much of a problem if some of us double up,” I shrugged not overly worried.

“Are you serious?” Tyhra demanded as she waved at Neysa and Bright Claw, “There are nine of us!”

“Eight,” Zeven countered as the Grizhawk whined, “I’ll just dismiss Bright Claw back to his mount holding slot.”

“And Neysa, Helgath, and I should squeeze into a barrel easily

enough,” I assured everyone with a dismissive wave of my hand.

“Are you blind?” Tyhra demanded as her lips twisted in annoyance, “There’s no way your mount could fit in the barrel herself!”

“Sure, she can,” I dismissively snorted, before glancing around at my friends, “So, who else wants to double up?”

“Zeven and I will need our own barrels,” Töten said as the Badger Kin nodded in agreement.

“Is he blind or something?” Tyhra asked, looking around the circle at everyone as her voice went up a notch.

“You do realize,” Phoenix laughed at the Cat Burglar, “That Neysa is the same girl you were drinking spiced ale with last night.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tyhra demanded, “That Wolf Kin girl could talk and everything!”

“She can shape change,” Töten explained with a laugh as the bartender closed the barn doors.

“It’s a pretty simple concept,” Phoenix added at the shocked expression on the Cat Burglar’s face.

“If you climb in, I’ll seal everyone up,” Drielra said while climbing up onto the rear-most wagon.

“Stop your jabbering and climb in,” I said, following action to words as I climbed into the first barrel.

“Come on, Braid?” Phoenix called out, motioning with her chin for the Gnome-Hogboon to join her as Zeven and Töten climbed into their own barrels.

“Are you sure, um, that you don’t, um, m-mind?” Braid stuttered while staring at the Barbarian’s breasts.

“Not as long as you keep your hands to yourself,” Phoenix grouched as she climbed into the barrel next to mine while Helgath squeezed in next to me.

“He might not have much of a choice,” I joked while squatting down so that the Half-Orc could sit in my lap.

“You can share a barrel with me if that’s a problem,” Tyhra offered as she began climbing into her own barrel.

“Ah, no thanks,” Braid hurriedly said as he began climbing in with the Barbarian.

“Gah, don’t stick your ass in my face,” Phoenix complained as she tried to help him climb in.

‘I’m coming,’ Neysa warned as she leaped into the barrel with us, shrinking to the size of a small puppy as Helgath nabbed her out of the air.

“That’s not right,” Tyhra muttered while shaking her head at the odd sight.

“Squat down so I can put your lid on,” Drielra ordered as he finished up with Phoenix’s and Braid’s barrel.

“Ack, sorry,” Braid apologetically choked out when the back of his helm bounced off the edge of the barrel and caused him to faceplant into the Barbarian’s chest.

“Whatever loverboy,” Phoenix sarcastically said while rolling her eyes, “Just hand me no lines and keep your hands to yourself.”

“W-what did y-you s-say?” Braid stuttered in alarm.

“Seriously, Phoenix,” Töten let out a bark of laughter, “You’re quoting Georgia Satellites song lyrics now?”

“Eh, I felt like it fit,” Phoenix shrugged, ignoring the Gnome-Hogboon’s questioning look as she pushed his head down for the bartender to seal up their barrel.

“You guys,” Zeven chuckled at the pair.

“I hope you know that we’re all gonna stink like stale beer after this,” Tyhra’s muffled complaint had the big guy trading an eye-roll with me.

“But they’ll probably love us in Aeroch Nor,” Töten joked as the bartender pounded his and Zeven’s lids closed.

“That’s quite possibly a true statement,” Zeven harrumphed thoughtfully as an exasperated sigh came from Tyhra’s barrel.

“I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come out,” Drielra assured me, before sealing our barrel up.

A second later, the wagon began moving out of the courtyard to the main road. As we got up to speed, the wooden wheels began hitting the potholes with bone-jarring impacts. After five minutes of this, everyone was complaining in group chat.

“Is he purposely hitting every pothole in the road?” Zeven complained from his barrel.

“I can’t believe how much worse this is than riding on the wagon’s seat,” Phoenix grunted after a particularly large bump.

“All that I can say is this isn’t even one-star accommodations,” Tyhra grumbled as the whole wagon violently shuddered, “I strongly do not

recommend!”

“I honestly don’t know if slower would’ve been better,” Töten groused as the wagon began to slow down.

“This is all part of the fun,” I chortled a little too loudly.

“Keep it down,” Drielra hissed while thumping his fist against my barrel, “I’m approaching the gates!”

“No sounds, people,” I said in group chat, “We’re nearly at the gate.”

“Thank god!” Tyhra cursed in relief.

“You think we can trust this guy, Star?” Phoenix suddenly asked in a serious tone.

“It’s a little bit late to be worried about that now!” Braid scoffed at her question.

“Be prepared to fight if needed, but honestly, after the fight in the courtyard, I’m pretty confident that Drielra is being straight with us,” I said, understanding her concern. Not that she was the only one worrying about how all of this might go down as I continued sagely, “Worst case scenario is we respawn at the graveyard and try again later.”

Everyone quieted down as the wagon rolled to a stop. Probably because all of us were listening to make sure nothing odd was said, when a gruff voice called out, “Halt and state your business!”

“It’s Drielra from the Grubbing Boar Inn with my weekly delivery of ale for the stronghold, Knight Commander Sivriur,” I heard the bartender dully state in a downtrodden voice.

“Steward Mevnee is still purchasing ale from that dirty Halfling lover?” I heard another deep voice ask in the background.

“Why didn’t you deliver the ale yesterday as planned?” Knight Commander Sivriur demanded in an ugly tone.

“My apologies for the delay,” Drielra groveled as I heard the crunch of gravel from the Dark Elf’s approach, “There weren’t any more laborers to assist in loading the wagon after yesterday’s cleansing of-”

“Lord Dukey doesn’t want excuses,” Knight Commander Sivriur snarled as the sounds of metal hitting skin came to my ears and the wagon began shaking from repeated impacts, “You were commanded to deliver five barrels of ale every week.” Suppressed whimpering came from the bartender with each word that was snarled over the horses’ nervous nickering. “Miss the deadline again and you’ll join your dirty Halfling

family in the pit!”

“Yes, Knight Commander,” Drielra’s muffled voice answered after the beating stopped. Again, I heard the receding sound of crunching gravel.

“Proceed with your delivery,” Knight Commander Sivriur ordered as the wagon slightly shook from the bartender righting himself, “And stop by the pit first so you can see what awaits your next failure!”

“These guys are some serious assholes,” Phoenix snarled under her voice as the wagon jolted forward again.

“It gonna make it easy to slaughter them without any hard feelings,” Zeven joked with a hint of truth to his words.

“I’m gonna kill every last one of them,” Tyhra snarled under her breath.

“As long as it’s not today when we’re outnumbered and outleveled,” I warningly growled even while feeling the same desire to jump out and kill the pompous bastard, “Remember, we’re here to save who we can and get the hell out of dodge.”

“Are you seriously okay with that?” Tyhra demanded from her barrel.

“That guy really deserves someone ramming their foot up his ass,” Zeven agreed in a strained tone.

“Because being overwhelmed by a stronghold worth of high-level Knights and getting everyone killed is the better option right now?” Töten irritably snapped, before I could speak up.

“Remember to focus on the mission at hand of saving the children and Drielra’s family before getting out of dodge,” I sighed as Helgath nuzzled up against my chest and hugged me to calm my nerves.

Thankfully, that reminder seemed to calm everyone down even as the wagon turned onto a dirt road. Again, we were violently jostled around inside our barrels from the rough road. I was just starting to feel a little pukey from motion sickness when a harsh female voice called out from up ahead.

“It’s about time you showed up with our ale.”

“My apologies, Sub Leader Wiumrie,” Drielra gruffly replied as I assumed we reached our destination, “I couldn’t get any help loading up the barrels into the wagon until earlier this morning.”

“Do you think Assault Leader Shrailnumiud cares about your weak excuses?” Sub Leader Telzoth demanded, before letting out a growl of

disgust, “Whatever, head around to the kitchen’s backdoor and then I’ll bring you to him in the pit. He wants to have a word before you head up to the keep.”

“Don’t you dare puke on me, Braid!” I heard Phoenix urgently swear as the familiar gulping and heavy breathing sounds of someone about to vomit came to my ears.

“Hurry, we need to get you out before Sub Leader Telzoth can open the door,” Drielra hissed in a hushed voice as the wagon jerked to a stop and the handbrake was thrown. There were scraping sounds on the lid before it was pried off as the bartender warned, “There are usually two squads of off-duty guards inside the barracks.”

“Let’s move,” Töten hissed as his and Zeven’s lids were punched away.

As Helgath and Neysa jumped out of the barrel, I went to follow as the rest of the barrel lids went flying away. Before I could jump down from the wagon, I saw Phoenix thrust Braid up out of her barrel as she ducked low. His short arms urgently yanked his bevor down and his helmet up as a wave of projectile vomit shot from his mouth.

“Turn him the other way!” Töten shouted as he turned his back toward the Gnome-Hogboon.

“Not my fur!” Zeven shrieked in a too-high voice as he got a face full of vomit.

“Oh, hell no!” I cried out while throwing myself out of the wagon.

“What the hell is going on out there?” Sub Leader Telzoth demanded as the locks were thrown back on the opposite side of the door.

“Point him away from me!” Tyhra roared as the barrel she was in tumbled out the back of the wagon.

Climbing to my feet, I caught a glimpse of Helgath yanking her blades from their sheaths. As she threw her back against the wall next to the door, Neysa transformed into a towering and very naked Silver Dire Werewolf. She was just crouching low next to the Half-Orc when the female Dark Elf furiously threw the door open with her blade drawn.

‘Try to subdue and capture her if you can,’ I urgently sent to my girls as Helgath swung around the doorframe. As she parried the Dark Elf’s blade away and ducked low, Neysa silently pounced on top of her, tackling her to the ground as I warned, ‘And there could be another ten troopers inside the barracks!’

“Guards help-” Sub Leader Wiumrie’s muffled shout was abruptly cut off as I raced into the kitchen.

“Sub Leader Wiumrie?” an alarmed voice suddenly called from the main room of the barracks.

“Are you alright?” another concerned voice added as the sounds of numerous boots scrapping against wood came to my ears.

‘I’ve got her!’ Neysa cried out as I raced past the scuffle for the open door on the far side of the kitchen, ‘Go help Star!’

‘I’m behind you!’ Helgath’s confident voice sounded in my head as I barreled through the doorway at full tilt into the roomful of Dark Elves.

There were ten of them in various states of undress with nearly equal amounts reaching for their nearest weapons, climbing out of bed, or jumping to their feet from where they’d been sitting playing cards and drinking. Without slowing down, I launched myself at the nearest trio of Shadow Swordsmen while I still had the element of surprise.

With a look of horror on her face, the female Dark Elf in the center kicked the trestle table at me as I leaped in the air in a flying sidekick. The move allowed me to skim across the top of the table as I blasted the Shadow Swordswoman off her feet, sending her tumbling backward over a second trestle table behind her. The Swordsman on my left managed to grab the shaft of my descending Vicious Executioner’s Axe of Cruelty in two hands while I stabbed the Dark Blade of Lord Kayden through the chest of the Dark Elf to my right.

As the rest of the Dark Elves jumped into action, I shoved the Dark Elf off my blade, pushing him into the Ranger behind him. While the one on my left tried twisting and ripping the hand axe out of my hand, I yanked the shaft close to my chest to slam my forehead into the yelling Dark Elf’s face.

Instead of the crunch of soft cartilage like I’d expected, there was the loud thudding sound of bone hitting bone as our foreheads collided. Reeling back from the unexpected headbutt, I saw Helgath race past me. Two quick slashes to the eyes and throat of the Dark Elf I was fighting and she continued past to dive over the trestle table behind us.

That assist allowed me to recover before my enemy. Using the shaft of my hand axe to yank the male close, I stabbed him underneath the jaw and watched my blade slide through his head as two Rangers fired Multi-Shots at me from the other side of the room. A quick heave and twist turned

him into a living shield as six arrows thudded into his back, dropping his hit points into the red as I ripped my hand axe free. While the male convulsed in agony, I yanked my sword free while burying the cruel edge of my hand axe into the side of his neck with a heavy backhanded slash.

As the Dark Elf crumpled dead to the ground, the rest of the crew came charging through the doorway behind me with Zeven and Töten leading the way. The battle turned into a chaotic melee as a volley of Multi-Shots was haphazardly released around the room hitting both friend and foe alike. Ignoring the arrows that pin-cushioned my breastplate, I launched myself at the four Shadow Swordsmen who were hacking and slashing at Helgath as she ducked and dodged while kicking chairs between their legs.

Slamming my Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty into the back of the first Dark Elf's head, I stabbed my Dark Blade of Lord Kayden into the ribs of the one beside me. While the second Shadow Swordsman turned to stab me in the chest, the first staggered away as I yanked my hand axe back to parry away the blade stabbing me in the shoulder.

Ignoring the bloody wound, I batted away the first Shadow Swordsman's thrust at my face only to see two crossbow bolts slam into the side of his head. A second later, Braid was bowling over the staggered Dark Elf as he rammed the wide blade at the end of his crossbow into the male's chest. Another slash from the second Shadow Swordsman cut open my cheek wide-open as I brought my hand axe down on his forearm.

"Gah!" the Dark Elf screamed as his sword and hand clunked to the ground.

Seeing the opening, I thrust the Dark Blade of Lord Kayden through his chest. Pushing the Dark Elf away from me, I kicked him off my blade, sending him sprawling backward onto the trestle table behind him. With a wordless shout, I brought my Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty slamming down onto his chest.

The Shadow Swordsman tried to batter my blades away with his forearms as I repeatedly stabbed and slashed at him like a madman. Hacking through his forearms, I finished him off several hits later with my axe splitting his chest open. Seeing a pair of Dark Elves on the opposite side of the table trying to overpower my soul mate, I furiously kicked the table into the closest Dark Elf.

Using the distraction, Helgath leaped on the female's head, and began stabbing her in the face, while I leaped over the table to bodily slam

into the closer Dark Elf. Shoving him hard, I bounced his head off the room's outer wall and chopped down on his sword arm to knock his blade away. Before he could shake off the stun, I spun around to bury the Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty into the side of his neck.

Though the hand axe didn't proc this time, I slashed my blade into the other side of his neck while yanking the hand axe free. The quick double attack sent him weakly sliding down the wall in agony while clutching at his throat. Before I could finish him off, Helgath shot past me to bury her daggers into the side of his head. Stepping back with a sharp twist, she sent his head rolling across the wooden floor and flashed me a pointy-tooth grin.

'Nicely done,' I congratulated her as we both turned to face the room.

Töten was squashing a Dark Elf's head like an overripe melon with his two-handed War Hammer as Zeven's polearm came chopping down, nearly splitting another female from head to groin in one hit. Next to them, Phoenix and Braid had finished off their own Dark Elves and were looking around for more, when I saw the Cat Burglar racing for the open door at the far end of the room.

"We've got a runner!" Tyhra hollered in warning as she snatched up a bow from the floor with a handful of arrows and ran out after the fleeing target.

"Don't let her escape!" I shouted while racing for the door with Helgath beside me.

"Enhanced Shadow Bolts?" Phoenix asked as she sprinted ahead of me.

"Do it," I hollered back as Braid chased after us while reloading his crossbow.

By the time we burst out of the barracks, Tyhra was sending arrow after arrow at the Dark Elf's fleeing back. Spreading out to either side of her, Phoenix, Helgath, and I began shooting Enhanced Shadow Bolts while Braid slid to one knee and brought his crossbow up. There was a loud clank as his bolts flew across the distance to sink into the female's back, sending her crumpling to the ground like a ragdoll.

"Should I grab her corpse?" Braid hesitantly asked, looking up at me questioningly.

"Do it," I ordered with a nod.

'I'll do a quick loop around the barracks to see if we missed anyone else!' Helgath sent as she took off at a sprint.

"Where is she going?" Tyhra asked as she rose to her feet.

"I'm gonna go help loot," Phoenix announced as she headed back inside the building.

"She's seeing if we missed anyone else," I explained when the nearby sounds of clashing metal and screams caught my ear.

"Do you hear that?" Tyhra asked as she suddenly cocked her head to the side, "It sounds like someone's fighting nearby."

"Fuck," I cursed, getting a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as a bell began ringing in the distance in the direction of the main keep. Turning around, I stormed back inside the barracks growling, "We've got major problems, people!"

"The pit is just northeast of here," a beat-up Drielra eagerly called out as he came rushing out of the kitchen with a bloody Neysa stalking close behind him still in her Werewolf form.

'He's too good with a blade to only be a bartender,' Neysa sent in a bemused tone as her eyes scanned the bodies scattered across the room.

"What's up?" Töten asked as everyone began hurrying over to join us.

"Someone's fighting to the northeast of the barracks," Helgath announced as she strode inside the room behind me.

"And warning bells are going off at the main keep," Braid added close on the Half-Orc's heels.

"There was no way that was from us, was it?" Zeven asked, looking around at the rest of us worriedly.

"Not that fast," Phoenix agreed with a worried shake of her head.

"Must be someone else raiding at the same time we are," Töten growled as he strode out the door to get a better feel for what was going on. As everyone followed him outside, he glanced over his shoulder, making eye contact with the bartender at the back of the group, "Any idea how long it takes for the guards to respond to an attack?"

"For an attack on the fortress, no," Dreilra frowned as he paused for a moment to think while listening to the bells, "They'll first want to determine the extent of the threat to Duke Dukey's life before sending the House of Dukey's Troops out to deal with the enemy."

"Then we have maybe a half an hour to-" Töten began to say when

the Cat Burglar exploded.

“Enough wasting time,” Tyhra screamed, “I didn’t come all this way with you annoying assholes just to lose my children to some bullshit!”

“Dammit it to all hell!” I roared while shoving my hand in my pouch of chicken bones as Helgath and Phoenix followed my example, “She’s going to get everyone fucking killed if she keeps this shit up!”

“Zeven, Braid, and I will try to keep her dumbass out of trouble,” Töten growled as he grabbed the Gnome-Hogboon and Badger Kin by the shoulder and began heading out the door, “while the three of you get your undead pets summoned.”

“What do you want me to raise?” Phoenix urgently asked as Helgath and I began our casts.

“Skeleton Warriors,” I distractedly snapped, casting an extended Raise Skeleton Warrior spell for five of my thirteen pet slots while Helgath began raising five Skeleton Mages.

The difficulty we were having was balancing out our shared Attributes over our soul link. While we’d been riding, we’d come up with a way to let us exchange base stats during our individual casting so as to give our Mages and Skeletons the highest base stats possible. Maybe an emergency like this was the wrong time to try something new, but I worried that we were gonna need every trick in the book to survive what was coming.

Seriously, who in the hell would openly attack a stronghold like this in broad daylight? I wondered while starting my next extended cast of eight Raise Skeleton Dark Mages. We had to be dealing with a platinum-sized guild or possibly a betrayal of the Azure Mages for some transgression by Duke Dukey. Either was enough to ruin our stealth run and possibly our entire day if they wanted to be complete assholes.

Between the two possibilities, I was betting more on the Azure Mages being the culprits in this mess since they seemed to be going after the pit with the Eldritch Crystals. Was it a faction that wanted the gold all for themselves? Had Battle Mage Linienkkaack somehow figured out where we were heading and decided to meet us here?

While the last part of that didn’t make any sense, I was doing my best to be prepared for everything. Not that I saw any way for us to deal with a pissed-off level 112 Battle Mage. Maybe, I could get the fucker to chase me while the girls grabbed the children and ran. As Phoenix and my

second cast ended, there were thirteen Skeleton Dark Mages and seven Skeleton Warriors crowded around us as I turned to the Silver Dire Wolf and a very alarmed bartender.

“Drielra, grab your cart and bring it as close as you can to the pit without being seen,” I said to the bartender before turning to the Silver Dire Wolf, “Neysa your job is to keep him safe.” Seeing their confused looks, I explained in a rush of words, “Look, I don’t know what or who we’re dealing with out there, but if they’re too powerful, I’ll try to lead them away while the two of you save everyone you can and get out of dodge.” See them both nod, I clapped the Dark Elf on the shoulder, “We’ll meet back at your Inn and figure things out from there.”

“Your honor is greater than I’d ever expected, Startum,” Drielra nodded, clapping me back on the shoulder.

“Let’s go,” I shouted to Phoenix and Helgath as we began running for the pit.

“You think this is gonna be as bad as all of that?” Phoenix asked in a hushed voice as Helgath and I began casting battle buffs for the three of us and our skeletons.

“You plan for the worst and hope for the best,” I gritted out through clenched teeth while continuously casting my spells. Seeing the redhead’s raised eyebrow, I scowled, “You try running and casting at the same time.”

“Eh, that’s why I decided to play as a Barbarian,” Phoenix said with a laugh, “That stops me from being everyone’s buff bot and lets me just play for fun.”

“Dick!” I grunted as the woods opened to one of the weirdest melees I’d yet to see in The World.

Near the edge of a large pit, I saw Töten trading blows with a fancy-looking male Dark Elf and what looked to be his five guards. They all had quality gear, with four of them moving like Mike’s Shadow Assassins while the last appeared to be some sort of specialized Shadow Priest.

Further back, Zeven and Braid were fighting for their lives against a group of ten Shadow Rangers. The Badger Kin was doing a good job of breaking them up with his polearm and keeping them dodging, while the Gnome-Hogboon hammered them with his crossbow at range. There were also what looked to be four odd metal rune-powered Warriors that were doing their best to shield the others and hunt down any other Dark Elves

that came too close.

On the opposite side of the large pit, I saw a number of Shadow Rangers and Shadow Warriors on the edge fighting for their lives against what looked to be Ghostly Dark Elves. The phantasmal-like beings were jumping on their targets and ripping their hit points away with odd-shaped long-clawed fingers and misshapen fang-filled maws. They were freaky looking as hell and reminded me of something out of a horror movie.

Adding to the otherworldly spookiness, there was a heavy black fog rolling out of the forest behind them. From the sounds of clashing blades and screams of horror, more fighting was going on within its depths. I didn't know what the hell was going on but just looking at the billowing blackness gave me the heebie-jeebies.

And if that wasn't enough freaky deaky to deal with, there was a group of six Fire Mages in the center of the pit who were surrounded by numerous frozen bodies covered in Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines. The pissed-off Dark Elves were throwing Enhanced Pyroblasts whenever they had a clear shot at one of the ghostly Dark Elves, metallic Warriors, or my friends around the edges of the pit.

'We'll need to be careful. Those are weak monsters from the Spirit Realm,' Helgath warning brought me back to the moment as she continued, 'How do you want to handle this?'

"Targeting the Shadow Priest!" Phoenix snapped as she sprinted past us into the fight.

'Order the Dark Mages to focus target on the Shadow Rangers,' I said while acknowledging Phoenix's words with a wave, 'And then use the Skeleton Warriors to help Töten with Mr. Fancy Pants' guards while I say hi to their boss.'

'What about the phantasms?' Helgath pressed as we moved out to join the battle.

'We'll just have to see what they do,' I mentally grunted as Zeven and Braid started in surprise as the first volley of thirteen Enhanced Shadow Bolts instantly killed one of the Shadow Rangers, 'If they don't fuck with us, then we won't fuck with them.'

'Rrrright,' Helgath playfully mocked she drove into the fight with Töten.

"It's about time you losers showed up!" a panting Töten irritably hollered in relief, "I've got-"

“The adds,” I yelled while running past him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Star!” Töten roared in warning as I lunged for the high-level Dark Elf, “He’s a level 50 DPS Warrior!”

“I’ve got his!” I dismissively called back while parrying aside the Shadow Warrior’s long sword’s slash at my face with the flat of my hand axe. To my shock, the Dark Elf easily deflected my thrust aside and laid into me without hesitation. As the next series of lightning-quick slashes came at me, I managed to block the first with the flat of my hand axe as the second, third, and fourth peppered my legs and arms to rip away my Bone Shield in purple-black sparkles.

Relying on my magic, I drove forward, thrusting at the Dark Elf’s chest only to have the bastard tap the tip of my Dark Blade of Lord Kayden aside with casual disdain, before driving the point in my throat. Once again, the strike did no damage due to my second magic shield, Enhanced Mage Armor. With a look of utter disgust, the male struck again quicker than my eyes could follow.

My head jerked from side to side as his long sword struck in quick succession. As I batted aside his blade, the first long sword slashed across my eyes, forcing me to step back as a cloud of white sparkles filled the air around me. With a thought, I released Frost Nova and brought my hand axe around in a powerful backswing for his chest.

To my annoyance, the wave of ice didn’t even touch him as he danced a half-step back to let the axe blade harmlessly swish past, before diving back at me. Again, he deflected the Overpowered slash from my blade with a flick of his wrist. Before I could recover, his long swords hammered at me from both sides within a complex series of strikes only to have my Holy Shield soak up the damage. As a cloud of golden sparkles surrounded me, the Dark Elf stepped back and gave me a withering glare.

“How many more cheat magic shields are protecting your worthless ass, newfar?” the male sneered as it dawned on me how royally I’d just screwed up by attacking him head-on.

I’d been so used to fighting lower-level opponents or taking on equal-level opponents with my range magic, pets, and in groups, that I’d forgotten I wasn’t a true melee fighter. Hell, even the higher-level Orcs that I’d taken down were with group tactics that focused on weakening the green bastards first at extreme range. Making myself rethink my tactics, I

began anxiously backing away from the Dark Elf casting a three-second spell while calling over my shoulder.

“Need your help here, Töten!”

“Give me a few seconds,” the big guy growled as traded blows with one of the Shadow Assassins, “Phoenix, can you grab this asshole?”

“You think that oaf can save you from my blades?” the Dark Elf taunted as the ground around him erupted with Zombie Hands.

“On my way!” Phoenix grunted in a tight voice as I began blasting at the Dark Elf Leader with my Enhanced Shadow Bolts.

“Die newfar!” the Dark Elf roared as he leaped directly at me without the grasping hands slowing him down one bit.

“Gaahhh!” I screamed, trying to duck low and bring my weapons up as he somersaulted over my head.

This time his long swords drew blood as he stabbed down in quick succession, piercing my body between my armor and neck. Ignoring the agony from the steel piercing my skin, I dropped to my knees and spun around while bringing both of my weapons around in swiping strikes to catch the frozen bastard as he landed. Instead of completing the move, my head was rocked backward as an iron-toed boot slammed into my determined face.

How in the hell was he not frozen by my Artic Shock Armor? I mentally cried while tumbling backward. Thankfully, I was able to shake my shock off enough to control my fall. Rolling head-over-heels, I rose back to my feet inside the five-yard swath of Zombie Hands. As I raised my blades defensively across the chest, I reached into my bag of tricks and cast Cold as Ice as the Dark Elf came charging back at me.

“You have Artic Shock Armor too!” the Dark Elf demanded as his blades came flying at my face and chest.

Between the clutching Zombie Hands tearing at his legs and the twenty percent speed increase from my new Frost Spell, I barely managed to parry the first four flurry of blows as I fell back while mentally reviewing my newest spells. With a snarl, I hit him with a Cone of Cold as his swords ripped a deep gash through my Black Coral Breastplate. As his elbow slammed into my mouth, I hit him with an Artic Flash.

Breathing a sigh of relief as the Dark Elf was suddenly encased in a block of ice, I urgently backpaddled from the melee bastard, trying to put as much space between us as possible. While the crowd control spell was

supposed to be good for fifteen seconds, I wasn't about to bet my life on it since the Shadow Swordsman had been surprisingly resistant to my magic.

"Where the hell are you, Töten?" I hollered while keeping my blades pointed at the Dark Elf's back and my new Piercing Strike spell ready to cast.

"Coming up behind you," Töten shouted from behind me just as the block of ice exploded in front of me.

"What the hell?" I screamed in confusion while double-casting Piercing Strike.

The asshole didn't even bother deflecting the Ice Spikes flying at his back as he dropped to his knees and zipped around in a tight circle to slide directly at me. As a burning conflagration of flames appeared beneath our feet from the big guy aura, I felt Töten presence beside me as I dropped a Light Word of Censor in the bastard's path just as the Zombie Hands disappeared.

"How many damn magic trees do you have?" the Dark Elf snarled as he sprang backward just before entering the golden fiery ground.

"DPS Warriors have numerous escape and quick damage abilities in their skill tree," Töten warned as we faced the Dark Elf together.

"How are we doing against the other melee fighters?" I asked not daring to look away from the slippery bastard.

"About the same," Töten sighed at the alarmed look I gave him, "Helgath and your Skeleton Warriors are holding their own but we won't take them down until your Skeleton Mages have time to finish taking down the Shadow Rangers."

"I don't know who you intruders are, but your time is nearly up," the Dark Elf Leader spat as his eyes quickly swept the battlefield, before worriedly focusing on the black fog behind us, "Once the Captain of the Guard arrives with our reinforcements, I'll make sure to give you a proper tour of the pit after the deaths you caused here and in Thyflumoor village."

"Thyflumoor village?" Töten asked, eyeing me questioningly.

"I think that was where the children were from," I replied with a confused shrug.

"That wasn't you who attacked us in Thyflumoor village?" the Dark Elf demanded in shock.

"We're from Haldale," I offered, trying to see what information that might shake loose.

“I guess these assholes are making friends wherever they go,” Töten sarcastically added as the sounds of fighting increased behind us.

“Lies!” the Dark Elf shrieked as he heedlessly rushed into the range of the big guy’s flaming aura.

Without hesitation, I hit the bastard with both a Shackles of Light and Enfeeblement spell, bringing him to a stop for a split second. Even with reduced stats, he broke free as I hit him with a double-cast of Frost Bane. Blurring forward, he dodged Töten’s swing and stabbed him in the chest while I double cast Piercing Strike at point blank range.

Letting go of the hilts of his long swords, the slippery bastard blurred to evade both icy spikes and a swipe from Töten’s heavy shield. With a quick side-step, he dodged the oversized War Hammer as it came slamming into the ground next to him. As I dodged to the side for a clear shot at him, the Dark Elf spun around and yanked his blades free, before following up with another unique attack that tore two large gashes in Töten’s breastplate.

Ducking below another swing of the oversized hammer, the Dark Elf’s blades flashed in a complex series of strikes piercing the big guy’s chest as I double-cast Piercing Strike once again. This time, I got the hit as Töten punched him in the face. The triple hit seemed to stagger the male. As Töten followed up with a Shield Bash, the Shadow Swordsman dodged backward to evade the blow as I slipped behind him and hit him with another pair of Piercing Strikes.

That got his attention really quickly. As the Dark Elf turned around to eviscerate me with a series of lightning-fast slashes, Töten used a special ability as he suddenly sped up to bring his War Hammer slamming down onto the Dark Elf’s back. Even then, the bastard managed to batter away my thrusts and slashes as if I were a noob. As he advanced on me, I hit him at point-blank range with another pair of Piercing Strikes while the big guy Shield Bashed him from behind.

Staggered from the Demon Shield, the Dark Elf tried to dodge away from the two-handed War Hammer coming down at his head, but I was there thrusting and chopping to block his escape. This time, both blades struck true. Even as his long swords both pierced my chest, Töten’s War Hammer crunched down on his shoulder, ripping the blades from my chest and slamming him to the ground with his hit points flashing in the red of near death.

“That fucking hurt,” I gasped, staggering a step back and hitting both of us with a Regeneration as I quickly glanced around the battlefield.

My Skeleton Dark Mages had nearly burned through all of the Shadow Rangers, while Braid was taking potshots at any that tried to run. Zeven and Phoenix had joined Helgath and my Skeleton Warriors in taking down the remaining melee Dark Elves. All three of them were looking pretty beat up. Nonetheless, they were close to taking the four of them down if they could shut down the Dark Priest that was keeping them alive when the big guy pulled my attention back to him.

“Good thing you kept making him burn up his special abilities to break out of your crowd control spells or that could’ve gotten ugly,” Töten distractedly said as he quickly checked over the holes in his breastplate. Shaking his head at the jagged holes, he bent down and picked the Dark Elf Leader by the throat and held him out to me as I began rebuffing, “What do you want to do with this asshole?”

“I don’t know,” I grunted, momentarily wondering how much worse that could’ve gone. Shaking my head to dismiss that ugly thought, I frowned as my eyes went to the four high-level Dark Elves still fighting our friends and the group of Fire Mages blasting the far side of the pit, “Think we can use him to get his troopers to surrender?”

“Maybe, but why would we?” Töten grunted as his eyes swept the fighting going on around us, “They’ll be going down as soon as your Skellies finish off the Rangers.”

“I don’t know,” I sighed, wondering if it was worth the effort or not. Truth be told, I didn’t like the idea of having any enemies alive that might stab us in the back when we were dealing with whatever other group was headed our way, “Do you think we can use them as hostages for our escape if their reinforcements arrive before we’re finished getting everyone freed?”

“Uh, possibly,” Töten hesitated as he paused to consider my words when a Humanoid figure in full plate mail armor, glowing blue eyes, and a massive two-handed Great Sword came stomping out of the black fog bank.

To my surprise, half of the Fire Mages seemed to shrink back in fear at the sight of the ghastly-looking Warrior. Ignoring the feeling of dread that seemed to radiate out from him like one of Töten’s aura, a frown came to my lips upon seeing six ghostly Dark Elf apparitions float out of the black fog following after him. Wondering who this yahoo was and how

many more players he might have with him, I hit him with an Identify as he came to a stop at the far edge of the pit.

“My name is Sir Talos Darkwind of the Dark Tower Order,” the male sonorous voice bellowed across the pit and over the sounds of battle as his glowing blue eyes met mine, “I am only here to cleanse the evil cretins that have bound themselves to the Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines and the evil of the Reavers.” The name Talos Darkwind, level 43 Shade-Touched, Wraith Knight suddenly appeared over his head as he spoke. “On my word of honor, I offer you one chance. Stop your fighting and leave now or face my wrath along with the guilty!”

“What the hell is this asshole going on about?” Töten demanded in a hushed voice, “He’s only level 43!”

“No clue,” I hissed back trying to understand what was going on, “Maybe, there’s a lot more of them in the black fog?”

The guy couldn’t possibly be alone here with his ghostly pets, could he? I silently wondered as my mind churned with possibilities. Only one of those Role Players would be ballsy enough to act like this when faced with overwhelming force. If our whole stealth raid was screwed up because this asshole wanted to stay in character and cash out, I was gonna give him a piece of my mind after spawn camping his ass for an hour once this was over.

“Doubtful,” Töten scoffed with a sharp shake of his head as he growled, “How much you want to bet this asshole is only here to grab the Eldritch Crystals for himself?”

“Fuck that jazz,” I snorted with a shake of my head. Before I could reply to his demands, a shout came from the pit.

“We not going anywhere without these children, asshole!” Tyhra roared at the Wraith Knight after Sneak Attacking a Fire Mage in the pit.

“Then, you will die with the rest of the evil cretins!” Talos roared at the Cat Burglar as the Fire Mages tried to burn her down. Swinging his Great Sword over his shoulder, the Wraith Knight roared to his ghostly pets as his arm suddenly shot forward, “Slaughter them all!”

“I have returned, Wraith Knight!”

“I serve, Wraith Knight!”

“I obey, Wraith Knight!”

“Heads up!” I shouted jumping backward as the Great Sword cleared the gap between us in the blink of an eye.

To my utter shock, the massive blade went through the Dark Elf Leader's entire body and punched through Töten's breastplate, sending both males flying backward a good five yards from the force of the impact. As the big guy slid to a stop with the Dark Elf pinned to his chest, I checked my HUD while the six ghostly apparitions flowed into the pit heading for the Fire Mages.

"Are you okay?" I grunted, noting the ten percent drop in the big guy's hit points. As I hit him with a Regeneration, the Great Sword shimmered and disappeared with the pop of displaced air.

"I'll live," Töten painfully groaned while pushing the Dark Elf Leader's corpse off his chest. As the Great Sword suddenly reappeared back in the Wraith Knight's gauntleted hands, he dizzily began climbing to his feet as the Wraith Knight started charging toward us, "But it feels like I was kicked in the chest by a horse," he grimly added, "in the real world."

"Phoenix, Zeven, and Helgath, we've got incoming. Let those assholes go and fall back to Töten and me!" I shouted while commanding my Skeleton Warriors to do the same. With a quick glance at the range battle raging behind us, I ordered the Skeleton Dark Mages to finish off the Shadow Rangers before targeting the Wraith Knight.

"Fuck that," Phoenix snarled as she continued fighting, "I'm not gonna let some glowy bitch steal my kill!"

"That goes double for me!" Zeven agreed as he focused on taking down the Shadow Assassin in front of him.

'What should I do?' Helgath asked as she hesitantly backed away from the Shadow Assassin and Shadow Priest that she'd been fighting with my Skeleton Warriors.

"Dammit all to hell!" I snarled under my breath. Commanding my Skeleton Warriors to keep fighting, I mentally added to the Half-Orc, 'Once that asshole joins the fight, try to get the hell out of dodge and fall back to me as quickly as you can!'

'Yes, War Leader!' Helgath smartly replied as she swung around to keep a line of sight on the approaching Wraith Knight.

"Phoenix is right, the asshole is only level 43," Töten growled as he watched me take out another five chicken bones and begin another extended cast of Raise Skeleton Warrior, "What the hell are you so freaked out about?"

"Look at your health!" I irritably snapped as he came charging up

to Phoenix, “One hit and he dropped your hit points down by ten percent!”

“That is kind of weird,” Töten frowned while watching the Barbarian spin around to slash at the Wraith Knight coming up behind her, “I’m seventy-five percent resistant to all magic but Frost.”

To her surprise, Talos easily deflected her attack with the flat of his two-handed sword, before kicking her in the chest. As she flew backward eight yards to crash into the ground, he took the Shadow Assassin’s Flurry of Blades without even flinching as he spun around and chopped down with his Great Sword.

To Töten’s and my shock, the single two-handed blow nearly chopped the Shadow Assassin in half. Even with her body nearly split in half, the Dark Elf fell forward while managing to jab her blades under the Wraith Knight’s underarms and deep into his chest. Accepting the pain, Talos lifted a forearm and slammed it down on the base of his massive blade, forcing it through the rest of the Shadow Assassin’s body.

“Helgath thinks he might be using some sort of Spirit or Essence ability and not magic,” I explained as the Dark Elf’s body crumpled to the ground.

“Okay, that’s not good,” Töten agreed as Zeven spun around swinging his polearm at the approaching Wraith Knight.

We watched in shock as the other player stepped inside the swing. Hooking his arm around the shaft, Talos pivoted harder and faster to yank Zeven off his clawed feet. Refusing to let go of his weapon, the Badger Kin was slung away as the Wraith Knight suddenly let go of the shaft. As the Badger Kin tumbled into the pit, the Shadow Assassin that he’d been fighting appeared at the Wraith Knight’s vulnerable back and struck with a blur of quick Backstabs targeting the gaps in the heavy armor.

It was an impressive attack that dropped Talos’s hit points down into the red of severely damaged. Even so, the Wraith Knight didn’t back down or hesitate. Using the momentum from tossing the Badger Kin into the pit, he completed his spin to bring his Great Sword up and around in an overhead slash at the Shadow Assassin.

“Are you guys, okay?” I heard Töten call out in group chat as the Dark Elf shimmered and disappeared just before the Great Sword sliced through the spot where he’d been standing.

“Yeah, just pissed” Zeven irritably snapped as a loud series of Enhanced Pyroblasts rang out below the rim.

“We’re helping dumbass finish off these Fire Mages,” Phoenix furiously added as I watched the Shadow Assassin reappear behind Talos’s back only to catch a spinning forearm in the face, “And then we’ll be back up to give you guys a hand with that asshole.”

“Seriously, that fucker needs to go down,” Zeven snarled as the Shadow Assassin reeled from the blow, but not before getting a few wicked strikes on the Wraith Knight’s extended arm and chest that should’ve dropped him right then and there.

“Agreed,” Töten snarled as he gave me an unhappy glare, “Which begs to ask, why aren’t we taking this ass-clown down now?”

“Because something is not right here. How did this guy make it this far into the stronghold against all of these higher-level opponents?” I irritably snapped while watching the triumphant grin die on the Shadow Assassin’s face. The Dark Elf had obviously thought his last combo should’ve killed the lower-level Wraith Knight too, which was why he was just as shocked as I was when the massive two-handed sword swung around in a wide arc to chop off his head. “I’d like to have a better understanding of who else we might be going up against and what their Nightmare tree might be, before adding another name to my already too-long list of enemies!”

“How in the hell did he pull that shit off?” Töten demanded in shock as the Shadow Assassin’s headless corpse collapsed to the ground, “And how the hell is he nearly back to full health!”

‘Get out of there!’ I ordered, wondering the same thing as the Wraith Knight turned toward Helgath’s battle. As the Shadow Assassin rolled away from her Backstab, the Half-Orc triggered Slip into Shadow and disappeared just as my extended cast completed and the Skeleton Warriors around her collapsed into their base components.

To my surprise, the two remaining Dark Elves didn’t try to chase after her. Instead, they turned to face the Wraith Knight as he came to a stop not eight yards away from them. Stretching out his arms, his sonorous voice called out, “Raise Ghost!” as the Shadow Assassin disappeared in a shimmer of shadows and the Dark Priest hit him with some sort of purple spell.

“Ah, shit!” Töten swore as a ghostly Dark Elf rose from the corpse at the Wraith Knight’s feet, “He’s one of those special Spirit Essence classes!”

“Die you undead monster!” the Dark Elf screeched as he stepped out of the Wraith Knight’s shadow with his blades striking.

“Raise Ghost!” Talos bellowed as the first phantasmic Dark Elf flew through his body to leap on top of the Shadow Assassin behind him.

Töten and I watched the horrific fight in stunned amazement as the Shadow Assassin screamed in terror and agony. As the Wraith Knight shook off the damage from the Sneak Attack, the ghostly Dark Elf began viciously shanking, clawing, and biting at his previous comrade while tightly clutching the Shadow Assassin with its arms and legs.

To my surprise, the Shadow Assassin did manage to finally kill the ghostly Dark Elf with its sword, but not before taking a massive amount of damage. Not because his weapons didn’t hurt the ghostly phantasma, I slowly realized, but because it was extremely difficult to kill the creature once it was on top of you. As the Shadow Assassin finished off the ghost, Talos’s hand locked around the Dark Elf’s neck as he roared, “No, you die!”

‘He drained half of my mana!’ Helgath warningly sent as she came to a stop beside me.

‘Any idea of the range of the spell?’ I asked as my frown deepened.

“What’s a special Spirit Essence class?” Braid demanded as he turned around in alarm with his crossbow held at the ready, “And are we bloody killing him or not?”

‘Maybe, a ten-yard radius,’ Helgath immediately answered.

“The World has some unique Nightmare trees and classes that use no mana,” Töten said, making air quotes, “Like using Psionics, Spirit, and Essence abilities.”

‘I wonder if that’s how he’s recovering his hit points so quickly,’ I mentally replied.

“So, you’re saying it’s possible to learn how to be Jedi?” Braid asked, noticeably perking up in excitement.

“Something like that,” Töten grunted in exasperation.

“That would be freaking cool,” I agreed, giving him a sideways look.

“That being said,” the Gnome-Hogboon continued, “You never did say if we’re killing him or not.”

“That’s the part I’m still trying to figure out,” I admitted with a frown.

Not that I particularly wanted to fight this guy if we didn’t need to.

If I handled this right, who knows, we might be able to get access to some unique abilities and spells.

As those thoughts went through my mind, I curiously watched as he eagerly killed the Dark Elves. Except for hurting Töten when he'd killed their leader, Talos had only tossed my friends around and not truly attacked any of us. That either meant he was simply trying to keep us out of his way or he'd show his full hand once he was done with the guards. That was the hundred-dollar question, I thought while wondering what his unique Nightmare tree might be.

Even with the high damage being dealt to him, Talos had no problems surviving the fight. He tanked the last few desperate strikes as he finished choking the Shadow Assassin to death. That was even with the Shadow Priest blasting him with every attack spell he had. That Vitality spell was no joke, I thought with a frown. As he leaped on top of the Shadow Priest, my mind began working on ways to counteract his displayed abilities if needed.

“What, are you planning to recruit him or something?” Töten scoffed as I made a noncommittal grunt.

“All that I can say,” Braid warned in a concerned tone, “Is that I wouldn't get too close to that guy if you can help it.”

“Tell me about it,” I grunted with a frown, “That mana-leeching spell he has is no joke.”

“Mana leeching spell?” Töten demanded, grabbing me by the shoulder as the fight came to an abrupt end.

“Yeah, Helgath said it had around a ten-yard radius,” I quickly replied, when the Wraith Knight turned to face us, “Let me see if I can come to an agreement with this guy.”

“So, Sir Darkwind, since you ruined our stealth run and set off every alarm in the main keep,” I said in a loud voice while walking toward him and commanding my Skeleton Dark Mages to hold their fire as they finished off the last Shadow Ranger with Braid's help, “Do you want to discuss how we're going to work together to save the kidnapped people in the pit and divvy up the loot or should we cut you down and be on our way?”

“Who are you that has chosen to face my wrath?” Talos demanded, striding toward me as his glowing eyes swept the area, “Do you speak of all of those that are present?”

“My name is Overlord Startum Ironwolf,” I stated, using my full in-game title as I came to a stop. Staying in character was always a big thing when dealing with Role Players. Noting that the dark fog was slowly clearing away behind him and the solo figure standing within its midst, I confidently continued as a wry grin flashed across my lips, “And, yes, I speak for those that are here, and as the one that currently holds your life and that of your companion’s in my hands.”

“You not only dare to engender my wrath!” Talos’s voice mockingly boomed across the clearing, “You also have the audacity to challenge me to a duel!” He planted the point of his Great Sword into the ground at his feet and posed, gripping the hilt with both hands. “It is not a simple thing to kill that which is already dead!”

“I’m actually quite the pro at it,” I assured him while waving an arm at the eighteen Skeletons arrayed behind me.

“Overlord Ironwolf,” Talos’s sonorous voice took on an edge of disappointment, “There is no way a Warlock Baron Mage such as yourself can defeat me in a one-on-one duel. Accept my forbearance and leave the battlefield with your life and those of your companions.” He swept an arm toward the pit and the kidnapped victims held within. “I’ll purge this evil and be on my way.” His haunting glowing eyes returned to mine. “Besides, there is no power that can free a Reaver’s victim once they’re in the embrace of Carnivorous Flesh-Cursed Vines.”

“Over my dead body!” I heard Tyhra shout from inside the pit, “I’ll kick anyone’s ass who tries to hurt my children!”

“Do you claim that female too?” Talos heatedly demanded as if I’d somehow broken my word.

“Unfortunately, I do,” I sighed and shook my head while thinking back to the note that had been part of my Identify for the Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines. The description said something about researching the Reaver War for more information, “Nonetheless, what she says is true. I will slaughter you and anyone else who attempts to hurt those that I am here to rescue.” Seeing the Wraith Knight’s blue eyes flare at my words, I jerked my chin toward the pit. “As far as your Reavers and their Carnivorous Flesh-Cursed Vines, these aren’t them. So, until I know they can’t be saved, you’ll kill those kidnapped victims over my dead body.”

“Your terms are acceptable,” Talos stated after a moment of thought.

“See, I told you everything would be cool,” I whispered in group chat while glancing over my shoulder.

“Uh-huh, right,” Töten mockingly laughed while shaking his head.

“What?” I demanded, giving him a “What the fuck” look.

“Prioress Phimyar, attend me!” Talos bellowed over his shoulder as an armored female Half-Elf stepped out of the shimmering haze left over from the black fog.

“Damn, she’s fine!” Töten exclaimed in group chat as I hit her with an Identify.

“Nice armor,” Zeven chimed in from the center of the pit.

“Eh, I like mine a bit sexier,” Phoenix dismissively grunted next to the Badger Kin as the name Selussa Phimyar, Gray Elf-Human Prioress, level 41.

“Are you seriously checking out the crazy Wraith Knight’s companion?” Tyhra demanded in exasperation at our comments, “As far as you know, she’s dead too.”

“Is it necrophilia if they’re living undead?” Töten asked as the Cat Burglar and Zeven groaned.

“A corpse is a corpse is a corpse,” I singsonged as the Cat Burglar gagged.

“Hey, side chicks need lovin’ too,” Phoenix added with an amused chuckle, “Besides that’s a sweet-ass claymore she’s carrying.”

‘I don’t like this,’ Helgath worriedly sent as I felt her approaching from behind. Without waiting to be asked, the Half-Orc began quietly refreshing our battle buffs.

“I think a Prioress is somewhat like a Paladin or Cleric,” Töten thoughtfully muttered to himself in group chat as I quickly buffed myself with the handful of spells that were self-cast only, “I wonder if she’ll-”

“Talos!” the Prioress hissed as soon as she noticed the big guy standing further back behind me, “There’s an Oni Anti-Paladin here!”

“Hate me,” Töten finished after the Half-Elf’s outburst.

“Is this going to be a problem with whatever we’re doing?” I drolly asked, checking the time on my HUD as the female’s face tightened in disgust, “Because we’re sort of running out of time here.”

“Prioress Phimyar is here to ensure the rules of our duel are properly followed and no one else interferes,” Talos emotionlessly stated as his companion came to a stop behind him.

“Duel?” Phoenix exclaimed in excitement as she began climbing out of the pit, “I’ve gotta see this!”

“Me too,” Zeven agreed as he followed after her.

“It would probably be better if you started seeing how you can free those people,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes at the pair.

“I’m trying to figure that out now since you guys are screwing around,” Tyhra growled from somewhere in the pit.

“Try not to kill anyone,” I snapped back, before calling over my shoulder in local chat, “You want to second me too, Töten?”

“It’s probably for the best,” Töten agreed as he unhappily eyed the Prioress.

“How dare you question the honor of the Dark Tower Order!” the Prioress huffed as if I’d just besmirched her honor, “All adherents to our Order are known throughout the Nordic Region as-”

“Look, I don’t know you or your Order from Adam,” I growled, stopping the proud female’s protests as her face turned beat red, “But I can judge you by your actions.” I flipped a forefinger out as she sputtered in outrage. “First, you’re the companion of a Wraith Knight that would slaughter innocents because it’s expedient.” I flipped a second finger out meeting her gray eyes. “Second, you assaulted and now are challenging those who are trying to save the poor Halflings that have been kidnapped to a duel. Third-”

“You don’t understand the Reavers or the evil that’s being unleashed-” Prioress interrupted me in a rush of words.

“I don’t understand!” I roared in righteous fury, cutting her off again as Talos’s eyes dangerously flared, “You have no clue as to what I understand or don’t!” My face darkened as I glared at them both, “State the rules of this duel!”

“You may only use the weapons, abilities, magic, and skills that you possess without any outside assistance,” Prioress Phimyar gritted out through gritted teeth.

“Upon losing,” Talos took over the explanation, “You and your group will vacate the premises without taking anything else except for your corpse and the items left behind in your gravestone!”

“Sounds easy enough,” I grunted as a sneer came to my lips, “I assume that means you will ensure that your companion will keep far enough away to not add to your mana leeching or whatever other abilities

you might be able to trigger?”

“I’m his wife,” the Prioress hauntingly explained as the Wraith Knight raised a gauntleted fist to stop any further comments.

“She will keep an appropriate distance,” Talos assured me, before sweeping an arm at the pit and my friends, “Nor will I leech from any others that are present.”

“Is there a limit area we must fight inside?” I asked, nodding at his words.

“You will not be able to stay out of my reach, but I would agree to hold this duel within the clearing around the pit,” Talos coldly stated as if this were a moot point, “Is that acceptable?”

“It works,” I smirked at his cocky attitude, “Lastly, what will you give up if you lose this duel?”

“If I lose this duel!” Talos’s exclamation of disbelief echoed around the clearing, “I’ll serve as your vassal for a month and a day as long as it doesn’t interfere with my oaths!”

“Your oaths?” I asked, arching an eyebrow as the Barbarian loudly scoffed.

“That’s a convenient get-out-of-jail-free card you can throw down at any time,” Phoenix ridiculed from the edge of the pit.

“I will not tell a lie, fight with dishonor, or battle against the Dark Tower Order,” Talos stated in a cold and emotionless tone.

“None of which means you won’t fight against the enemies I have of the Northern Tribes and are willing to travel with me?” I pressed for clarification. Getting a silent nod from the Wraith Knight, I shrugged, “Excellent, I accept the terms of the duel.”

“Then,” Talos said, motioning to Helgath and Töten as his wife backed away, “Clear out the Goblin and your second and we will begin on the count of three.”

“Oh, the Half-Orc stays,” I said as Helgath unsheathed her blades.

“You already try to cheat?” Talos roared as he whipped his Great Sword up above his head.

“The Half-Orc is my soulmate and is a part of my base abilities,” I innocently stated while looking back and forth between them, “There is no way for me to not share our abilities.”

“What proof do you have of this?” Prioress Phimyar demanded as she placed a staying hand on the Wraith Knight’s shoulder.

‘Show them your rune,’ I sent while unstrapping my chest plate. A moment later, we both showed them the Rune of Soul Binding seared into our chests. As we touched, the runes pulsed with power.

“What does any of that prove?” Talos growled as his wife gasped in understanding.

“They are soul-bound, meaning you’ll have to kill them both to win,” Prioress Phimyar explained in a harsh whisper as the Wraith Knight’s head jerked back in surprise, “Such a factor is within the boundary of the duel’s rules.”

“Whatever,” Talos growled, recovering his cool as his glowing eyes flared, “She’s just another soon-to-be corpse for me to suck dry!”

“You sure we shouldn’t just slaughter them and go about our way?” Töten asked in group chat as he joined the others at the edge of the pit.

“By the way, Star,” Phoenix crowed while folding her arms across her chest, “If you lose, you owe us our share of the gold for all of the Lesser Eldritch Crystals we’re gonna lose!”

“That,” Zeven countered, “Or we can kill these idiots and loot everything for ourselves.”

“Yeah, I like that option a lot better,” Töten agreed, laughing and high-fiving as Braid quietly joined them.

“Just chill your jets,” I sighed as we faced off against the Wraith Knight while the Prioress came to a spot between us fifteen yards away.

“Sir Talos Darkwind,” Prioress Darkwind announced as she waved an arm to the Wraith Knight, before turning toward us, “Overlord Startum Ironwolf and Helgath Ironwolf, prepare to fight!” As we both nodded, she began counting down while I drew my weapons, “Three, two-”

“What is this?” Phoenix scoffed from the sidelines, “A Mortal Combat match?”

“Looks that way,” Braid agreed with a snort.

“One,” Prioress Darkwind dropped her arm and shouted, “Fight!”

What surprised me is that Talos didn’t immediately rush to attack. Instead, he whipped his sword back over his shoulder and began calmly striding towards us like an unstoppable tank. Splitting up, we both started hammering the Wraith Knight with magic.

I hit him with a Magnify Damage, before starting a cast of Zombie Hands as Helgath began blasting him with Enhanced Shadow Bolts. Each hit took a decent chunk of the Wraith Knight’s hit points away even if they

didn't seem to be doing full damage. Even more annoying, the clutching Zombies' clawed hands did nothing to slow his advance. As he strode within ten yards, a wave of fear washed over me as he raised a gauntleted hand and shouted, "Vitality!"

'Okay, that mana drain is no joke,' I grunted to Helgath while doing my best to ignore the aura of fear. Hitting him with another Magnify Damage spell, we both switched to different spell trees.

'The draw is nearly the same as your bonus to regeneration from your Spirit stat,' Helgath noted as she backed out of the range of his fear aura and mana-leeching spell to blast him with Piercing Strikes, 'Frost Magic isn't any more effective.'

'Let's see how he deals with Light Magic,' I gritted out through clenched teeth and hit him with a Regeneration.

"Die honorless scum!" Talos roared, lunging at me with an overpowered swinging of his massive Great Sword.

"Come and get some!" I hollered while catching the heavy blade with my crossed hand axe and blade.

To my utter shock, I barely stopped the blow from crushing my skull as my arms went numb from the strike. Before I could shove his two-handed sword away and take a swing at him, his heavy gauntleted fist slammed into the side of my face. Even though my magic shield took the hit, the force of the blow sent me staggering backward and lowering my weapons.

'Light Magic hurts him double the amount of the heal!' Helgath reported while the two-handed sword I'd been blocking slammed into the side of my helm.

There was an explosion of purple-black sparkles as my Bone Shield collapsed. As I braced my rear foot to recover, Talos's front foot slammed into my chest. The iron-toed greaves hit like a freight train as I was lifted off my feet and sent crashing to the ground. Even though I took no damage, it felt like my molars had been shaken loose. Tucking my head to my chest, I just managed to turn the move into a backward roll.

Springing back to my feet, I'd barely raised my blades defensively in front of me, when the Wraith Knight was on me. Pressing my blades together, I swung them like a single weapon to parry the incoming blow from his Great Sword coming in at my head. Shoving the heavy blade aside, I slammed the metal portion of my helm into his faceplate.

The strike ruptured my Enhanced Mage Armor but at least sent the undead bastard a step backward. Trying to keep up the pressure, I hacked my Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty into the side of his head and stabbed him in the breastplate with my Dark Blade of Lord Kayden. Both strikes seemed to do little to no damage as he whacked me across the face with the flat of his two-handed sword.

Luckily, the strike was blocked by my Holy Shield, allowing me to punch him in the side of the helm. The loud gong from my fist ringing his bell didn't seem to bother him in the least. Instead of having him backpaddle from my follow-up elbow to his face, his fist slammed into my gut, shoving me backward as the damage was mitigated once again.

"What do I have to do to hurt you?" Talos roared as I began hacking at him with my hand axe and sword like a berserker.

Gripping his Great Sword like a bō staff, the Wraith Knight used the flat of his blade to push my weapons aside. Before I could bring them back around, he hammered the point into my gut in a shower of golden sparkles. Gasping for breath as I doubled in pain, I let out a roar and swung my Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty into his groin for all I was worth. Instead of reacting like a normal living being, the bastard swung the hilt of his two-handed Great Sword into my face.

'I still don't understand why you're so intent on trying to beat him this way,' Helgath worriedly sent as I staggered away from the Wraith Knight, 'He's a powerful melee class and you're a support mage class!'

'What can I say?' I groaned as he came striding after me, 'I thought I could beat him at his own game since I'm eight levels higher!'

'You can't take him on mano a mano,' Helgath ardently sent as the bastard's Great Sword came smashing down at my head, 'And I can't do enough spell damage to overcome the mana-leeching health conversion he's using against you!'

"You should've taken the deal I'd offered," Talos confidently stated as he repeatedly chopped at me with his two-hander faster than humanly possible. He was like a machine, I thought, as he continued to goad me, "Now, I'll be able to apply for the bounty that was placed on your head by the Chaos Storm Alliance without breaking any of my oaths!"

"You haven't killed me yet!" I shouted in his face even as he ripped Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty from my hand and punched me in the face.

“You’re already dead, you just don’t know it!” Talos taunted as his next swing blasted me off my feet and sent my Dark Blade of Lord Kayden skittering away across the ground.

‘Star!’ Helgath mental shriek rang in my head as I quickly rolled to my feet while commanding my undead pets to me.

“Pick up your blade so we can complete this foolish duel,” Talos coldly stated as he confidently stabbed his Great Sword into the ground at his feet, “Or fall to your knees and yield to me!”

“Not too shabby for an eight-level difference,” I admitted, giving the Wraith Knight an impressed nod as I dusted off my hands. Noting Helgath’s Regeneration spell had raised my hit points back to full, I cracked my neck. As a confident smirk split my lips, my five Skeleton Warriors came charging at his back, “But you’re right, it’s time to end this charade!”

“You betray me even after I offer you mercy?” Talos demanded as he swung around to parry the blows coming at his back, “I’ll slaughter every last one of you!”

“I’ve broken no rules of our duel,” I replied to the Wraith Knight’s accusation while backing out of his Vitality spell’s range. As soon as I crossed that invisible line, I ordered my Skeleton Dark Mages to begin pummeling him.

“How is this within the rules of the duel?” Talos bellowed in confusion as he furiously pummeled the Skeleton Warriors surrounding him while the thirteen Skeleton Dark Mages began repeatedly hitting him with volleys of Enhanced Shadow Bolts.

“They’re all part of his personal retinue!” Prioress Phimyar anxiously explained as she helplessly watched her husband’s soon-to-be death, “There is nothing I can do!”

“This just shows your lack of honor!” Talos roared as he tried to smash the wall of Skeleton Warriors surrounding him so that he could charge me.

“My lack of honor!” My guffaws of laughter rang out across the clearing as tears came to my eyes. “Did seriously expect me to use only melee weapons for our duel? Or, is it only unfair because you can’t adequately counter my magic tree like you expected?”

“This is unconscionable!” Talos screamed as my Skeleton Warriors used their blades sticking into his body to drag him to the ground, “You’re a one-man raid!”

“Git gud scrub!” Phoenix’s taunting shout from the sidelines made the Wraith Knight’s glowing eyes smolder in outrage.

“Uh, sorry about that, man,” I apologized, trying not to laugh as I embarrassingly rubbed the back of my neck, “We sort of joke hard with one another.”

“Rraawww!” a pissed-off Talos raged as I silently shrugged and cast Inner Light.

As soon as I’d cast the spell, it felt like a fire had been lit inside my chest. The extra forty points from the spell brought my total Spirit up to two hundred and fifty-one points. Waiting for my mana pool to hit fifteen hundred, I walked over and picked up my Dark Blade of Lord Kayden, before gathering up my Vicious Executioner’s Axe of Cruelty. By the time I turned back to the Wraith Knight, it was obvious the fight was nearly over.

In a last-ditch effort, Talos had begun raised ghosts from the dead Dark Elves around us. That was an impressive feat to perform while being repeatedly blasted and stabbed from a decent-sized raid of skeletons. However, it was probably some sort of special undead ability because he hadn’t flinched or visibly reacted to any of my previous hits.

‘You pushed that too close to the edge,’ Helgath complained as she took each ghostly Dark Elf out with an instant cast of Regeneration.

‘You’re right,’ I agreed with a mental frown, ‘I was acting a little too cocky there and nearly got smacked down for the mistake.’

Instead of letting my pets and Helgath burn him down alone, I began hitting him with Enhanced Heal as the Half-Orc bounced back and forth between Regeneration and Enhanced Quick Heal. Even with the massive spell damage he was taking, the Wraith Knight’s hit points didn’t start to bottom out until his mana pool was completely empty.

‘Don’t kill him,’ I warned Helgath when Talos dropped to his knees, ‘Let’s try to stop around one or two hundred health.’

It took a lot of coordination for Helgath and me to simultaneously stop the attack at that low of health. While the Half-Orc focused on controlling the Skeleton Dark Mages, I worked on having the Skeleton Warriors pull their blades from the Wraith Knight’s body and hold him in place. Thankfully, by then Sir Talos had finally accepted the fact that he wasn’t going to overpower the five undead holding him down. As the last Enhanced Shadow Bolts pummeled his body, I squatted down eleven yards in front of his face

“So, Sir Talos,” I said while looking into his glowing blue eyes, “Do you wanna yield and admit defeat or have me send you to the graveyard to make it official?”

“You didn’t have the skill to beat me,” Talos gritted out through clenched teeth, “Your magic and summons are what defeated me.”

“Says the Wraith Knight that can’t feel pain and has the ability to leech health from the living around him,” I said, letting out a bark of laughter.

“I’m speaking blade-to-blade,” Talos disagreed, refusing to back down an inch, “Not one Nightmare tree against another.” He shook his head in pure disgust. “You’re eight levels higher than me and a Mage. Where is the honor in that?”

“And you’re a Warrior with a bunch of unique melee attacks, an attribute focused on physical combat, and a Race type that can ignore the seventy-five percent realism of pain.” I shook my head in disappointment. “Regardless of the level difference between us, where is the honor in that?” Seeing his lips press together at my points, I relented somewhat. “Life is not equitable-”

“Equitable?” Talos scoffed at my use of the word.

“Fair, equitable, or whatever word you wish to use in its place.” I dismissively continued, “All of us have different abilities and capabilities. How we use them to get the win is what’s important.”

“And be damned the lack of honor that requires,” Talos sneered as he held his head up high.

“While I always fight to win and will use any tactic that I deem appropriate to achieve my goal,” I unequivocally stated, “That doesn’t mean I don’t have my own sense of honor.” A cruel grin came to my lips. “Otherwise, I’d simply just slit your throat and be done with it.”

“If you guys are gonna kiss and make up, you need to be doing it quicker than this!” Phoenix interrupted our back and forth as I saw my other friends jumping down into the pit, “Because something bad is happening at the keep.”

“Bad?” I asked as the Barbarian jumped in after the rest of the team.

“Didn’t you idiots hear the gong being beaten back at the keep?” Töten demanded in a huff, “They’re getting ready to send a force out to repel the invaders, meaning us. So, you’d better get your asses down here

and start giving us a hand or we're not gonna be saving anyone!"

"On it," I assured him, before focusing back on the Wraith Knight.

"I yield and will help with removing the altered Carnivorous Flesh-Cursed Vines, if possible," Talos stated as if he were making an oath.

"Fine, then come," I commanded while ordering the Skeleton Warriors to release him. As I whirled around and began heading toward the pit, the Wraith Knight and Helgath fell in beside me as I messaged Neysa, 'We have control of the pit. You can bring Drielra and the wagons over.'

'Helgath already informed me,' Neysa replied without hesitation as I noticed the smug grin on the Wraith Knight's face while Prioress Phimyar quietly stepped up beside him, 'We'll be there in a second!'

"Why do you look like the fat cat that just got the mouse?" I asked as we reached the edge of the pit.

"This was more or less a win-win situation for me," Talos explained, lowering his voice as he came out of his role-playing personality.

"Explain!" I demanded, trying to hide my surprise at the sudden change.

"If you weren't as good as all of the hype on the forums, I get the fame for taking you down along with a nice reward from your enemies along with a nice boost to my Twitch Stream channel," Talos explained in a low voice so that his companion couldn't hear, "Or, I get to hang out with you for a bit while players on the forum feel sorry for me, both of which would also give my Twitch Stream channel a nice boost."

"Good," I grunted and jumped down into the pit, "Then, I don't have to feel bad for using you."

"Using me?" Talos asked in confusion. As he followed me down into the pit, I noticed Zeven and Töten were trying to help Tyhra while Phoenix and Braid began gathering up any loot they could find.

"It's like this, I need mercs for the Hobgoblin invasion attacking my stronghold," I explained as my eyes swept the horror around us. There only seemed to be the children and maybe a handful of others left alive. Seeing them trying to remove the vines around Deress, the level 9 child whom we'd first met in Haldale, I began striding over to see what could be done, "What easier or cheaper way for me to get a strong fighter for the siege then beat them in a duel?" As the smug grin died on the Wraith Knight's face, I waved to the child that Tyhra was kneeling next to as we came to a stop. "What skills do you have to kill this thing so we can save

the survivors?”

“Stop trying to pull the thorns free!” Talos snapped at the pair back in his role-playing mode, “You’ll only kill him faster!”

“What else can we do?” Tyhra demanded with tears running down her cheeks as she glared up at him, “They’re dying!”

“Hurting him more isn’t going to help anything,” Talos chastised the Cat Burglar as his voice turned emotionless once again. Gazing down at the silently screaming child, he tried to explain the problem, “I have a series of spells that kill Reavers and their ilk. From what I’ve studied of the last Reaver War, that normally included the victim when dealing with Carnivorous Flesh-Cursed Vines.” His lips pressed together in distaste. “What effect that will have on these accursed Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines, I do not know.”

“Do you have anything to add to all of this, Mr. Beta Tester?” I asked as Tyhra and Talos glanced at the big guy in surprise.

“Uh, I participated in the Reaver Wars,” Töten shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, “But we never had anything to do with the Reaver vines.”

“A Beta tester, huh,” Talos grunted as Töten proudly stuck his chest out.

“That never seems to have the answers when we need’em,” I sighed in annoyance as the Wraith Knight continued.

“Do you mind if I pick your mind about the Reaver War later-”

“Can we stay on topic for the current emergency before you start playing fanboy?” I snapped, glaring at the pair as the Wraith Knight let out an unhappy huff at being called out.

“All that I can do is try my lowest spell and see what happens,” Talos explained as he knelt down next to Tyhra and reached for the child.

“If you kill him, I’ll-” Tyhra began to threateningly say.

“Be grateful he died without further pain,” Talos interrupted as he yanked his arm free and placed it on the boy’s chest. Before the Cat Burglar could come back with a snappy reply, he cast his spell in a sonorous voice, “Touch of the Reaver.”

To all of our surprise, a shadowy black cloud began to surround Deress’s small frail body. Within a few seconds, it sank into the vines covering the boy, before bursting into blue flames. Tyhra leaned away from the mini-inferno as the Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines ripped

themselves free of the child's body and reached out to attack the Wraith Knight, before turning to ash. As the last of the vines burned away, the Halfling child jerked upright.

"It burns!" Deress screamed in agony as the remains of the vines burned away from his flesh.

Quick as a thought, I hit him with a Regeneration as Tyhra began doing her best to pat out the flames with her gloved hands. The flames went out within seconds but not before his hit points dropped by half. Luckily, one tick of the healing spell brought him to full health. As he sagged in relief, the Cat Burglar hugged him to her chest.

"You're alright, we saved you!" Tyhra sobbed as tears of relief ran down her face.

"So, the victim needs to be strong enough to survive the momentary burn of the vines dying," I harrumphed in thought as the Wraith Knight rose to his feet.

"Also, it depends on the level of the vines," Talos thoughtfully added as his gray eyes gazed around the pit, "Whatever excess spell power that is leftover from killing the vines is transferred to the victim." He nodded to the child at our feet. "Which is why he didn't die when I used my lowest-level cleansing spell."

"Can you share that with the rest of us?" Zeven asked with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Not at your behest," Talos hauntingly stated with a raised chin.

"But you will at mine since you're my vassal," I stated as a frown came to his black lips.

"You can't!" Prioress Phimyar hissed from behind him, "What about the dictates of the Dark Tower Order?"

"The dictates of the Dark Tower stipulate that I may share the Reaver cleansing spell when the cause necessitates," Talos patiently reminded his wife as a disapproving look flashed across her face, "And if we can't clear this evil in time and within the confines of my oath," He pointed glanced in my direction before proceeding, "Then this corruption might be left to fester and spread."

"It is your call to make," Prioress Phimyar agreed, calming down and nodding as he finished his spiel.

"As always," Talos agreed, before offering his wife a respectful half-bow, "With your wisdom to guide me." With that said, the Wraith

Knight turned to me as two pop-up windows appeared before my eyes.

Sir Talos Darkwind has offered to teach you the Phantasmal magic tree. Do you accept? Yes or No

Sir Talos Darkwind has offered to teach you the spell, Touch of the Reaver. Do you accept? Yes or No

Without hesitation, I selected yes for each option as more windows popped open before my eyes.

Congratulations! You have learned the new magic tree, Phantasmal.

Congratulations! You have learned the new spell, Touch of the Reaver.

Touch of the Reaver - (25 Mana) – five sec cast – Specialized attack against Reavers that deals 50% Spell Power. Requires Spirit Magic skill level 0. Range touch.

“Neysa will be happy to know that we made it in time to save you and the other children, Deress,” I said, giving him a reassuring clap on the shoulder as Tyhra held the crying boy in her arms, “Just know that this constantly being hunted by Duke Dukey and his men are over. I’m bringing all of you back home with me to my lands for a better life.”

“Does that include Tyhra too?” Deress worriedly asked as the Cat Burglar gave me the stink eye.

“It’s one of the first things we worked out,” I assured him with a gentle smile. As I stood up, I continued as Helgath headed off to free the next child, “We’ll talk about this more later, but for now, just know that you’re safe and we’re working hard to save everyone else that we can.”

“I don’t understand,” Deress said as I turned around to go, “Won’t Duke Dukey and the other nobles like him keep hunting us?”

“I’m sure they will,” I agreed with a savage smile, “But they’ll quickly learn the futility of fighting against the House of Kayden and its troopers.”

“How can that be true? Why would Star’s House of Kayden be willing to protect us Halfling orphans?” I heard Deress ask Tyhra as I hurried over to where Lignos lay.

“Don’t worry, I’ve gotcha,” I dropped down beside the level 11 Dark Elf-Gnome and began my cast while stroking her long white-blonde hair for the spell’s touch requirement. Five seconds later, the Carnivorous Essence-Cursed Vines latched into her skin wrenched its thorns out of her body, and began to burn as I hit her with a Regeneration.

“It was so horrible!” Lignos cried out as she flung her arms around my neck and sobbed.

“You’re safe,” I assured the girl while scooping her up in the crook of my arm and moving to the next child, “And will be coming with us now.”

‘We’re here,’ Neysa’s exclamation rang in my mind while I watched my friends spread out to start freeing the kidnapped victims that were still alive, ‘And Drielra is already in the pit looking for his family.’

‘That’s fine,’ I replied, hearing the Bartender cry out and run to the far corner of the pit, ‘Come help collect the children and get them loaded up in the cart.’

“W-what about the other c-children and T-Tyhra?” Lignos stuttered as her hot tears ran down my cheek and neck.

“All of you are coming with me,” I assured her while kneeling down next to her brother and placing a calming hand on his vine-wrapped chest, “Don’t worry, Hulvyp. I’ll have you free in a moment.”

“Neysa!” I heard Deress cry out as the Silver Dire Wolf hopped down into the pit. She was once again in her more humanoid form wearing nothing just her Brown Leather Underbust Corset Top as she padded around barefooted. As I began casting the next Touch of the Reaver spell, a part of me worried that no one was keeping watch for the stronghold’s guards, when Helgath’s voice sounded in my mind.

‘It’s a problem, but I’ve sent the skellies to guard the edge of the woods.’

‘So, we’ll have some warning, but not much,’ I grunted, knowing we had to get the hell out of dodge. As the spell was completed, Hulvyp climbed to his feet and threw himself sobbing into his sister’s arms.

“Come, let’s get you and the other children into the wagon so we can leave this place,” Neysa encouragingly said as she hurried over with a number of already freed children.

Giving a quick hug to Hulvyp, Neysa gathered Lignos from my arms and began herding the children toward the stairwell leading out of the

pit. A quick glance around the pit let me know Tyhra, Braid, Zeven, Talos, Prioress Phimyar, and Töten were finishing up with the last of the children. As I began heading over to the Bartender, I caught the Wraith Knight's eye as Phoenix and Helgath jogged over to me.

"Hey, Talos, when you're finished up," I called out, "Can you get your ghosts up and patrolling the edge of the forest so we don't get ambushed?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Damn, man," Phoenix swore as she caught up to me, "I completely forgot about getting scouts up."

"You wanna get some Ghouls up before giving me a hand with the farmers?" I asked as we reached the Bartender and two very sickly females.

"I swear, I'll be your vassal or slave," Drielra half-sobbed as he looked up at me with a tear-streaked face, "Whatever you require, just please, save my family!"

The youngest of the two looked to be near death. That was probably because the younger girl didn't have the same levels her mother had to burn. As I knelt down next to the girl, I hit her with a Regeneration while Helgath went to the mother.

"I don't need slaves," I explained to the Bartender while resting my hand on the daughter's forehead and starting my cast, "But loyal vassals willing to build a better future with their new House."

For a moment, I was worried the girl couldn't take the extra damage as the flames burned the vines away. Luckily, the Regeneration ticked in time to stop her hit points from dropping below fifty. As the girl let out a sobbing breath, Drielra was there gathering her up in his arms. His wife was with him a second later as the three of them cried and hugged each other in relief.

As I turned toward the next farmer, I worriedly eyed the young girl in the Bartender's arms. Even as the Regeneration spell ticked, her hit points didn't seem to be going up all that quickly. Hopefully, there weren't any long-term effects for being brought so near to death from these evil spirit vines.

"Overlord Ironwolf," Drielra called out as I laid my hand on the next child's chest and hit the boy with a Regeneration while Helgath went to help the nearest farmer, "Even though none of them can speak, I've explained the deal you're offering for saving their lives."

“I appreciate that, Drielra, but I would’ve rescued them from this evil without any oath,” I said as the young boy let out a sobbing cry and sat up, “To join my house and lands is what requires swearing fealty as a vassal.”

“Khenca!” the farmer cried out as he pulled his son into his arms. Looking up at me with pleading eyes, he continued in a rush of words, “Please save my wife and we will serve you faithfully!”

“My soulmate is helping her now,” I assured the Dark Elf-Dwarf. As I moved to the next farmer, I caught the Bartender’s eye, “And what’s with not calling me Startum like before?”

“I heard the title from your own lips while we were hiding in the woods waiting for you to win the duel,” Drielra explained somewhat nervously as I began casting again.

“While I appreciate the respect,” I neutrally explained as Phoenix joined us in raising the farmers, “For now, it would be best if everyone stuck with calling me, Startum while we’re traveling.”

Helping the female Halfling up, she cried out and clung to her husband whom Helgath had just helped. Accepting their promise that they’d serve me well, I moved to the next group as the Bartender gave me an odd look.

“I thought that’s when nobles most liked to flaunt their titles,” Drielra scoffed before thinking better of it as his wife worriedly shushed him.

“It’s fine, Mrs. Sedruc,” I assured her while kneeling down next to another child with a smirk, “Not that I generally disagree with your husband’s opinion on nobles and their titles.”

“I’m D-Daksome, m-milord,” the female stammered put off at by friendly smile as she traded a nervous look with her husband, “And while he might be perceptive on such points, most townsfolk know better to keep their traps shut on such taboo subjects.”

“Star has a lot of faults,” Phoenix chimed in with a chuckle, “But flaunting his title is not one of them.”

“Thanks for that vote of confidence, Phoenix,” I sighed, before turning back to the Bartender’s wife while I worked, “During official events and around other nobles, Overlord Ironwolf would be proper, but until we reach your new home, it might be best to keep that title and the name Ironwolf private. Otherwise, it might cause some excitement during our

travels if other newfars were to overhear.”

“As you command, milord,” echoed around us from the freed townsfolk and farmers.

“Are you guys almost done?” Töten called out from the middle of the pit.

“Working on our last trio now,” I hollered back.

“Good, because it looks like the main gates are starting to open!”

“Fuck!” I cursed as the townsfolk worriedly looked at me. Waving them toward the steps, I continued in a rush of words, “We need to get out of the stronghold now or we’re not gonna be leaving!” As everyone ran for the stairs, my strategic mind began to spin up, “Talos, Phoenix, and Helgath, we’re sending our pets toward the stronghold’s main gate to sow some confusion.”

“My ghosts won’t last long to direct damage,” Talos warned even as he had his ghosts move to join the rest of our skellies.

“They don’t need to,” I assured him as we rushed up the stairs and ran for Drielra’s wagons. The first was full while the second was only half. A quick headcount of the farmers and their families and I calculated there would be enough space for everyone if they squeezed in together tightly, “They just need to tie them up while we make a break for the western gate.

“The guards at the main gate will never let us willingly pass through,” Drielra warned as the farmers we saved hurriedly scrambled into the back of the last wagon while the rest of us recalled our mounts.

“We could head to the northern gate,” Talos offered, tilting his helmeted head toward the north as Bright Claw began bitching up a storm for not being part of the battle, “That’s where Selussa and I entered the stronghold at.”

“It’ll be a bit of a rough ride for the wagons until we reach the road leading to the gate,” Drielra explained while nodding at the Wraith Knight’s words, “But that shouldn’t be too much of a problem as long as we don’t bust a wheel or axle.” He motioned with his chin toward Gnome-Hogboon as everyone did their best to ignore the bellowing Grizhawk. “And we shouldn’t have too much of a problem swinging by my inn to pick up some food and your companion’s G.O.L.E.M.”

“If we get lucky,” Töten thoughtfully added, “It might get Duke Dukey’s troopers hunting for us in the completely wrong direction.”

“We can only hope,” I agreed even as a frown came to my lips. If

the Dark Fist were able to hunt down Tyhra and the children when they'd run all the way to Haldale, I didn't think they'd have all that much trouble finding us this close to their stronghold, when a thought hit me, "Change of plans. If we're using the northern gate, they'll check the pit to make sure their investment is secure first."

"Sounds about right," Töten agreed as everyone else nodded.

"How about instead of sending our summoned pets to attack the main gate, we have Talos make one of those dark fog banks and leave the summoned pets on patrol inside."

"That'll cause'em some trouble," Töten laughed.

"Besides giving my ghosts the ability to get in close before they're seen," Talos agreed.

As the Wraith Knight got to work, I recalled my skellies and gave them new commands as Helgath raised a Ghoul to command the lesser undead. There were a few curious looks from my new vassals and the children as Neysa stripped out of her social clothing and transformed into a wolf. As Helgath tucked the clothing away and mounted, I noticed a red-faced Hulvyp staring at the Silver Dire Wolf. A sharp smack from Lignos made him look away in embarrassment as I silently rolled my eyes. Young boys will be young boys, not that I blamed him in the least for thinking that Neysa was beautiful as I mounted up behind the Half-Orc. Hell, even Talos had done a double-take.

"Lead the way, Talos," I ordered as he silently eyed our mounts and shook his head, before running off into the treeline with his wife at a fast clip while the rest of us followed.

Luckily enough, there was a dirt path through the woods that was relatively smooth. Relative being the primary word. More than a few times the farmers and children had let out startled screams as they were nearly tossed out of the wagons.

By the time we'd hit the cobblestone road leading to the northern gate, the sounds of battle could be heard coming from the woods. We thankfully had managed to get out of dodge while the getting was still good. Everyone nervously glanced over their shoulder as the horses' hooves pounded for freedom. As we approached the gatehouse, I saw riders come speeding around the bend in the cobblestone road that went around the wooded area of the pit.

There were a solid fifty Dark Elves in the fast-approaching cavalry

group. While I couldn't make out their levels from this distance, there was no doubt in my mind they'd catch up to us shortly after exiting the gate. There was simply no way for the Bartender's supply wagons to match a cavalry horseman's speed. At least, not unless we could get a decent head start first.

"I got something that should allow us to drop the portcullis and block the riders," Braid called out from where he knelt looking backward on the bench seat next to the Bartender.

"How do you know that the gatehouse has a portcullis?" I asked in surprise.

"I, um, poked a hole in the lid of the barrel," Braid diffidently explained.

"That's why you were squirming around so much on my lap!" Phoenix suddenly exclaimed in understanding, "I'd thought you were just coping a cheap feel!"

"Uh, that too," Braid somewhat embarrassedly admitted as the Barbarian raised her arm as if she was going to backhand him.

"You know, if you could bring down the portcullis long enough for us to get away," Töten thoughtfully interrupted the pair, "We could split up and head off in different directions to throw off any pursuit."

"How would we meet back up?" Phoenix asked with a frown.

"We could meet up outside the main gates of Thoronjhi," Töten suggested, before adding, "Or, better yet, a pub across from the entrance to the Great Library that Star is planning to visit."

"Yeah, that makes more sense," Phoenix agreed, nodding to herself, "That way we're not waiting around bored out of our gourd."

"The only problem is that we'll need someone to escort your new vassals and the children to the rest of the caravan," Zeven said with a frown, before adding, "And it ain't gonna be me."

"I can do that," Tyhra grumbled from where she rode on the driver's bench of the second wagon, "It's not like I've never been to Thoronjhi before." Her lips twisted at some unknown memory. "Trust me, you're not missing anything much in that shithole."

"Cool," I said while silently shaking my head for my friends not to press her on the topic. From our earlier talk, I figured that was probably where she'd lost her Nightmare quest and had been pushed out of the Thieves Guild, "We can send our undead pets with her to help fight off

anyone stupid enough to try attacking them, but,” My eyes fell on Talos and his wife who were barely keeping up with the slow wagons, “it would be better to send someone else with you in case one of the cavalry patrols manages to find you.”

“I don’t need no babysitter to go with me,” Tyhra heatedly complained.

“You do if one of those squads manages to catch up with you,” Zeven disagreed as the Cat Burglar scowled.

“Ttaloos,” Töten coughed meaningfully into his fist as the Wraith Knight glanced up at the big guy with a frown.

“I don’t see a Nightmare Thief and some undead pets putting up much of a fight if a squad of fifty high-level cavalry riders catches up to them,” Talos stated without batting an eye as the Cat Burglar let out a strangled groan.

“He’s probably right,” Phoenix agreed with a frown.

As we neared the gatehouse, Braid jumped down from the still-moving wagon. Hopping over the scattered corpses, he ran inside to do his thing as we came to a stop on the opposite side of the gate. Glancing over my shoulder at the pursuit, it looked like we’d make it with more than enough time if his acid bombs worked.

“Do you mind escorting them back to the caravan?” I asked the Wraith Knight while curiously noting that neither of them seemed to be particularly winded from the hard run.

“As long as being left behind is not a regular occurrence, it doesn’t bother me,” Talos stated as his wife silently stood next to him, “Besides, you’re planning to move fast and there’s no way we could keep up with your galloping mounts.”

“Thanks for being so understanding,” I grunted, surprised at his acquiescence to what basically amounted to a boring escort quest without experience.

“You know that someone they recognize as part of our party has to go with them, right?” Phoenix innocently added, “Otherwise, there’s no way Marshal Slangneedon will let them travel with the caravan.” Seeing my raised eyebrow, she gave me a put-out look, “And don’t give me that look. I’m not about to miss out on a hot meal, fresh ale, and a new capital city to check out.”

“Me neither,” Töten snorted rolling his eyes.

“How about you, Zeven?” I asked, catching the Badger Kin’s eye, “Braid won’t either because part of the reason he came on this trip is to set up his seller and buyer for the Auction House.”

“Yeah, I don’t mind heading back early if it’s needed,” Zeven half-heartedly grumbled, “If anything, that’ll make Nahi happy.” As Braid came racing through the gatehouse, he added, “Though, I wouldn’t have minded some ale and a hot meal either.”

“How about some of Slaifaddwuck's Best Honey Mead as a thank you?” I asked while tossing him over a flask.

“Oh, hell yeah!” Zeven cheered, catching the flask with a big grin on his black lips.

Before either of us could say more on the topic, there was a mini poof of an explosion immediately followed by the earsplitting sound of a heavy chain ripping through the gears of the gatehouse. Turning around in my saddle, I saw the portcullis begin to uncontrollably drop across the entrance as Braid sprinted for the shrinking gap.

For a moment, I thought for sure that he wasn’t going to make it. With his short arms wildly flailing in alarm, he dove for the gap with his arms thrust out ahead of him like Superman. A part of me wanted to look away, but to my amazement, he belly-slid to safety as the portcullis came crashing down behind him.

“Damn, Braid, could you have cut that any closer?” Phoenix mockingly asked as the Gnome-Hogboon scrambled back to his feet and came running over to us.

“Over here,” I waved the little guy over as Helgath made space for him to climb up in front of her. Without waiting, I turned to the rest of our group and began calling out orders, “Phoenix and Töten, you guys head east while the wagons, Tyhra, Zeven, Talos, and Prioress Phimyar catch up with the caravan.”

“Milord, you said they were headed to Aeroch Nor with a heavy load of farming equipment being pulled by G.O.A.H.L.M.s, correct?” Drielra asked as the rest of us nodded, “Good, G.O.A.H.L.M.s move slower than regular mounts. If we circle around Thoronjhi and take the road heading to Thyflumoor village, we can take the main fork to the Kingdom of Sayr to get ahead of your caravan.”

“Then go,” I ordered as Drielra offered me a first salute and clucked the reins. As the group headed off, I caught Zeven’s eye to stop him

and waved for him to come close.

“Don’t let Tyhra do anything stupid with the kids,” I whispered to him under my breath while arrows began pinging off the portcullis as the cavalry troop sought to harry our escape.

“I figured that was more the reason you wanted one of us to go with them,” Zeven knowingly said as he offered me a two-finger salute and got Bright Claw moving out in a gallop.

“Take care when you’re passing by the western gate,” Töten called out in warning over his shoulder while riding away with Phoenix, “You don’t want to get caught being spawned camped by a bunch of Dark Elves.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I hollered back as Neysa sprang into a gallop, “But, I have a plan!”

“You’re gonna need it!” Phoenix chortled while the big guy offered me a thumbs up before they both disappeared into the village surrounding the stronghold.

“I’m falling, I’m falling!” Braid cried out as his arms flailed about to keep him on the Silver Dire Wolf’s bouncing back.

‘If you keep as close as you can to the outer wall, that’ll probably be the quickest way back,’ I warned as Neysa began racing through the cobblestone streets of the nearly empty village.

“You’re not going anywhere, Braid,” Helgath assured the wide-eyed Gnome-Hogboon, “I’ve got a death grip on you!”

“Whooaaa!” Braid shrieked as he nearly shot off of the Silver Dire Wolf’s back. As the Half-Orc hauled him back into place a second later, he anxiously panted out, “You might have me, but who has you?”

“She has strong thighs,” I assured him with a laugh as the Gnome-Hogboon finally got his little hands knotted in Neysa’s mane.

“She’d better,” Braid complained as he slowly started to get used to the Silver Dire Wolf’s sudden changes of direction, “Because this isn’t anything like driving a G.O.A.H.E.M.!”

“The plan is we’re gonna have you jump off at the Grubbing Boar Inn to collect your G.O.A.H.E.M.” I explained while we galloped, “While we go see about holding up any pursuit, you get your hunk of rune bolts heading out of town by heading northwest.”

“What are you guys going to be doing?” Braid asked somewhat more calmly as he began getting the hang of clinging to Neysa’s neck.

“We’re going to head back to the western gate and cause a

distraction,” I explained in a tight voice.

“Can you do that before the cavalry troop realizes what’s happening?” Braid worriedly asked as we reached the main road heading back to the inn.

“That’s the million-dollar question,” I ruefully laughed, before turning serious once again, “If we do our job right, that should give you a head start out of town.” A grimace flashed across my face. “Otherwise, there’s no way you’ll get away with your G.O.A.H.E.M. intact.”

“How are we going to meet back up?” Braid asked after a moment of thought.

“Unless we meet up on the western road heading into Thoronjhi, then we’ll stick to the plan for meeting up at a pub outside of the Great Library,” I said as Neysa tore into the Grubbing Boar’s courtyard and slid to a stop.

“Can Neysa stay ahead of those Baernathrad Horses?” Braid worriedly asked as he jumped down from Neysa’s back.

“We’re gonna find out,” I hollered over my shoulder while Neysa leaped back into a gallop.

“Are you sure it’s wise to be splitting the party like this?” Braid called out as we hit the main street heading to the western gate.

“No, but I don’t have a better idea,” I yelled back.

While I wish we could’ve confronted the asshole in his lair, I knew that wasn’t possible at this point in time. Not unless I had a full army at my back and everyone leveled up. Even then, with the newest Emergency Hot Fixes that had been implemented, a direct frontal attack would boost each of the guards to Nightmare stat levels. That meant the only way for us to escape was to break contact with Duke Dukey’s troops and make a run for it.

As we reached the edge of the town, Helgath and I both reached into our pouches to pull out a handful of soul stones. The timing was going to be tight. Due to the twenty-five-yard range limit of the spell, we needed to get deep within the outer wall’s kill zone, cast the spell, and get out of dodge fast while pulling the pursuit after us.

“Intruders are advancing on the western gate!” I heard a Dark Elf call out in warning to the gatehouse as soon as Neysa galloped into the kill zone between the outer wall and the edge of town.

‘Fuck!’ I needlessly swore as crossbows began being swiveled in

our direction on the top of the wall, ‘I completely forgot that we’re flagged as enemies for our earlier attack!’

‘I’ll do my best to dodge what I can,’ Neysa assured me as we began our long cast.

This was going to take longer because we were both using Extend Magic II and Magnify Magic. The combined spells we were casting were going to use up nearly all of our mana. That would leave us in a bad way while we galloped away to make our escape.

Volley of heavy bolts began being shot at us from atop the gatehouse. As we drew near, I saw what had to be Knight Commander Sivriur come running into the gate’s tunnel to stop us from passing through. It was ridiculous. They must’ve thought the three of us were going to charge the stronghold alone as more Heavy Men-At-Arms formed up to either side of the Knight Commander.

“Gah!” I grunted as a crossbow bolt slammed into Helgath’s chest and nearly blasted both of us off Neysa’s back. If not for our Focus Casting II, we would’ve been knocked out from the spell interrupt right then and there. Through gritted teeth, the Zombie Wall spell was released a split second later as both of our mana pools dropped to twenty points and we both sagged on Neysa’s back.

“What kind of Dark magic spell is that?” I heard Knight Commander Sivriur roar as my vision swam.

“We’re trapped between them!” I heard another Man-At-Arms shout.

“Get back!” Another Dark Elf shouted.

“Aaiee, it’s got me!” I heard another Man-At-Arms suddenly scream.

A savage grin came to my dry lips as Neysa galloped along the outer wall inside the kill zone. While I didn’t see the completion of the spell, we’d both cast our own Zombie Wall to trap the guards inside the tunnel and cause confusion. I’d cast the spell at the far end of the gate’s tunnel while Helgath had cast hers just on the outside of the portcullis. That meant the Knight Commander and his Men-At-Arms were trapped inside the gate until they took down one of the walls.

I had a feeling that wasn’t going to be such an easy feat. Instead of using the required twelve soul stones, both Helgath and I used a total of twenty-four soul stones on each wall. That meant every foot of the wall had

a level 51 Zombie Orc Warrior embedded in its length that would claw and bite any enemy that came too close. This would hopefully pull as much pursuit as possible after us instead of Braid or the wagons full of our non-combatants.

“Oof,” I grunted as a heavy bolt slammed into my back and nearly knocked me off Neysa’s back.

While it hadn’t done any damage, if she hadn’t jinked to the side to help keep me on her back, I’d have tumbled to the ground right then and there. Helgath’s clawed hand locked around my forearm trying to help keep me pressed to her back as a trail of white magic sparkles momentarily fluttered behind us making us that much more of an easy target to hit.

I heard several near misses whoosh past my head as my hit points regenerated past a hundred. Ignoring the splitting headache emptying my mana that quickly gave me, I held on for dear life as another pair of bolts slammed in my back. The first took out the last of my magic shields, while the second splintered against my Black Coral Iron-reinforced Defender and nearly ripped me from the Silver Dire Wolf’s back.

If the shot hadn’t been coming from nearly directly behind us, that would’ve sent me sprawling. Even with the bolt hitting my shield and being cushioned by my Magi-Weaved Traveler’s Backpack, my hit points dropped by a third. Holding on tight and crossing my finger, I urgently screamed over our link, ‘Get us out of the kill zone!’

‘We’re already out of it,’ Neysa assured me as she raced down the dirt road that led out onto a wide grassy plain, ‘That was just a lucky shot!’

‘Those anti-siege crossbows are no joke,’ I grunted as Helgath hit me with a Regeneration and promptly sagged in my arms.

Both of our hit points were too low for that kind of crap. Craning around, I looked back toward the stronghold not seeing any immediate signs of pursuit. Truth be told, those Zombie Walls wouldn’t last long against a cohesive attack. The cavalry troopers chasing after us could take them both down in a matter of minutes. Then again, their purpose was mainly as a distraction and misdirect to buy us a head start so we could hopefully escape.

Wrapping Helgath in my arms, I clung with my knees to Neysa’s back and hoped for the best.

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Chapter Ten

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Startum Ironwolf and friends in Thoronjhi city.)

“Hey, Star,” Braid’s booming voice called out from his G.O.A.H.E.M. ahead of me in the line, “Glad to see you made it!” He waved his large shield at me. “Come here, I’ve been saving you a spot in line.”

“Excuse me, coming through,” I called out as Neysa trotted around the long line toward the front of the bridge. As she squeezed past several annoyed groups of players, I flashed them an apologetic smile, “We’re just joining our teammate.”

“Damn, the higher-level players are always acting like they own the place!” One of the Warriors groused to his party.

“Just chill out.” One of the party’s Rangers dismissively waved their tank’s concern away, “It’s just two players joining their teammate.”

“We’ve been waiting for nearly five minutes to enter this freaking city!” The Priestess standing next to him angrily huffed.

“Yeah, and we’re almost through the line.” The Mage standing next to the Ranger said while rolling his eyes.

“I don’t know what the big deal is.” The Rogue with them laughed as I slid in front of Braid’s G.O.A.H.E.M. just in front of the group. “It’s the same thing you did when we left the city and you two were running late.”

“Next!” The Scribe called out while waving us forward.

I curiously noted the two fully armored Knights standing to either side of the entrance to the gate both standing up straighter at the sight of Braid’s G.O.A.H.E.M. Not that I blamed them, the Gnome-Hogboon’s G.O.A.H.E.M. Spell Knight was a scary rune-powered mechanized suit. One, that I doubted, the city guards were used to seeing outside of the Kingdom of Cadarea.

If I’d thought that was funny, the reaction of the two squads of city guards was even more hilarious. Both groups straightened to attention and puffed out their chests to look tough as Helgath and I dismounted and stepped forward with the G.O.A.H.E.M. looming at our back. I swore right

then and there that having Braid around was the best. It was the first time I'd entered a city and hadn't felt like the center of attention until the Scribe jumped to her feet when she looked up at me.

"Overlord Ironwolf!" The Scribe exclaimed in surprise, "My name is Scribe Thundrian!" She gave a hurried bow. Thankfully, none of the players waiting in line could see her due to the massive G.O.A.H.E.M. "The city of Thoronjhi is happy to welcome such an esteemed noble and Battlemage." From the stunned looks the city guards were trading with one another, they were surprised to see the Administrator carrying on so respectfully to a Halfling. "Might I inquire as to your plans? How long do you expect to be staying and at what Inn so I might inform Count Dhomidel?"

"Thank you, Scribe Thundrian," I replied with a polite nod, "But my party and I are only planning to be in the city for a few hours for a bite to eat before visiting the Great Library and leaving once we are done with our research." I lowered my voice conspiratorially, "On my next visit to Thoronjhi, I plan on staying a bit longer to pay my respects to Count Dhomidel."

"Ah, yes, that won't be a problem," Scribe Thundrian assured me, "I'll mark your short visit with the explanation that you won't be staying overnight with your," Her lips turned down into a frown as she eyed the Half-Orc and the G.O.A.H.E.M. standing behind me, "companions."

"Helgath Ironwolf and Braid Born," I motioned to my two companions, "Both are my personal guards for this short side trip away from our caravan."

"I'll, um, make a note for the city guard so there are no, ah, misunderstandings about their presence," Scribe Thundrian assured me with a curt nod as she sat down and began writing in her book, "Please enjoy your visit to Thoronjhi!"

"And try not to drink too much," I heard the Sub-Leader of the city guard mutter under his breath to one of his subordinates as we entered the gate.

"I swear, it smells like he bathed in ale instead of drinking it!" the Dark Elf hissed back.

"Along with his mount," another guard chimed in.

"Nobles and their freaky shit," the other joked back as their squad mates all chuckled.

“Do we really smell that bad?” I asked while raising up an arm to sniff my armpit.

“Probably, the stink of stale ale is no joke,” Braid said in his Darth Vader voice from behind us as we made our way across the kill zone toward the main avenue, “But I doubt either of you smell half as bad as I do.”

“Why would you smell worse than the rest of us?” I distractedly asked as my eyes searched the city’s skyline for the Mage Towers.

The city of Thoronjhi looked to have been constructed out of a developer’s dark Gothic architecture dream. Every building in sight had small towers that were held up with flying buttresses, pointed arches, and ribbed vaulting ceilings. The stone façade of every building in sight was ornately decorated with overlaid tracery and stained-glass windows. As if that wasn’t enough detail, the higher ledges and rooftops held gruesome gargoyle-like statues of all sizes.

“Because I’ve been sweating in this enclosed hot box without getting an air bath like the rest of you.” Braid let out a harsh bark of laughter. “It’s so bad in here that I can barely stand my own stink.”

“If you’re that smelly,” I said, looking over my shoulder at the massive G.O.A.H.E.M. with an arched eyebrow, “Maybe, you should pop your hatch open and let yourself air out some before we eat lunch.”

“You might want to step back,” Braid warned as the hatch on the G.O.A.H.E.M.’s chest popped open.

“Oh-my-gawd!” I gagged at the terrible wave of stench that came pouring out of the Gnome-Hogboon’s cockpit. The steamy air was so heavy and thick that it formed a white haze cloud around us. Breathing through my mouth, I shook my head in mock horror, “The inside of your G.O.A.H.E.M. smells like a gym and a pub had an illegitimate child together and this is how bad it would smell the morning after.”

“Holy Hell!” A player shouted as he made a large circuit around us. “Take a shower or something!”

“Gah, I’m gonna puke!” A female Dark Elf gagged and backed away from us with her hand clenched over her mouth.

“Ug, that should be listed as a war crime!” A male Dark Elf shouted with his face screwed up in disgust.

“I told you it was bad,” Braid laughed as he tried to wave clean air into his cockpit.

“Maybe, the pub will let us sit on their patio or something,” I

doubtfully sighed while shaking my head.

“Huh, that’s cool,” Braid said as he suddenly took note of the buildings ahead of us, “It looks like we’re entering a primitive version of Gotham City or an Assassin’s Creed game.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty badass,” I said, looking across the cityscape, “I love the gothic feel of the city.”

“It makes me wonder what kind of quests they have here,” Braid enthusiastically agreed, “With all of these towers, it must be a blast to be a Rogue or Assassin here.”

“I bet,” I grunted, before it hit me that I had no idea where we were heading, “Let me see if Töten and Phoenix are already here or not.”

Startum Ironwolf: Hey Töten, are you guys here in Thoronjhi?

Töten Feinde: It’s about time you slow pokes showed up! Did you just get into the city?

Startum Ironwolf: Yeah, we just entered the western gate and wondered where we should be heading.

Töten Feinde: Oh, cool, you’re close to where you need to be. Just keep on heading down the main avenue until you hit the next main avenue. The first tower you’ll see on your right is the Frozen Spiral. You’ll want to head left. The next tower will be the Codex of the Magi Spiral. We’re in a pub across the street from the entrance called The Gruuting Mage.

Startum Ironwolf: The Gruuting Mage? That doesn’t particularly sound like one of the classier establishments to drink at.

Töten Feinde: It is if you enjoy drinking the finest rotgut in all of Thoronjhi.

Startum Ironwolf: Oh, joy, I shouldn’t have given up my flask of Slaifaddwuck’s Best Honey Mead.

Töten Feinde: On the flip side, it is directly across from the entrance to the Codex of the Magi Spiral, and the Hernen Fingers and Fries are too bad.

Startum Ironwolf: There’s at least that going for it.

Töten Feinde: Don’t sound so down. It shouldn’t take you more than ten minutes to get here and I’ll make sure to have the rotgut waiting for you.

“Wonderful,” I sourly thought when I noticed Braid talking behind me.

“Once you get the wagon built, I want you to go ahead and sign up as merchants at the Auction House, before purchasing a spot in the local marketplace.”

Turning around, I was surprised to see the Gnome-Hogboon talking to what looked to be two mechanical Humanoids. That’s the best way I could describe the odd-looking beings. They sort of reminded me of those Human-like mechanoid miniature dolls that you’d used to see all the time in the Christmas decorations. Usually, the display had them miming building toys by hammering or sawing with doll-like faces.

The main difference with these guys was that they were fully functional. Their bronze bodies were covered in classic Gnome social clothing. The male was wearing a frock coat, dress shirt, leather dress pants, and shin-high leather boots, while the female had a worker’s dress that was more similar to the outfit I’d purchased for Helgath. That and they were twice the size of the small Gnome-Hogboon.

“Yes, Lord Born,” the male said with a polite bow.

“If you’ll give us our mechanical guardians, we’ll get moving,” the female tactfully added with a curtsy.

“Oh, yeah, sorry about that,” Braid said as the Gnome-Hogboon reached back into the extra-large Bag of Holding at his feet.

As Braid quickly went about pulling out four large beachball-sized iron balls and putting them on the ground, the two mechanized Humanoids began activating them with the press of a button. The first two unfolded into a six-foot-tall rune-powered mechanical Warrior with a sword and shield that rolled around on a ball instead of using feet, while the last two held large crossbows. As the Gnome-Hogboon stuffed the Bag of Holding into his Backpack of Holding, he held out a small belt pouch to the pair.

“Here are the extra mana accumulation crystals you’ll need to keep everyone powered up,” Braid said as the female mechanoid accepted the bag, “You should be fine with mana as long as you remember to put the empties in the runes on the roof of the wagon.”

“As you’ve explained the previous five times,” the male mechanoid joked, before stepping back in unison with his companion, “By your leave.”

To my surprise, the pair of mechanoids marched off five yards away and stopped. I curiously noted that the mechanical guardians had taken up a protective stance at four corners around the pair as if they were making a five-yard by five-yard square. As the male pulled out an extra-

large Bag of Holding and began placing large mechanical parts on the ground, the female began attaching the pieces together as a wagon like the one Braid was driving began taking shape before our eyes.

“I take it Töten and Phoenix are here?” Braid asked as he climbed back into his G.O.A.H.E.M.

“Uh, yeah, come on,” I said, tearing my eyes away from the pair as they worked and began walking quickly toward the main avenue ahead of us. Looking back at the Gnome-Hogboon, I noticed Neysa was already in her Humanoid form and dressed as I motioned with my chin back toward mechanoids and their mechanical rune-powered guardians, “I take it that’s all part of your Nightmare tree?”

“Yeah, it’s one hundred percent a crafter class which is why I ended up going the merchant trader route for my gameplay,” Braid agreed as we entered Thoronjhi proper. Luckily enough, the avenues had more than enough room for the oversized G.O.A.H.E.M. which also had the added benefit of drawing all the attention away from me and my girls, “Though, with how expensive these mechanoid Humanoids are to craft and run, I was sure the developers had bloody well screwed me over with my Nightmare tree.”

“From my experience, it’s usually best to start an engineering-type class after you’ve leveled up a main character that can earn all the gold you need to build and repair your creations,” I said as Helgath and Neysa raptly listened to our conversation.

“I’d have been screwed if I wasn’t following a game plan The Spiffing Brit did in one of his older MMOs,” Braid explained as we walked, “That’s how I came up with the idea of controlling the Auction House. But unlike the strategy he managed to pull off with his friends, The World is all on one server, and the Auction Houses are not connected, so it’s a lot harder to pull off the trading hack I’m trying to copy.”

“Cool beans,” I grunted, trying to follow along with him, “I take it The Spiffing Brit is a game blogger or-”

“He has a gaming Uview channel,” Braide interrupted as I nodded in understanding, “Without that, there would’ve been no way I could’ve managed to pull this Nightmare Tree off until closer to the end game.”

“Yeah, that would’ve sucked,” I agreed with a chuckle.

I’d learned that hard way in Chaos Online. The cool engineering class that I’d tried in the early game had used up every credit that I’d

earned. While the developers had presented the class as a fun soloing class with your own tank, the truth of the matter was that it was unplayable without a higher-level character funding your growth. Even using the bot as additional DPS hadn't helped much with the repair bill. By the time you'd finish a mission, the robot was so damaged that it was falling apart because the same level tank couldn't properly hold aggro.

"I just hope this whole plan I have will work with my mechanoids and the Auction Houses," Braid said while looking back over his shoulder with a worried frown, "Otherwise, this is going to be an expensive failure."

"Why's that?" I asked as we turned left at the next main intersection, "Isn't that basically what you're doing back in Tulduroc?"

"More or less," Braid agreed as we neared the next Magic Spiral, "I even have plans to have them run quests in the city as needed to build their reputation up with the Kingdom of Thayjar if needed. The only problem with that is it'll take a big cut out of the initial profits." His G.O.A.H.E.M.'s shoulders rose and fell in a shrug as he sighed. "But long term it should end up making bank if the developers haven't set something else up to screw me over."

"Tell me about it," I laughed, thinking of my issues with Rani. That Admin seriously had it out for me, "I nearly got hit with a forty-eight-hour ban for some bullshit back in Darom."

"From a developer?" Braid asked in confusion.

"Ah, sorry, no, the trouble was with an Admin gimping me and my friends," I said not wanting to go into details. Seeing a wooden sign with the picture of a Mage in purple robes drinking from a clay mug, I read the name underneath and motioned toward the pub, "That's the place."

"The GRUUTING Mage?" Braid asked with a frown.

"Ayep," I laughed not particularly liking the name either.

"Why does that sound like a drunk hangout spot for poor mages in training?"

"Because that's exactly what it is," I scoffed at the alarmed look on the Gnome-Hogboon's face, "Töten said it has the best rotgut in Thoronjhi."

"That doesn't seem like much of a recommendation for them to stop here," Braid said with a confused frown.

"That and it's opposite of the Codex of the Magi Spiral," I said jerking my chin toward the extra-large tower across from the place, "And what looks to be a much smaller branch of the Academy of Technology."

“Now, that makes more sense,” Braid sighed as we began heading for the rundown pub, “This must be a place of learning for the poorer nobles who can’t afford to send their children to Tulduroc.”

“More or less,” I agreed as Braid backed his G.O.A.H.E.M. up next to the front door and hopped out. For some reason, it made me think of a biker parking out front of a bar. As the Gnome-Hogboon looked around at the rundown conditions of the nearby shops and apartment complexes, he frowned and conspiratorially lowered his voice, “Do you think it’s safe to park my ride here?”

“Probably not,” I agreed in a normal voice, “Then again, you haven’t changed the colors and markings from when the Azura Skulls owned it.”

“You think that will make a difference?” Braid asked while giving me an arched look, “Because I don’t want to have to re-steal this bad boy after getting it mostly fixed.”

“Does it have a lock?” I asked, having no idea how these G.O.A.H.E.M.s worked as I studied the cockpit.

“It’s doubtful a Dark Elf would be small enough to squeeze inside,” Helgath pointed out as we traded surprised looks.

“She has a point,” I agreed with a shrug.

“I’ll make sure to sit in a seat that’s facing the front windows,” Braid sighed as he closed the chest up and did something to lock it.

“Probably for the best,” I agreed, holding the door open as a cowbell jingled at the motion.

Being a gentleman, Braid waved Helgath and Neysa to go ahead of him. As soon as the girls stepped inside, I heard a high-pitched voice happily cry out, “They’re finally here!” Stepping into the dimly lit pub, I saw a blitzed Barbarian throwing herself at my girls. “What took you guys so long? We’ve been waiting here for hours!”

“More like a half hour,” Töten translated while rolling his eyes.

“Times goes by faster when you’re drinking,” Phoenix drunkenly slurred as she hooked her arms around my girls’ necks and began steering them toward the table in the front corner.

“She’s drunk,” Braid remarked sotto voce as we followed behind the trio.

“Yeah, you might not want to drink more than a mug of this stuff,” Töten warned as the Barbarian sloppily filled our glasses from the clay

pitcher on the table.

“Braid, you made it,” Phoenix cheerfully said, hugging the Gnome-Hogboon to her breasts as he sat down on one of the barstools. She paused mid-hug as her face screwed up in confusion, “Dude, what’s that stank?”

“I, um, sort of stewed in my, uh, cockpit,” Braid stammered with wide eyes.

“I just puked up in the back of my throat,” Phoenix gagged as she shoved the little guy away.

“How much has she had to drink?” I asked, sliding onto the stool between Braid and Helgath.

“She’s on her second mug,” Töten innocently said as the Barbarian pushed a clay mug into the Silver Dire Wolf’s hands with an elbow still hooked around her neck.

“Drink up, Neysa,” Phoenix called out while turning toward the Silver Dire Wolf girl, “This stuff is the bomb!”

“Don’t drink too much,” I warned as Neysa took a too-large gulp and then began hacking up a lung, “I don’t wanna hear you’re too drunk to carry us to Aeroch Nor.”

“Starr!” Phoenix whiningly dragged out the “r” of my name, “You’re no fun!”

“That’s because I’m the party pooper,” I said in my best Arnold Schwarzenegger voice.

“Dude! You didn’t just quote Kindergarten Cop, did you?” Phoenix exclaimed as she dangerously swayed on top of her stool, “You seriously sound like one of those old boomer gamers when you do shit like that!”

“Get off my dick, Phoenix,” I chortled at her weak slam, “You were the first to recognize where the scene came from!”

“That’s not the point,” the Barbarian exaggeratedly denied as Neysa took a smaller drink of the rotgut while Helgath easily drank from her glass without batting an eye. Using the Silver Dire Wolf girl to pull herself back on the stool, she sloshed her mug at us, “Sooo, what took you guys so long to get here?”

“Gah, that’ll put hair on your chest,” I gagged, after taking a sip from my mug. It reminded me of fruit-flavored turpentine, “I made myself a target so that Braid could get his ride out of Splaet-VonDuekey.”

“Oh, yeah,” Töten grunted in sudden understanding, “Those G.O.A.H.E.M.s are slower than a regular mount.”

“Yeah, so I had to loop around further west than I’d initially planned. Luckily, we ran across a decent-sized forest and they followed us inside,” I explained while sliding my mug below the table to covertly dump it on the floor.

‘I’ve got that,’ Helgath sent as she smoothly slipped the mug from my hand and downed it in one go.

“Damn, girl, you go!” Phoenix sloppily cheered as the Half-Orc covertly placed the mug back in my hand.

“Anyway, we got out ahead of them and lost them in the woods, before we cut back east to enter Thoronjhi from the west,” I explained as Helgath slipped a flask from her belt pouch and filled up my mug while I nodded to the Gnome-Hogboon, “Braid was already waiting in line to enter the city and you know the rest.”

‘You’re the best!’ I sent to my soulmate as soon as I tasted the Slaifaddwuck’s Best Honey Mead in my mug.

‘This is much better than what we normally drank when I was a slave,’ Helgath explained as a worn-down Dark Elf dropped four plates of what looked to be fried chicken fingers with sauce and a large basket of fries on the table.

“Just a free tip for you folks,” the waitress said, looking Braid straight in the eyes, “There’s a community Bath House just three blocks north of here that only costs five coppers a piece.” With that said, she turned to Töten to give him a meaningful look up and down, “Are you gonna be wanting anything else, Biggums?”

“Not if it’s not on the menu, he doesn’t,” Phoenix slurred as she possessively leaned on the big guy’s shoulder.

“Stop being a cockblock, Phoenix,” I mocked the Barbarian as the big guy elbowed her away.

“Naw, we’re good Tobazco,” Töten grinned, acting like we hadn’t said anything as he slipped her two silvers.

“Thanks, Biggums!” Tobazco said, visibly cheering up as she made a production of tucking the coins between her breasts and strutting back to the bar.

The female Dark Elf looked like your typical party girl. She was young with ripped-up leather pants, a too-big red peasant shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and jet-black hair in a braided ponytail. While she wasn’t too busty, she had a nice backside which was what she was showing off now.

“If you haven’t figured it out yet,” Phoenix giggled as she elbowed the big guy back, “Tabasco is a little sweet on Töten.”

“Must be because he’s a big tipper,” I joked as he flipped me off.

“This place isn’t Slaifaddwuck’s Grill!” Töten protested like I was calling him a cheapskate.

“I wasn’t dishing you,” I laughed as the big guy rolled his eyes.

“Personally, I prefer my girls with a more top-heavy plot,” Braid quietly joked, causing me to nearly spew out my mouthful of Honey Mead while the Barbarian nearly fell over backward off her stool.

“Whatever,” Töten dismissed our comments with an annoyed wave of his hand while taking another sip of rotgut. Setting down his mug, he got back to the business at hand while the Barbarian busied herself with encouraging the Silver Dire Wolf girl to drink more, “If those Dark Fist cavalry troopers are anything like how they were in closed beta, we probably have a few hours before they show up looking for us in the city.”

“You think they’ll follow us all the way into Thoronjhi?” I asked, not bothering to pick on him for his closed beta comment as we dug into our food. That’s because it actually sounded like he might know something useful for a change.

“Are you kidding, we’re still in the Kingdom of Thayjar,” Töten barked in laughter at the surprised Pikachu look on my face, “I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if those guys follow us all the way to Dolurn!”

“Talk about an insane aggro range,” I sighed while enjoying the crisp fried food, “Still, it’s good to know.”

“My recommendation is to knock out your research as quickly as possible so we can leave the Kingdom of Thayjar before we attract any more trouble,” Töten stated as I dragged a handful of fries onto my plate, “Otherwise, we might not be able to leave the city.”

“Are you saying the city guards will aggro on us once Duke Dukey’s troopers enter the city?” I asked in surprise while dipping the crispy potatoes in the chick fingers’ barbecue-like sauce.

“Not unless they find us and are actively chasing us down,” Töten explained as I began to eat faster.

“How would they even identify who we are?” Braid asked not following the in-game logic while polishing off his plate, “It’s not like we left any witnesses alive.”

“If you explore the details of your Reputation tab, you’ll see that

you've already lost points with the Duke Dukey faction," Töten explained while the rest of us listened and ate, "The actions you take within the game will have instant consequences with the faction in question even if they haven't actively seen you committing the crime."

"So, the noble in question will know I'm at fault, but depending on the situation, I won't have lost my reputation with the city or kingdom, and the various city guards and other nobles won't attack me on sight?" Braid asked as the big guy nodded along with what he was saying, "Which is why when I fought off those criminal organizations being run by different noble factions, I still gained Reputation points with the city of Tulduroc and the Kingdom of Cadarea as a whole."

"Exactly," Töten agreed as the rest of us listened, "You'd have only lost Reputation points with everyone else if it hadn't been a local power struggle between two nobles."

"But, if Duke Dukey's forces found us and are in active pursuit, then the issue is brought to the attention of the local city guard if the city is in the same kingdom as the noble?" I asked, trying to follow the logic while polishing off my plate and drinking down my Honey Mead.

"Then, what?" Braid asked as his face squinched up at the foul-tasting rotgut, "You're charged with whatever laws of the city that you actually broke?"

"Basically, but usually that comes down to how many witnesses you can bribe to support your case," Töten agreed, "And is why most noble factions simply take justice into their own hands and bypass the courts altogether."

"That explains why I had no issues with building my Reputation points within Tulduroc even as I was taking out so many of their household troops," Braid thoughtfully harrumphed.

"And why altercations between nobles in foreign kingdoms are dealt with by not drawing attention from the local city guards," I said while the big guy nodded along with my words.

"Exactly," Töten agreed, "As far as the local city guards are concerned, you're both simply gangs fighting for your own advantage and a partial blind eye is given your altercations as long as you're not putting the city at risk."

"So, how are we going to do this?" Braid asked as he woozily plopped his mug down on the table.

“Do what?” Töten and I asked at the same time.

“Should I wait here in the pub for you guys to finish up, or leave my G.O.A.H.E.M. parked outside the library and give you a hand with the research?” Braid asked while plopping his empty mug down on the table loudly.

“That’s a good question,” Töten harrumphed as he caught my eye, “What do you think, Star?”

“Let’s see how they react to having you entering the library inside your G.O.A.H.E.M.,” I said, thinking back to the city guard G.O.A.H.E.M.s that were guarding the entrance to The Codex of the Magi Spiral in Tulduroc, “If they deny you entry, then I’d suggest having you wait inside your G.O.A.H.E.M. by the entrance in case we run into any trouble.”

“Oh, come on, Star,” Phoenix scornfully said like I was some insane conspiracy theorist, “Do you think those Azure Skull are here in Thoronjhi too?” She outright laughed at the frown that came to my lips. “Dude, The World doesn’t revolve around you!”

“I’m not saying it does,” I sighed as Töten looked away trying not to laugh in my face, “But maybe what we’re researching is the trouble.” My words didn’t help the situation any as both of my friends outright laughed at my suspicion. “I just don’t want to get caught with our pants down like last time.”

“What information are you researching?” Braid asked, giving me a curious look.

“Portals and teleportation!” Phoenix bawled out in laughter.

“Could you try to keep that on the down-low?” I hissed in frustration while looking around to make sure no one could overhear us and signaling to my video editing representative to erase this part of the video for upload, “I don’t want everyone in on this secret!”

“Dude, not to burst your bubble or anything,” Töten finally managed to get out between guffaws, “While I know Battle Mage Mylimdart was supposedly disposed of for his research into portals and teleportation, I’m telling you now, there was nothing about either in Closed Beta.”

“Then, why attack us in the Great Library over it?” I heatedly demanded of them both while Braid silently listened, “They even said it themselves that was the reason they were trying to capture us.”

“When did that happen?” Töten asked, turning a bit more serious as

he wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you about that,” Phoenix drunkenly waved his question away, “We overheard that while Star was molesting me on the ceiling.”

“Wait, it’s not as bad as she’s making it out to be,” I said, holding up my hands as everyone else at the table turned to regard me with wide eyes, “We were hiding up in the ceiling away from the horde of Azure Skull Mages,” I waved my hand at the Barbarian’s upper chest, “And I didn’t have a handhold.”

“So, what, you decided to hold onto Phoenix’s tits?” Töten roared in laughter, “Oh-my-gawd! Now, I’m gonna have to look that Twitch Stream up and see exactly what happened!”

“Dude, let me just say,” Phoenix enthusiastically added, “He wasn’t gentle in the least. I thought for sure he was gonna pop my babies before they left!”

“I think, I’m gonna have to check out that stream too,” Braid coughed under his breath into his hand, “You know, for research purposes and all that.” The Gnome-Hogboon gave me a concerned look. “I hope I didn’t upset you by riding in the same barrel with Phoenix and-”

“We’re not a thing and I’m not jealous,” I roared, cutting the little guy off as Töten and Phoenix roared in laughter.

“At least, he bought you dinner after that,” Töten joked as I stood up, “Even if I’m the one that took you to bed.”

“That’s not even funny,” Phoenix snapped as she slammed her forearm into the big guy’s chest.

“If everyone’s done talking shit,” I said while rolling my eyes, “Then let’s get going.” Draining my mug of Honey Mead, I slammed my mug down and began walking toward the door with Helgath and Neysa scrambling after me as I waved toward the bar, “Thanks for the food and drinks, Tobazco!”

“Have a nice day!” the Dark Elf waitress waved back.

As I walked out onto the street, I paused at seeing a trio of Dark Elves poking and prying at Braid’s G.O.A.H.E.M. They were dressed in dirty leather armor with piecemeal bronze plates strapped onto various places of their bodies. The rear one’s head had turned around at the sound of the opening and was looking at me wide-eyed while the other two continued working.

“Blade, I’m not seeing the latch to pop this bad boy open anywhere!” the first Dark Elf complained from where he clung to the chest plate.

“I found a keyhole down here,” the second Dark Elf called over his shoulder where he was trying to pry his dagger into the lock, “But I can’t force the lock.”

“Close your mouth and keep on walking if you don’t want any trouble, Halfling!” Blade menacingly snarled at me while thumbing the edge of his dagger. As his two friends looked back at me in alarm, the door opened behind me as Helgath and Neysa stepped out.

“I have a different offer for you three,” I smirked at the surreal situation as the pair traded alarmed looks with one another behind their leader’s back, “Just stop your posturing and leave so I don’t have to kill your sorry-asses and deal with the city guard.”

“Do you have any idea who we are?” Blade demanded as he importantly puffed his chest out. Without waiting for a reply, he confidently continued, “We’re the Death Dealers and everyone up and down this street knows-” As the door opened behind us to let Töten, Phoenix, and Braid out, the Dark Elf’s voice died away as a panicky look came into his eyes.

“It was seriously fucked up, but sort of funny as hell,” Phoenix said to the big guy as she came to a sudden stop behind us.

What was it with MMOs and dumbass muggers? I thought as everyone stared at one another in stunned amazement. My friends seemed to be amused at the situation while the trio looked to be crapping their pants. The silence was broken when the Barbarian cocked her head to the side and demanded, “Why are three noobs trying to steal Braid’s ride?”

“Because they’re complete dumbasses?” Töten growled as he swung his two-handed War Hammer from his back.

“I’ll take care of these idiots,” Braid said as he pushed past the girls while bringing up his crossbow.

“Uh, gotta go!” the Dark Elf clinging to the front of the G.O.A.H.E.M. said as he leaped away.

“Me too!” the thug standing behind him shouted and ran after the first.

“We’ll let you go thi-” Blade began to say when Braid stomped his foot down loudly and pointed his crossbow at the leader’s face. Letting out a shriek of fear, he blurred away in a sprint, “Eeek!”

“I told you someone would get stupid,” Braid said, shooting the Rogue in the ass before the mugger could disappear around the corner of the building.

“Were those players or NPCs?” Phoenix curiously asked as she gave up trying to draw her blade.

“Does it matter?” I asked as the Gnome-Hogboon popped the cockpit open and climbed in.

“Not really,” Töten chuckled while shaking his head, “But that was so cliché it was almost ridiculous.”

“How can an honest criminal make a dishonest living?” I snorted and began walking across the street toward the entrance to the tower.

“All I am surrounded by is fear, and dead men,” Braid joked in his Darth Vader voice as he fell in behind us.

“You would’ve had to have killed them for that to be true,” Phoenix playfully countered as we passed through the gate.

“Go ahead and head for the library’s entrance while I grab tokens for everyone,” I said while popping inside the Codex of the Magi Spiral with my girls.

Passing through the foyer, I entered the main room to see a female Dark Elf working the counter. The ice-blue robes she wore probably meant she was a Frost Mage, I thought, coming to a stop in front of the counter. It was almost comical watching the disgust on her face change from shock to respectful fear when she ran her Identify spell on me.

“Uh, O-Overlord, er, I mean, B-Battle M-Mage Ironwolf!” the female stammered as she shot to her feet in alarm, “My name is Librarian Bizainrot. How may I help you today?”

“They’re a lot more respectful this time around,” Helgath sent in amusement.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Librarian Bizainrot,” I politely nodded, while doing my best to smother the shit-eating grin that came to my lips, “I’m in need of six tokens for the library.”

“Right away, Battle Mage Ironwolf,” the Librarian squeaked as she hurriedly dropped the requested tokens in my hand and offered me a respectful bow, “Is that all?”

“Uh, that’s it,” I hesitantly pocketed the tokens, surprised that she hadn’t asked for any payment. As I turned toward the side exit for the library, she called out, “Have a nice day, and enjoy your visit to the library.”

“What did that Halfling want?” An arrogant male voice demanded from the Librarian as we headed out the side door. “And why did you give him library tokens without requiring payment?”

“My apologies, Librarian Supervisor Pholdish,” I heard the Librarian reply while glancing over my shoulder. Catching sight of blue and purple robes, I hurriedly closed the door behind us as the female Dark Elf respectfully continued, “Just a Battle Mage requesting tokens to access the library.”

“What’s up?” Töten asked, seeing the freaked-out look on my face.

“I think the supervisor of the Codex of the Magi Spiral is an Azure Skull,” I hissed under my breath while we jogged over to the rest of our team standing in front of the Great Library.

“Dude, why are you whispering?” Phoenix mockingly asked as I frowned.

“Probably because he doesn’t want to be hunted down again by a small horde of Azure Skull Mages if he can help it,” Töten offered as I hurried past them.

“Or do I need a better reason than that?” I asked, holding open one of the doors while Helgath grabbed the other, “Come on, Braid. You’re taking the lead.”

“I’m taking the lead?” Braid protested as he strode through the doorway, “I don’t even know what floor we’re heading to!”

“What I meant,” Phoenix said in an exasperated tone as she waved around the empty courtyard, “Is that there’s no one else here to overhear what we’re saying so why whisper?”

“We’ll probably be in the graduated Mage-only section above the eighth floor if this library is anything like the one in Tulduroc,” I called after him as we fell in behind the rest of the team followed behind the G.O.A.H.E.M.

“And what happens if they realize I’m driving in a stolen G.O.A.H.E.M.?” Braid nervously asked as we entered the foyer.

Unsurprisingly, there were two very powerful and high-level-looking city guard Knights in full plate mail armor standing to either side of the entrance. Like in the Tulduroc library, there was a Librarian Information desk and a turnstile to enter into the main part of the library. On the far side of the room, there were familiar archways leading to various side rooms and a wide stairwell heading up.

“Spell Knight Gnyfebnim!” I heard a female Dark Elf call from in front of Braid. Peeking around his bulk, I saw a female Dark Elf wearing a familiar blue and purple robe sitting at the desk, “I hadn’t realized you were visiting Thoronjhi.”

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed in group chat, “There’s another Azure Skull Mage here!”

“Quick,” Braid anxiously hissed in a panic, “Do any of you know how Spell Knight Gnyfebnim talked?”

“What does it matter?” I demanded while I hit the Librarian with an Identify, “You changed the voice of your G.O.A.H.E.M. to sound like Darth Vader!”

“He sounds like a pompous asshole,” Phoenix explained, elbowing me in the side to shut up as the name Drubsourn Khesri, level 55 Dark Elf, Librarian Receptionist / Arcane Mage appeared over her head.

“Librarian Khesri, I need to escort these Halflings upstairs for a quick interview before bringing them to our tower in Tulduroc,” Braid calmly stated in a deeper tone even as the female Dark Elf bolted upright at the unexpected voice, “Oh, and I’ve just altered the settings of my voice emulator to sound a bit more intimidating. What do you think?”

“Uh, um, ohhh! That modulation sounds deliciously terrifying,” Librarian Receptionist Khesri gushed as her mind caught up with what the Spell Knight had said. As we stepped to either side of the G.O.A.H.E.M., she gave us a haughty once over, before continuing, “Using the secret passage to escort our new volunteers to their interview shouldn’t be any problem at all.” Hitting a lever under her desk, a secret door slid open near the entrance. “Let me know if you need anything else, Spell Knight Gnyfebnim.”

“Ah, thank you very much, um, Librarian Khesri,” Braid stammered in reply as he motioned us toward the secret passage.

Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed a look of confusion momentarily flash across the Librarian Receptionist’s face before she dismissed whatever concern she had and pulled the lever. As the door slid shut behind us, the Barbarian furiously whirled on the Gnome-Hogboon.

“What the hell was that Braid?” Phoenix barked, “You nearly blew the whole thing!”

“It was good enough to get us in,” Braid snapped back as he angrily drew his G.O.A.H.E.M.’s arm back, “So get off my bloody back!”

“Chill out, Phoenix!” I snapped at the Barbarian as she huffed and crossed her arms across her chest, “Braid did good and got us in with his G.O.A.H.E.M.” As I eyed the corridor, the Half-Orc subtly pointed toward the “T” section off to the left, “Now, let’s find the ramp up to the tenth floor and see if we can get to a Phonograph so we can find the next book we need.”

“What, you think the book is gonna be in the same place as the last one was?” Töten demanded as we began jogging toward the intersection.

“Why not?” I asked, taking a right and seeing that the secret passage angled up higher into the tower, “If the Great Libraries all basically look the same, why wouldn’t they be set up to be nearly mirror images of the other with just slightly different books with additional information than the others?”

“Look, I’m not saying you’re wrong or anything,” Töten said as he jogged next to me, “And I mostly agree with what you’re saying. Even if it’s not the exact same layout, we should still generally be in the correct area since all of this special information is only accessible to Mages above the eighth floor.”

“We just need to make sure we’re not caught by surprise like last time,” Phoenix grumbled as we ran up the spiral, “Because I doubt that trick you did will throw them off a second time.”

“Then again, that whole thing could’ve just been an old fluke with Tulduroc,” I joked as both Töten and Phoenix rolled their eyes at me.

“Since we’ve already seen one Azure Skull-looking Mage,” Töten disagreed with a hard shake of his head, “I’ll have to give a hard, no.”

“That was actually the second one,” I said with a frown.

“Two!” Phoenix exclaimed from where she wheezed behind us, “Whatcha talkin’ bout Willis?”

“Seriously, you’re dishing out some Different Strokes now?” I laughed, running backward as the Barbarian tried to push off the wall to keep up with us, “I would’ve expected that more from Braid than you.”

“Damn, why am I so out of breath?” Phoenix asked between gasps of air.

“Are you saying that just because I’m a Gnome-Hogboon?” Braid’s voice rumbled throughout the dark corridor.

“It fits,” Töten snorted, following the joke even as he rolled his eyes, “Not that Star has the best jokes around.”

“That was pretty weak,” Phoenix agreed while holding her side.

“You should know,” I laughed, motioning with my fingers like guns as if I were shooting her, “Looks like someone can’t hold their rotgut!”

“Says the pussy that made his girl drink the hard stuff while he drank the fluffy Honey Mead,” the Barbarian shot back as I flipped her off.

“He has you there,” Töten roared in laughter as Helgath gave me a wink.

‘I don’t feel well either,’ Neysa admitted as she fell behind looking a little green.

‘Told you not to drink too much,’ I snorted at the pained look she gave me, ‘Otherwise, Helgath will need to run a Cleansing spell on you to clear out the toxins.’

‘I’m feeling better already!’ Neysa jolted in place as she eyed her girlfriend warily.

‘Only if there’s no other choice,’ Helgath assured her as we came up to the eighth floor.

“Does anyone have something that can be used to jam the levers?” I asked, coming to a stop next to the panel.

“Actually, yeah,” Phoenix said as she began fishing around in her bag, “I decided to pick up a few things this morning when I logged in.” Pulling out a handful of basic iron daggers, she motioned with her chin to get my attention, “How many floors do you want to do?”

“All of them from the eighth up,” I said as the Half-Orc grabbed five of the daggers before tossing me three.

‘You get these while I get the upper levels,’ Helgath said as she took off at a sprint.

“Where is she going?” Töten asked as Braid came lumber up behind us.

“She’s knocking out the upper floors,” I explained while jamming the iron dagger into the mechanism. Taking off again, I called back, “Let’s keep moving!”

“Think that’s really necessary?” I heard Braid ask the Barbarian while I finished jamming the ninth floor’s lever.

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Phoenix grunted as we hurried up to the next level.

“Alright, let’s be ready for anything,” I hissed as we piled up behind the secret door with our weapons in hand. Before triggering the

lever, I concentrated on my soul link to the Half-Orc, ‘How’s everything going?’

‘No problems so far,’ Helgath promptly replied, ‘I’m doing the twelfth floor now.’

‘Good, we’re heading through the secret door now,’ I answered, before swatting the lever up with the head of my Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty.

As the doors cranked open, we rushed into the room before the door was completely open. There was a tense moment as we spread out looking ready for a fight. Seeing no one in the immediate area, I quickly turned around and headed to the bookshelf 10G-27B and began scanning for any books on portals or teleportation.

“See anything?” Töten asked as he came up behind me and began scanning from bottom to top.

“Fucking nothing,” I cursed while shaking my head.

“Oh, goody,” Phoenix singsonged a little bit too loudly, “That means we get to kick the hornet’s nest.”

“Shush it, dumbass, or switch to group chat!” Töten hissed in annoyance.

“You wanna kick the baby, or should I?” I asked, motioning with my chin toward the Phonograph in the main room by the stairs.

“I’ll kick the baby,” Töten sourly said as he began striding toward the central chamber, “While all of you get into position.”

“Don’t kick the baby!” Phoenix called out not dropping the skit as I shook my head.

“Where do you want me?” Braid asked in a low voice, “And what’s the whole thing with kicking the baby?”

“It’s an old internet meme created from a South Park episode,” I explained while glancing around trying to think where the best spot was for the G.O.A.H.E.M., “If you can run backward, you might want to take up a position facing up the secret passage. Any attack will more likely than not start from the eleventh or twelfth floors.”

“How about if I stand sideways instead?” Braid asked as I arched an eyebrow. Seeing the look, his shoulders rose up and down, “Running backward down a spiral secret corridor doesn’t sound like something I’d want to try during combat.”

“There’s that,” I agreed as Half-Orc squeezed past the

G.O.A.H.E.M. into the room.

“Too bad we don’t have more time here,” Braid said as he scanned the room full of books, “I swear I could get lost inside of here for a month.”

‘I take it the books weren’t in the same place,’ Helgath asked as I silently shook my head. Seeing the big guy getting ready to speak into the Phonograph, she frowned, ‘Ah, I understand.’

“That sounds fun, Braid,” I replied out loud, “I might have to join you.”

“Is everyone ready?” Töten asked as we traded nervous glances with one another and sounded off with a “Yes.” Hell, even Phoenix seemed to get her head back into the game as she called out with a “Yes.”

Taking a moment to glance up and down the stairwells, he went back to the machine and began speaking under his breath. There was a noticeable pause before he began hurrying back to us.

“Close but no cigar, Star,” Töten called out, before listing off the related books that had popped up, “The bookshelf this time is 10G-30A. We’re looking for The Kingdom of Thayjar Major Gátts, A Discussion on Ocean Trade via Thystaur's Gátt, Creating Links Between New Stronghold Gátts, and Initiating New Gátt Heart Stones.”

“I’m grabbing Creating Links Between New Stronghold Gátts and Initiating New Gátt Heart Stones,” I stated while hurrying over to the bookshelf three rows away.

“I guess I’ll grab The Kingdom of Thayjar Major Gátts,” Phoenix grumbled as she followed after me a little slower.

“I’ll grab The Kingdom of Thayjar Major Gátts,” Töten offered as he came to a stop behind us.

‘Let me take one of the books from you,’ Helgath offered, holding out her hand.

‘Uh, sure,’ I stuttered in surprise while handing over Initiating New Gátt Heart Stones.

‘I learned from our soul link,’ Helgath answered my unasked question as I flipped open the book Creating Links Between New Stronghold Gátts and began taking screenshots.

“If we knock this out quickly, they might never know who was here,” Phoenix chortled as she flipped pages and snapped screenshots.

“Unless they’re on alert after the shit we caused in Tulduroc,” Töten offered as the Barbarian made a raspberry sound with her lips.

“Dude, are you seriously trying to jinx us?” Phoenix half-heartedly demanded without looking away from her book.

“Let’s just hope that I don’t need anything else when I go to put one of these together,” I grunted as both my friends laughed.

“Yeah, that would majorly suck,” Phoenix readily agreed.

“I might have to bypass that side trip,” Töten snorted in amusement, before slamming the book in his hand close, “And done.”

“Me too,” the Barbarian chimed in next.

“And done,” I stated, before sliding the book back into place.

‘How’s it looking?’ I asked just as the Half-Orc snapped the book closed and offered up a toothy smile.

“Finished!” Helgath announced to the group as she replaced the book from where I’d found it.

“Let’s move it then, people!” I hollered as a commotion seemed to come from the higher floors.

“I think someone just tried to open the secret passage a floor or two up,” Braid nervously called out from the secret passage.

“Go, go, go,” Töten chanted, pushing Phoenix after me and Helgath while Neysa rushed out of the secret passage ahead of us.

“They’re coming down the stairwell!” Töten urgently hissed as soon as he came flying into the secret corridor.

“On it!” I assured everyone while throwing the switch. As soon as the door slid close and I’d jammed the iron dagger into the mechanism, Töten was shoving all of us down the spiral corridor shouting, “Let’s book it!”

“Just for the record,” Phoenix gasped out, struggling to keep up as the big guy kept shoving us from behind, “That was a hell of a lot quicker response time than last time.”

“Which makes me think they already have a working portal or something,” I frowned, churning over that fact while we ran, “And makes me wonder how they’ll respond when we hit the library in Aeroch Nor.”

“I agree,” Töten grunted behind us.

“Can we worry about escaping the library we’re currently in before worrying about the next?” Phoenix said in a flabbergasted tone.

“No one behind us yet,” Braid happily reported as he easily kept up with the rest of us, “Looks like we’re clear.”

“Ugh,” Phoenix groaned, “You just jinxed us for sure.”

“What can I say,” Braid confidently stated behind us, “I’m not superstitious like that.”

“I hear footsteps coming down the secret corridor!” a male voice bellowed in warning below us.

“Fucking Braid,” Töten groaned as I shook my head. Murphy’s Law wasn’t something that should be challenged even at the best of times.

“Who approaches from above?” A confident voice demanded from around the curve in the corridor. “Identify yourself or die!”

“You’ve gotta be bloody kidding me,” Braid snarled under his breath as Phoenix began snickering behind me. Letting out a calming breath, he growled, “Let me get in front so I can handle this.” Switching to local chat, the Gnome-Hogboon raised his voice as we let him take the lead, “Azure Skulls stand down. I’m Spell Knight Gnyfebnim escorting a group of Halflings to our tower in Tulduroc.”

“That wasn’t half bad, Braid. I’m impressed,” I complimented the Gnome-Hogboon.

“Eh, it wasn’t all that hard,” Braid dismissively said with a confident laugh, “That raid in Tulduroc is the only thing you’ve been talking about all morning.”

As we came to the ground floor, I peeked around the Gnome-Hogboon’s bulk to see there were twenty Azure Skull Mages waiting for us with their wands gripped tightly in their hands. The Dark Elves had positioned themselves at the base of the spiral ramp and stood between us and the intersection that led to the secret door by the entrance. A quick glance over my shoulder reminded me that everyone had their weapons drawn and were ready for a fight.

“Sheath your weapons and act like we’re being escorted by Braid,” I hissed in group chat.

“Please accept my apologies, Spell Knight Gnyfebnim.” The lead Azure Skull Mage politely bowed as we came to a stop in front of the group. “I am Expert Mage Craget. An alarm was triggered that someone was researching forbidden knowledge on the tenth floor and we are simply following orders to detain any intruders in the Great Library.”

“What happens if they attack us?” Phoenix whined not wanting to sheath her sword as I hit the Azure Skull leader with an Identify.

“Then you run for the exit while Helgath and I try to trip them up,” I succinctly explained to a chorus of groans as the name Idrane Craget,

level 53 Dark Elf, Sub-Leader Arcane Mage.

“As you can see, I’m not an intruder,” Braid replied without stuttering. He waved up the way we’d come, “I’m sure the Azure Skull Mage in charge has already dealt with the problem. Now, let us pass so that I can deliver my charges to Battle Mage Linienkkaack.”

‘How do you wanna deal with these Azure Skulls?’ Helgath asked as we eyed the size of the raid. Luckily, the corridor kept them clumped up relatively close together.

“Of course,” the female Dark Elf agreed with a bow, before turning to the Azure Skull Mages behind her and commanding, “Step aside so they might pass!”

‘Same as we did with the cavalry troopers,’ I answered as we both reached into our pouch for soul stones.

“Thank you, Sub-Leader Craget,” Braid formally replied to the Azure Skull Mage while waving for the rest of us to go ahead of him, “I’ll let Battle Mage Linienkkaack know the situation here in Thoronjhi is well in hand.”

As Braid began following after us, Töten, Phoenix, and Neysa took the left at the intersection instead of proceeding to the closed door at the end of the hall. Helgath and I were just following after them, when one of the Azure Skull Mages asked their leader, “Why are they heading to the entrance and not the portal chamber?”

With a quick glance behind us, we stepped around the corner. I immediately noticed the odd look on Expert Mage Craget’s face as we put our backs against the wall to wait for Braid. The female Dark Elf had an odd look on her face as she repeated something under her breath. I figured that was the only reason she didn’t immediately respond to her subordinate’s question.

“Uh, Spell Knight Gnyfebnim,” Expert Mage Craget asked with a peculiar edge to her voice, “Why did you call me Sub-Leader Craget?”

“Ah, bloody hell!” I heard Braid mutter under his breath.

As Helgath and I began casting our spells, I heard a commotion happening around the corner as Dark Elves screamed in pain. The corridor lit up like a strobe light as Arcane blasts began flying down the hall. There was another loud scrapping sound as Azure Skull Mages went flying past our hiding spot. A second later, the hurried stomping steps of a G.O.A.H.E.M. in full flight came to our ears.

“Run for the secret door,” Braid hollered as he came sliding around the corner at too high of a speed for his G.O.A.H.E.M. and slammed into the opposite wall, “We’ve got incoming!”

“Go, we’ve got this,” I calmly said while stepping to the edge of the corridor with the Half-Orc at my side.

There was the sound of bone grating against stone as two thick Zombie Walls rose up out of the ground. One at either end of the corridor to block the corridor we were standing inside. Ignoring the muffled cries of shock, we took off at a jog for the secret door while waving for Braid to follow.

“Everyone act calm when you step out into the anteroom of the Great Library,” I ordered as we caught up to the trio, before slowing to a walk.

“What are we gonna do with the level 70 city guard Knights standing by the exit?” Braid demanded in a panicked tone.

“Whatever is needed,” I calmly said as we followed the trio out of the secret corridor, “But if this is anything like Tulduroc, those city guards won’t be aware of our altercation with the Azure Skull Mages in the secret passageway.”

“A-Are y-you s-sure?” Braid worriedly stuttered as he followed us out.

“Spell Knight Gnyfebnim!” Librarian Receptionist Khesri exclaimed in surprise as she rose to her feet in confusion, “What happened to these Halflings’ interview?”

“Ah, it d-didn’t, uh, work as i-intended,” Braid stammered while we beelined for the exit. He paused to give the female Dark Elf an apologetic wave before following us out the door, “Have a nice day, and thank you for your help.”

“Thank you for your help?” Phoenix barked in laughter as the G.O.A.H.E.M. stumbled down the steps.

‘I’m changing back to my Silver Dire Wolf form,’ Neysa warned as the Half-Orc snagged her clothing and tucked it away in her Magi-Weaved Traveler’s Backpack.

“Come on, we need to get the hell out of here,” I said while jogging for the exit in the outer wall around the Codex of the Magi Spiral.

“Are you planning to ride out?” Töten worriedly asked at seeing Neysa back in her regular form, “If we do that, the city guards will be all

over us!”

“Only if it’s needed,” I countered as piled out into the main street. Turning left, I began hurriedly retracing our way back to the western gate.

“Not that way,” Töten warned as he and Phoenix began heading in the opposite direction, “We wanna leave through the northern gate.” Seeing our confused looks, he explained as we squeezed past Braid who was struggling to turn his G.O.A.H.E.M. around without plowing into anyone, “The main road that heads to Thylflumoor village has a split off for Aeroch Nor that’s faster to take.”

Hearing a loud clattering of hooves on cobblestones behind us, I peeked around the G.O.A.H.E.M.’s bulk to see a large group of cavalry troopers surrounding the entrance to The Gruuting Mage. Luckily, we were far enough ahead to not draw their attention.

“Hot damn,” I swore as we hurried down the curving avenue at a jog with our mounts trailing behind us, “Those Dark Fist cavalry troopers have caught up to us!”

“What do you mean?” Töten anxiously asked as we weaved past the slower pedestrian traffic.

“A whole bunch of them just rode up to The Gruuting Mage,” I explained as the Barbarian’s head whipped around to stare at me.

“You mean just now?” Phoenix demanded.

“Didn’t you hear that loud clattering of hooves just a moment ago?” I asked while waving behind me.

“I just thought it was normal traffic,” Phoenix replied somewhat taken aback as she craned her head around to see if she could see any pursuit.

“As long as they didn’t actually see us,” Töten explained as we followed him to another avenue, “We’re still good.” He waved toward the gatehouse in front of us. “They’re probably take an hour or two to retrace our steps inside the Great Library and will hopefully decide to check the surrounding streets, before concluding that we’ve left the city.”

“So, we should have plenty of time to get ahead of them,” I said, relaxing a bit as we reached the northern gate.

Though we passed through the gate without any trouble from the city guards, I noticed a number of players pointing at us as we hurried past. There were several exclamations of “That’s the Ironwolf guy!” and “Did you know there’s a huge bounty on his head!” reached my ears, while other

players commented on Töten's fiery mount and Braid's massive G.O.A.H.E.M. While it was disconcerting on one level, no one was stupid enough to try anything before we could mount up and ride away.

"Making a big scene as we left might not have been the best idea you've ever had," Phoenix commented as we traveled down the road at a fast trot.

"Eh, it's better than being caught without our mounts and being forced to fight before we could leave the city," I shrugged not overly concerned while calling up my in-game message box, "Did all of you send me the screenshots from of the books you scanned?"

"Yeah, you should already have it in your message program," Töten said as I opened up his window and saw the snapshots he'd taken.

"I've already sent you mine too," Phoenix assured me with a wave. Seeing that I was focused on my HUD, she snorted, "I'm gonna ride with Töten if you're planning on working the entire way back."

"It's probably for the best," I distractedly agreed while going to my own screenshots first.

We had a solid three-hour ride back to Haldale, and another two-hours after that before we'd reach Aeroch Nor. That was plenty of time to go through all of the material we'd copied from Tulduroc and Thoronjhi. Hell, it might be even longer than that depending on how far along the caravan was when we caught up with them. As I began reading the first book on Creating Links Between New Stronghold Gátts, Braid, Phoenix, and Töten voices faded into the background as they talked and joked about our recent foray against the Azure Skull Mages while Helgath leaned back into my arms.

Chapter Eleven

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Maarin Silferwing in Aeroch Nor)

“This is such bullshit!” Maarin steamed as she stalked off the central pillar and out onto the connecting bridge. Pushing her way past the crowd of Dwarves going about their day, she angrily continued her rant, “First Captain Sighideth promises my people logistical support for fighting against the Sekolahian Empire invading the harbor, and a week later she tells me the Honorable Deepmane is sorry but supplying my people with weapons, armor, and health potions is costing too much to keep the port open!”

“Is that why you had us fight to the last?” her companion gruffly asked.

“We were completely surrounded!” Maarin roared, tears of frustration welling up in her eyes as she whirled to glare into the Killer Sea Fox’s golden eyes. It felt like Tsukihime had rammed an icepick through her breast! “What else could we have done?”

“Not trusted the land dwellers to have our backs!” Tsukihime growled back, looking rabid in her Humanoid form.

“Who else could we have asked help from?” Maarin furiously demanded in the same tone, “Every other aquatic race we met is either under the Sekolahian Empire’s webbed claws or out for our blood!”

Seeing the hurt reflected in her companion’s eyes, Maarin let out an explosive breath and turned away to grip the railing with her blue-clawed hands. Her overlarge chest heaved with each breath as she looked out across the hollow mountain while trying to get a grip on her raging emotions. The memories of her people being ripped apart as they fought against the impossibly large frenzies that had finally overwhelmed their defenses still haunted her after a week.

What was even more infuriating was the outright hostility Maarin had received from the Dwarves who were supposed to be her allies. She knew the main crux of the problem was that she’d assumed the Dwarves were basically good and honorable from the other MMOs that she’d played

in the past. While they officially held themselves to that base racial honor in The World, she'd learned too late that didn't mean they held the same honor when dealing with other races, let alone a Halfling race like hers.

Maarin felt a furred hand hesitantly grip her shoulders as the smaller female silently stepped up behind her. While the Killer Sea Fox infuriated her at times, she knew in her heart that her companion only meant the best for her. Sometimes Tsukihime couldn't hold in the fury she felt for the landlubber race that had betrayed them in their greatest time of need.

"I know you warned me when I agreed to move our stronghold to the mouth of the harbor that the Dwarves couldn't be trusted," Maarin sniffled as she gripped the other female's hand firmly in her own, "But I didn't see any other way for our people to survive against the onslaught." Wiping away the tears that had started trailing down her cheeks, she gazed out across the cavern at the strength and power of the Kingdom of Saur in disgust. "And I'd thought they would, at least, hold to their word of protecting our people long enough for them to fall back to Dolun. Instead, they gleefully watched as we were cut down to the last."

"That's why I don't understand why we're here in the home of our betrayers to beg for their charity," Tsukihime hatefully spat. Her long claws momentarily dug through the Frozen Robe of the White Whale Maarin was wearing as she furiously continued, "And continuously worked to improve our Reputation."

"How else am I supposed to level up and earn enough coin to save the House of the Azure Jörmungandr?" Maarin quietly demanded of her furry companion. Turning around, she pressed her dark-blue lips together as she met the Killer Sea Fox's golden eyes, "How else am I to afford to get the Sabre of the Dark Moon repaired so we can recover Høre om Slangen stronghold and flee?" Her eyes momentarily flicked to her HUD, "And in five days no less."

"Even if you do get the Sabre of the Dark Moon repaired, how are we going to defeat the Kraken?" Tsukihime demanded, ignoring the tears running down the furry cheeks as she lifted her chin.

"I've been doing some research on this when I've been offline," Maarin explained as determination flared in her sky-blue eyes, "If I can max out my purchases of new recruits, we should be able to use their appearance to get past the Kraken and into the control room of the main

keep. If I can trigger the travel mode in time, we can escape and set up our stronghold in an out-of-the-way location that's not in the direct path of a major invasion."

"How are you gonna charge the crystal with the required mana in time?" Tsukihime asked in a shocked voice, "It took a whole week for you to save up enough mana for the first move!"

"Why do you think I've been purchasing every mana potion that I can my hands on and running every quest possible to raise my Reputation?" Maarin asked as the Killer Sea Fox's face lit up in sudden understanding.

"I'd wondered about that!" Tsukihime exclaimed as a look of amazement crossed her face, "Wait! You've been trying to raise your reputation so much because you're trying to reduce the cost of getting your broken blade repaired by Clan Hammertoe!"

"Not only that," Maarin said with a hungry look as she spelled out the obvious, "And the higher our reputation with the kingdom of Sayr, the more money we'll have saved for purchasing new recruits!"

"That might work," Tsukihime muttered thoughtfully under her breath before her eyes locked on Maarin's, "But it'll be close."

"It's the best chance we have within the fourteen-day deadline," Maarin admitted not about to back down from the challenge while the Killer Sea Fox slowly nodded in agreement.

"But afterward," Tsukihime lowered her voice and leaned in close to whisper into her ear, "We'll never trust these dirty Dwarves' words of honor again!"

"No, we won't," Maarin agreed as her heart slightly unclenched.

Maarin was glad her companion was in agreement with the wild plan that she'd come up with. She'd been so uptight after losing her Nightmare Start stronghold that she almost couldn't stand it. Over the last week she'd barely eaten or slept due to all the stress, besides using every day of vacation she had saved up. All so that she wouldn't lose the Nightmare Start she'd worked so hard to achieve.

Mostly, she was pissed at the VMMORG developers for making this all but impossible. How could anyone possibly hold onto their stronghold when the game kept sending wave after wave of monsters after them? Overnight, it was like The World had gone crazy and turned into one of those Zombie Horde survivor games where you tried to hold out for as long as possible until you were overwhelmed by impossible odds.

“Come, Tsukihime,” Maarin ordered as she sucked in a ragged breath and squared her shoulders, “Or we’ll be late for our meeting.”

“Yes, Maarin,” Tsukihime grunted, following behind her as she began striding for the far end of the bridge.

Reaching the other side, Maarin mentally frowned when she noticed the Dwarven patrol eyeing them warily as they walked past. So far, they hadn’t had any major trouble with any of them, but she’d been here long enough to know how the city guards regarded newfars, let alone Halflings. Cause any trouble and they’d gladly slit your throat, before tossing you in the local dungeon for an hour or two.

While that was wrong on so many levels, at the same time, Maarin couldn’t exactly blame the city guards for the way they were acting. Not after several of the larger player guilds had tried to take over a number of major cities throughout the Nordic Region. Except for the Human city of Telrain, they’d all been successfully smacked down with overwhelming violence. That the city no longer stood had caused a panic among the various kingdoms’ nobles. Since then, the forums had been filled with reports of NPCs using an iron fist to squelch trouble with newfars as soon as any started.

Heading down the hexagonal corridor, Maarin did her best to retrace her steps from the first time that she’d met with the Clan Leader’s daughter. She’d heard the female Dwarf’s father was a hard-ass to deal with but supposedly fair. Not that she could say one way or another. Avna Hammertoe had surprisingly been quite fair and upfront, plainly stating the costs for repairing her Nightmare Start blade and even suggesting that Maarin increased her reputation with the kingdom to reduce the overall price.

So far, in Maarin’s experiences, that type of congenial attitude was sorely lacking among the other Dwarven Founding Clan Leaders that she’d met. Honestly, it was like every one of them was high from sniffing their own farts in their dark little holes. Nothing she said had swayed them to offer up any form of support to assist in recovering her stronghold and removing the Kraken that was blocking access to the port of Dolurn.

That said, Maarin had to admit that Hammertoe Clan didn’t seem to be doing as well as the other Dwarven Founding Clans. Not only that, none of the other Founding Clans seemed to like them very much. Maybe, it was because they weren’t complete assholes, she mentally snorted in derision. It

didn't hurt that they even had Halflings serving in their clan. None of the others had that, so maybe it was a problem with them all being inbred.

While that thought forced a chuckle from her dark-blue lips, it did nothing to offset the general hatred Maarin had for Dwarves and the Kingdom of Sayr. If not for the driving need to have her Sabre of the Dark Moon repaired and her Høre om Slangen stronghold recovered, they could all go to hell as far as she was concerned. Coming to a stop before the Hammertoe Clan's armored door, she paused to regain her composure. It wouldn't do to have her face reflecting her angry thoughts when she was being forced to beg for help, now would it?

"Remember to let me do the talking and to stay respectful and polite at all times," Maarin hissed under her breath to the Killer Sea Fox standing next to her, "This is too important to screw up!"

"I know well what you expect of me, Maarin," Tsukihime acknowledged, before adding in a low growl, "You've repeated it more than enough!"

"You know I could hear that, right?" Maarin sighed with her hand on the small chain to pull the doorbell.

"I sure hoped you would," Tsukihime snorted as Maarin silently rolled her eyes, "Maybe, that'll stop you from repeating yourself!"

"Just ... don't start," Maarin grunted before yanking the chain and a deep bong sounded on the other side of the thick, iron door.

"Who goes there?" a gruff voice demanded from the portal that was opened in the middle of the massive door.

"Maarin and Tsukihime Silferwing from the House of the Azure Jörmungandr," Maarin officiously stated to the bearded face behind the grilled window, "We're returning to speak with Avna Hammertoe about blacksmithing work."

"Aye, yer marked on the list. Just one moment," the gruff voice agreed as the portal was shut.

There were some sounds of clanking gears and the sounds of a heavy door closing. Maarin had first thought the Hammertoe's Clan security was a bit over-the-top, but that was before she'd gotten a better understanding of the constant fighting going on under the mountain between the various Dwarven Clans.

Now, Maarin felt like such high security was the basic minimum necessary to keep your stronghold safe. Her attention was pulled back to the

present as the clanking sounds of gears came to her ears and the portal before her swung inward. By now, she was accustomed to the process as they both stepped inside and the heavy door automatically swung shut behind them.

There was another pause before the inner armored door at the end of the tunnel swung open to a series of defensive barricades and a large squad of clan guards. Stepped into the room, Maarin turned to the antique solid-wood desk where an old armored Dwarf sat before a quill and a large open book. A grin came to her lips as she stopped in front of the desk.

“Captain Warfury,” Maarin politely acknowledged.

“Lady Silferwing,” Captain Warfury responded, before nodding to the open book, “If ye’d sign in, that would be appreciated.”

“Of course,” Maarin replied as she signed her name in the book and marked her reason down, “Is that all?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Captain Warfury nodded, before motioning with his chin toward the small Dwarfling standing before the entrance to the clan’s cavern, “Belkar Kegflayer will escort you to the greeting hall.”

“If ye’ll follow me,” Belkar gruffly said as unceremoniously started toward the archway and the open iron door, “I’ll be bring ye to the Clan Leader.”

“The Clan Leader!” Maarin exclaimed in alarm, worried that she was now going to have to deal with someone new, “I thought Borear Hammertoe was still setting up the Mining Town of Kragrock?”

“Aye, that he is,” Belkar gruffly agreed as he led them past the homes embedded into the walls of the cavern.

“So, how can he be here and there at the same time?” Tsukihime asked under her breath.

“No clue,” Maarin grunted, giving the Killer Sea Fox a shake of her head to stop her from speaking further, “But I’m sure we’ll find out.”

“Aye, that ye will,” Belkar agreed without a shred of embarrassment for listening into their conversation. However, what shocked Maarin the most was the sexist comment he added under his breath as they began walking up the steps to the ceremonial greeting hall, “Ye big-titted cow!”

“What the hell did you just call me, midget?” Maarin demanded in outrage as she came to a stop just before the entrance.

While she’d set the infamous boob-bar-slider all the way up when

she was making her character, Maarin angrily thought, that didn't mean she deserved disrespect. As the Dwarfling turned to stare up at her, he crossed his short-stubby arms across his chest to give her a challenging stare.

"Sure, I don't mind repeating what I've said," Belkar scoffed, "I called ye a-"

"Belkar, that's enough! I told you to escort them to the greeting hall," a voice bellowed from the dais where a familiar-looking female Dwarf sat, "Not bore them with your inane thoughts."

"Avna Hammertoe?" Maarin asked in confusion as the Dwarfling wordlessly turned around to escort her into the greeting hall, "I thought, I was being brought to the Clan Leader, Borear Hammertoe!"

"Borear Hammertoe is no more. He died protecting the clan in the Mining Town of Kragrock when an Elite Beithir attacked," Avna explained in a heavy voice, "I have now succeeded him as Leader of the Hammertoe Clan."

"Please accept my heartfelt apologies for your loss, Clan Leader Hammertoe," Maarin politely replied with a respectful curtsy. While that bit of information was somewhat shocking, it was better for her since she'd already dealt with the female Dwarf about her needs and had come to a preliminary agreement. One that had been waiting to be ratified by the Clan Leader.

"Thank you, Lady Silberwing for your kind words," Avna acknowledged her courtesy, "As you can imagine, there's much to do with our losses, so if you don't mind, I'd like to get right down to the business at hand." At Maarin's silent nod, she continued, "I assume you're ready to proceed with repairing your House of the Azure Jörmungandr's damaged blade?"

"Yes, Clan Leader," Maarin replied while doing her best to keep her tone respectful, "And as you've suggested, I've raised my reputation within the Kingdom."

"Ah, yes, I see you have. Along with gaining a number of levels," Avna agreeably said after a wave of her hand to cast an Identify spell, "That will reduce the cost from five hundred gold to two hundred fifty."

Two hundred fifty! Maarin silently exclaimed in relief as she physically sagged where she stood. It had taken everything she had to earn the three hundred fifty golds that she'd acquired over the last week. Much of that had been from selling the unique items on the Auction House that

she'd been saving to expand and strengthen her stronghold before the invasion. The rest of that immense effort had been to increase her reputation for this very deal.

"That is great news," Maarin expelled an explosive breath as the Dwarfling openly ogled her chest, "Thank you, Lady Avna!" Standing up straighter, she met the female Dwarf's eyes. "And might I request to have my blade finished within the next day or two?" Her face tightened knowing this was the key to rescuing her stronghold.

"As a matter of fact, it should be finished by this evening," Avna stated with a smile of understanding. Seeing the confused look on her face, the female Dwarf continued, "It's the least I could offer with the dire straights you're in."

"Not to overstep my bounds," Maarin said, doing her best to not sound ungrateful, "But might I inquire as to the decision that has been reached on my second request?"

"That, Lady Silberwing is a bit more complicated," Avna replied as she unhappily pressed her lips together in a frown, "Due to the loss of our clanmates who were slaughtered during the attack on the Mining Town of Kragrock, we can offer no additional troops to aid you in retaking your stronghold. For that, you have my sincerest apologies." Seeing the surprised look on her face, the female Dwarf let out a heavy sigh, "While the House of the Azure Jörmungandr deserves more direct military support for all they've done, the Hammertoe Clan holds no sway over Duke Brewguard of Dolurn."

"I know it's not your responsibility," Maarin gritted out through clenched teeth as she clenched her fists at her side, "But the lack of any support to defend the port of Dolurn after everything my House surrendered-

"Is a travesty and shows a complete disregard for the precepts of honor," Avna finished, cutting her off with a raised hand, "And I can imagine the fury that must've left inside of you toward the Kingdom of Sayr and its Dwarven people."

"I don't, um, mean any, ah, disrespect-" Maarin stammered like a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar. At the same time, her insides clenched at the thought she'd just blown her last chance of recovering her stronghold after all of the hard work she'd done to get this far.

"Whether or not you're a Humanoid, Halfling, or Demi-Human,"

Avna said, overriding her protests, “You have the justifiable right to feel betrayed by what has transpired to your people and House. While I don’t have the power to make that right, I might have another option that you might find useful.”

“Another option?” Maarin asked in confusion.

“Any day, I expect the return of one of our Honorary Clansmen. His name is Zeven Al'Zaric and he’s a Badger Kin Chieftain from the Diongmalta Clan. Although there are differences between your situations, he’s gone through similar losses as you have and is looking to recover his missing clanmates,” Avna explained while watching her closely, “If he returns before you depart, I’d like to offer introductions.” Seeing Maarin opening her mouth to protest, she raised her voice to make her point. “Look, I know this is not the level of military assistance you’d hope to receive, but nonetheless, it might be enough to help you recover your stronghold in your time of need. The only requirement I expect he’ll request from you is to assist him in a similar manner.”

“Thank you, Lady Hammertoe,” Maarin stiffly replied, “I plan to head back to Dolurn in three days.”

While she understood the female Dwarf wasn’t at fault for Duke Brewguard’s betrayal, the whole situation still left a sour taste in Maarin’s mouth. She didn’t quite understand what the Hammertoe Clan Leader was exactly suggesting. Was this another player or a possible NPC companion? The first she wasn’t exactly interested in while the second was of limited use since her people lived underwater. Whatever, she decided with a grimace as she focused on what was important in the here and now.

“If my blade won’t be finished until later tonight,” Maarin continued, “Then if it’s fine with you, I’ll return to pick it up first thing in the morning?”

“That’s more than acceptable,” Avna assured her with a gracious nod, “And might I inquire as to what Inn you’re staying at in the city in case Zeven returns before your departure?”

“I’m staying at an Inn in the Market District called-” Maarin suddenly paused as her eyes widened in sudden embarrassment. Before she could think of a way to say the Inn’s name without being embarrassed, the Dwarfing loudly coughed into his hand.

“Let me guess,” Belkar scoffed in amusement, “Ye’re be staying at Pints and Pussies?”

“Ah, y-yes,” Maarin embarrassedly stammered, “I b-believe that’s the n-name of the place.”

“From what I understand, it’s a fine but cheap establishment,” Avna replied with a twinkle in her eyes as she repeated their byline, “Something about catering to all your needs.”

“I think it’s something like that, Lady Avna,” Maarin agreed as she flushed to the tips of her long ears.

“Excellent, then until tomorrow morning,” Avna replied with a grin as she nodded to the Dwarfing, “Belkar, please show them both out.” Her face turned momentarily stern as she added, “Politely!”

Chapter Twelve

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Startum Ironwolf and friends catching up with the caravan before reaching Aeroch Nor)

“Where in the hell are they?” I asked while double-checking the map for the third time, “We’ve nearly reached Aeroch Nor!”

“How the hell should I know,” Phoenix grouched as she jerked her chin toward the big guy, “That’s a question for our resident Closed Beta Tester.”

“Resident Closed Beta Tester?” Töten scoffed in amusement, “You make it sound like a paid position or something!”

“Only in insults,” I snorted as Töten flipped me off, “And I’ve got plenty of those to go around.”

“Because it’s not like numb nuts here ever has anything to add to the pot,” Phoenix helpfully added.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Töten protested as everyone glanced over at him, “I always bring my sparkling personality.”

“So, aka, nothing,” Braid chimed in from where he ran in the rear.

“Don’t be acting all cool, FNG!” Töten snapped over his shoulder, “It’s not like you’ve been adding anything to the pot.”

“Except for my rune power muscles and ability to tank hits,” Braid said without hesitation as the rest of us laughed.

“And he did that without the extra side of whining,” Phoenix helpfully pointed out, before adding to the big guy’s annoyance, “Besides, he hasn’t actually been with us long enough to be a dinner mooch like you.”

“Like me!” Töten exclaimed, “This is his first full day hanging out with us!”

“Exactly my point,” Phoenix pointed out with a laugh, “The least you could do is offer to buy a meal or two every once in a while.”

“Why aren’t you including Zeven in that?” Töten demanded with an annoyed wave of his gauntleted hand, “There’s two of them to feed with him around!”

“He just joined up two days ago,” Phoenix flippantly pointed out, “And unlike you, they even bought their own meal for the first night.”

“Whatever,” Töten dismissively snorted at her comment, “Besides, what am I supposed to do when Star is always pulling out food from his bag that’s way better than most stuff we could even buy!”

“Oh, come on,” Phoenix said rolling her eyes, “Slaifaddwuck’s Grill was like a one-time thing.”

“Stop trying to bring logic into our discussion, woman,” Töten groused as the Barbarian gave him the stink eye, “Sheesh, get off my ass already. I’ll buy dinner tonight!”

“I appreciate that, man,” I said in a conciliatory tone while not bothering to suppress my shit-eating grin, “Because Zeven says the Dwarven capital can be pretty pricy.”

“Son of a bitch!” Töten swore while Phoenix traded a fist bump with me, “You’ve gotta be shitting me!”

“Really, man,” I joked with a twinkle in my eyes, “That’s something I would’ve thought a Closed Beta Player would have known.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Töten swore, flipping me off again.

Even Helgath laughed in my arms as the big guy groaned and looked up to the darkening sky. While we all gave each other shit, it wasn’t meant in a bad way. And as far as the mooching went, I didn’t feel as if any of my friends had been trying to take advantage of me during our travels. At least, not like Hefe tended to do to all of his in real-life friends whenever we went out together. With the guys and Phoenix, it was more of an unspoken agreement that I was paying for everyone’s upkeep while they were playing the role of my mercenaries during the trip.

I think that partly came from the fact that I always had food on hand. Between my girls and the eating requirements of my Nightmare Start, I needed to constantly have something in my bag to munch on whereas Phoenix didn’t. Because the Barbarian was always joining us for dinner, Zeven, Nahimana, and Töten had naturally fallen into the same routine.

That might sound somewhat strange but sharing food was a sort of big deal for me when it came to family and friends. It came from growing up with a single mother who regularly stole my dinner which forced me to go to bed hungry on a regular basis. For me, there was no better way for me to say that I cared for someone than to share my food with them.

“Looks like we finally caught up with the caravan,” Töten called

out as he crested the ridge.

“And reached the Dwarven mountain city of Aeroch Nor,” I added upon catching sight of the massive mountain fortress at the far end of the valley.

“Why are they split into two groups?” Phoenix asked as she followed us over the crest, “Are they under attack or something?”

“I wonder if that’s a problem around here,” I thoughtfully commented out loud while eyeing the odd scene on the slope below.

It looked like Marshal Slangneedon and his G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers were harassing Zeven, Tyhra, Sir Talos, and the Halfling refugees from Splaet-VonDuekey. Further behind them, I saw both Neristhana and Nahimana bitching up a storm at the caravan guards’ backs. While I couldn’t make out what they were saying, from all of the waving and pointing going on, it was obvious they were arguing about the other group following them to the entrance.

“Come on,” I growled while clicking my heels against Neysa’s flanks, “Let’s go see what these idiots are fighting about!”

“Do you want me to bite his face off?” Neysa offered as she began heading down the slope.

“When you say idiots, do you mean Zeven or those Gnomes?” Phoenix humorously asked.

“I mean the guards we have on loan from Viscount Hollysharp,” I irritably snapped, cutting the Barbarian off as we rode past.

“Aren’t they more guards like loan shark thugs waiting to take your stuff if you don’t follow the letter of the agreement?” Töten asked while clucking his reins to follow.

“Don’t you mean, even if you follow the letter of the agreement?” Braid asked as he got his G.O.A.H.E.M. moving.

“Basically,” Töten grunted as we caught up to the two groups before things went completely south.

“What the hell is your major dysfunction?” Zeven roared at the impassive Marshal, “I’m a part of Overlord Ironwolf’s party. He specifically asked me to return with the rest of his new vassals so there weren’t any issues with you guys. So, step back and let us join the rest of the caravan.”

“Until Overlord Ironwolf returns, you are to keep a hundred yards distance between us or we will consider this an attack on the caravan!”

Marshal Slangneedon stated in an unfriendly tone while the rest of his G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers eagerly held their weapons at the ready.

“Are you freaking deaf and an idiot!” Zeven roared back, “None of you can even enter the city without me being a part of your party!”

“I swear by the dark!” I heard Neristhana shout at the top of her lungs, “If you attack the second part of our caravan and Overlord Ironwolf’s vassals, I’ll report you to the Aeroch Nor city guards as brigands and claim Viscount Hollysharp’s deal with Overlord Ironwolf to be null and void!”

“That’s perfectly fine with me, Trader Lighttouch,” Marshal Slangneedon smugly stated, “I’ll just rule that Overlord Ironwolf reneged on his agreement and confiscate the wagons.”

“I see that I shouldn’t have expected anything more from the Viscount’s words or the House of Hollysharp’s honor,” I scathingly roared as Neysa trotted to a stop in front of the hard-faced Marshal and his Gnomes.

“You dare impugn the honor of the House of Hollysharp?” Marshal Slangneedon demanded in an ugly tone as he quickly suppressed the look of shock that flashed across his face, “I, Marshal Carbom Slangneedon, am here to make sure the letter of the agreement is precisely followed-”

“Then stop acting like an honorless hoodlum and disrespecting your house,” I snapped, cutting him off mid-rant. Waving a hand at the wagons and refugees behind me, I continued non-plussed, “You can clearly see these individuals are all vassals of the House of Kayden. Threatening to assault them for joining the rest of my caravan is the same as making a declaration of war and proof of your lack of impartiality in carrying out the agreement of our bet.”

“That undead monstrosity is not of the House of Kayden!” Marshal Slangneedon roared as he pointed at the Wraith Knight who was now standing at my side.

“As I’ve already clearly stated,” Sir Talos’s sonorous voice echoed off the mountain slope, “I am sworn to Overlord Ironwolf for a month even though I’m not part of the House of Kayden.”

“Whether or not Sir Darkwind is an undead monstrosity is not the question here,” I calmly stated, holding the Gnome’s icy-blue eyes, “You were informed by Chieftain Al’Zaric, who is a member of my party, and now by me that he’s one of my vassals. Stand down and let my people join the rest of the caravan or be at fault for reneging on the bet that Viscount

Hollysharp and I made.”

“The agreement was for guarding the three wagons of farming materials and G.O.L.E.M.s,” Marshal Slangneedon formally stated through gritted teeth while his eyes swept the dirty refugees in the wagons behind me, “Not for taking responsibility for dirty peasants, orphans, and Halflings!”

“Once again, you’re incorrect,” I snapped with my face etched in stone at the implied insult, “You were commanded to guard my caravan all the way to Dolurn and to ensure that I followed the letter of the agreement that Viscount Hollysharp and I made or you and your Gnomes would confiscate the items that I purchased through Lady Tuin’Dyrr for farming. Nowhere in that agreement was it stipulated as to what or who was considered a part of my caravan.” Raising a hand that shook in rage, I pointed toward the head of the lead wagon behind him, “So, get your honorless asses to the front of the caravan and carry out your orders-”

“You dare raise your voice -” Marshal Slangneedon bellowed, trying to override my tirade.

“Or!” My voice snapped like a whip to silence the Gnome as we glared at each other. “I will slaughter the lot of you here and now as common brigands. After which, I will send a messenger back to Viscount Hollysharp addressing the lack of honor of his House and demand additional restitution along with the confiscation of the farming equipment that was part of our initial bet!”

As if we’d scripted the move, I thrust a hand into my pouch and pulled out a handful of Hernen bones while Helgath, Phoenix, and Neristhana did the same. Out of the corner of my eyes, I noted Töten, Zeven, Braid, and Sir Talos all drawing their weapons and stepping forward to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me. Without missing a beat, I drew the Dark Blade of Lord Kayden and sat back on the Silver Dire Wolf’s back.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Marshal Slangneedon scoffed in disbelief

‘I’ll make sure to cut him down first!’ Helgath’s voice echoed in my mind as she drew her Toxic Fang of the Cheliferidae Risso dagger with her free hand.

‘Only after you raise all the skellies that you can,’ I warned before saying out loud, “I have too much to do tonight to be dealing with your stupidity, so decide now, or I’ll make the decision for you in ten seconds.”

“There’s no way the lot of you can take on-” Marshal Slangneedon

began to argue as I simply started counting down out loud.

“Ten, nine.”

“A cavalry unit of G-G.O.A.H.E.M. C-Cavaliers!” Marshal Slangneedon sputtered in alarm.

“Eight, seven.”

“If you attack us, it will be a declaration of war-”

“Six, five.”

“Against the Kingdom of Cadarea!” Marshal Slangneedon exclaimed.

“Four, three.”

“Alright, you win this time,” Marshal Slangneedon finally relented.

“Two, one.”

“Get back into position, now!” Marshal Slangneedon nearly screamed at his Gnomes in a panic as he yanked his G.O.A.H.E.M. around and spurred it toward the front of the caravan.

“Not bad,” Sir Talos grunted while planting his Great Sword into the ground at his feet.

“Whatever psycho,” Töten hissed to the Wraith Knight as he let out a tense breath, before quietly adding, “Though, I have to admit. I almost wished they’d gone for it.”

“Why are you acting like beating all of those G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers wouldn’t be a problem?” Phoenix asked with a frown while jerking her chin toward the Wraith Knight, “Even chuckles here couldn’t tank the damage that those G.O.A.H.E.M.s can dish out!”

“With their large sizes, there’s only so many of them that could pound on me all at once,” Sir Talos assured the Barbarian as he confidently folded his gauntleted hands atop his two-handed Great Sword, “And all the while my captured spirits would be rending them from inside out.”

“Is this guy for real?” Phoenix demanded as she traded a look of disbelief with the big guy.

“Doubtful,” Braid snorted as his torso twisted to eye the Wraith Knight, “Even my G.O.A.H.A.M. Spell Knight wouldn’t have lasted long with that many G.O.A.H.E.M. Cavaliers pounding on it.”

“Hey Drielra, go ahead and join the rest of the caravan,” I called out to get the Bartender. As Zeven trotted over on Bright Claw, I jerked my chin at the trio while sheathing my blade and returning the Hernen bones to their pouch, “It would’ve sucked, but I figure we probably could’ve taken

them after a few deaths and a long drawn-out battle.” As the Bartender reined in the wagon next to me, a frown came to my lips. “That’s probably why he decided not to risk the confrontation.”

“It didn’t hurt that you threatened him that Viscount Hollysharp’s honor would be held in question due to them not properly carrying out their duty,” Töten added with a wide grin.

“I try,” I smirked in appreciation to the big guy as the Badger Kin began to swear.

“Seriously, what the hell is wrong with that guy?” Zeven demanded as he glared over his shoulder at our Gnome escort, “I was sure they were gonna have a go at us!”

“Thank you, milord,” Drielra respectfully dipped his head while my other friends continued their banter, “It’s a stroke of luck that you arrived when you did.” He jerked his chin toward the twenty Gnome G.O.A.H.E.M.s.

“He’s right,” Zeven growled as he turned back to give the Bartender a nod, “Those assholes were raring to go for a fight!”

“Probably because he’s been ordered to use any means necessary to ensure Viscount Hollysharp wins our bet,” I glared at the Marshal’s back while jerking my chin at the Bartender and his wagon, “And he’d decided to use my absence and your group’s arrival as the catalyst to make that happen.”

“That would’ve been ugly if you guys hadn’t arrived when you did,” Zeven added under his breath as the Dark Elf silently nodded at the Badger Kin’s words.

“I’ll warn everyone to be on their best behavior around them, milord,” Drielra said as he clucked the reins to get the horses moving.

“And pass it around to let me know if anyone has any trouble with those Chofe-ka so I can take care of it,” I added, using The World’s slang for honorless cowards.

“Aye, milord,” the old Bartender acknowledged with a fist salute as the wagons clattered away.

“If those guys are gonna bunch up near the front of the caravan, then we may as well take up the rear in case anyone decides to jump us,” I said, squeezing my knees as Neysa started forward at a trot.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Zeven admitted as Bright Claw matched the Silver Dire Wolf’s pace, “The kids and I were jumped by a

bunch of inbred Dwarves when we were passing through the forest below,” Zeven said as the rest of my friends fell in behind us still arguing.

“Kids?” I asked, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“Uh, yeah,” Zeven grunted in embarrassment while rubbing the back of his furred neck, “I sort of saved some kids from the Hammertoe Clan and became an Honorary member.” Dropping his hand, he shrugged as my eyebrows rose even further. “That’ll come in handy tonight because Dwarves don’t usually let Halflings without a positive reputation in the Kingdom of Sayr to enter Aeroch Nor.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right,” I grunted as my face lit up, “Aren’t you supposed to be picking up your Nightmare Start weapon for your stronghold or something here?” Seeing the Badger Kin begin nodding in agreement, I flashed him a grin. “Good, because I could use a guide for the city tonight.”

“Why do you need a guide for tonight?” Phoenix demanded as she momentarily stopped giving the guys shit, “I thought we were gonna go out drinking again!”

“Some of us have work to do tonight, Light Weight,” I joked as the Barbarian flipped me off.

“You’re not planning on doing that Great Library run tonight, are you?” Töten suddenly demanded, leaving Talos looking to Braid for an explanation.

“Not on your life,” I scoffed, before listing out the stuff I needed to do off the top of my head, “I need to get mount armor for Neysa and a saddle, see what it takes to set up regular ore deliveries for BrokenFang Hold, check the prices for finished weapons and armor, and see if there’s any Dwarfplings that might be open to becoming my vassal.”

“You want to do that all tonight?” Zeven demanded while Phoenix and Töten busted out laughing.

“We’ve got most of the morning too,” I shrugged as the Badger Kin buried his face in his palm and groaned.

***** the story continues in book 15 *****

MAILING LIST FOR JASON CHEEK'S BOOKS!

Because Amazon doesn't always choose to inform my fans when a new book has been released, I've decided to take it upon myself to create a Mailing List. This way my fans will be notified in a timely manner via

email when new books are released.

<https://www.thecheekyfellow.com/mailling-list.html>

An update on Amazon's Kindle Unlimited program: Amazon has been reducing the amount of money they give to the authors via the KU program for books read and that reduction is making it hard to make a living being a writer. Patreon support helps to make up the difference. I do my best to offer a lot of extras for the series: Sneak Peeks for the next book, a variety of concept art for the various characters, interesting articles on VR and FIVR gaming technologies, funny memes, and other stuff about the series. Any support is greatly appreciated and helps makes this series possible. You can find my Patreon page here:

<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=23281087>

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Appendices and the Post Credit Scene

The various appendices are put here for those readers who enjoy the technical aspects of Star's Character Sheet, Equipment, gaming terms, the various people in The World, and whatever else that people ask me to include because they're interested in the mechanics. This is not taking away from the story. It is in addition to the story for those people who enjoy such things.

There are some people who want to spam pages of this information throughout their stories instead of placing it within an appendix at the end of the book where it belongs. While that would increase my page count for the monies earned for pages read by Kindle Unlimited and would match how many of the other authors in the genre, GameLit and LitRPG, are adding this information into their stories, I personally will not be doing that.

As a reader, I hate such information being needlessly spammed throughout the body of the book. From conversations with my fans, they feel this way too. For myself, such senseless spamming of tables and gear takes me out of the story and is frankly annoying in my personal opinion. How do people on the audiobook even handle that? For my own series, I will add in the base information that has changed and allow the reader to choose if they want to look up the pages and pages of Character Sheet or whatever other information they are interested in at the back of the book.

As to the Post Credit Scene, well, it goes after all the credits and other information like any Post Credit Scene in any Marvel movie you've ever enjoyed. It's a short fun addition to the main story.

Sadly, due to its location, I receive no additional remuneration from adding such a scene, since Kindle Unlimited doesn't count anything after the end of the main story. The Post Credit Scene is simply here because my geeky gamer side loves the idea and so I've started adding such scenes into The World series starting with book 5. I hope you enjoy them. At the same time, not reading them doesn't make you lose any important plot points to the story.

Sincerely,

Jason A. Cheek

OceanofPDF.com

Character Sheet

Startum Ironwolf: Level 51

Difficulty: Nightmare Start

Half-Elf: House of Kayden

Class: Battle Mage

Profession Title: Warlock Baron

Titles:

First Settler

First Village

Hero of Delonshire Mine

Leader of House Kayden

Lord of BrokenFang Hold

Wyrn Slayer

Tribal Leader

Mine Boss

Noble Warden

Ship's Captain

Protector of Auris Shaeras

Orc Bane

Sekolahian Bane

Beastkin Brother

Noble Defender

Scourge of the Dishonorable

Protector of the Kingdom of Kader

Overlord

Champion of the Royal House of Isolde

Scourge of the Dil-Hilth Race

Honorable Noble

Scourge Bringer

Hero of the Gigantic Cheliferidae Risso Infestation

Statistics:

Hit Points: 2,921

Mana: 4,010

Endurance: 2,670

Attributes:

Strength: 114 (+91)

Intelligence: 224 (+186)

Spirit: 138 (+81)

Agility: 141 (+31)

Stamina: 160 (+112)

Charisma: 80

7 Unassigned Attribute Points.

Racial Ability:

Adaptable Survivability (Passive) – All defenses increased by 5% and total hit points are increased 10%.

Darkvision (Passive) - Grants ability to see in dim-lighting conditions up to 100 yards and the ability to see in complete darkness up to 60 yards.

Ambitious (Passive) - Receive 5% experience bonus when gaining experience.

Racial Modifiers - +2 points to any stat of choice per level.

Abilities:

Frost Magic – Level 42

Light Magic – Level 51

Fire Magic – Level 20

Dark Magic – Level 51

Water Shaman – Level 13

Nature Magic – Level 37

Shadow Magic – Level 10

Battle Mage – Level 35

Warrior Monk Jutsu – Level 12

Phantasmal Magic – Level 1

Unarmed Combat – Level 30

One-hand edge – Level 51

Two-hand edge – Level 25

Shield Block - Level 49

Shield Bash – Level 48
Riposte – Level 49
Lunge – Level 50
Parry – Level 51
Dodge – Level 51
Archery – Level 13
Riding – Level 51
Riding Exotic Beasts – Level 51

Spells:

Frost:

Frost Blast (30 Mana) – 2 sec cast – Launches Blast of frost at enemy. Damage is 200% of Spell Power. Slows target by 50% for 15 seconds. Range 60 yards.

Frost Nova (50 Mana) – Instant cast - Blasts enemies within 10 yards of the caster for 100% Spell power and freezes them in place for up to 8 sec. This spell does not affect friendlies within range of the AOE. Damage caused may interrupt the effect. 30 second cool down. Requires frost magic skill level 5.

Ice Lance (40 Mana) – Instant cast - Deals 400% Spell power to an enemy target. Ice Lance damage is doubled against frozen targets. Slows target by 50% for 15 seconds. Requires frost magic skill level 10. Range 40 yards.

Flurry (60 Mana) – Instant cast – Hurls a flurry of ice shards at target that strikes enemy 3 times for a total of ((400% of spell power) * 3). Each shard slows target by 50% for 5 sec. Requires frost magic skill level 15. Range 40 yards.

Ice Barrier (30 Mana) – Instant cast – Shields caster for 1 minute, absorbing 1400% ranged spell damage. Melee attacks against caster reduces the attacker's movement speed by 50% for 5 seconds. Armor Class is not increased. Requires frost magic skill level 20. 20 second cool down.

Ice Barrage (100 Mana) – 4 sec cast – Releases a storm of ice on targeted area. Spell power is 1600% Spell Power. All targets in area of effect have movement slowed by 50% for duration of cast or an additional 5 seconds if they leave the area of effect. 30 second cool down. Area of effect is 10

yards. Requires frost magic skill level 30. Any direct damage will cancel the cast. Range 100 yards.

*Special Attack – (600 Mana) - Can be continuously channeled for up to 30 seconds for continuous 1600% spell damage every 5 seconds. 30 second cool down.

Artic Flash (250 Mana) – 1.5 sec cast – Creates a block of Ice around the target and keeps them frozen in place for 15 second. The frozen target is unable to move or attack. Any damage inflicted on the frozen target will release them. Cooldown is 60 seconds. Requires Frost magic skill level 35. Range needed to cast is 40 yards.

Cold as Ice (150 Mana) – 1.5 sec cast – Increases user's casting and movement speed by 20%. Duration is 5 minutes. Cooldown is 60 seconds. Requires Frost magic skill level 35. Range is self only.

Frost Bane – (50 Mana) – instant cast – Increases all Frost damage and effects on the target by 5% for thirty seconds. This effect can be stacked up to three times. Each Frost Bane cast extends the length of the effect by thirty seconds. Require Frost magic skill level 35. Range is 40 yards.

Piercing Spike (120 Mana) - Instant cast - Deals 1600% Spell power to an enemy target. Hurls a solid spike of ice at the target that ignores 15% of target's armor. Has a 5% chance to freeze target upon hit. Has a 5% chance to shatter frozen targets upon hit. Slows target by 50% for 5 seconds. Requires frost magic skill level 35. Range 60 yards.

Wall of Ice (300 to 600 Mana) – 3 to 5 sec – Creates a solid wall of ice that is two-yards thick, four-yards high, and ten-yards long or a dome that is five-yards in radius, four-yards high, and two-yards thick. Any creature within the area the wall is cast will be pushed to the side, front, or back of the wall. Wall can be damaged by physical or magical means. If wall is breached, any creature passing through the opening will have their physical speed reduced by half for five seconds. With skill and concentration, the solid wall of ice or sphere can be thinned to increase the size of the area covered while both reducing the strength of the overall wall/sphere and the length of the freeze effect. The spell will expire after 30 seconds or if enough damage is inflicted to destroy wall. The freezing effect will affect anyone vulnerable to Frost magic. Requires Frost magic skill level 40. Range needed to cast is 40 yards.

Artic Shock Armor (40 Mana) – 3 cast –Caster’s armor class is increases to 200 against physical attacks. Melee attackers will be frozen for 1 second upon a successful strike with a 25% reduction to the attacker’s movement speed for 3 seconds. Duration is for one hour. Requires frost magic skill level 40. Range is self only.

Light:

Heal (50 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Ray of golden light that heals target for 500% Spell Power. Range 60 yards.

Quick Heal (30 Mana) – 5 sec cast – A pulse of golden light that quickly heals target for 300% Spell Power. Requires Light Magic skill level 5. Range 60 yards.

Restore (40 Mana) – 3 sec cast – A flash of golden light that instantly heals target for (50% of Spell power) and then (300% of Spell power) over 15 sec. Requires Light Magic skill level 10. Range 40 yards.

Minor Healing (60 Mana) – 5 sec cast – A ray of golden light that instantly heals target for 800% Spell Power. Requires Light Magic skill level 15. Range 60 yards.

Minor Mend Bones (80 Mana) – 10 sec cast – A healing energy that heals target of minor debilitating debuffs 200% Spell Power. Requires Light Magic skill level 15. Range 60 yards.

Minor Dispel (60 Mana) – 5 sec cast – Removes one beneficial magical effect on enemy target, or removes one negative magical effect on friendly target. Requires Light Magic skill level 15. Range 60 yards.

Holy Shield (80 Mana) – 3 sec cast – Absorbs 350 points of damage. Requires Light Magic skill level 20. 10 second cool down. Expires automatically after a half an hour. Range 60 yards.

Light’s Blessing (200 Mana) – 120 sec cast – Gives an additional 500 Hit Points to target when cast. Requires Light Magic skill level 25. Expires automatically after one hour. Range 10 yards.

Regeneration (100 Mana) – Instant cast – An aura of light that continuously heals target every second for ten seconds at 800% Spell Power. Requires

Light Magic skill level 30. Range 60 yards.

Minor Cure Disease (80 Mana) – Instant cast – Cures one poison on inflicted target. Requires Light magic skill level 35. Range 60 yards.

Light Word of Censure (150 Mana) – Instant cast – Creates an aura around target in a five yard radius that unleashes the judgement of light for 600% spell power. The affect also stuns the target for five seconds. One minute cool down between casts. Requires Light magic skill level 35. Range 60 yards.

Resurrection (1000 Mana) – 60 sec cast - Brings a dead player back to life with 25% health and mana. Cannot be cast when in combat. Range 40 yards.

Wall of Light (500 mana) – 30 sec channel – Creates a five-yard-long and two-yard-high wall of light that blocks all physical and magical attacks. Additionally, the Wall of Light acts as a physical barrier and cannot be passed through by the designated enemy of the caster, while the caster's allies can physically/magically attack or pass through the barrier. The Wall of Light can be breached with enough physical or magical damage, 3000% Spell Power/1800 points of physical damage, or if the caster's channeling is disrupted. Duration is up to thirty seconds with a minute cool down between casts. Requires Light magic skill level 40. Range needed to cast is 10 yards.

Shackles of Light (150 mana) – 1.5 sec cast – Shackles the target for up to 15 seconds. The shackled target is unable to move or attack. Any damage inflicted on shackled target will break the shackle. Requires Light magic skill level 40. Range needed to cast is 40 yards.

Inner Light (25 mana) – Instant cast – This ignites the target's spirit turning them into a beacon of light. This inner light grants +40 to Spirit. Duration is one hour. Light magic skill level 40. Range needed to cast is 40 yards.

Enhanced Heal (500 Mana) – 5 sec cast – Ray of golden light that heals target for 6000% Spell Power. Light magic skill level 45. Range 60 yards.

Enhanced Quick Heal (150 Mana) – 1.5 sec cast – A pulse of golden light that quickly heals target for 1800% Spell Power. Requires Light Magic skill

level 45. Range 60 yards.

Light's Blessing (50 Mana) – 1 sec cast – A power burst of light that heals caster for 3600% Spell Power. Light magic skill level 45. Range is self only.

Mana Leech (100 Mana) – 15 sec channel – Drains target of 400% Spell Power per second and inflicts 400% Spell Power of Light damage. Light magic skill level is 45. Range is 40 yards.

Rays of Burning Light (500 Mana) – 5 sec cast – Rays of Burning Light rains down on target inflicting 1800% Spell Power of Light damage. Light magic skill level 50. Range is 40 yards.

Enfeeblement (400 Mana) – 3 sec cast – This destructive light reduces the targets Stamina, Strength, and Agility by fifty for one minute. Light magic skill level 50. Range is 20 yards.

Enhanced Resurrection (3000 Mana) – 30 sec cast - Brings a dead player back to life with 25% health and mana. Spell is able to regenerate internal organs such as eyes, kidneys, and similar internal organs. Cannot regenerate heart, brain, or missing limbs. Three day time limit on resurrecting targets using this spell. Cannot be cast when in combat. Range 20 yards.

Fire:

Flame Blast (40 Mana) – 2 sec cast – Launches Blast of fire at enemy. Fire damage is 200% of Spell Power. Burns target for an additional 20 seconds for 5 points of damage every 5 seconds. Range 60 yards.

Fire Burst (50 Mana) – Instant cast - Blasts all enemies around the caster for 200% Spell power and burns them for up to 3 sec. This spell affects everyone within range of the AOE. 30 second cool down. Requires Fire magic skill level 5. Range 10 yards.

Fireball (60 Mana) – 2.5 sec cast – Hurls a fiery ball at enemy. Fire damage is 300% of Spell Power. Burns target for an additional 20 seconds for 10 points of damage every 5 seconds. Area of effect is 5 yards. Requires fire magic skill level 10. Range 40 yards.

Pyroblast (80 Mana) – 3.5 sec cast – Blasts a fiery ball at enemy. Fire

damage is 1200% of Spell Power. Burns target for an additional 15 points of damage every 5 seconds. Area of effect is 7 yards. Requires fire magic skill level 15. Range 100 yards.

Fire Shield (30 Mana) - Instant cast – Shields the caster for 1 minute, absorbing 1000% spell damage. Melee attacks against the caster causes 5 points of fire damage to the target. The caster's Armor Class is not increased. Requires fire magic skill level 20. Range is self only.

Focused Meditation (20 Mana) – 15 sec channel – Restores 3400% Spell Power of the caster's mana over 15 seconds. Cool down is fifteen seconds. Any direct damage will cancel the effect. Requires Fire magic skill level 20. Range is self only.

Ignite (20 Mana) – Instant cast – Increases all Fire damage effects on the target by 5% for thirty seconds. This effect can be stacked up to three times. Each Ignite cast extends the length of the effect by thirty seconds. Require Fire magic skill level 20. Range is 40 yards.

Dark:

Summoning Tree:

Raise Skeleton Warrior (25 Mana) – 1 minute cast – Requires a bone from a corpse to cast. Raises an undead Skeleton Warrior of the same level of caster that will serve the caster until released or dead. Requires Dark magic level 0.

*Number of pets available to caster is determined by caster's intelligence level.

**50 points of intelligence required per summoned pet.

**Melee skills available to Skeleton Warrior are based on the caster's acquired skills.

Skeleton Resiliency – Activates upon command – Skeletons can recover health by consuming the dead. Based on level of corpse in comparison to level of the skeleton. Corpse cannot be skinned after this skill has been used. Requires dark magic skill level 5.

Touch of the Grave (80 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Raises the melee damage of the summoned skeleton's damage output by 25%. Duration is for one hour. Requires Dark magic skill level 10. Affects all skeletons within a 10 yard

radius.

Raise Skeleton Archer (30 Mana) – 1 minute cast – Requires a bone from a corpse to cast. Raises an undead Skeleton Archer with unlimited arrows of the same level of caster that will serve the caster until released or dead. Requires Dark magic level 15.

*Number of pets available to caster is determined by caster's intelligence level.

**50 points of intelligence required per summoned pet.

**Ranged skills available to Skeleton Archer are based on the caster's acquired skills.

Enhanced Bone Vitality (80 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Raises skeletons hit points by 300 points. Requires dark magic skill level 15. Expires automatically after one hour. Affects all skeletons within a 10 yard radius.

Breath of the Grave I (80 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Raises the ranged damage of the summoned Skeleton Archers by 25%. Duration is for one hour. Requires Dark magic skill level 20. Range 60 yards.

Grave Flesh (120 Mana) – 5 sec cast - 1 hour duration - Raises the skeleton armor points by 200 points. Requires dark magic skill level 20. Affects all skeletons within a 10 yard radius.

Scourge Touch (140 Mana) – 5 sec cast - Skeletons receive 1% of damage dealt back as Hit Points. Expires automatically after one hour. Requires dark magic skill level 25. Affects all skeletons within a 10 yard radius.

Raise Skeleton Mage (35 Mana) – 1 minute cast – Requires a bone from a corpse to cast. Raises an undead Skeleton Mage of the same level of caster that will serve the caster until released or dead. Skeleton Mage defaults to a Dark Mage.*** Requires Dark magic level 30.

*Number of pets available to caster is determined by caster's intelligence level.

**50 points of intelligence required per summoned pet.

***Type of Skeleton Mages available are based on the magic trees that the caster has mastered. This can be selected upon summoning.

Aura of the Grave - (100 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Raises the Spell Power of the summon Skeleton Mage by 400%. Duration is for one hour. Requires

Dark magic skill level 35. Range 60 yards.

Elemental Repel (120 Mana) – 5 sec cast – Add a 25% elemental repel to all skeletons. Expires automatically after one hour. Requires Dark Magic skill level 40. Affects all skeletons when cast.

Soul Stone (20 Mana) – Instant cast – Used to capture the soul of a creature upon death. Once activated, the spell is always on for the caster to capture the souls of their vanquished enemies. These soul stones are then used to raise the dead as their undead pets.

Raise Zombie (25 Mana) – 1 minute cast – Requires a soul stone per cast. Raises captured soul as an undead pet of the same level upon death that will serve the caster until released or dead.

*Number of pets available to caster is determined by caster's intelligence level. **50 points of intelligence required per raised pet.

Undead Resiliency (40 Mana) – 10 sec cast - Activates upon command – Summoned creature can recover health by consuming the dead. Based on level of corpse in comparison to level of summon creature. Corpse cannot be skinned after this skill has been used. Requires dark magic skill level 5.

Touch of the Grave I (80 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Raises the damage of the summon creature's natural weapons by 150 points per attack (Aka: slashes and bites). Requires dark magic skill level 10. Expires automatically after one hour. Range 60 yards.

Monstrous Vitality (80 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Raises summon creature's life by 300 points. Requires dark magic skill level 15. Expires automatically after one hour. Range 10 yards.

Grave Flesh – 5 sec cast - Raises the summoned creature's armor points by 200 points. Expires automatically after one hour. Requires dark magic skill level 20. Affects all pets within a 10 yard radius.

Leeching Touch I – 5 sec cast - Summoned creature receives 1% of damage dealt back as Hit Points. Expires automatically after one hour. Requires dark magic skill level 25. Affects all pets within a 10 yard radius.

Elemental Resistance (120 Mana) – 5 sec cast – Add a 25% elemental

resistance to all summoned pets. If summoned undead already has a natural resistance, the spell's resistance is added to that natural resistance. Expires automatically after one hour. Requires Dark Magic skill level 40. Affects all summoned undead when cast.

Raise Ghoul (50 Mana per soul level) – 1 minute cast – Requires a soul stone per cast. Raises captured soul as an undead pet of the same level upon death that will serve the caster until released or dead. Unlike zombies, Ghouls have 25% of their original intelligence along with being able to utilize the skills, abilities, and spells that they had during life. A Ghoul's intelligence is more of that of a calculating monster's that has a ravenous hunger for the essence of the living but has no knowledge or thought as to their previous life. They also have the ability to issue simple commands to allied zombies with the ability to use basic concepts of strategy to complete their objectives. Additionally, their bite and claw attacks deliver a rot-effect in targets that are not killed that can only be removed with a cure disease spell or potion. If not treated within a week, the affected individual will die from the affliction. *Number of pets available to caster is determined by caster's intelligence level. **50 points of intelligence required per raised pet. Requires Dark magic skill level 50.

Destruction Tree:

Shadow Bolt (50 Mana) – 2 sec cast – Launches a shadowy bolt of Dark Magic at enemy. Requires dark magic skill level 5. Damage is 600% of Spell Power. Range 60 yards.

Dark Bolt (20 Mana) – 3 sec cast – Launches a shadowy bolt of Dark Magic at enemy. Requires dark magic skill level 10. Damage is 200% of Spell Power. Range 60 yards.

Enhanced Shadow Bolt (60 Mana) – Instant cast – Launches a shadowy bolt of Dark Magic at enemy. Damage is 1200% of Spell Power. Requires dark magic skill level 15. Range 100 yards.

Enhanced Dark Bolt (40 Mana) – 2 sec cast – Launches a shadowy bolt of Dark Magic at enemy. Damage is 400% of Spell Power. Requires dark magic skill level 20. Range 60 yards.

Enhance Damage (30 Mana) – Instant cast – Amplifies all incoming

damage by 10% in a 5-yard radius of target. Requires Dark magic level 35. Range 100 yards. Expires after 10 seconds.

Corpse Blast (35 Mana) – Instant cast – Any selected corpse explodes causing 300% Spell Power damage. Area of effect is 3 yards. Requires Dark magic skill level 45. Range is 60 yards.

Corpse Explosion (80 Mana) – Instant cast – Any selected corpse explodes causing 600% Spell Power damage. Area of effect is 3 yards. Requires Dark magic skill level 25. Range is 60 yards.

Amplify Damage (100 Mana) – Instant cast – Amplifies all incoming damage by 25% in a 5-yard radius of target. Requires Dark magic level 35. Range 100 yards. Expires after 10 seconds.

Dark Lance (160 Mana) – Instant cast – Launches a shadowy shaft of Dark Magic in a direct line that does 800% of Spell Power to all targets within a half-yard radius of the shadowy shaft's entire 100-yard path. Requires Dark Magic level 45. Range 100 yards. *Does half-damage in full-sunlight.

Life Tap Curse (100 Mana) – Instant Cast – When cast on an enemy, the AOE continuously affects all enemies within a five-yard radius of the original target. The caster or any allies that attack the affected enemies gain 50% of all physical damage dealt back as life. Requires Dark magic level 45. Range 100 yards. Expires after 10 seconds.

Corpse Transmutation (100 Mana) – Instant Cast – When cast on an enemy, the AOE continuously affects all corpses within a 10-yard radius of the caster and transmutes the life essence into Mana. Restores 50 points of mana per corpse within range for 15 seconds. Corpses used in this way cannot be raised as an undead, or used for corpse explosion, and consumes the corpse's soul stone. Requires Dark magic level 50. Range is 10 yards radius from caster. Expires after 15 seconds.

Torment Tree:

Lesser Life Tap Curse (100 Mana) – Instant Cast – When cast on an enemy, the AOE continuously affects all enemies within a five-yard radius of the original target. The caster or any allies that attack the affected enemies gain 15% of all physical damage dealt back as life. Requires Dark magic level 25. Range 100 yards. Expires after 10 seconds.

Bone Barrier (40 Mana) – instant cast – Forms an orbiting shield around caster that absorbs up to 250 points of damage. Requires Dark magic skill level 20. Can only be cast on self. Expires after 1 hour.

Bone Barrier (40 Mana) – instant cast – Forms an orbiting shield around caster that absorbs up to 250 points of damage. Requires Dark magic skill level 20. Can only be cast on self. Expires after 1 hour.

Bone Teeth (50 Mana) – instant cast - Upgrades Bone Barrier to cause 100% Spell Damage to all creatures within a three yard radius around caster. Requires Dark magic skill level 25. Can only be cast on self and when Bone Barrier is in effect. Expires after 1 hour.

Weaken Curse (100 Mana) – Instant Cast - When cast on an area, the AOE continuously affects all enemies within a five-yard radius of the original targeted area. The spell reduces all affected enemies Strength, Stamina, and Agility by a total of 15%. Requires Dark magic level 25. Range 100 yards. Expires after 10 seconds.

Skeletal Hands (200 Mana) – 3 sec - Targeted location erupts with Skeleton Hands that will attempt to hold all large, normal, and small creatures within the area effect of the spell for fifteen seconds. Held creatures can still attack and defend themselves, but all attack and defense actions are taken at a negative 15% due to balance. Spell casting takes 25% longer. 30 second cooldown after cast. Area of effect is 5 yards. Requires Dark magic skill level 40. Range is 60 yards.

Bone Wall (250 to 750 Mana) – 1 sec up to 5 sec – Creates a two-yard-long, five-yard-high bone wall. This wall can be increased in size by increasing mana expenditure and cast time. This can either lengthen the Bone Wall up to 15-yards or compress into a smaller length. The spell does not take up a summoned pet slot. The spell will expire after a half-hour or if enough damage is inflicted to destroy the wall. Requires Dark magic skill level 50. Range is 25 yards.

Life Leech (80 Mana per sec) – 30 sec channeling – Drains life from target, causing Dark magic damage. Damage to target is 2400% of Spell Power for every second of spell activation and returns 5% of the damage back to the caster as health. Requires dark magic skill level 15. Requires caster to be

touching the target.

Bone Shield (40 Mana) – instant cast – Forms an orbiting shield around caster that absorbs up to 500 points of damage. Requires Dark magic skill level 20. Can only be cast on self. Expires after 1 hour.

Bone Fangs (50 Mana) – instant cast - Upgrades bone shield to cause 200% Spell Damage to all creatures within a three yard radius around caster. Requires Dark magic skill level 25. Can only be cast on self and when Bone Shield is in effect. Expires after 1 hour.

Zombie Hands (200 Mana) – 3 sec - Targeted location erupts with Zombie Hands that will attempt to hold all large, normal, and small creatures within the area effect of the spell for fifteen seconds. Held creatures can still attack and defend themselves, but all attack and defense actions are taken at a negative 15% due to balance. Spell casting takes 50% longer. 30 second cooldown after cast. Area of effect is 5 yards. Requires Dark magic skill level 40. Range is 60 yards.

Zombie Wall (250 to 750 Mana) – 1 sec up to 5 sec – Creates a two-yard-long, five-yard-high zombie with a pair of arms and biting heads with the use of a single soul stone. This wall can be increased in size and lethality by adding up to three soul stones. This can either lengthen the Zombie Wall up to 15-yards in length or compress into a smaller length with the arms and heads more closely packed together. The spell does not take up a pet slot. The spell will expire after an hour or if enough damage is inflicted to destroy the wall. The zombies will not attack caster, caster's party, or allies. Requires Dark magic skill level 50. Range is 25 yard.

Shaman:

Water:

Detect Liquid (5 Mana) – 10 sec cast – Most liquids are essentially water. The spell enables a shaman to detect liquids. Requires Water Shaman skill level 0. Range 40 yards.

Draw Liquid I (10 Mana per sec) – 30 sec channeling – Most liquids are essentially water. The spell enables a shaman to draw liquids to caster. If used in combat the damage to target is 200% Spell Power per second of spell's activation. Requires Water Shaman skill level 5. Range 40 yards.

Alter Liquid I (20 Mana) – 5 sec cast – Most liquids are essentially water. The spell enables a shaman to alter the composition of a liquid. Can be used to remove contaminants from liquids. Can be used to separate liquids from other liquids. If used in combat the damage to target is 200% Spell Power. Requires Water Shaman skill level 10. Range 40 yards.

Nature:

Zap (10 Mana) – instant cast – Shoots a bolt of concentrated natural energy at enemy doing 50% Spell Power damage. Requires Nature Magic skill level 0. Range 100 yards.

Manifest Giant Squirrel (100 Mana) – 60 sec cast – Manifest a level 10 giant squirrel to protect caster for a day or until creature is destroyed or dismissed. Requires Nature Magic skill level 10. Cooldown of 24 hours.

Enhanced Shocking Grip (60 Mana) – instant cast – Sends out a chaotic force of natural energy into target that deals 800% Spell Power. Requires Nature Magic skill level 20. Range touch.

Manifest Large Wolf (200 Mana) – 60 sec cast – Summons a level 20 large wolf to protect caster for a day or until creature is destroyed or dismissed. Requires Nature Magic skill level 20. Cooldown of 24 hours.

Enhanced Magic Armor (40 Mana) – instant cast – Creates a shield of Nature Magic that acts like armor giving wearer plus 800 to armor class against physical attacks and 800% protection against Spell Damage. Requires Nature Magic skill level 25. Range 10 yards. Cooldown of 30 seconds.

Healing Breeze - (60 Mana) – instant cast – Sends the wind of life force into target area that heals all friendly teammates and allies for 1200% Spell Power. Requires Nature Magic skill level 25. Range 100 yards. Target area 40 yards radius from the point designated.

Homing Zap (120 Mana) – instant cast – Shoots three bolts of concentrated decay force at enemy doing 500% Spell Power damage each. Requires Nature Magic skill level 30. Range 100 yards.

Manifest Cave Bear (300 Mana) – 60 sec cast – Summons a level 30 Cave Bear to protect caster for a day or until creature is destroyed or dismissed.

Requires Nature Magic skill level 30. Cooldown of 24 hours.

Shocking Wave (60 Mana) – instant cast – Sends out a chaotic force of natural energy in a radius around caster that deals 800% Spell Power to all targets. Requires Nature Magic skill level 35. Range 5 yards.

Shadow Magic:

Slip into Shadow (200 Mana/50 Agility/25 Spirit/25 Intelligence) – Instant cast – Allows caster to enter Stealth when being observed. Does not function if under attack. Three second cool down between casts. Requires Shadow magic skill level 0. Range is self only.

Gift of Shadows (225 Mana/50 Agility/25 Spirit/25 Intelligence) – 3 sec cast – This is an add-on to the Slip into Shadows skill. It allows the caster to Stealth even in broad daylight or any other direct artificial light while under observation. Requires Shadow magic skill level 5. Range is self only.

Incognito - (300 Mana/65 Agility/40 Spirit/35 Charisma) – 5 sec cast – Allows caster to disguise their displayed name while showing a blank for class and profession. The name is randomly chosen and will stay the same as long as the spell is refreshed before the previous cast has expired. Requires Shadow magic skill level 5. Range is self only.

Shadow Breastplate - (350 Mana/65 Agility/40 Spirit/35 Charisma) – 3 sec cast – Allows caster to create a breastplate made from pure Shadow. This Shadowy Breastplate can be used alone or in conjunction with a physically breastplate to enhance the caster base defense against all physical melee and range attacks. The Shadowy Breastplate will disappear after absorbing 150 points of damage. Expires automatically after an hour. Requires Shadow Magic skill level 5. Range self only.

Warrior Monk Jutsu:

Arcane Speed (20 Mana/20 Stamina/20 Spirit) – instant cast – Increases casters movement, attack, and cast speed by 25%. Duration is a half an hour. Range self only.

Phantasmal:

Touch of the Reaver - (25 Mana) – five sec cast – Specialized attack against Reavers that deals 50% Spell Power. Requires Spirit Magic skill level 0. Range touch.

War Leader:

Level V – High Strategist:

- Plus 5% Increase to magic healing for team or raid when outnumbered.
- Plus 5% Increase to magic damage for team or raid when outnumbered.
- Plus 5% Increase to range damage for team or raid when outnumbered.
- Plus 5% Increase to melee damage for team or raid when outnumbered.
- Plus 3% Increase to melee defense for team or raid when attacking a fortified position.
- Plus 3% Increase to range defense for team or raid when attacking a fortified position.
- Plus 3% Increase to magic defense for team or raid when attacking a fortified position.
- Plus 2% Increase to melee damage for team or raid.
- Plus 1% Increase to melee defense for team or raid.

Skills:

Stealth I

Sneak Attack I

Backstab I

Concentration I

Quick Shot I

Overpower I

Kick Back I

Knockdown I

Gouge I

Duel Wield I

Power Attack I

Execute I

Dual Cast II

Multishot I

Perception I

Focus Casting II

Extended Magic II

Sweep Takedown (unarmed)

Linked Magic

Silent casting

Magnify Magic

Programmed Magic II
Merge Magic
Penetration Magic I

Crafting:

Skinning Level 19
Jury-Rigging Level 5
Lumberjack Level 30
Wood Working Level 9
Construction Level 18
Architecture Level 8
Mining Level 16 (+2 when Pickaxe of Earth is equipped)
Herbalism Level 25
Enchanting Level 1
Smithing Level 54
Alchemy Level 112
Cartography Level 10
Exotic Animal Handling Level 15

Beast Companion:

Silver Dire Wolf, Neysa, level 51

Manifested Pets:

Giant Squirrel: Tengsly (Gray Flying Squirrel - level 50)
Large Wolf: Shadow Fang (Shadow Wolf - level 33)
Cave Bear: Kitano (Demon Bear - level 39)

Soulbound Companion:

Helgath (Half-Orc), Water Shaman, level 52

Available Pets:

Available slots: 4 (+9) = 13
Currently Summoned: 13

Reputation: 11,710

Special Awards:

-Permanent 3% increased damage to all attacks for all members of any team or raid you are a member.

-Permanent 3% increased defense for all members of any team or raid you are a member.

Additional Special Attacks and Abilities:

Vampiric Touch (Type: Dark Magic) temporarily transfers 20% of damage per hit to wielder's hit points for thirty seconds. The effect stacks with each hit and resets the 30 second time limit upon each successful hit.

*when Vampiric Bastard Sword of Slaughter is equipped.

-Deals double damage on targets under twenty-five percent health.

-Rend, causes the target to bleed with every successful hit for an additional 25 points of damage for 15 seconds.

-100% decapitation when struck against the neck of any large or smaller incapacitated target.

-Deals double damage on targets under twenty-five percent health.

-Rend, causes the target to bleed with every successful hit for an additional 25 points of damage for 15 seconds.

-100% decapitation when struck against the neck of any large or smaller incapacitated target.

*when Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty is equipped.

-Removes all root effects to wielder and all summoned creatures.

-Increases the chance of dropping Soul Stones by 12%.

-Summoned creature has 3% chance of receiving one of killed creature's special attacks or skills.

-Summoned creature has a 30% chance of keeping one of its special skills.

+200 Attack Power to Summoned Creatures

+5 to the maximum number of Summoned Creatures.

+3 level increase to all Summoned Creatures

+50% Resistant to Elemental magic.

-Ignores target's armor.

-5% of maximum health leached per second on successful strike until dagger is removed.

*When Leeching Dagger of Piercing is equipped.

+10% Haste to range attacks.

*When wearing Delonshire Guard quiver.

-Renders lesser undead creatures such as zombies, skeletons, spirits and etc. neutral and unable to attack first.

Permanent 3% increased damage to all attacks for all members of any team or raid you are a member.

Permanent 3% increased defense for all members of any team or raid you are a member.

Startum Ironwolf's Gear

Startum Ironwolf's Gear:

Rockjaw Chopper (for cutting wood)

Item Quality: Inferior

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Axe

Damage 23-31

Durability: 25/25

Weight: 4 kg

Black Coral Iron-reinforced Defender

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Armor: 2000

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 14 kg

+10 Strength

+10 Stamina

-40% increase chance to block.

-Resistant to elemental magic +5%

-*Waterproof*

**This item has been magically grown from black coral*

Pickaxe of Earth

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Unique

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Pickaxe

Damage: 30-50

Stuffed in inventory

Black Cuttle Leather

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: General Clothing

Defense: 800

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 12 kg

+10 Strength

+10 Stamina

+10 Agility

-*Waterproof*

Goo-Filled Leather Boots

Item Quality: Inferior

Item Type: Common

Slot: Feet

Defense: 10

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 11/25

Weight: 1.07 kg

- 10 Charisma

**Slug trails - The goo has wet the leather of the boots to the point where they leave gooey wet spots on the ground.*

-Description - The goo looks like it's from the digested remains of the last wearer of these basic boots and smells like it.

Durability: 180/200

Weight: 4 kg

+2 to Mining

Vicious Executioner's Axe of Cruelty (Purple)

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Axe

Damage: 160-185

Durability: 287/300

Weight: 15 kg

+30 Strength

+30 Stamina

-200% increase of pain inflicted with every successful hit.

-Deals double damage on targets under twenty-five percent health.

-Rend, causes the target to bleed with every successful hit for an additional 25 points of damage for 15 seconds.

-100% decapitation when struck against the neck of any large or smaller incapacitated target.

Leeching Dagger of Piercing

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Common

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Dagger

Damage: 34-41*

Durability: 100/100

Weight: 2.3 kg

-Ignores target's armor.

*20 points of health leeches per second for 15 seconds on each

Half-Digested Brown Leather Pants

Item Quality: Inferior

Item Type: Common

Slot: General Clothing

Defense: 0

Armor Type: None

Durability: 8/25

Weight: 1.3 kg

-5 Charisma

-Description – Too thin rancid leather pants that smell like rotten food and digestive juices.

Extra rings – Hollysharp and Braid

Ring of Water Breathing (x2)

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

*Allows the wearer to breathe underwater.

Black Coral DarkCuirass Weave with Pauldrons

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest

Defense: 800

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 12 kg

+25 Intelligence

+5 Strength

+5 Stamina

-Summoned creature has a 30% chance of keeping one of its special

successful strike.

Dark Blade of Lord Kayden

Item Quality: Epic

Item Type: Unique

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Sword

Damage: 110-130 (upgraded to 185-205)

Durability: 400/400

Weight: 7.5 kg

+20 Strength (+29)

+20 Intelligence (+29)

+20 Stamina (+29)

-Soulbound on pickup.

-Lord's Dark Blade of House of Kayden. The wielder of this blade is the rightful owner of BrokenFang Hold and the surrounding lands.

-Grants the owner the mastery of Dark Magic along with all related spells and skills, including the ability to teach the profession of Dark Magic to others.

-Renders lesser undead creatures such as zombies, skeletons, spirits and etc. neutral and unable to attack first.

- This weapon is scalable. The weapon's stats will increase as owner's character grows in level.

Vampiric Bastard Sword of Slaughter

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Special

Attack: Two-hand Edge

skills.

-Resistant to elemental magic +5%

-Waterproof

*This item has been magically grown from black coral and crafted to bind with a Bonereaver DarkCuirass. The undercoat has been reinforced by Cuttle leather. It has taken on the elements of the items it has been crafted from.

Black Coral Savage-poleyns

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Legs

Defense: 700

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 9 kg

+25 Strength

+5 Intelligence

+5 Spirit

-Summoned creature has 3% chance of receiving one of killed creature's special attacks or skills.

-Resistant to elemental magic +5%

-Waterproof

*This item has been magically grown from black coral and crafted to bind with a Bonereaver Savagewraps that have been reinforced with Cuttle leather. It has taken on the elements of the items it has been crafted from.

Black Coral Soul-gauntlets

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Weapon Type: Sword
Damage: 190-215
Durability: 190/200
Weight: 15 kg
+20 Strength
+30 Stamina
* Vampiric Touch (Type: Dark Magic) temporarily transfers 20% of damage per hit to wielder's hit points for thirty seconds. The effect stacks with each hit and resets the 30 second time limit upon each successful hit.

Greatsword SoulBreaker (Star being used by Ulia)

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Special

Attack: Two-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Sword

Damage: 160-185

Durability: 113/200

Weight: 14 kg

+15 Strength

-15 Spirit

- Blight (Type: Dark Magic)

Reduction of all enemy attributes by 50% for 60 seconds, unless successful save vs Spirit. Area of Effect: 10 Yard radius from caster. Cooldown - 5 minutes.

Brutal Bracers of Summoning

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Wrist

Weight: .04 kg

+200 Attack Power to Summoned

Slot: Hands

Defense: 280

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 1.28 kg

+15 Spirit

+5 Intelligence

-Increases the chance of dropping Soul Stones by 6%.

-Resistant to elemental magic +5%

-Waterproof

*This item has been magically grown from black coral and crafted to bind with a Bonereaver Soulclaws that have been reinforced with Cuttle leather. It has taken on the elements of the items it has been crafted from.

Black Coral Gore-belt

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Waist

Defense: 280

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 197/200

Weight: 2 kg

+15 Stamina

+5 Intelligence

-Increases the chance of dropping Soul Stones by 6%.

-Resistant to elemental magic +5%

-Waterproof

*This item has been magically grown from black coral and crafted to bind with a Bonereaver Goreplate that has been reinforced

Creatures

*Color is dark iron grey with intricate designs of various monsters worked into the metal.

Royal Army Assault Bow

Item Quality: Fine

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: Ranged

Weapon Type: Bow

Damage 110-120

Weight: 5.2 kg

+10 Agility

+10 Spirit

+15 to Critical Strike

+10 to Armor Piercing

Delonshire Guard Quiver (Star)

Soul bound upon pickup.

Item Quality: Fine

Allows up to 500 arrows to be stored in quiver.

-Gives +10% Haste to range attacks.

10 Ring Slots Available:

Ring of Wolf

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+20 Agility

Ring of Bear

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

with Cuttle leather. It has taken on the elements of the items it has been crafted from.

Cuttle Leather Corpse-boots

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Feet

Defense: 260

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 5.07 kg

+3 Intelligence

+1 Spirit

-Removes all root effects to wielder and all summoned creatures.

-Waterproof

*This item has been magically combined with Cuttle leather. It has taken on the elements of the items it has been crafted from.

Helm of Inaxidor

Item Quality: Epic

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Head

Defense: 400

Armor Type: Light mail

Durability: 320/400

Weight: 2.5 kg

+100 Intelligence

- Allows the wearer to comprehend and speak all spoken and written languages.

- Once a day has the ability 'gift common' to all creatures within a 50 yard range.

Description - Lorsan Inaxidor who

Weight: .04 kg
+30 Stamina

Ring of the Owl

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .04 kg
+20 Spirit

Minor Ring of Monster Power

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .04 kg
+3 level increase to all Summoned
Creatures

Ring of Peaceful Thought

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .04 kg
+30 Spirit

Ring of Ox

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .04 kg
+20 Strength

Ring of Water Breathing

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .04 kg
*Allows wearer to breath

created the helm was an Archmage of great renown for furthering the peace between the races of The Word and his scholarly pursuits of magic inscriptions. He went missing in The Straight of Icelus during a trip to the Isle of Doom and hasn't been seen or heard from since.

Bracelet:

Fortifying Charm of the Defender

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted
Location: Inventory
Durability: 250/250
Weight: 0.2 kg
Charges: 3

-When triggered, the trinket stops the next incoming attack from affecting the durability of the wearer's gear. The wearer still takes damage as normal.

1 Amulet Spot Available:

Dark Amulet of Summoning (Star)

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Neck
Weight: .06 kg

+5 to the maximum number of Summoned Creatures.

Inventory:

Talisman of Yeenoktu

underwater.

Ring of the Elemental Shaman

Item Quality: Rare

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .06 kg

*Gives wearer +25% resistance to elemental magic.

Ring of the Elemental Shaman

Item Quality: Rare

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .06 kg

*Gives wearer +25% resistance to elemental magic.

Lesser Ring of Flame

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .03 kg

+10 Intelligence

*Adds plus fifty points of damage to all Fire magic spells cast by the wearer.

Ring of Stamina (x2)

Item Quality: Common

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+25 Stamina

Belt Pouch of Holding

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Uncommon

Item Quality: Epic

Item Type: Crafted

Location: Inventory

Durability: 400/400

Weight: 0.5 kg

+10 Strength

+10 Stamina

*Token from a Gnoll Priest of the Demon Lord Yeenoktu the Soul Crusher.

**When activated by a non-believer, makes wearer invulnerable to all elemental spheres of magic, melee and ranged attacks, poisons and mental attacks for ten seconds. Can only be activated once every seven days.

**When activated by a Gnoll true believer, first effect: makes wearer invulnerable to all elemental schools of magic, melee and ranged attacks, poisons and mental attacks for ten minutes. Second effect: casts aura of the berserker on entire group or raid. Can only be activated once daily.

Classic Long-Sleeve Silk Dress Tunic

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Chest

Defense: 10

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 0.7 kg

Weight: 1 lbs

*The bag is considerably larger on the inside than on the outside. It can hold up to a thousand pounds without ever exceeding its one pound of weight. The limit of items that can be placed inside the rucksack is only limited by the opening of the bag. Due to the nature of the item being a sack, it can be carried in the hand or placed in another bag or backpack as long as it's not another type of Bag, Pouch, or Rucksack of Holding.

Prustine's Runemaster Arc Cane
(Social)

Item Quality: Rare

Item Type: Unique (Social)

Attack: One-hand Blunt

Weapon Type: Mace/Sword

Damage: 100-120

Durability: 350/350

Weight: 3.7 kg

+30 Intelligence

+30 Spirit

+30 Charisma

-Shocking Strike: Black steel tips on each end of the cane discharges a jolt of lightning on each successful hit. (Requires stored charge) Uses a 100 mana for each release. Inflicts 1300% Spell Power. Locks up the target's muscles for 1.5 seconds.

-Plus 3000 to base mana pool which can be recharged indefinitely

+10 Spirit

+10 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Master Tech Brown Leather Gear Belt

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Waist

Defense: 15

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2.3 kg

+15 Spirit

+15 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Gray-Leather Dress Pants

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Legs

Defense: 20

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2.9 kg

+30 Spirit

+30 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

by the user.

-Anvil-shaped black steel head can be used as a war hammer. The horn of the anvil acts as an armor-piercing pick while the heel functions as the hammer.

-Triple beveled black steel point can be wielded as a piercing-only long sword. (Search épée in the in-game wiki for further information.)

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

*This cane has been crafted from the wood of a level 100 Ironwood tree and is as tough as the black steel anvil-shaped tip the handle and pointed base are crafted from. Additionally, it has a mana accumulation crystal core for storing copious amounts of mana.

Classic Martial Gray-Leather Frock Coat (long)

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Chest

Defense: 25

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 3.7 kg

+35 Spirit

+35 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Master Tech Steel-Toed Brown Patent Leather Boots

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Feet

Defense: 20

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2.1 kg

+10 Spirit

+10 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Master Tech Brown Leather Gloves

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Hand

Defense: 10

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 3.7 kg

+5 Spirit

+5 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Master Tech Purple-Spectacles

(Social)

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Unique (Social)

Slot: Head

Classic Martial Brown Leather Vest

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Chest

Defense: 20

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 3 kg

+15 Spirit

+15 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by one hour if they have it.

Magi-Weaved Traveler's Backpack

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Back

Weight: 12 kg

*The bag is larger on the inside than on the outside. It can hold up to a thousand pounds without ever exceeding twelve pounds of weight. The limit of items that can be placed inside the rucksack is only limited by the opening of the bag.

Defense: 5

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 0.3 kg

+10 Intelligence

+10 Spirit

+25 Charisma

-These purple mana-infused crystal lenses have been etched with runes that allow the wearer to see the glow of mana-infused items.

Additionally, the spectacles give the wearer True Sight which disrupts visual illusions. Lastly, they increase the wearer's chance to find hidden and camouflaged doors/traps. A stylish must for any noble.

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

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Helgath Ironwolf's Gear

Helgath Ironwolf's Gear:

Wand of the Azure Skull

Magi (Adapt)

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Unique

Attack: One-hand Blunt

Weapon Type: Wand

Damage: 18-28

Durability: 282/300

Weight: 0.3 kg

+25 Stamina

+25 Intelligence

+25 Spirit

+25 Charisma

-Allows users to utilize Mix Magic without being a Battle Mage Class for the Arcane and Frost Magic trees.

(Requirements: must have first learned both the Arcane and Frost Magic trees.)

+ 400% Spell Power to all Arcane Magic spells.

+400% Spell Power to all Frost Magic spells.

*Requires a base of 200

Intelligence and 50 Spirit to equip.

Black Cuttle Leather

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Blue Steel Bracers of the Fortitude

(red script)

Item Quality: Rare

Item Type: Crafted

Location: Inventory

Durability: 350/350

Weight: 0.8 kg

-Resistance to elemental magic +15%
+15% increase to dodging ranged attacks.

+15% increase to evading melee attacks.

*Has a 5% chance to cast a protect wearer in a protective shield when wearer is struck in combat by melee and ranged attacks.

Ring of Ox

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+20 Strength

Pugio of the Honorable Centurion

Item Quality: Epic

Item Type: Unique

Attack: One-hand Edged

Weapon Type: Dagger

Damage: 160-185

Durability: 400/400

Weight: 3.8 kg

Slot: General Clothing
Defense: 800
Armor Type: Medium
Durability: 200/200
Weight: 12 kg
+10 Strength
+10 Stamina
+10 Agility
-Waterproof

Toxic Fang of the Cheliferidae Risso

Item Quality: Uncommon
Item Type: Unique
Attack: One-hand Edge
Weapon Type: Dagger
Damage: 120-130
Durability: 300/300
Weight: 1 kg
+15 Stamina
+15 Agility
-Venomous Touch (Type:
Poison) Target suffers a
poisonous effect that slows
movement and reaction
speeds by 20% for thirty
seconds on each successful
strike.
*5% Chance on proc to inflict
a five-second paralysis on
each successful strike.

Rune Stalker Chitin Reinforced boots

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Special
Slot: Feet
Defense: 460

+50 Strength
+50 Spirit
+50 Agility
+50 Charisma
-Sharpened Edge: Durability Erodes
more slowly and increased Critical
Chance.
-The owner of this dagger automatically
receives a “friendly” reputation status
with the Asterion Empire.
*This item will scale with the owner’s
level.

During his many travels before he
became king, Harald Isolde was
traveling through the southern continent
when he came across a group of
Minotaurs in a desperate fight. Jumping
into the fray, he and his adventurers
helped to turn the tide of battle. Later,
Harald learned that the young bull that
he’d saved along with the ninth legion
was Prince Corona Borealis of the
Asterion Empire. Due to his timely
rescue, the prince gifted this dagger to
Harald as a sign of honor and
friendship.

Classic Martial Brown Patent Leather Equipment Belt (Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)
Slot: Waist
Defense: 120
Armor Type: Very Light
Durability: 250/250
Weight: 1.3 kg

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 1.07 kg

+15 Stamina

+15 Intelligence

+15 Agility

*Removes all root effects to the wielder and their summoned creatures.

*Silent Step - Regardless of the surface the wearer is crossing, they have a ninety-five percent chance not to make any sound when walking or running regardless of the terrain.

Matriarch Black Chitin Breastplate with Pauldrons

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Unique

Slot: Chest

Defense: 680

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 7.6 kg

+20 Strength

+20 Stamina

+20 Agility

*Removes all root effects to the wielder and their summoned creatures when caught in any web or sticky trap.

*Neurotoxin Immunity - Due to the nature of the Gigantic Cheliferidae Risso chitin this

+5 Spirit

+5 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Brown-Leather Reinforced Pants

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Legs

Defense: 40

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 3.1 kg

+25 Spirit

+25 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Steel-Toed Brown Patent Leather Strapped Boots

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Feet

Defense: 40

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2.7 kg

+10 Spirit

+10 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

breastplate is crafted from, the wear is immune to paralysis poisons.

Royal Army Grade Hand Assault Mechanical

Crossbow

Item Quality: Fine
Item Type: Crafted
Attack: Ranged
Weapon Type: Bow
Damage 60-80
Weight: 2.1 kg
+10 Agility
+10 Spirit
+20 to Critical Strike
+20 to Armor Piercing

Royal Army Quiver

Item Quality: Fine
Allows up to 200 bolts to be stored in the quiver.
-Gives +25% Haste to range attacks.

Classic Martial Tech

Goggles

(Social)
Item Quality: Uncommon
Item Type: Unique (Social)
Slot: Head
Defense: 10
Armor Type: Medium
Durability: 300/300
Weight: 0.9 kg
+5 Intelligence
+5 Spirit
+15 Charisma

Classic Fur-Lined Brown-Leather Captain Half-Jacket

(Social)
Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)
Slot: Chest
Defense: 100
Armor Type: Medium
Durability: 250/250
Weight: 4.5 kg
+30 Spirit
+30 Charisma
-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Brown Silken Shoulder-less V-Shaped Tunic

(Social)
Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)
Slot: Chest
Defense: 5
Armor Type: Very Light
Durability: 250/250
Weight: 1.2 kg
+5 Spirit
+5 Charisma
-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by one hour if they have it.

Classic Martial Brown Leather Ribbed Underbust Corset Top

(Social)
Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)
Slot: Chest

-These mana-infused crystal lenses have been etched with runes that allow the wearer to see the glow of mana-infused items. Additionally, the spectacles give the wearer the ability to see in full darkness. Lastly, they increase the wearer's chance to find hidden and camouflaged doors/traps.

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Gnome Razor Whip

Item Quality: Fine

Item Type: Unique

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Whip

Damage: 40-60

Durability: 150/150

Weight: 0.6 kg

+10 Stamina

+10 Agility

-The razor whip is an assassin-style or last-resort weapon. The quarter-inch diameter steel-edged chain is one foot in length when in storage mode and three yards in length when deployed. In storage mode, the whip is as harmless as a length of rope-like metal. When the mana accumulation crystal shard in

Defense: 80

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2.8 kg

+15 Spirit

+15 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Electrum Off-Hand Shoulder Guard

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Left Shoulder

Defense: 120

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2.3 kg

+15 Spirit

+15 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Magi-Weaved Traveler's Backpack

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Back

Weight: 12 kg

*The bag is larger on the inside than on the outside. It can hold up to a thousand pounds without ever exceeding twelve pounds of weight. The limit of items that can be placed inside the rucksack is only limited by the opening of the bag.

its base it activated, the whip unfurls to its full length and lethality.

Classic Martial Electrum Off-Hand Shoulder Guard
(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Left Shoulder

Defense: 120

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2.3 kg

+15 Spirit

+15 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Fingerless Brown Leather Buckled Gauntlets

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Hands

Defense: 20

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 1.7 kg

+5 Spirit

+5 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Ring of Agility (x2)

Item Quality: Common

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .03 kg

+25 Agility

Ring of Stamina (x2)

Item Quality: Common

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+25 Stamina

Ring of the Ridged-Spike Boar

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+40 Spirit

*Enemies that strike the wearer with a melee weapon take 45 points of damage with each strike.

Ring of Web Walking

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+ 20 Agility

*Allows the wearer to stick to surfaces when barefoot for 60 seconds with a five-minute cooldown between uses.

Ring of the Essence Shaman

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

**10 Ring Slots Available:
Ring of Water Breathing**

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

*Allows wearer to breath
underwater.

**Lesser Ring of the
Wolverine**

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .03 kg

+50 Stamina

+25% Increased resistance to
physical Stun and Knockback
effects.

**Ring of the Bone Armored
Boar**

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

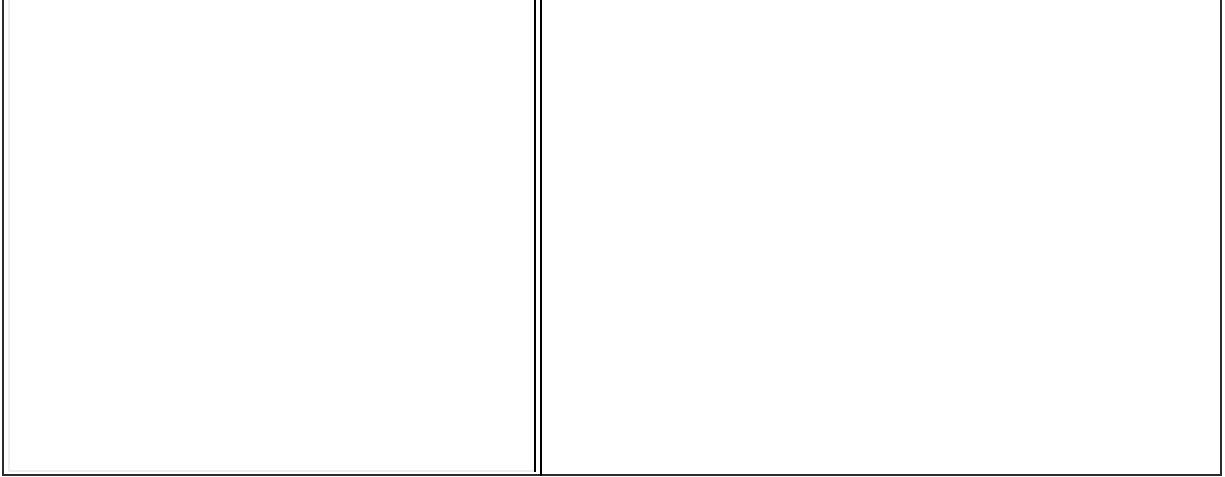
Weight: .04 kg

+20 Strength

+20 Stamina

*Gives the wearer a +400
Armor Class to all physical
damage.

Weight: .04 kg
+50 Spirit



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Neysa Ironwolf's Gear

Lesser Amulet of Transformation

Item Quality: Rare

Item Type: Unique

Slot: Neck

Durability: 330/350

Weight: 2.06 kg

Charge: 500 Mana

-The amulet allows the wearer to transform into an intelligent Demi-Human or Humanoid race.

(Some intelligent races cannot be emulated due to the base limitations of this enchanted device.)

-This amulet is able to transform the wearer into a race of similar size or up to one size larger or smaller than their base form once a blood sample for the specific race has been acquired. Additionally, each transformation requires energy to perform and maintain for the length of one hour. Mana costs are as follows:

Equal-sized form: 20 points.

One-size smaller or larger. 40 points.

-The wearer will automatically be transformed back to their original form when the available energy pool is completely consumed to the minimum energy level required for

Classic Master Tech Dark Brown Leather Spaghetti Strapped Victorian Ruffled Dress

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Chest

Defense: 100

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 7.5 kg

+50 Spirit

+50 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Master Tech Dark Brown Leather Underbust Corset Top with Electrum Clasps

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Chest

Defense: 80

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 3.2 kg

+25 Spirit

+25 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by one hour if they have it.

the wearer's final transformation.

-Upon transformation, the wearer does not automatically acquire knowledge of the new form's language or culture.

-The Lesser Amulet of Transformation charge is automatically refilled at the end of twenty-four hours.

(Important Note: The wearer's visualization of the form they are changing into is necessary for an exact transformation. Otherwise, physical variances will occur.)

Classic Master Tech Brown Leather Crystal-Shards-Tipped Hair Ties

(Social)

Item Quality: Fine

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Waist

Defense: 40

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 150/150

Weight: 0.3 kg

+5 Spirit

+5 Charisma

-Plus 500 to the wearer's mana pool due to the pair of mana accumulation crystal shards attached to the leather.

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Tech Goggles

(Social)

Classic Master Tech Patent Black Leather Gear Belt with Electrum Buckle

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Waist

Defense: 40

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 1.8 kg

+15 Spirit

+15 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Martial Electrum Forearm Guards

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Arms

Defense: 200

Armor Type: Heavy

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 5.1 kg

+10 Spirit

+10 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Classic Master Tech Dark Brown Patent Leather Thigh-High Open-Toe Boots

(Social)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Unique (Social)

Slot: Head

Defense: 10

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 0.9 kg

+5 Intelligence

+5 Spirit

+15 Charisma

-These mana-infused crystal lenses have been etched with runes that allow the wearer to see the glow of mana-infused items. Additionally, the spectacles give the wearer the ability to see in full darkness.

Lastly, they increase the wearer's chance to find hidden and camouflaged doors/traps.

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Ring of the Forest Stalker

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+ 30 Stamina

+25% Increase to Stealth within wooded terrain.

+5% Increase in Speed when traveling through wooden terrain.

Ring of Water Breathing

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Feet/Legs

Defense: 60

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 3.9 kg

+30 Spirit

+30 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

10 Ring Slots Available:

Ring of the Unbound Warrior

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .06 kg

*Removes all root effects to the wielder.

Ring of Frost Resistance

Item Quality: Common

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .06 kg

*Gives wearer +25% resistance to Frost magic

Ring of Flame Protection

Item Quality: Common

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .06 kg

*Gives wearer +25% resistance to Fire magic

Ring of Agility (x2)

<p>Weight: .04 kg *Allows wearer to breath underwater.</p>	<p>Item Quality: Common Item Type: Crafted Slot: Ring Weight: .03 kg +25 Agility</p> <p>Ring of Air Elemental Protection Item Quality: Good Item Type: Uncommon Slot: Ring Weight: .06 kg *Gives wearer +25% resistance to Air Magic.</p>
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Zeven Al'Zaric's, Bright Claw's, and Nahimana Tor'Narc's Gear

Zeven Al'Zaric's Gear:

<p>Dirk of Torrac Tor'Narc Item Quality: Rare Item Type: Unique Attack: One-hand Edged Weapon Type: Dagger Damage: 54-65 Durability: 320/350 Weight: 2.8 kg +100 Spirit A dying gift left by a true friend. This dirk has a part of Torrac Tor'Narc imprinted into the blade. -Soulbound - can only be held or used by owner or a member of the House of Bruic Diongmhalta. Anyone else picking up this dagger</p>	<p>Spirit Lochaber of Chieftain Diongmhalta (Broken) Item Quality: Epic Item Type: Unique Attack: two-hand Edge Weapon Type: Halberd Damage: 165-180 (+24) Durability: 389/400 Weight: 13.5 kg +21 (+8) Spirit +21 (+8) Intelligence +21 (+8) Charisma -Soulbound on pickup. - Spirit Lochaber of the House of Bruic Diongmhalta. The wielder of this halberd is the rightful owner of</p>
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will take damage equal to its maximum damage for every second in their possession.

-Nullifies psychic and magic incapacitating attacks, when combat is initiated, to owner and their group or raid.

-Warns of evil intent towards owner within a 10-yard radius.

Silver-Bladed Sgian-Dubh

(hidden in Kilt hose)

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Ceremonial

Attack: One-hand Edged

Weapon Type: Dagger

Damage: 20-30

Durability: 100/100

Weight: 0.8 kg

Silver-Bladed Mattucashlass

(hidden under the arm)

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Ceremonial

Attack: One-hand Edged

Weapon Type: Dagger

Damage: 40-50

Durability: 100/100

Weight: 1.9 kg

Rucksack of Holding

Item Quality: Unique

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Back

Weight: 3 kg

*The bag is considerably larger on the inside than on the outside. It can hold up to a thousand pounds

Blaidh Ogof Hold and the surrounding lands.

-Grants the owner the mastery of Spirit Shamanism along with all related spells and skills, including the ability to teach the profession of Spirit Shamanism to others.

-Renders lesser spirits such as ghosts, wraiths, spectre and etc. neutral and unable to attack first.

- This weapon is scalable. The weapon's stats will increase as owner's character grows in level.

Hand Axe of True Aim (2)

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Common

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Axe

Damage: 40-50*

Durability: 100/100

Weight: 4.3 kg

*True Aim means the hand axe will hit the targeted location only when thrown. Hand axes will automatically return to brace in five seconds.

Mountain Dwarven Bardiche

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: two-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Halberd

Damage: 135-145

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 16.5 kg

+30 Strength

+30 Stamina

without ever exceeding four pounds of weight. The limit of items that can be placed inside the rucksack is only limited by the opening of the bag.

Beithir Hide Jodhpurs

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Legs

Defense: 500

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 5 kg

+25 Strength

+20 Stamina

+15 Spirit

-Plus 15% resistance to all Piercing Weapons.

-Plus 15% resistance to all Slashing Weapons.

-Plus 20% resistance to all Lightning Type of Elemental Air magic attacks.

-Plus 15% resistance to all Air, Fire, Earth, and Water

Slashing/Piercing spells below level 45.

-Waterproof

*This item has been crafted from the rare hide of the World Boss Warptooth the Thunderstrike. Due to the Journeyman Leather Worker that worked the hide, many of the original resistances from the Elite Beithir's hide were transferred to the armor.

-Knockback, knocks any Humanoid or smaller-sized target ten yards back when triggered upon a successful hit. Cooldown is five minutes.

-Rend, causes the target to bleed with every successful hit for an additional 30 points of damage for 5 seconds.

* Modified with a steel hook that can be used to dismount riders.

Beithir Hide Long-Sleeve Shirt

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest (under armor)

Defense: 600

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 4 kg

+15 Strength

+10 Stamina

+5 Spirit

-Plus 10% resistance to all Piercing Weapons.

-Plus 10% resistance to all Slashing Weapons.

-Plus 15% resistance to all Lightning Type of Elemental Air magic attacks.

-Plus 10% resistance to all Air, Fire, Earth, and Water

Slashing/Piercing spells below level 45.

-Waterproof

*This item has been crafted from the rare hide of the World Boss

Beithir Hide-Gauntlets

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Hands

Defense: 200

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 1.05 kg

+5 Strength

+4 Stamina

+2 Spirit

-Plus 5% resistance to all Piercing Weapons. (Not Cumulative)

-Plus 5% resistance to all Slashing Weapons. (Not Cumulative)

-Plus 5% resistance to all Lightning Type of Elemental Air magic attacks.

-Plus 5% resistance to all Air, Fire, Earth, and Water Slashing/Piercing spells below level 45.

-Waterproof

*This item has been crafted from the rare hide of the World Boss Warptooth the Thunderstrike. Due to the Journeyman Leather Worker that worked the hide, many of the original resistances from the Elite Beithir's hide were transferred to the armor.

Girdle of Stone Giant's Fortitude

Item Quality: Epic

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Waist

Defense: 400

Weight: 2 kg

Warptooth the Thunderstrike. Due to the Journeyman Leather Worker that worked the hide, many of the original resistances from the Elite Beithir's hide were transferred to the armor.

Beithir Scale Breast Plate

Item Quality: Uncommon

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest

Defense: 1200

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 300/300

Weight: 6 kg

+30 Strength

+25 Stamina

+20 Spirit

-Plus 25% resistance to all Piercing Weapons.

-Plus 25% resistance to all Slashing Weapons.

-Plus 30% resistance to all Lightning Type of Elemental Air magic attacks.

-Plus 25% resistance to all Air, Fire, Earth, and Water Slashing/Piercing spells below level 45.

-Waterproof

*This item has been crafted from the rare scales of the World Boss Warptooth the Thunderstrike. Due to the Adapt Smith that crafted this armor's scales, many of the original resistances from the Elite Beithir's hide were transferred to the armor.

+60 Strength

+60 Stamina

Melmor Smelttoe was a Dwarf from the Smelttoe Clan captured by Mountain Trolls in the Dwarven Mountains and had all of the hair on his head burned off during the fighting. To his surprise, he was rescued by Stone Giants who took him in to be a part of their tribe, thinking that he was an injured baby giant. When it was discovered that he was not as strong as other Stone Giant children, his father crafted a magic girdle to give his adopted son the same fortitude and power as that of other Stone Giant children.

Melmor Smelttoe was the only Dwarf to ever be friends with a Stone Giant tribe and was considered by some Dwarves to be a traitor to his species when he returned home to his Clan.

-Crafted from plates of brown granite and bound together with braided gray strands of Stone Giant hair. The large buckle in the middle is crafted into the shape of a hammer.

-Allows the wearer to speak, and write Jötunn, the language of giants.

-Allows wearer the ability to catch and throw stones like a Stone Giant.

-Temporary grants the wearer the

Mountain Strider Horn

Item Quality: Epic

Item Type: Crafted

Durability: 400/400

Weight: 0.5 kg

Snaldrugret Orebuckle was a Dwarven adventure that spent most of her life wandering in the search of new ores for crafting. During one of her many adventures, she was traveling in the northern hinterlands of the far frozen wastes, when she was captured by Frost Giants.

Instead of being slaughtered for sport, Snaldrugret was taken as a slave once it was discovered that she was a Dwarf. One day, during her many years of captivity, she ran into a herd of Mountain Striders while she was out gathering ore outside the capital city of Jötunheimr. The entire herd was trapped on the side of the mountain from a massive avalanche that had cut off their path to safety after angering a spiteful Frost Giant Princess who wanted the herd for her garden. Knowing her decision would mean death, Snaldrugret still chose to secretly clear a path along the side of the mountain so that the herd could escape its death sentence. Due to her selfless act of defiance, the lead stallion chose to offer its own life in service to free Snaldrugret from her own imprisonment which allowed her to

universal hardness of a Stone Giant. When activated, the wearer's Armor Class is increased by a thousand points, is immune to all poisons, elemental resistance is increased by fifty percent, and hit points are increased by two thousand. Duration is for five minutes. Can be triggered once every twenty-four hours.

BlackGuard Velvet Frock Coat

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)
Slot: Chest

Defense: 100

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 2 kg

+35 Spirit

+35 Charisma

-The quality of this item gives the wearer a "Well Dressed" buff for eight hours.

Camouflage Mountain Great

Kilt (Traditional)

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Accessory (Unique Overslot - Can be used over regular leg and chest armor)

Defense: 150

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 6 kg

-Plus 25% increase to Stealth in wooded areas.

return back to Aeroch Nor.

*Instantly calls a Mountain Strider mount to serve the owner of the horn. The Mountain Strider base speed is equal to that of a level one mount. The Mountain Strider can carry up to two humanoid individuals and comes with the following attacks: Bone Horn charge, fanged bite, front hoof strike, and rear hoof kick.

Additionally, the owner of the horn can fight while mounted without any negative effects. Called Mountain Strider will return to horn if too much damage is taken.

Mountain Strider can be recalled after a minute cooldown. The owner of the horn must be at least level 40 to call Mountain Strider.

*This item will scale with the owner's level.

Description: A Mountain Strider looks to be a combination of a mountain goat and a plains horse. They have the special ability to climb like that of a mountain goat with a series of harden horns that travel from the forehead back to the base of the neck. While they have no mane, they do have a thick tuft of fur around the base of their neck that functions like natural armor against physical impacts and cold attacks.

Brutal Bearded Axe of Slaying

- Plus 35% increase to Stealth in mountainous areas.
- Plus 15% increase to Stealth in darkness.
- Plus 50% resistance to effects from inclement weather.

Mountain Wool Wear Cap
(Traditional)

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)
Slot: Head
Defense: 10
Armor Type: Very Light
Durability: 250/250
Weight: .3 kg
+5 Spirit
+5 Charisma
-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by one hour if they have it.

Gabhail-Anam Shrunken
(Nacario Deathreaver)

Number of Active Shrunken Slots: 1 of 5
Item Quality: Superior
Item Type: Unique
Location: Belt
Durability: 200/200
Weight: 0.3 kg
+10 Agility
*Captured soul fragment that's active when displayed on outer clothing or armor.
*Adds an equal negative stat to the original owner whenever they fight against the Gabhail-Anam

Item Quality: Superior
Item Type: Special
Attack: One-hand Edge
Weapon Type: Axe
Damage: 160-200
Durability: 157/200
Weight: 14 kg
+30 Stamina
+30 Agility
*Causes the target to bleed when hit for an additional 50 points of damage for 15 seconds.
*50% Chance on Hit of a limb to sever from the target.
*Increase wielder's movement and attack speed by one percent with each successful hit. The effect caps out at one hundred percent. This speed boost will end if a target has not been struck after thirty seconds.

Mountain Half-Calf Black Ghillie Brogue Boots with Silver Buttons
(Traditional)

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted (Social)
Slot: Feet
Defense: 25
Armor Type: Very Light
Durability: 250/250
Weight: 2.5 kg
+10 Spirit
+10 Charisma
-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by two hours if they have it.

Patent Leather Belt with Cross-

Shrunken's owner. Can only be nullified by winning the fight and recapturing their lost head.

Gabhail-Anam Shrunken

(Xxnos Copexx)

Number of Active Shrunken Slots:
2 of 5

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Unique

Location: Belt

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 0.3 kg

+10 Agility

*Captured soul fragment that's active when displayed on outer clothing or armor.

*Adds an equal negative stat to the original owner whenever they fight against the Gabhail-Anam Shrunken's owner. Can only be nullified by winning the fight and recapturing their lost head.

Gabhail-Anam Shrunken

(Stannis Dickatheon)

Number of Active Shrunken Slots:
3 of 5

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Unique

Location: Belt

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 0.3 kg

+9 Agility

*Captured soul fragment that's active when displayed on outer clothing or armor.

*Adds an equal negative stat to the

Shoulder Strap with Silver Buckles (Traditional)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Waist

Defense: 15

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 3.1 kg

+10 Spirit

+10 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by one hour if they have it.

Black Kilt Socks with Mountain Tartan Flash (Traditional)

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted (Social)

Slot: Feet

Defense: 0

Armor Type: Very Light

Durability: 250/250

Weight: .3 kg

+1 Spirit

+1 Charisma

-The quality of this item increases the wearer's "Well Dressed" buff by half an hour if they have it.

Arm Bands of the Wolf

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted

Location: Inventory

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 0.2 kg

+30 Agility

+10% increase to dodging ranged

original owner whenever they fight against the Gabhail-Anam Shrunken's owner. Can only be nullified by winning the fight and recapturing their lost head.

Gabhail-Anam Shrunken

(Carebear Slayer)

Number of Active Shrunken Slots:
4 of 5

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Unique

Location: Belt

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 0.3 kg

+9 Agility

*Captured soul fragment that's active when displayed on outer clothing or armor.

*Adds an equal negative stat to the original owner whenever they fight against the Gabhail-Anam Shrunken's owner. Can only be nullified by winning the fight and recapturing their lost head.

Gabhail-Anam Shrunken

(Muhlder Piehole)

Number of Active Shrunken Slots:
5 of 5

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Unique

Location: Belt

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 0.3 kg

+9 Agility

*Captured soul fragment that's active when displayed on outer

attacks.

+10% increase to evading melee attacks.

Torc of the Bear

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Neck

Weight: .04 kg

+30 Strength

Ring of the Wisdom

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+20 Spirit

Ring of the Stamina

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+25 Stamina

Ring of the Recovery

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+25 Spirit

clothing or armor.

*Adds an equal negative stat to the original owner whenever they fight against the Gabhail-Anam Shrunken's owner. Can only be nullified by winning the fight and recapturing their lost head.

Bright Claw's Gear:

Mountain Watch Steel Bear Breast Plate with Pauldrons

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest

Defense: 800

Armor Type: Heavy

Durability: 175/200

Weight: 16 kg

+10 Strength

- Special Enchantment: Monstrous Vitality – gives plus 500 to max Hit Points.

Mountain Watch Steel Bear Helm

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest

Defense: 200

Armor Type: Heavy

Durability: 175/200

Weight: 12 kg

+10 Strength

- Special Enchantment: Dark Vision - Grants ability to see in dim-lighting conditions up to 100 yards and the ability to see in complete darkness up to 60 yards.

Mountain Watch Steel Bear Claws (4)

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: One-Hand Edge

Weapon Type: Claw (4)

Damage: 103-113 (x4)

Durability: 175/200

Weight: 6.5 kg

+10 Strength

- Special Enchantment: Adds 20 points of Bleed Damage to each slash for five seconds.

Mountain Watch Steel Bear Fangs (4)

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: Bite

Weapon Type: Piercing (4)

Damage: 207-212

Durability: 175/200

Weight: 2.5 kg

+4 Strength

- Special Enchantment: Adds 5 – 10 points of Piercing Damage to each bite.

Nahimana Tor'Narc's Gear:

Toxic Chitin-Spiked Knuckles

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Unique
Attack: One-hand Edge
Weapon Type: Dagger
Damage: 40-60
Durability: 250/250
Weight: 7 kg
+10 Stamina
+10 Agility
-Venomous Touch (Type: Poison)
Target suffers a poisonous effect that slows movement and reaction speeds by 3% for thirty seconds on each successful strike or pierce against the target's dermis, scales, chitin, etc.

Light Brown Leather Pants

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Legs
Defense: 200
Armor Type: Light
Durability: 37/100
Weight: 1.3 kg
-Description – These leather pants are common to the Beast Kin clans and are well constructed.

Sturdy Dark Brown Leather Boots

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Common
Slot: Feet
Defense: 50

Spittle-Strand Reinforced Chitin Belt

Item Quality: Superior
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Waist
Defense: 280
Armor Type: Medium
Durability: 200/200
Weight: .8 kg
+15 Intelligence
+15 Spirit
*Friction Touch - Potions and equipment can be pressed to any part of the belt to be held in place.
-Once a day the belt will grow a spittle sack with a Lesser Antidote Potion.

Coarse Raw Wool Peasant Blouse

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: General Clothing
Defense: 0
Armor Type: None
Durability: 21/100
Weight: .3 kg
-Description – These raw woolen shirts are common to the Beast Kin clans and are well constructed.

Dark Brown Leather Vest

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Chest
Defense: 75
Armor Type: Light

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 32/100

Weight: 1.07 kg

-Description – These boots are common to the Beast Kin clans and are well constructed basic boots.

Durability: 51/100

Weight: 2.4 kg

-Description – These leather vests are common to the Beast Kin clans and are well constructed.

Neristhana Lightouch's Gear

Neristhana Lightouch's Gear:

Bag of Holding

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Uncommon

Weight: 2 kg

*The bag is considerably larger on the inside than on the outside. It can hold up to a thousand pounds without ever exceeding its two pounds of weight. The limit of items that can be placed inside the rucksack is only limited by the opening of the bag. Due to the nature of the item being a sack, it can be carried in the hand or placed in another bag or backpack as long as it's not another type of Bag, Pouch, or Rucksack of Holding.

Tharbolt's Crossbow of Accuracy

Item Quality: Fine

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: Ranged

Weapon Type: Crossbow

Damage 110-130

Weight: 4.8 kg

Durability: 127/150

+40 Chance to Hit

+5 Agility

Geartrop's Quiver of Unerring Bolts

Savage Hand-Axe of Maiming

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Special

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Axe

Damage: 160-200

Durability: 250/250

Weight: 14 kg

+40 Strength

+40 Stamina

*50% Chance on Hit of a limb to sever from the target.

Leeching Hand-Axe of Severing

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Axe

Damage: 130-160

Durability: 112/200

Weight: 12 kg

+20 Strength

+20 Stamina

*15% of damage inflicted recovered as health per successful strike.

Trade Captain's Leather Crimson Frock Coat

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest

Item Quality: Fine

-Allows up to one hundred bolts to be stored in quiver.

*These bolts will hit the designated target as long as the bolthead is within a fifteen-degree angle to the intended target.

-Bolts remaining: 67/100

+25 Agility

Light Beige Leather Leggings

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Legs

Defense: 300

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 189/250

Weight: 2.1 kg

+30 Agility

+30 Charisma

-These are stylish Gnome leggings that are usually worn by traders.

They is resistant to punctures and slashes, reducing damage by such attacks by three percent.

-Water Resistant

Dark Brown Leather Thigh-High Boots of Speed

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Feet

Defense: 200

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 243/250

Weight: 1.2 kg

+25 Agility

+25 Charisma

Defense: 400

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 157/250

Weight: 3.2 kg

+30 Agility

+30 Charisma

-This is a stylish Gnome coat with many pockets that is usually worn by traders. It is resistant to punctures and slashes, reducing damage by such attacks by five percent.

-Water resistant

Light Beige Leather Crop Top with Long Cuffed Sleeves

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest

Defense: 50

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 240/250

Weight: 1.2 kg

+5 Agility

+5 Charisma

-This is a stylish tight leather crop top.

Studded Dark Brown Leather Pauldrons of Defense

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Chest (Shoulders/Arms)

Defense: 350

Armor Type: Light

Durability: 83/250

Weight: 5.2 kg

+30 Agility

-These are stylish Gnome boots that are commonly worn by sailors. They are resistant to punctures and slashes, reducing damage by such attacks by two percent.
-Water Resistant

Dark Brown Studded Leather Gloves

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Hands
Defense: 280
Armor Type: Medium
Durability: 137/250
Weight: .8 kg
+10 Agility
+10 Charisma

-These are stylish studded leather gloves are commonly worn by melee fighters and sailors. They are resistant to punctures and slashes, reducing damage by such attacks by one percent.
-Water Resistant

Magi-Weaved Traveler's Backpack

Item Quality: Uncommon
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Back
Weight: 12 kg
*The bag is larger on the inside than on the outside. It can hold up to a thousand pounds without ever exceeding twelve pounds of weight. The limit of items that can be placed inside the rucksack is

+30 Charisma
-These are stylish Gnome pauldrons that are commonly worn by melee fighters and sailors. They are resistant to punctures and slashes, reducing damage by such attacks by ten percent.

Amulet of Jumping

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Neck
Weight: .03 kg
Increases Jump skill by 200 skill points.
+30 Agility

Rogue Shank

Item Quality: Fine
Item Type: Crafted
Attack: One-hand Edge
Weapon Type: Dagger
Damage: 67-87
Durability: 150/150
Weight: 14 kg
+20 Strength
+20 Stamina
*15% Chance to Crit on a successful strike.

Ring of Agility (x3)

Item Quality: Common
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Ring
Weight: .03 kg
+25 Agility

Ring of Stamina (x3)

only limited by the opening of the bag.

10 Ring Slots Available:

Ring of Clear Thought

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .08 kg
+25 Spirit

Ring of Stamina

Item Quality: Common
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Ring
Weight: .06 kg
+25 Stamina

Lesser Ring of the Warrior

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Common
Slot: Ring
Weight: .03 kg
+20 Spirit
+ 400 to Armor Class.
+3% Increased resistance to Stun effects.

Item Quality: Common

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .04 kg

+25 Stamina

Ring of the Earth-Shock Wolf

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .04 kg
+30 Agility
+25% Increase resistance to Fire Elemental Damage.
+10% Resistance to being Stunned.

Ring of Water Breathing

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .04 kg
*Allows wearer to breath underwater.

Ring of Agility

Item Quality: Common
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Ring
Weight: .03 kg
+25 Agility

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Phoenix's Gear

Phoenix Sonata's Gear:

Vicious Blade of Rending

Item Quality: Uncommon
Item Type: Crafted
Attack: One-hand Edge
Weapon Type: Long Sword
Damage: 210-260
Durability: 252/300
Weight: 11 kg
+30 Strength
+30 Agility
-Rend, causes the target to bleed with every successful hit for an additional 25 points of damage for 15 seconds.

Savage Battle Axe of Slaying

Item Quality: Rare
Item Type: Unique
Attack: Two-Hand Edge
Weapon Type: Axe
Damage: 210-285
Durability: 340/360
Weight: 15 kg
+40 Strength
+40 Stamina
+40 Agility
-Rend, causes the target to bleed with every successful hit for an additional 25 points of damage for 15 seconds.
- This weapon is scalable. The weapon's stats will increase as

Mithridatum's Amulet of Fortification

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Neck
Weight: .8 kg
Makes wearer immune to paralysis-type of poisons. Instead of being paralyzed, the wearer's movements are reduced by seventy-five percent.

Red Coral Breastplate with Pauldrons

Item Quality: Superior
Item Type: Crafted
Slot: Chest
Defense: 800
Armor Type: Medium
Durability: 200/200
Weight: 12 kg
+25 Agility
+5 Stamina
+5 Strength
-Resistance to elemental magic +5%
-Increase movement speed through water by 5%.

Red Coral Skirt and Vambrace

Item Quality: Superior
Item Type: Crafted

owner's character grows in level.

Blade of Piercing

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: One-hand Edge

Weapon Type: Dagger

Damage: 60-80

Durability: 72/100

Weight: 2.1 kg

+5 Strength

+5 Agility

-Piercing Attack – Ignores 15% of armor class on a successful hit.

Red Coral Belt

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Waist

Defense: 280

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 197/200

Weight: 2 kg

+15 Agility

+5 Stamina

+5 Strength

-Resistance to elemental magic

+5%

-Increase movement speed through water by 5%.

Red Coral Boots

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Feet

Defense: 260

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Slot: Legs

Defense: 700

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 9 kg

+25 Agility

+5 Stamina

+5 Strength

-Resistance to elemental magic

+5%

-Increase movement speed through water by 5%.

Red Coral Gauntlets

Item Quality: Superior

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Hands

Defense: 280

Armor Type: Medium

Durability: 200/200

Weight: 1.28 kg

+10 Agility

+3 Stamina

+3 Strength

-Resistance to elemental magic

+2%

-Increase movement speed through water by 2%.

Short Bow of the Plains

Item Quality: Fine

Item Type: Crafted

Attack: Ranged

Weapon Type: Bow

Damage 60-80

Weight: 4.0 kg

Durability: 143/150

+20 Piercing

Weight: 5.07 kg
+15 Agility
+5 Stamina
+5 Strength
-Resistance to elemental magic
+3%
-Increase movement speed through
water by 3%.

+10 Strength
+10 Agility

**Hunter's Quiver of Unending
Arrows**

Item Quality: Fine
-Allows up to 100 arrows to be
stored in quiver. Takes a day to
restore used arrows.

Töten Feinde's Gear

Töten Feinde's Gear:

Imbued Heavy Bronze Demonic Belt

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted by Töten Feinde
Slot: Feet
Defense: 300
Armor Type: Heavy
Durability: 231/250
Weight: 4.4 kg
+15 Strength
+15 Stamina
-Resistant to elemental magic +5%
- Infernal Armor Set Bonus -
Chance for a rare magic item to drop from enemy increased by 3%.
*This item has been quenched in Orc blood during its creation which has imbued the essence of the demi-humans into the metal.
*Warning: This item design is based on the Infernal Armor Set. Due to inferior resources used in the item's creation, many of the default bonuses and buffs are missing.

Imbued Heavy Bronze Demonic Visage Heater

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted by Töten Feinde

Imbued Heavy Bronze Demonic Head Breastplate with Pauldrons and Vambraces

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted by Töten Feinde
Slot: Chest
Defense: 1300
Armor Type: Heavy
Durability: 130/250
Weight: 25 kg
+35 Strength
+35 Stamina
-Resistant to elemental magic +2%
- Infernal Armor Set Bonus -
Reduces attackers' morale by .7%.
*This item has been quenched in Orc blood during its creation which has imbued the essence of the demi-humans into the metal.
*Warning: This item design is based on the Infernal Armor Set. Due to inferior resources used in the item's creation, many of the default bonuses and buffs are missing.

Imbued Heavy Bronze Helm of Demonic Visage

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted by Töten Feinde

Armor: 3860
Armor Type: Heavy
Durability: 80/250
Weight: 22.3 kg
+25 Strength
+25 Stamina
-52% increase chance to block.
-Resistance to elemental magic
+5%
- Infernal Armor Set Bonus -
Reduces attackers' morale by 2%.
*This item has been quenched in
Orc blood during its creation which
has imbued the essence of the
demi-humans into the metal.
*Warning: This item design is
based on the Infernal Armor Set.
Due to inferior resources used in
the item's creation, many of the
default bonuses and buffs are
missing.

“Last Rites” Abyssal War Hammer

Item Quality: Epic
Item Type: Unique
Attack: Two-Hand Blunt
Weapon Type: Hammer
Damage: 280-300
Durability: 400/400
Weight: 18.5 kg
+56 Strength
+56 Spirit
+56 Stamina
-Soulbound on pickup.
- “Last Rites” Abyssal War
Hammer of the House of

Slot: Head
Defense: 400
Armor Type: Heavy
Durability: 180/250
Weight: 5.7 kg
+5 Strength
+5 Stamina
-Resistant to elemental magic +2%
- Infernal Armor Set Bonus -
Reduces attackers' morale by .3%.
*This item has been quenched in
Orc blood during its creation which
has imbued the essence of the
demi-humans into the metal.
*Warning: This item design is
based on the Infernal Armor Set.
Due to inferior resources used in
the item's creation, many of the
default bonuses and buffs are
missing.

Imbued Heavy Bronze Demonic Cuisses with Greaves

Item Quality: Exceptional
Item Type: Crafted by Töten
Feinde
Slot: Legs
Defense: 900
Armor Type: Heavy
Durability: 161/250
Weight: 14.3 kg
+35 Strength
+35 Stamina
-Resistant to elemental magic +3%
- Infernal Armor Set Bonus -
Reduces chance to be Knocked
Down by an enemy opponent by

Muspelheim. The wielder of this War Hammer is the rightful owner of Fortress of Mund-spilli and the surrounding lands.

-Grants the owner the abyssal mastery of Anti-Paladin magic along with all related spells and skills, including the ability to teach the profession to others.

-Renders all abyssal denizens' aggression to that of what it would be to a full-blooded Oni.

-Upon being thrown, this weapon will automatically be return to owner after three seconds.

- This weapon is scalable. The weapon's stats will increase as owner's character grows in level.

Imbued Heavy Bronze War Hammer

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted by Töten Feinde

Attack: One-Hand Blunt

Weapon Type: Hammer

Damage: 250-270

Durability: 237/250

Weight: 18.5 kg

+30 Strength

+30 Stamina

-Resistant to elemental magic 5%

-Upon being thrown, this weapon will automatically be return to owner after three seconds.

*This item has been quenched in Orc blood during its creation which

2%.

*This item has been quenched in Orc blood during its creation which has imbued the essence of the demi-humans into the metal.

*Warning: This item design is based on the Infernal Armor Set. Due to inferior resources used in the item's creation, many of the default bonuses and buffs are missing.

Imbued Heavy Bronze Demonic Boots

Item Quality: Exceptional

Item Type: Crafted by Töten

Feinde

Slot: Feet

Defense: 350

Armor Type: Heavy

Durability: 218/250

Weight: 14.3 kg

+10 Strength

+10 Stamina

-Resistant to elemental magic 2%

- Infernal Armor Set Bonus - Roots and other movement restrictive effects reduced by 50%.

*This item has been quenched in Orc blood during its creation which has imbued the essence of the demi-humans into the metal.

*Warning: This item design is based on the Infernal Armor Set. Due to inferior resources used in the item's creation, many of the default bonuses and buffs are

has imbued the essence of the demi-humans into the metal.

*Warning: This item design is based on an Infernal Weapon design. Due to inferior resources used in the item's creation, many of the default bonuses and buffs are missing.

Amulet of Regeneration

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: 1.09 kg

+500 Hit Points

*Automatically regenerates fifty points of health every five seconds.

Iron Band of the Conquer

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .06 kg

+30 Stamina

*Adds plus 25 bleed damage to all melee attacks.

Orc Shaman Savage Band of Mana

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Ring

Weight: .18 kg

+400 Mana

*Restores plus forty points of mana while in combat.

Ring of Ogre Strength

missing.

Handy Haversack

Item Quality: Unique

Item Type: Uncommon

Slot: Back

Weight: 4 kg

*The bag is considerably larger on the inside than on the outside. It can hold up to a thousand pounds without ever exceeding four pounds of weight. The limit of items that can be placed inside the rucksack is only limited by the opening of the bag.

Minor Bronze Band of Leeching

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .09 kg

*Leeches 25 points of health per second for five seconds on each successful strike.

Band of the Bear

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Crafted

Slot: Ring

Weight: .31 kg

+20 Strength

+20 Stamina

Band of the Wolf

Item Quality: Good

Item Type: Crafted by Töten

Feinde

Slot: Ring

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .27 kg
+80 Strength

Ring of the Frost Shrieker

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Uncommon
Slot: Ring
Weight: .3 kg
*Imbues wearer with 15% Frost Resistance.

Weight: .03 kg
+20 Agility
+20 Stamina

Bronze Ring of Magic Protection

Item Quality: Good
Item Type: Crafted by Töten Feinde
Slot: Ring
Weight: .21 kg
*Reduces all magic attacks taken by fifty points.

Character List

In-real-life People and Friends

Aegis Karrath: Kenneth (Julie's boyfriend), Florida, Human, Warrior – male

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Akrix Ragen: Level 44, AJ, Florida, Dwarf Warrior – male – Florida, bald headed, short dark-brown beard, hazel eyes, 5'4" tall in-game, wide muscular shoulders. IRL he's a bald head, brown eyes, 5'5", big smile, shit talker, a little on the heavy side and dating Jill with regular threesomes with Krystal. He wore a heavy chain mail coat, leather armor pants with iron thighs-guards, knee-high iron-toe boots, and matching shin guards. And if that wasn't enough, more plates of iron covered the chest and back to increase the chain mail's protection. On top of that, he wore an ornate leather vest and a Viking-style iron helm with an eyes and nose guard. His weapons of choice were a kite shield that was almost as long as he was tall and an oversized hand axe. His manifest flying squirrel is named Shorty and was colored like a brown chipmunk. Combat Pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolf Brutus.

Anthony: male waiter at The Boynton Beach Ale House.

Aren Dargoth: LittleAsianGirl, LAN Party, Female Wolfkin, Fire Mage/Priest, male

Brenda: Waitress at The Gun Club Café

Bonnie Smash: Level 45 Bonnie Jean, Half-Orc Dark Elf –female - DPS Warrior, West Virginia, dark-brown shoulder length hair, green eyes, 6'6" in-game height, Grayish-black skin. IRL she's a petite 5' tall girl, gamer, likes to joke around and have a good time, interested in Hefe. Long-brown hair, green eyes and super thin. (Pookey Bear, Honey Bear and shnukums). Combat pet: Elite Molten Flow Strider, named Lava.

Daiza Karrath: John, Florida, Human, Warrior – male – cheated on Julie while we were dating,

Death Forall: Trivolt, LAN Party, Hacker, Human, Fire Mage – male (nightmare)

Denise: Regular inside bartender for the Boynton Beach Ale House.

Töten Feinde: Eric Quinn, Level 50, Half-Oni (Oni/Fire Giant), red cat-eyes, bronze skin, short-cropped red hair (ginger), full red beard with dual braids, 8' tall. (Usually, fire giants have red eyes and black skin.) two-handed war hammer is named Last Rites. Demon-head imprinted in the breast plate with ornate fang demon faces designed into the gauntlets. Father was a Fire Giant and mother was an Oni. Summoned Nightmare steed is named Lilin (abyssal flames attack from nostrils). She has a special ability called Expunge where she blows up in a fiery blast. House of Muspelheim, Fortress of Mund-spilli. (DOA) Disciples of Armageddon. Nightmare expelled dual jets of Abyssal Flames.

Fluffy Tomohiahya: Danielle, (Danny) Virginia, Human, Hunter – female, bear pet, Large Rock Bear

Hefe Beatudown: Level 44 Jeff (Hefe), Barbarian – male – Gnome, long-blond hair and matching goatee, blue eyes, 3'6", muscular build. Florida, brown hair, buzz cut, clean shaven, blue eyes, 6'4", large man with a natural muscular build, goofball, nice guy, shit talker, interested in Bonnie Jean. (Pookey Bear, Honey Bear and shnukums), Giant Spider Pet is called Webby. Small buckler shields on each forearm and katar-punch daggers in each hand. Leather armor. Combat Pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolf: Wolfy
Jelly Dman: JellyDonutMan, LAN party, Human, Fire Mage – male (nightmare)

Kim: Outside bartender at the Boynton Beach Ale House.

Kriminali Ragen: Level 45 FF, Florida, Dark Elf Arcane Mage – female – Jill, Florida, long-black dreads, black-skin, hazel eyes, stacked, 5'6. Wears heavy wool robes with leather pads and leather knee-high boots. Out of game wavy brown hair, hazel eyes, 5'6", early twenties, gamer, sarcastic humor, has healthy curves, and is dating AJ. Sometimes does threesomes with Krystal, and AJ. Combat Pet: Wildclaw named Fang.

Laura: New bartender for the inside bar at the Boynton Beach Ale House.

Lena Stonehammer: Kitty, Texas, Dwarf, Priestess – female

Lora Lyn: Twitch Video Technician – female

Marge: Hostess at The Gun Club Café

Mike Eyedol: Mike, Florida, Half-Human/Dark Elf Shadow Assassin, Nightmare start, friend of Jason's

Nuthar Inurface: Jimmy, Florida, Gnome, Priest / Bruiser - male

Philip Moore: Twitch Account Rep – male

Phoenix Sonata: Level 53 - Barbarian – Human female - red long hair and green eyes. Stands 6'2" with long legs and C cup. Wears knee-high leather boots, leather combat skirt, chain-mail vest with black leather armor underneath, arms are bare, and wears a black hooded cloak. IRL name is Matt. Large man, heavy set, 6'2" tall with red hair. Easy going personality and loyal to friends. Uses a two-handed battle axe with red armor. Flying Squirrel's name is Eterna with red and black fur. (Was kissing a Wolfkin named Eza in Darom in book 4)

Rain Maker: John Fay, LAN party, Human, Warrior/Priest – male

Rinaquenon Karrath: Julie (John's daughter), Florida, Human, Fire Mage – female

Runartin Stonehammer: Glen, Texas, Dwarf, Warrior – male

Sarka Dazd: Level 45, Florida, Light Elf Warrior – female, Combat Pet named Freya and is an Elite Fanged Tarpan Strider. (Her NPC group is called Sarka Avengers)

Seb Chutzpah: Seb, LAN Party – male

Shirley: Local cashier girl at Publix, ex-cheer leader.

Tatheirel Irlanthien: Level 45 Krystal, Florida, Dark Elf Priestess – female – wavy long-white hair, blue eyes, Florida, long blonde hair, blue eyes, stacked figure, sweet personality, semi-threesome relationship with Jill and AJ, hardcore gamer. Combat Pet: Twin-Tailed Fox named Silver.

Tanya: Waitress at the City Café Diner in Chattanooga Tennessee.

Terry: Local bag girl at Publix. Gamer-Girl, just turned eighteen, and wants

to one of the new pods for the summer.

Tinyr Nebril: Kevin, Charlotte, North Carolina, Level 45, Light Elf Rogue, male. Picked up combat pet: Elite Fanged Tarpan Strider named Arashi

Tony Tomohiahya: Anthony, Virginia, Human, Hunter, male, bear pet.
Large Rock Bear

Unalia Nebril: Shannon, Charlotte, North Carolina, Level 45, Light Elf Ranger, female. Combat Pet: Elite Large Rock Wolves named Rex - silver quartz color.

Uthgaart Nightbane: Tony Lupus, Florida, Wolf Totem Barbarian Black Smith

Vengeance Burnslinger: Domenic, Florida, Paladin, Nightmare start, friend of Jason's, Dwarf/Human Halfling. In game: 5'8 dark brown hair shoulder-length hair (Looks like Kili the Dwarf from The Hobbit) and almond-colored eyes, Pounce: Level (Same as Player) Male – Blink Lynx cat companion + eventually a mount.

Yun Dazd: Level 45, Florida, Light Elf Priest/Frost Mage, male – wavy brown hair, blue eyes, muscular build, clean shaven face, and 6'2". Picked up combat pet: Elite Large Rock Wolf named Odr, black color.

Zilla Killer: Zilla, LAN Party – male

Dread Herd

Shadowspike the Dreadmare Matriarch – Level 61 – Mare -

Zror – Lead Dread Stallion of group with Ashley – Level 31

Rend - Dread Stallion – Level 31

Onyx - Dread Mare – Level 31

Shar Dread Mare – Level 31

Cora - Dread Mare – Level 31

House of Tuin'Dyrr from Duraddor Fortress, guild leader is called Head of Midnight or (shade = small raid / 185 members/ 4 NPC House Officers aka

Sub-Leaders)

Mike Eyedol: Level 48, Mike, Florida, Half-Human/Dark Elf - Shadow Assassin, Nightmare start, friend of Jason's, Guild Leader of House of Tuin'Dyrr, gray-blue eyes.

Uglorn Chuzedros: Level 42, Dark Elf, House Officer, Shadow Assassin, Sub-Leader of ambush group – female - black coarse hair in a crisscross short-braid cornrows, piercing green eyes, 6'2", with a thick muscular body, paralytic poisons, bow, dual short swords, and daggers. (Snuck into Domenic's base to help us reach Dom to talk.)

Dhinzur Zuvnabod: Level 46, Dark Elf, House Officer, Shadow Assassin, Sub-Leader of main hunting group – male – bald head, dark-brown eyes, short goatee, 6'1", slim muscular body, paralytic poisons, bow, dual short swords, and daggers. (Job is to spawn camp the runners heading back to the battle field.)

Ruirze Keeshrer: Shadow Assassin that nearly shoots Tengsly.

Merodve Zisebil: Level 46, Dark Elf, House Office, Shadow Assassin, Sub-Leader of southern graveyard group – male,

Sardren Pevnuth: Level 46, Dark Elf, House Office, Shadow Assassin, Sub-Leader of eastern graveyard group – female, bald-headed, silvery-blue eyes. (Nearly attacks Stars group with her raid due to Helgath and Fylreh)

Diothraid Ghemrah: Level 50, female, Dark Elf, Group Leader under Sub Leader Pevnuth,

Qhudromo Iarviagod: Level 45, male, Dark Elf, Group Leader under Sub Leader Pevnuth,

Nekzurn Vustrai: Level 45, female, Dark Elf, Group Leader under Sub Leader Pevnuth,

Plain's Centaur Tribe

Drenall Iloxoeis: Level 40 Centaur Tribal Clan Leader – male - One of two surviving Clan Leaders – kind of a muscle dick when we first met – palomino coat – gray-white hair – pale blue eyes, golden-blonde hair, massive two-handed iron-shod staff, iron shield sheath of javelins on his

back – early 30's

Fylreh Ilyrall: Level 50 Centauride Chieftain's Daughter – female - oldest daughter of Chieftain – Filly (aka unmarried – not a mare) – chestnut hair and coat, golden eyes, stacked – early twenties – long bow and dual scimitars with an iron-shod shield on back. Arbitrator. Reminded me of young Lagertha from Vikings. Father is Darrix Ilyrall. Combat Pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolf Rocky. Skirmisher Class.

Darrix Ilyrall: Chieftain of Clan Ilyrall, dead from worm that attacked Star in book 4 during a raid to rescue captured centaurs from the Orcs.

Naamro Xlantu: Level 39 Centauride Mystic Shaman (air & spirit) – female - Overo coat (jagged white and brown patches reaches half way up human abdomen) milf in mid-30's, a little touched, shock of white long hair with a black lock running down the center, gray eyes, two-handed bone staff crafted from the spine of a battering ram (topped with the glowing blue eye sockets of sapphire and the skulls horns that create duel points like a spear) with three feathers hanging from the base of the skull colored green, blue and red. The bottom of the staff flared out in a weighted base with two blade-like protrusions. Staff was extremely ornate and carved with battle scenes of great beasts that the tribe had fought.

Pevral Dubrankm: Level 40 Centaur Tribal Clan Leader – male - Two of two surviving Clan Leaders – more thoughtful – tells Drenall to stand down and hear the Halfling through – bay coat (mixture of reds and browns with black highlights) – black hair, onyx-black eyes, powerful bow, scimitars, and iron shield, with lance – gruff forty-year-old.

Tavon Ilyrall (Brat Pack): Level 25 Centaur Chieftain's Son – male - youngest son of the Chieftain – blue roan coat, black hair, and highlights – golden eyes – iron-wood staff and long bow, leather armor – 14-year-old. Like Ragnar son, Ivar the Boneless. Kopy-Katze, Silver Jolie (blue eyes).

Demaros: male – helping with construction.

Nikeall: male – helping with construction.

Hyraia: female – helping with construction.

Isonice: female – helping with construction.

Pherala Dubrankm: Centauride – Scout with Forrest Gimp and Vector for the Hobgoblin army. A member of the Dubrankm Tribe.

Iolia Xlantu: Level 45 Centauride, Advanced Smith and Smelter,

Semelle Ilyrall – Level 46 Centauride, Heavy Archer, Cook, dark brown hair in a long ponytail, Sabino coat (dark roan-colored back and flanks with bright white hooves and belly) dusty olive skin, green eyes, dame, mid-twenties, excellent cook.

Metite Ilyrall – Level 16 Centauride teenager, Piebald Tobiano colored (dark roan and white spots), and assisting in waiting tables.

Gnomeron Mining Company

Gafiz Quaros: Gnome Digger – male

Mিনny Bigirry: Gnome Assistant Lead Digger – female, brown hair in pig tails on either side of her head, green eyes, friendly and super talkative, wields dagger and pickaxe, miner. Says hot diggity dog damn. Nickname little mouse.

Spog Addreonnyn: Gnome Lead Digger – male

Zafnit Rosadqua: Gnome Digger – male

Smorbist Clanzbig: Journeyman Gnome Miner and Smelter, Level 36 male, gruff, gray hair,

Deloneshire Town NPCs

Calada Thrilmadien: Light Elf Calada Metal Smithing – male

Dalilath Traovudd: Light Elf Sergeant of the Guard, Swordsman – male

Elal Throlad: Light Elf - the White Unicorn Inn Keeper – male

Faelivrin Elayoe: Light Elf Faelivrin's Alchemy Emporium – female

Folduin Naevyre: Light Elf Mayor's Magister – male

Garang Ralith: Light Elf Guild Master – male

Ines Eruaistaniel: Light Elf Priestess of Light – old female

Master Isundir: Light Elf Master Frost Mage - male

Miya Faelwen: (level 42 book 7) Light Elf Captain of the Guard, Swordswoman – female - emerald-green eyes, long blonde hair, stacked-figure

Nettya Timiniel: Light Elf - the White Unicorn Bartender/Server – female

Obeteliol Filmalad: Light Elf Frost Mage Apprentice Trainer

Rathal Faeberos: Light Elf Mayor of Delonshire – male

Tardo Ibohanydd: Light Elf Corporal of the Guard, Swordsman – male

Tion Solarian: Light Elf Solarian's Enchanting Boutique – male

Urael Andelmore: Light Elf - the White Unicorn Waitress – female

Devil Dog Guild (Most come from Nebraska / Central Time Zone)

Jerome Thompson: Level 50 Light Elf Priest – male – short spiked brown hair, hazel eyes, kind clean-shaven face, fit muscular build standing at 6'1".

Combat Pet: Twin-Tailed Fox female fox named Yuki. Thompson surprisingly enough ended up looting a talisman that turned him into a Great White shark for thirty seconds that put his damage output in the water through the roof. Somewhat similar to my Talisman of Yeenoktu.

Kenzie McMillan: Level 50 Light Elf Rogue – female – black shoulder-length hair, green eyes, golden tanned skin, 5'4". IRL: Wounded warrior, missing right leg and about 20% of her skin on her right side. Scarred on right side of facing/skull. Tiger-stripped (black/charcoal gray) flying squirrel named Nightblade. Wildclaw combat pet named female Hanekawa. Wields duel short swords or long sword and dagger.

Matt Cobra: Level 50 Light Elf Warrior – male, Wildclaw combat pet male named Zuma

Matt Darkhorse: Level 50 Light Elf Rogue – male - Combat Pet: Twin-Tailed Fox female fox named Inari

Sara Cruise: Level 50 Light Elf Frost Mage – female, Combat Pet: Elite Grizzly Bear cub Flowers.

Terry Cobra: Level 50 Light Elf Warrior – female, Wildclaw combat female pet named Astra

Thomas Anderson: Level 50 Light Elf Warrior, Guild Leader – male – bald head – brilliant blue eyes, tanned skin, 6’4”. IRL: Gunny Sergeant, Wounded warrior, 80% burns on his body from an IED, missing both legs from the knees down. Midnight-black flying Squirrel named Blackhawk. Combat Pet: Meatball (Elite Crown-Bladed Eurasian Elk with granite bladed horns and stone-skin)

Zhou Li: Level 50 Light Elf Rogue – female, American-Japanese, 5’2” IRL, Combat Pet: Wildclaw combat pet named Blair

Orion Prakoli: Level 39 - Fire Mage/Martial Artist - (focuses on unarmed combat) – Light Elf male – brown short-cut hair, brown beard and mustache, blue eyes, 6’ even. Enjoys engineering and crafting. Miner, but not herbs or gathering. Combat Marine corpsman. Katar punch-daggers. Was the door gunner on a Ch46. Unit was HMM 268, aka the Red Dragons. Later on, uses Air Shamanism with Fire Magic and martial arts as an Elemental Martial Artist. (Or-re is Minny’s nickname for him.) Ex-Rachael, Chris Ell. “Wind Wave Blast!” (not “Wave Motion Fist” from Street Fighter)

Zyphonn Padaedus: Level 36 - Rogue/Frost Mage – Light Elf male - IRL Alek Truitt, ATSC is Egress, (now contracting) marines have fun giving him a hard time, (assassin or mage)

Blu3buck (Buck) Zackary: Level 34 - Ranger/Priest—Light Elf male – dirty-blond hair, hazel eyes – 5’8” - goatee, IRL name Zackary Boyd Buchanan, Nice guy, fits in easily with everyone. If pushed around, he can snap. Play’s Priest/Ranger combo. Doesn't drink. Designated driver. Married with a wife that doesn't like him gaming too much while he's trying to make money from gaming and bitches about it. Marine, worked as crew chief on copper with Orion. Has hots for Ashley who he met at the local VA hospital.

Killtet Duchenson: Level 39 – Rogue/Ranger – Light Elf male - IRL name Daniel (nickname Danny) Cook, Murderhobo rogue. Nature Chaotic Neutral, Dual Blades, short Swords, steals everything in sight, getting the

party into trouble and making the party leader have to use diplomacy to get him and the party out of trouble. Army, cav scout, husband of Ashley. 6', brown hair, almond eyes.

Ashley Duchenson: Level 38 - Warrior/Priest – Light Elf female - IRL name Nicole Cook, wife of Killtet, Army Reserves, support for cav scout First Sergeant, Defensive - uses long sword and kite shield. 5'6", sandy blonde hair, blue eyes. Works hard to keep her husband out of trouble.
Matt Mellon: Level 36 - Barbarian – Light Elf male - uses dual hand-axes or two-handed great axe, tall and thin, buzz cut brown hair, blue eyes.
Marine.

Shelly Marie: Level 36 - Priest/Fire mage – Light Elf female - uses staff, short, light brown hair, hazel eyes, Marine (combat medic)

Marina Heart: Level 36 - Ranger/Priest – Light Elf female - bow and long sword/dagger, short, black hair, green eyes, Marine (ex helicopter pilot)

Allen Hiser: Level 36 – DPS Warrior – Light Elf male - David Hiserman, Walrus Mustache, 6'1", black hair, dark-brown eyes, that uses a two-handed sword and bow sometimes, Marine (ex helicopter gunner).

Daiki Musashi: Level 36 – Fire Mage / Priest – Light Elf male - IRL: Daiki Ono

Austin Montoya: Level 36 – DPS Warrior/Rogue – Light Elf male - long and short sword, dual wielding, announces attacks like Death Strike, IRL name Berry: Austin Mayberry Smart Ass extraordinaire that spouts a bunch of useless facts, kind of geeky. Saying 1: Hard to breathe when your throat is laying at your feet. Saying 2: You didn't need that arm anyways, you have another. Recently finished tour with the Navy and is now in college. Hates bullies and can have a sharp tongue. Also, good scrapper.

Santaz Krew: Level 36 – Frost Mage / Ranger – Light Elf male - IRL name Micah Sauer, active Navy on is the USS Ralph Johnson. I have blue eyes with green rings around my pupils and Rimrock, Arizona for the town and state.

Vector Fisher: Level 37 - Frost Mage / Warrior / Priest – Light Elf male - IRL name Keith Jennings. Still in the reserves. Spiked Mace and shield. Entered into the Army as active duty in Oct 2007, deployed to Iraq with the

1st Cav Jan '09 - Jan '10, my ETS was Oct 2014, and went straight into the reserves where I'm still a medic in the MP Company on the West Coast.

(Hobgoblin Scout) Forrest Gimp: Level 45 - Class: Ranger (focus on pets) wants to learn enchanting and weapon smithing, has long bow, dagger, and fiery long sword, and like Star loves pet combat but will fight to keep animals alive and safe. (Carries body of BMF double-barrel Hollysharp special with 50 round clip of bolts) Main pet: White Plain's Wolf Bishop with green eyes (my IRL white German Shepard) although I have a small pack of them and a pit/jack Russell mix, 5' 10" green eyes half/elf, Loner keeps to his pet stealth everywhere even in camp. Despises bullies and animal cruelty. Will do what it takes to save and protect those he cares about even to his own end. IRL name is: Tony McDonald. Scouting Hobgoblins. (Designed the BMF Double-Barrel Hollysharp Special) Also developed the Spear Fence. Pherala Centauride was traveling with them. Academy of Technomancy graduate.

(Hobgoblin Scout) Connor Mac: Level 47 - Warrior / Natural Druid / Hunter (Mix of Ranger and Druid abilities) – (carries tripod, hammer, stakes, and ammunition for extra-large double-barrel Hollysharp special), daggers (throwing and non-throwing), Shield and large bladed hand axe, - Connor in Gaelic means Concoibar, meaning hound lover...which is fitting as I have a large Celtic cross surrounded by the hounds of war (it would be cool to incorporate that as a summoning spell for support pets?) IRL name Dennis Rooney (married to Amber) Service History: I spent 20 years as an infantryman and deployed 6 times, 3 to Afghanistan and 3 to Iraq. Over the course of all deployments, I was in one IED strike and multiple IDF attacks as well as numerous direct fire engagements. On my last deployment I was a Platoon Sergeant responsible for 40 other individuals. Preferred gaming fighting style is a bastard sword and Shield with a backup axe for my shield hand. I prefer a predominantly warrior build with some ranger/assassin/ambush styles to open up my fights. In Game appearance: 6'4" 230lbs of muscle with close cropped hair and full beard. Preferably dressed in kilt and enchanted leather armor. Scouting Hobgoblins. Level 30 - Wraith Hounds (was from a pack of wild hounds) names: Ankou- God of death (longest dead and the pack leader of the group), Herne- God of the Hunt, Eammon- The hidden one, Torin- chieftain, Cormac- Legendary Irish king. (Removed Gallagher- Eager helper- because there are only five)

Pherala Centauride was traveling with them. Level 27 book 8.

(Meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes)

Tumms Darkbrew: Level 37 Light Elf (looks as if someone were trying to make a Light Elf look like a Dwarf), Priest- staff wielder, 5'2", brown beard, wavy short brown hair, green eyes, prefers close combat over ranged when forced to fight, but would rather be planning and coordinating logistics. I'm flexible on the class, but prefer support classes. Learning to enchant equipment. Expert logistician and easy-going guy, gets along with pretty much everyone. In game, bald with a long red beard. IRL name: Steve Gulick, Navy Supply Officer. Married to a girl from Philippines that he met while stationed in the Pacific. Plays mostly early morning and when he can sneak some time in.

Andy Murphy:

Zeppy's Heroes (subdivision of Devil Dogs-20 in all) (mostly dress the same – brown leathers over chain mail, brown cloaks)

(Meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes) Grody Gotti: level 38, Rogue, Half-Troll (Light Elf-Troll), female (extremely thick and muscular, light-gray skin, bald head, saggy breasts and large belly, ugly face, large hooked nose, ape-like arms, red eyes) 6'7", uses hand axes, IRL name John Weaver, male, 22 years Military Police, 26 years retired Police.

(Meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes) Zeppy Blau: level 38, Ranger Assassin, Light Elf (older looking-short cropped brown-hair), no beard, gray eyes, 6'3", longsword and dagger or short bow, great at taking down castles IRL: Mark Zeppy, retired military police/and cop, slight narcissistic

(Meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes) Lylar Sierra: level 38 Priest / Ranger, male Light Elf, short cropped blonde hair, blue eyes, 6'1", chainmail, shield, spiked mace, IRL name: Ron S -. Healer type player. Retired cop (he actually had to go out on a medical after he got hit by a drunk driver and it broke his back)

(Meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes) Sun Beam (Sunny): level 38 Essence Shaman, vine staff that ends in flower, blonde long hair, 5'8", light blue eyes, IRL name: Vicki S (enter a happy hippy name), she

always changed it. Ron's wife. Healer usually Druid type with CC too. She is a cop too.

(meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes) Warduke
Notintheface: level 38 DPS Tank, 5'11", brown hair, brown eyes, built like a brick house, IRL name: Rick H -.. tank or high dps. Current cop, military vet Air Force (friends give him shit for being so girthy)

(Meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes) Pheyed Toblack:
level 38 Rogue/Ranger, 5'8", black hair, blue eyes, scruffy stubble. IRL Name: Darren B. Cop and military vet (Army)

(Meets up in Delonshire with Jodi and Zeppy's Heroes) ChopU Ginsu: level 38 Monk DPS Warrior, 6'5", black hair, brown eyes, clean shaven IRL name: Don M. like monk types or duel wield tanks. Cop

The Revenants:

Jodi Tempest: level 37, Ranger/Priest, Light Elf female, 5'9", honey-brown mid-length hair, green eyes, and a slim compact figure. Thomas IRL sister. At his request, I invited her into the guild since she didn't meet the DD requirements. Dark brown, straight-cut hair just below the shoulders, hazel eyes, 5'6". Skilled in Exotic Animal Husbandry and Beast Taming skill, spears and shield, dual daggers (Legolas style), and a bow. Ranger/Priest, Light Elf. 38 Charisma. Has a snow-white Blink Lynx for a pet named Fiona with golden eyes (also necklace that causes freeze bonus to attacks), secondary combat pet named Blasto – an Elite Pyro Spitter (brown with darker streaks down its back, black nose, and golden eyes.) Married to John. Combat Mount is an Elite Battering Ram called Basher.

The Valkyrie Guild (39 players in all/talked about this in Elusive Prey)
Demonslayerz Valkyrie: Level 41 - Light Elf Warrior – male – second group leader & boyfriend of Lorelai.

Jorgen Valkyrie: Level 41 Light Elf Warrior – male –.

Ultra Valkyrie: Level 41 - Light Elf Warrior – male -

Julianna Valkyrie: Level 41 - Light Elf Frost Mage – female

Kyarina Valkyrie: Level 42 - Light Elf Priest – female - shoulder-length,

dirty-blonde hair, hazel eyes. PVP expert. Husband is Vardrid. Met at Delonshire Mine entrance that speaks up against Snufu for our group. Wife of Vardrid. Says hot diggity dog damn.

Lorelai Valkyrie: Level 42 - Light Elf Priest – female - Demonslayerz girlfriend

Lylirra Valkyrie: Level 41 - Light Elf Frost Mage – female, Jorgen’s girlfriend.

Torlandro Valkyrie: Level 41 - Light Elf Fire Mage – male

Vardrid Valkyrie: Level 41 - Light Elf Warrior, Guild Leader – male - Delonshire Mine entrance that speaks up for Startum and friends against Snufu for our group. Married to Kyarina.

Laya ShadowStalker: Level 42 – Light Elf Rogue

Lady Death: Level 42 – Light Elf Rogue

The Syndicate Guild – Pk’er Guild.

Blitzkill Syndicate: Light Elf Warrior - male

Cheezknife Syndicate: Light Elf Rogue – male

Desolation Syndicate: Light Elf Rogue – male

Eowan Syndicate: Light Elf Rogue – female

Genele Syndicate: Light Elf Defensive Warrior, Guild Leader – male – IRL name Kintaii

Glaildor Syndicate: Light Elf Warrior – male

Lamor Syndicate: Light Elf Frost Mage – male

Mebrin Syndicate: Light Elf Priest – male (Real name Joe/Genele’s brother)

Monzster Syndicate: Light Elf Warrior - male

Onepunch Syndicate: Light Elf Frost Mage - female

Lamaraldor Syndicate: Light Elf Fire Mage – male

Gougeous Syndicate: Light Elf Priest – female

PunkuGood Syndicate: Light Elf Rogue – male

Shankolots Syndicate: Light Elf Rogue – male

Snufu Sevenfive: Light Elf Warrior – male

Imkewl Yusuk: Human Rogue – male – Guild Officer on the Human side of the map - 28

The House of Kayden NPCs

Aidan Calanon: Level 50 – Half-Elf Blacksmith – male - blonde long braided hair, brown eyes. One of the half-elf’s saved in the mountain on the way to BrokenFang Hold. 6’,5”, with the sides of his head shaved with his hair in a thick braid down his back.

Alanah Valadhiel (Companion/Brat Pack): Level 20 – Half-Elf Priest – female child - had her arm chopped off during the Goblin Raid. Light-brown, long hair, comely, hazel eyes and thin as a rail. Metal magic arm, Kopy-Katze, gray Akito (green eyes).

(DOA)Aleia Talathiel: Level 44 – Half-Elf Necromancer – female - Chiara’s mother died in the BrokenFang and couldn’t be saved.

*Ara Loratris: Level 52 – Half-Elf Swordswoman Assault Leader – female - hard as nails, short blonde bombshell, green eyes, thick bones. Bronze breast plate, grieves, and gauntlets, reinforced with heavy brown leather and a forest-green cloak. Iron-Reinforced Bronze Shield and wicked looking savage blade with a brace of four throwing axes on her hip.

Athtar Jodan: Level 46 – Half-Elf Mason – male - short brown hair, muscular, short, and stout, brown eyes, boisterous personality.

Ava Wynhana: Level 7 – Half-Elf Priest – female child

Ayda Keywarin: Level 55 – Half-Elf Bard – female - beautiful, olive skin, dark brown hair, smoky gray eyes, smart and smooth operator, fit, shapely body, plays lute (long sleeve peasant blouse, tight push-up leather vest, leather pants – uses a whip and dual daggers.

Bevin Thalion: Level 51 - Old Half-Elf Hunter – male

*Bialaer Holaynore: Level 52 – Half-Elf – Ranger Assault Leader – male -

long brown hair, Viking braid on one side of head, unkempt medium length beard, almond eyes, serious personality, thin like a whip. (In charge of construction on Delonshire side of Fang Pass. Working with Elandorr Naronas the rogue assault leader.)

Brenna Talathiel (Companion): Level 55 – Half-Elf Hunter – female - archer / huntress, sandy-blonde hair, sturdy build, short, olive-brown skin, almond brown eyes. Combat Pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolf named Crag

Chiara Ithilwen (Lady Chiara): Level 60 – Assistant Leader of BrokenFang Hold – old female - 80+ old that helps Ilana as an assistant. Now has taken lead position as Startum's right hand woman in BrokenFang Hold.

Dalyor Gwirithiel: Level 46 – Half-Elf Warrior – male

Dan Hawkes: level 50 - Bounty Hunter - (Dan the Hu-man, if I can't get your target than no one can.) - bow, short sword, hand axe, dagger, shield, two-handed sword. Chainmail armor over thick wool padding. Easy going attitude that's comes off as overtly friendly and somewhat nerdy.

Darunia Xyrlen: Level 49 – Half-Elf Carpenter – female

Drannor Qinwenys: Level 50 – Half-Elf Miner – male - brothers, large stout man, boisterous, think of Russian, short hair, brown, brown eyes. Twin brother's name is Filarion Qinwenys.

*Elandorr Naronas: Level 51 – Half-Elf Rogue Assault Leader – male - smooth operator, dark black hair, pony tail, dusty brown eyes, tanned skin, black leathers. (Working with Bialaer Holaynora on the new fortifications on the Delonshire side of Fang Pass.) Met up with Jodi, Tumms, and Zeppy's Heroes in Delonshire to escort them to BrokenFang Hold.

Elidyr Leodove: Level 9 – Half-Elf Priest – male child - young child rescued from BrokenFang Hold – asked to watch out for boss.

Elyskaen Vafir: Level 48 – Half-Elf Lead Alchemist – female – came in batch of NPCs from book 4.

Eriladar Caladwen: Level 50 – Half-Elf Warrior – male

Filarion Qinwenys: Level 50 – Half-Elf Miner – male - brothers, large stout

man, boisterous, think of Russian, short hair, brown, brown eyes. Twin brother's name is Drannor Qinwenys.

Galen Nestariel: Level 49 – Half-Elf Enchanting / Medic Fire Mage – female – young healer without magic.

Galvin Bruic: level 50 - Guardian Ranger - Badger Kin - male - Dark Gray, black high-lights, golden eyes - shield, sword, and long bow. Chainmail mixed with leather armor, wears kilt.

'Hilron Wynstina: Level 50 – Half-Elf Bard (Balladeer) (book 11) – male – blond long-hair, chiseled face, 6',4", plays a lute, drums, and flute. Armed with long sword, dagger, and bow.

Jaena Sidhiel: Level 48 – Half-Elf Carpenter – female

Jinlura Dorhorn: level 50 - Shadow Stalker - Half-Elf - female - light-brown hair, green eyes - lean - tall - two short swords and blow - leather armor mixed with chainmail.

Katalina Iellwen: Level 51 – Herbalist – old female - herbalist watching after the children.

Keela Moréfindiel (Companion): Level 54 – Half-Elf Dark Mage – female - female elf, milky-white porcelain skin, dark mage, black long hair, gray eyes. Combat Pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolf named Maul. Had a one-night stand with ex-skirmisher Legar.

Kei Taro: level 50 - Deadshot Archer - Kitsune Kin - female - Dark Red fur with black highlights - almond eyes, bushy tail - leather armor with black silk robe underneath - dual long daggers, bow, with multiple throwing knives.

Klaern Maerwen: Level 51 – Half-Elf Sergeant Warrior – old male

Laeroth Vircan: Level 50 – Half-Elf Blacksmith – male

Liluth Gilmys: Level 7 – Half-Elf Priest – female child

Lyndis Crathya: Level 51 – Half-Elf Swordswoman - Sub-Leader – female – long-blond hair in a ponytail, gray eyes, tall and muscular, statuesque, DPS Tank, two short swords and one two-handed sword on back.

Mariona Furtaeln: Level 43 – Half-Elf Head Cook – female - cook at refugee camp and now BrokenFang Hold.

Meira Liaxidor: Level 51 – Half-Elf Blacksmith – female - tall, long brown hair, muscular, shapely, brown eyes, serious, quiet, creative.

*Nalaea Heleyra: Level 52 – Half-Elf Priest Assault Leader – female - blonde, long hair, white skin, blue eyes, large breasts, innocent/friendly.

Norlar Urihorn: level 50 - Beast Tamer - Half-Elf - male - blonde hair - brown eyes - muscular build - normal height - easy attitude with animals and stern with humanoids - has two Dire Frost Wolves (Claw -m- & Fang - f-) as Combat Pets - both have black coats with silver highlights.

Nym Valhice: Level 46 – Half-Elf Carpenter – male

*Nycorel Liawynn: Level 50 – Half-Elf Heavy Lancer (Book 11) – male – black short-cropped hair, brown eyes, short beard, hooked-pike, lance, long sword, and dagger.

Ordan Gauss: level 50 - Predatorial Hunter - Wolf-Kin - male - Black-fur, brown eyes - scruffy and large - mountain man look - wears heavy leather armor, bow and dual hand axes.

Pharom Xyrroris: Level 47 – Half-Elf Mason – male

Rayne Nessima (Companion): Level 55 – Half-Elf Swordswoman – female - protected children during Goblin Raid. Green eyes, long brown hair, dusty freckles, long-thin face, exotic, white skin, good with sword, Ilana Daeralds is her grandmother (from mother's side) Combat Pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolf Reaver.

*Saphielle Carzeiros: Level 52 – Half-Elf Fire Mage Assault Leader – female - long, black hair, coal black eyes, dark skin, fiery personality, emotional, slim small chest.

Rodinya Naroleen – Level 45 – Half-Elf Enchanter – female – came with 1st group

Ryu Shachu: level 50 - Arcane Ranger - Grimal Kin - male - Dark Gray coat - right ear is partly clipped from fight - scar down right eye - hard looking - blue eyes - sleek and toned muscled body

Taiah Nithiel: Level 47 – Half-Elf Leather worker – female - leather worker

Talia Beriadhwen: Level 43 – Half-Elf Construction – female - husband was skilled at construction, she helped him a lot with her work and learned the trade. Long brown braided hair, hazel eyes and built like a brick shithouse.

Terdian Sharidenum: Level 47 – Half-Elf Mason – male - silver long hair (braided on each side at the temples), blue eyes. One of the half-elf's saved in the mountain on the way to BrokenFang Hold. 6'2" big guy.

Theric Farestrider: Level 56 – Half-Elf Swordsman, Leader of Combat NPCs – male - mid-aged, dark brown hair, brilliant green eyes, whipcord thin. Also, in-charge of building defenses on the Plain of Atoll's side of Fang Pass.

Xanth Farsight – Level 44 – Half-Elf Enchanter – male – part of 1st group

Ulia Dathielen (Companion): Level 55 – Half-Elf Swordswoman – female - lean, hard face, chestnut short-cropped hair, piercing blue eyes. Ran into on ridge towards BrokenFang Hold, took spear in back. Picked up a combat pet: Elite Molten Flow Striders named Blaze. Had a one-night stand with the ex-skirmisher Gregory.

Valith Celaraldor (Companion): Level 51 – Sea-Elf Ex-Red Coral Knight Commander – male - dark-blue skin, shock of white Yu-Gi-Oh! Hair style, silver eyes, beardless, haughty gray eyes, and high cheekbones.

Vilshor Daeven: Level 41 – Half-Elf Assistant Alchemist – male – came in book 4 batch of NPCs.

*Vulmon Bryroris: Level 52 – Half-Elf Frost Mage Assault Leader – male - Precise man, short white hair, piercing blue eyes, light skin, blue-white robes.

Ex-Humanoid Prisoners

Cleftuf Fnirbier: Level 42 – Gnomeling Thief - male

Crux Blackaxe: Level 43 – Human Barbarian - male

Doom Hawk: Level 40 – Gnomeling/Dark-Elf Arcane Mage - male

Gray Jingo: Level 46 - Human Ranger – male

Hogar Orepike: Level 42 – Dwarven Warrior - male

Ex-Half-Orc Prisoners

Helgath (Soulmate/Companion): Level 35 – Slave Water Shaman – Half-Orc (Orc-Gnome-Goblin mix) - female - gave allegiance during Hall of Storm rescue. (When she met Star in book 4, she had stringy black hair, pointy teeth, yellow cat-eyes, black clawed fingers and toes, thin and sickly, has a greenish-gray skin tone with an odd, child-like voice / In book 6, she fills out due to Emergency Hot Fix attribute boost, fills out with muscle, skin becomes a healthy green and her hair turns Asian-like straight black, voice turns mezzo-soprano) She is soulbound from a rune on the chest that she shares with Startum Ironwolf.

Mugorlorth (Mügor or Mug) (Companion/Brat Pack): Level 27 – Slave Warrior – Half-Orc-Dwarf – male – warrior, shaved head, scarred face, yellow cat-eyes, gray skin. Kopy-Katze, gray Natsu (green eyes).

Gnomeling of the Wind Dancer

‘Mother Mylbim’ Lightouch: Level 45 – Cook – Gnomeling-Dwarf – female - Dark hair, short cut, brown eyes. Motherly with a sharp tongue. Wields a meat cleaver. 4 ½ foot tall.

Grahorn Lightouch: Level 48 – Trade Master / Captain – Gnomeling-Dwarf – male - head of family, serious, older, bald headed, white Van Dyke beard, green goggles, blue eyes (not being worn when met on boat as prisoner). A Warrior who fights with a wide-blade short sword and shield with hand axe hanging on waist. 5 foot tall

Ianfalcon Shortankard: Level 45 – Pilot – Gnomeling-Human - male - likes to run around shirtless with balloon leather pants, bald headed except for a long braid at the back of his head and a soul-patch goatee, uses a full-sized saber, piercing blue eyes. 5 foot tall

I Shortankard (Jan): Level 46 – Trader – Gnomeling-Dwarf - female - Mother of Norda who was slaughtered along with her husband during takeover. Uses hand-axe, plays violin. Long brown hair, hazel eyes. 4 ½ foot tall.

Neristhana Lightouch (Neri) (Startum’s companion – saved from

Morticians): Level 53 – Trader – Gnomeling-Dwarf - female - daughter of Grahorn (mother was a Shortankard), dark brown eyes, shoulder-length brown hair, almond brown eyes, black headband with runes, uses an axe, long dagger-like rapier, and crossbow. 4 ½ foot tall. Summoned Flying Squirrel - Wizzlebat (male/light blue with red stripes) Combat Pet: Elite Large Rock Wolves named Grim – gray in color. Had a one-night stand with the ex-skirmisher Hartley.

Prustine Hollysharp: Level 38 – Weapons Smith/Runemaster – Gnomeling-Dwarf – graduate of the Academy of Technomancy - cousin of Zinn. Pink hair in bushy pigtails, sky-blue eyes. 3 feet, 10 inches tall. More Gnome than dwarf. Father is Viscount Fendano Hollysharp the fourth - Gnome, GMT (Golem Magic-Tech) Assault Leader of the Eastern Region’s Imperial Forces), wife was a Dwarf, has lands and a mansion outside of Haldale (big farming and military city.)

Zinnaemita Lighttouch (Startum’s companion/Brat Pack): Level 30 – Trader Bard – Gnomeling-Light Elf - female - long honey-blond hair, pale blue eyes. Plays a Djembe hand drum or lute. Uses two long daggers, and stands 4 ½ foot tall. (Was used as a sex slave by Hyalag the Barbarian Leader of the Sword Flayers) Dressed in thigh-high, brown, open (Gnomeling) boots, loose baby doll dress made from soft gray leather with a low-cut cleavage that came down to the middle of her thighs, white leather glove-like sleeves wrapped around her middle fingers with a tie and came to a stop above her elbows where they strapped in place, and a gray half-cloak that hung from her shoulders. Soprano voice. Kopy-Katze, calico Nuri (gold eyes), Kopy-Katze, Kopy-Katze, silver/blue Miku (brown eyes).

Sub-Captain of Wind Dancer

Lornila Windcoat (Rescued from the Hall of Storms): Level 44 – Trade Master – Gnomeling-Human – female –Dark-brown hair down to her mid back, dark-brown eyes, slender, v-cut long sleeve blouse, undercut leather corset vest with long tails that go to the ground and slips over her shoulders like a leather trench coat, linen pants, and knee length leather boots, with a wide sword belt and short saber on hip, large bastard sword strapped to back. 5 feet tall.

Slyrba Woldhand (Rescued from the Hall of Storms): Level 43 – Pilot – Gnomeling Rogue – female - black shoulder length hair, black eyes, black

leather pants, black gloves and black leather boots, under-bust corset vest with v-cut long-sleeved blouse armed with a sabre and long dagger on her belt. 4 feet tall.

Captain of Orc Command Ship

Nirim Nighthand (Rescued from the Hall of Storms): Level 45 – Trade Master – Gnomeling-Light Elf – female - leather black armor, shield on her back and war axe at her waist, blonde long hair in tight dreads. Green leather pants and brown under-bust corset vest, linen open top that hugs the breasts off the shoulder with leather armored arms and black knee-high boots. 5 feet tall. Forced to dock first in Darom due to Princess's demands.

Captain of The Doon

Femdi Deepwater (Rescued from the Hall of Storms): Level 40 - Trade Master – Gnomeling-Human – female - reddish-brown hair in a wavy bob, green eyes, brown gloves and bandana, open white short-sleeved shirt, brown leather pants and knee-high boots. Armed with a long Saber and dagger. 5 feet tall. Sent to sell ships for mana accumulation crystals.

Ex-Beastkin Prisoners

Honey Mistborne (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 48 Silver Tipped Badgerkin Water Shaman – female - silver coat with black highlights, 5'10" with blue eyes

Lara Moonshadow (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 40 Grimalkin Air Shaman (cat kin) – female – Dark blue (black) Panther, 6'2" with green eyes. From the Clan of Grim.

Zane Silverfang (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 45 Wolfkin DPS Warrior – male - black-gray fur, mane like silver hair around his head and down his back, 6'7" with brown eyes. Is given Marine Sub Leader position by Captain Windcoat.

Ex-Dwarven Prisoners (130 dwarves 1/3rd of them are females)

Bragroud Caskstone (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 47 Artillery Captain – older male - shaved head except for scruff on top, immense beard, stern vassalage and hard brown eyes, two-handed axe.

Norrid Silvercoat (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 34 Bard – male - short brown bushy beard, brown eyes, jolly smart ass, carries a lute, dagger, and hand axe.

Sammaetrud Forgechest (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 46 Artillery

Warrior - female – red long hair, blue eyes, white freckled face, two-handed hammer.

Ex-Iron Falcon Mercenary Prisoners (77 members)

(DOA) Milo Hawkin (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 45 Swordsman – human male - no non-sense dark haired man with graying temples from a hard life – Veteran of the Royal Army and the Orc Wars – 6’1” slim build, hard blue eyes, weathered face late twenties. Ended up being a corrupted by a Dil-Hilth.

(DOA) Edwin Ryder: Level 40 Swordsman – Human male – who’s friend I raised as a zombie to eat him if he didn’t tell me what I wanted to know.

(DOA) Orson Fletcher: Level 40 Swordsman – Human Male – man I killed to raise as a zombie to eat his friend so that he’d tell me what I wanted to know.

Ex-Dark Elves Prisoners

Nivirth Dherler (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 48 Shadow Scout Captain – male - green eyes, black skin, slim muscular build, long black hair, hairless face.

Zocuth Eevro (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 47 Shadow Scout – Sub-Leader – male – blue eyes, black skin, thin muscular build, short black hair, hairless face. (Working with Startum)

Gykac Ozisin (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 47 Shadow Scout – Team-Leader – male – brown eyes, light black skin, muscular build, mop of black hair, hairless face. (Working with Startum)

Lerissi Dheni (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 47 Shadow Scout – Team-Leader – male – hazel eyes, midnight black skin, muscular build, long black dreads, hairless face.

Ex-Light Elf Prisoners

Cyran Herneiros (Rescued from the Sea Orcs): Level 50 Strike Marine Commander – male – lank, long blonde hair, scars across body, haunted look, green eyes, no facial hair, 6’2”, short-sword, axe and shield.

Ex-Human Prisoners

Princess Reeva Isolde (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Light Mage, next in line for throne – female - looks like Firiona Vie from the old EverQuest covers but is human instead of Elven, pale-white skin, long blonde hair,

blue eyes and tall 6'2" physique.

Sir Alderman Merrill (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 46 Guardian Knight, Princess' personal guard - male

Sir Briicot Curteis (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 46 Guardian Knight, Princess' personal guard - male

Sir Jace Hemmet (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 49 Guardian Knight, Leader of Princess' personal guard – male - hard dark-brown eyes (eyes look black), silver close cropped hair and silver beard, tall powerful looking man of 6'3" with tanned skin.

Sir Judd Beroldus (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 46 Guardian Knight, Princess' personal guard - male

Sir Macey Degarre (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 46 Guardian Knight, Princess' personal guard – male - muscular looking man, brown long hair in a ponytail, long sideburns, goatee, gray eyes and stands 6'2".

Sir Terrance Anon (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 46 Guardian Knight Squad Leader – male – muscular looking, whip thin, black long hair with a rough-cut that hangs down to the shoulders, brown eyes, full-beard, dark skin and stands 6'1".

Royal Army (ex-prisoner Sea Elves)

Morgan Dell (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Swordsman General of the Kayden Troopers; male, light skin, dark brown hair, green eyes, 6'2", trimmed full beard, muscular, serious. Was previously General Dell of the Royal Forces of the Kingdom of Kader, who'd been demoted to a Team-Leader when I met him in the Sea Orc rescue. Dark-brown flying squirrel named, Blink. Old unit was Royal Voltigeurs. Daughter - Lexi Dell, tortured and mentally mind-controlled by the Dil-Hilth of Palnisdale.

**Lexi Dell – Arcane mage – green-eyes, light brown hair, pale skin, nineteen,

Ollie Burns (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Swordsman Sub-Leader; male, olive skin, short black hair, brown eyes, whip thin, 6'1", no beard but five o'clock shadow. Sent to secure the northern-central graveyard in Darom.

Liam Miller (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Swordsman Sub-leader; male, short blonde hair, blue eyes, goatee, average build, 6'1". Sent to secure the southeastern graveyard in Darom.

Logan West (Rescued from Sea Orcs) – Dragoon Sub-Leader One (Logan's Riders): Level 50 Swordsman Sub-Leader; male, long blonde hair in a ponytail, brown eyes, clean shaven, large man that's 6'4". Sent to secure the southwestern graveyard in Darom and falls during the attack. Also, leads Dragoon wing for Darom assault in book 10.

Trent Carnell (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, hazel eyes, dark tanned skin, muscular build, close-cropped black hair, trimmed goatee, 6'2". (Working with Thomas)

Nuri Haag (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, brown shaggy hair, brown eyes, olive skin, muscular build, clean shaven, 6'3". (Working with Thomas) Used in book 10's Darom fight to hold the neck of the street at the end.

Lyle Runeschoff (Rescued from Sea Orcs) – Dragoon Sub-Leader (Runeschoff's Slayers): Level 50 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, red long hair in cornrows, blue eyes, white skin, immense muscular build, long braided beard, 6'5". (Working with Sarka) Red Flying Squirrel. Also, leads Dragoon wing for Darom assault in book 10.

Chris Fowle (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, blonde shaggy hair, green eyes, tanned skin, muscular build, clean shaven, 6'5". (Working with Phoenix)

Haakon Harper (Rescued from Sea Orcs): Level 50 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, shaved head, brown eyes, tanned skin, lean build, clean shaven, 6'1". (Working to collect the dead)

Darom Civilians

Elisa Cox (Rescued from the arena and The Dread Pack) (Dating Lyle Runeschoff): Level 18 Fighter (Swordsman in training) blonde shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail, blue eyes, slim muscular body, olive skin, 5'10". Wears adventurer's leathers.

Sheila Carnell (Rescued from the arena and The Dread Pack) (Wife of Trent Carnell): Level 24 Journeywoman Armorer, two kids (Lillian 8-year-old &

Greg 6 years old) brown, natural-curly shoulder-length hair, green eyes, curvy body, white skin, 5'6". Wears dresses.

James Fortner or 'Old Man Fortner' Darom City Elder (Companion): Level 44 – Darom City Elder – commoner – runs the market square and is a skilled trader, gray hair, stooped back, pale-blue eyes, white long beard, thin-grisly physique, wrinkled deep-tanned skin, 5'11". A veteran of the Royal Army and born on a farm.

Global Brutality PK'er Guild (553 Guild members total)

Keychain Alternity: Level 24 – Light Elf Warrior – male

Noskulls Accost: Level 25 – Light Elf Rogue – male

Dwankbone Swaggir: Level 26 – Light Elf Rogue – male – Guild Officer in Delonshire area.

Dante Lynne: Guild Leader - Level 40 – Dark Elf/DPS Warrior – male – high-fade quiff-cut brown hair, clean-shaven, martial art build, face set in a permanent sneer, amber eyes, olive skin, 5'11". Uses a two-handed sword.

Nykii Flores: Guild Officer – Level 32 – Dark Elf/Ranger – female - short-spiky brown hair, tattooed face, light-brown skin, voluptuous build, green eyes, 5'7". Angry at being forced to watch the Uten Syn Keep and prisoners.

Tammy Sully: Level 29 – Priest – female – shoulder-length brown dreads, green eyes, tone athletic build, dark-black skin, 5'4".

Islas Tortuga: Level 28 – Dark Elf/Rogue – male – buzz-cut brown hair, clean shaven, light-brown skin, slim-build, 5'6". (Feels sorry once he realizes they a group of blind players and talks to Angie who uses him for information.”

Tomeo Narayan: Level 28 – Dark Elf/Rogue – male – stringy shoulder-length brown hair, brown anchor beard, light-brown skin, dusty-brown eyes, weight-lifters build, 5'8".

Nathan Cohen: Level 29 – Dark Elf/Ranger – male – mane of long-black hair, black chin-strap beard, dark-black skin, weight-lifters build, 6'2"

Sarunas Dof: Level 26 – Dark Elf/Arcane Mage – male – short-cornrow

black hair, black chin-strip, light brown skin, brown eyes, lanky-build, 6'2". (IRL is 5'7" and is clumsy due to difference of in-game height)

Dalton Sevens: Level 31 – Dark Elf/DPS Warrior – male – long, braided black hair, clean shaved, cold blue eyes, hard faced, muscle bound, wannabe Conan, 6'4". Wields long, two-handed axe as primary weapon. Leads the night shift.

Lucky Tess: Level 28 – Dark Elf/Ranger – male – short black hair, dark almond eyes, clean shaven, martial-artist build, 6'1".

Lazo Jenkins: Level 29 – Dark Elf/DPS Warrior – male – bald head, beady dark-brown eyes, lamp-chop beard, big muscular build, two-handed maul.

City of Lodenburg

Aalsala Perlar: Lady of the city

Jack Wilson: Gate Guard Leader, level 40 Duelist,

Terry Brawn: Squad-Leader of the Gate Guard, level 38 Expert-At-Arms, female

Gina Hackly: Squad-Leader for Laurence Pulver.

Laurence Pulver: Team-Leader of local guard station outside of the Thirsty Troll Inn that comes to Startum's aid, male.

Janice Thorne: level 40, female, Bartender/owner of the Thirsty Troll inn, blue eyes, mid-back length brown hair,

Nauncy Layman: level 20, female, Barmaid,

Russian Guild (Krasnyy Volki) (72 members (5 of those members are on Light Elf side) (Wolves are Great Saber-Fang Wolf 67 wolves)

****Demyan Volk:** Level 38 – Human Ranger/Priest – male Dmitry – Guild Leader - dual short swords and long bow, short brown hair, 6-foot normal build, green eyes, (27) going for an IT security. Grew up together in St. Petersburg with Sasha, served in Red Army and later frequently visit your sister who moved to USA, Florida (lives in Orlando on the west coast) because of a job offer she took programming.) Combat Pet wolf is named Fenrir.

Anna Pantera: Level 37 – Light Elf Priest/Fire Mage – female – Ekateria’s IRL work friend - (IRL Anna Levieva)

Ekaterina Volk: Level 37 – Light Elf Rogue/Frost Mage – female - dagger/short-sword, brown skin-tight leathers, sister has auburn hair, usually dual braids, light brown freckles dusting cheeks, blue eyes, Russian thin body, tight b-cup, 29 years old, a little reserved. (Think of Anna from Frozen) Sasha tries to hang out with your older sister because he likes her, but is shy. She's waiting for him to ask her out, but difficult due to the distance.

Katya Volk: Level 38 – Light Elf Priest/Fire Mage – female – Demyan’s IRL girlfriend - plays, blonde hair, long braided ponytail, blue eyes, model thin, c-cup, a bit of a party girl.

Sasha Nesti: Level 38 – Light Elf Warrior/Priest – male – Demyan’s best friend IRL - bow/2-handed sword or dual daggers - will be your typical blonde tank of a man, blonde short-hair, blue eyes, ex-military, knee injury IRL (26yrs) going for a business/accounting degree.

Zheleznyy Chelovek: Level 37 – Light Elf - Warrior Priest - (IRL Oleg Mashkov) – shield and war axe black shoulder-length hair and hazel eyes, 6 foot and wide.

Vlad Kuvalda: Level 37 – Light Elf Ranger/Priest – male

°Boris Novbade: Level 37 – Dark Elf / Gnome – male – Assassin / Ranger – short older man, with a thick body, short hair, dark-brown eyes (could almost be called fat), uses massive two-handed war hammer and carries two mining picks on his hips for weapons. Officer in charge of gathering and crafting. Short bow on his back.

°Natasha Talefa: Level 37 – Dark Elf – female – Dark Mage / Ranger (normal) tall and thin, middle age but beautiful, black hair, green eyes, dual daggers with a long bow strapped to her back. In charge of espionage.

Taras Smirnov

Aleksei Kuznetsov

Sergei Volk

Andrei Popov

°Ivan Makarov: Level 37 – Dark Elf / Dwarf – male - Ranger / Warrior – large man, shaved head, long-blond side burns, and beard, blue eyes, young and good looking, two-handed sword, long sword, and shield and carries a mechanical crossbow. Officer in charge of the guilds' tanks.

Aleksandr Vasiliev

Izvestia Morozova

°Mikhail Ivanov: Level 38 – Dark Elf / Human – male - Ranger / Priest – white short-cropped hair, older man, clean shaven, gray eyes, uses long sword and dagger along with long bow. Officer of the guild.

Anna Mikhailova: Level 37 - female, Ranger / Fire Mage

Yelena Volk: Level 37 - female Ranger / Fire Mage

°Olga Federova: Level 38 – Dark Elf / Human – female – Ranger / Assassin – silver braided hair, dark skin, purple eyes, dual daggers. Officer in charge of stealth operations for the guild.

Tatyana Sokolova: female

Roza Smirnov: female

Kira Petrova: female

Agniya Volk: female

Varvara Morozova: female

Pwnguin PKer Guild

Alissa Comtumacious: Level 22 – Light Elf Fire Mage – female

Demon Pokemaster: Level 22 – Light Elf Rogue – male

Hadow Stabulots: Level 22 – Light Rogue – male

Rikopin Smash: Level 21 – Light Elf Warrior – male

Sourgamin Pikachu: Level 23 – Light Elf Rogue – Guild Leader - female

Staghollow Village of Myathlune

Ayla Wranydark: Filario's young daughter

Elanil Wranydark: Old farmer's wife killed by players – Mayor's daughter.

Filario Wranydark: Old farmer's son

Galather Krismenor: Mayor of Staghollow

Paeris Wranydark: Filario's young son

Thalanil Wranydark: Old farmer

Guard Patrol - City of Myathlune

Arun Yllafaren: Level 20 – Light Elf Private Swordsman – male

Aymon Miamær: Level 20 – Light Elf Private Swordsman – male

Darthoridan Cailamin: Level 25 – Light Elf Sub-Leader of Myathlune Patrol – male

Khatar Aehorn: Level 20 – Light Elf Private Swordsman – male

Mihangyl Heledi: Level 23 – Light Elf Sergeant Swordsman – male

Pelleas Fawraek: Level 20 – Light Elf Private Swordsman – male

Tannatar Keyra: Level 20 – Light Elf Private Swordsman – male

Toross Oritris: Level 20 – Light Elf Private Swordsman – male

City of Myathlune

Corpse Reavers Gang

Mortician Grungus: Level 40 – Elite Half-Orc – male

Mortician Assistant Gargatum: Level 38 – Elite Half-Orc – male

Mortician Assistant Gnormus: Level 38 – Elite Half-Orc – male

Simimar Virhice: Level 20 - Thug 1 – male

Gorred Dorven: Level 20 - Thug 2 – male

Sword Flayers Pirates

Beltalm Milltall: Level 34 – Human Rogue - male

Gurlynn Swordsteal: Level 35 – Human Fighter - female

Hyalag Lluddgalf: Level 40 – Half-Orc Barbarian Warrior – Leader – male

Marstine Moonshadow: Level 38 – Dark Elf-Human – Arcane Mage - female

Olatumal Warstout: Level 36 – Human Thug – male

Sekolahian Empire

Ghozuhs Riptide: Level 45 - High Priest

Priests (6x): Level 42

Grindylow

Warriors: Level 15 – tentacle goblins with armor and weapons

Meer-Lizards

Elite Shard Riders: Level 30 – two and four arm variants – males

Sea Elves

Princess Enania Naeris: Level 50 – Frost Mage / Air Shaman – Seal Elf female - light-blue skin, white hair piled on top of head in a complex Romanesque style, silver eyes.

Queen Amlaruil Naeris: Level? – Queen – died during Meer-Lizard assault

Red Coral Knights: Level 40

Tolith Waesfina: Level 43 – Red Coral Knight Sub-Commander – female

Oránn Énméarrul: Level 33 – Sea Elf Master Builder – short and spiky sea weed green hair, dark blue skin, green eyes, very thin and short for a Sea Elf, 5’3”. Water / Earth Shaman that can also work with stone.

Sea Elf Prisoners

Sea Orc Prisoners

Igtark Zugdar: Level 45 – Elite War Leader - male

Lurog Bloodfang: Level 40 Elite Orc Warrior/ Second in command - male

Elite Orc Warriors: Level 40 on average

Human Realm

Lekroth Isolde: Level 30 - Priest of Light, Human Prince – male – shoulder-length blond hair, pale blue eyes, smooth shaven, soft features, 6’1”, looks like a rich pretty boy.

Tervan Isolde: Level 100 - Human King – male

Great(8x) Grandfather King Harald Isolde: Created the Isolde Line.

Traveled the World.

Chaos Storm

Cristiane Sekhmet (Jason's Ex-Girlfriend): Level 44 – Battle Priest - female – Guild Leader of Chaos Storm – mid-shoulder length blonde hair, hazel eyes, and pale skin. Completed Nightmare start with Lightning Spell Tree (Lightning, Shock Armor, Chain Lightning, AOE Natures Storm (Julie Bowen - Startum Ironwolf's aka Jason Wolfe's ex-girlfriend))

Evil Sandra: Level 44 – Battle Priest – female – Guild Officer for Chaos Storm – Julie's best friend – IRL name is Sandra Moody, brown shoulder length hair, hazel eyes,

Kasey JoJo: Level 35 – Shadow Warrior – male – Executioner of Chaos Storm - large, muscular man, bald head, hooked nose, heavy forehead, heavy shadow-beard, mud-colored eyes, 6'4", nasty disposition, fancies himself as the Executioner for Chaos Storm.

Noah Stanislas: Level 37 – DPS Warrior – male – Chaos Storm Officer – black wavy shoulder-length hair, icy-blue eyes, clean shaven, pale skin, always brusque and angry, stands and 6'2".

Sodonon Yoshiyuki (Nickname Sodo): Level 37 – Shadow Assassin Rogue – female – Chaos Storm Officer – friends with Julie in-game, short black-curly hair, green eyes, harsh disposition, dark olive skin, and 5'4".

Ruston Clark: Level 35 – Shadow Assassin Rogue – male – Chaos Storm Watch Officer – brown hair, blue eyes, clean shaven, white skin, 6'1"

Seamus Moore: 38 Priest, male – Chaos Storm Officer

TJ Harden: Level 15 – Warrior – human male – short, brown hair, hazel eyes, tanned skin, goatee, sword and shield, chain-mail, and leather armor, 5'11", wants to become a member of Chaos Storm, but doesn't like being treated like crap. Still considered a PLEB aka plebeian to the guild. Normal start.

N3rd Amazonian: Level 20 – Rogue – human female –black spiky hair, brown eyes, white skin, dual short swords, black leather armor and clothing, 5'6", blood-thirsty attitude due to desire to become a core member of Chaos Storm to make money. Still considered a PLEB aka plebeian to the guild.

Normal start.

Shapo Xela: Level 38, Ranger – Chaos Storm Officer - at Domenic's Siege, Evil Sandra's right hand man, brown leathers, bow, long sword, and dagger. Short brown hair cut in a short bob, white blonde hair, green eyes, 6'2" with long legs and slim body. Call's Evil Sandra ES. Human

Cap'n D'hoser: Level 38, teamed with Shapo, DPS Warrior, 2 handed axe, Dwarf

Chip N'dip: Level 38, teamed with Shapo, Rogue/Assassin, two short swords, Human

Roberto Rimaru (Butcher of Bucharest / Romperu): Level 38, teamed with Shapo, Ranger, Crossbow with five shots, two handed swords, Dwarf, Romanian in real life.

Gene Anthony: Level 38, teamed with Shapo, Priest, dual one-handed maces, Human

Heik PoPo: Level 38 Warrior, Human, Male, team that molests Fylreh. Two-handed sword as main weapon.

SBC DiEtor: Level 39 Ranger, Male, team that molests Fylreh.

Gar EtMar: Level 37 Rogue, Human, Male, team that molests Fylreh.

Benji Landespe: Level 38 Priest, Human, Male, team that molests Fylreh.

Val Ebannaw: Level 38 Rogue, Human, Male, team that molests Fylreh.

Evad94 Gray: Level 38 Rogue, Human, Male, sub-leader helps Evil Sandra after Shapo gets locked out.

Dicky Wankerson: Level 36 Mage at Domenic's Siege.

Daniel Dingleberry: Level 36, Ranger at Domenic's Siege leading group guarding

Jord De'Gregory: Level 12

Lisa Nohos: Level 17

Harding Noll: subleader for Evil Sandra

SirKink Neet: Level 38 Warrior, Human, male - subleader for Evil Sandra

Coven (Poison)

Brandon Phillipe: Guild Officer, Rogue, Level 41, male, Human,

The Legion of Vengeance (Light- Luminosity Knight/tree)

Unholy Josephine: Guild Leader, DPS Warrior, Level 40, female, Human, brunet, shoulder-length cut, dark brown (crazy) eyes, dark olive brown skin, 5' 11", a two-handed sword, tight light-brown long-sleeve leather corset that is high-quality armor, white lowcut peasant shirt, tight dark-brown leather pants, and knee-high boots, topped with a dark-green half-cloak over the left shoulder, and a single leather pauldron on the right shoulder.

Darom (Human Realm)

(DOA) Warden Laxjar Rohan: Level 45 – Defensive Warrior – Human Noble – male – gray tipped temples, black wavy hair, hard blue eyes, gray tinged black beard, stands at 6'2" Slaughtered by Dread Pack.

Darom (Royal Army Contingent)

Laurie Butcher (Rescued from Darom's dungeon and The Dread Pack): Level 47 – Royal Army Team Leader (Promoted to Sub-Leader), Defensive Warrior – Human peasant – woman – parents were butchers in Darom, auburn hair down to the middle of her back, dark brown eyes, hard faced, dark-tanned skin, stands at 6'0". Knows poverty and discrimination for being a commoner, highest level of Royal Army and a Team Leader left alive in dungeon.

Alex Carnell: Level 45 – Royal Army Team Leader – Swordsman – male - curly brown hair cut short, green eyes, clean shaved, thin muscular build, tanned skin. (Recently promoted after leveling up from PVP battle – guarding Navy Officer corpses on docks)

Shaw Merrifield (Rescued from Darom Dungeon) Level 45 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, shaved head, hard-blue eyes, tanned skin, stocky build, blond beard, 6'3", young.

Maxime Chace (Rescued from Darom Dungeon) Level 45 Swordsman Team-Leader; female, short-brown hair, green eyes, tanned skin, whipcord build, 5'6", young.

Marks Milton (Rescued from Darom Dungeon) Level 45 Swordsman Team-

Leader; male, blond hair, brown eyes, pale skinned, heavy-set build, long blond beard, 6'0", young

Miller Goodman (Rescued from Darom Dungeon) Level 45 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, black rough-cut hair, dark brown eyes, pale skin, heavy-set build, black beard, 6'.

Derek Mollcoy (Rescued from Darom Dungeon) Level 45 Swordsman Team-Leader; male, shaved head, blue eyes, weathered skin, stringing build, clean shaven, 6'4".

Erwin Vow (Rescued from Darom Dungeon) Level 45 Swordsman Team-Leader; female, long-blond hair (ponytail), brown eyes, creamy skin, sturdy build, 5'5".

Darom (Royal Navy Contingent - The Howling Wolves Squadron)

Anthony "Tony" Davis: Level 50 – Royal Navy Sub-Captain – DPS Warrior – male – Human (late twenties / Trader family), short-cropped black hair, gray temples, short full beard around two inches in length, blue eyes, tanned skin, stands 6'1". Friendly disposition but a ruthless strategist in battle. (Missing his left hand upon being resurrected due to the Gull Hawks feeding. Beheaded by The Dread Pack for refusing to allow the slaughter of civilians. Ex Royal Navy Sub-Captain.)

Darom (Gnomeling Trader contingent)

Bellbor Stouthack (Last Survivor of Clan): Level 38 – Trader / Gearhead - Gnome/Human – male – broken goggles on his head, brown eyes, scraggly black hair and full beard, greasy blood-stained muscle shirt under a leather apron, rune tattoos on left arm, brown-leather overalls, and knee-high boots. The last of his clan. Fought with a wrench and the runes of his left arm that gave him an electric shock attack on touch.

Henkkor Spikebar: Level 36 – Ship Hands / Engineer- Gnome/dwarf - male – blonde short hair with right side shaved, braided beard with three separate braids, no mustache, black leather vest with spiked shoulder and forearm guards, reddish-brown leather pants, black knee-high boots. Wields a short one- or two-handed scythe and short sword.

Clippar Smithpot: Level 37 - Smith Engineer - Gnome/Light elf - female – blonde shoulder-length hair, light blue eyes, reddish-brown leather halter top, bluish-brown baggy pants, loin cloth outside of clothing, heavy and

wide gear belt, brown knee-high boots. Wields a massive smith's hammer on battlefield, helmet is more of a faceplate for smithing with hot metals.

Nereedu Cranktok: Level 38 – Smith Engineer – Gnome/human - female – iron left arms that is strapped in place and can be used like normal due to rune magic and enchanting, shoulder-length blonde stringy hair, dark brown eyes, pale skin, ripped brown-leather overalls with a tube top showing, knee-high brown leather boots. Wielding a wrench and Fire magic.

Blolnat Irontouched (Last Survivor of Clan): Level 38 – Trader / Gearhead-Gnome/light elf - female – very short, light amber eyes, red hair pulled back into a tight single braid, very pale skin, blood-stained face (retribution runes), dark-gray scale-mail robe, cream-colored heavy leather pants, angle-high boots. Fights with hands and feet. Traveling with the Brat Pack and bards.

Radbaic Domehead: Level 38 – Trader / Gearhead – Gnome/human - male – bald head, late twenties, mature face, short close-cropped brown beard, blue eyes, hard face, muscle t-shirt under a dark-brown leather overcoat (with white dirty fur on collar like a bomber jacket), wields large two-handed wrench and short sword, baggy light-brown leather brown pants, and dark-brown knee-high boots. Fought with an oversized wrench and had two long fighting-daggers strapped to his waist.

Darom (City Guard Contingent)

Justin Ridgely (Rescued from Darom's dungeon and The Dread Pack): Level 43 – Darom Guard - Swordsman in-training – male – parents were builders – short-cropped brown hair, dusty brown eyes, dark-tanned skin, and stands at 6'. Team Leader of city guard patrol.

Troy Butcher (Rescued from Darom's dungeon and The Dread Pack): Level 43 – Darom Guard - Swordsman in-training – male – younger brother of Laurie Butcher that Startum resurrected. Brown spiked hair, almond eyes, serious face, dark—tanned skin, stands 6'1". Knows poverty and discrimination for being a commoner, highest level of Royal Army and a Team Leader left alive in dungeon.

Palnisdale (the Citadel)

Cedric DeKhayed: (Demoted by Star) Scout Leader of Royal Light Cavalry Scouting Unit (Royal Scouts), level 45, golden skin, dark-brown eyes, sandy blond hair, goatee mustache, toned muscles, 6'1" - assigned to the

heavy cavalry unit from Palnisdale of 500 being led by Sir Terrance Anon – Guardian Knight.

*Light Cavalry: leather and chainmail for the arms and legs with a light bronze breast plate that protected the chest and back. Their weapons were sabers and shields with a spear. On top of that, each had a red cape and matching blue tabards.

Jasper Warf: Lance Leader of the Royal Heavy Cavalry Unit (Royal Lancers), Level 48, blond long hair in a ponytail, muscular, blue eyes, full blond beard, 6'4".

*Heavy Cavalry: chain mail with iron plate pieces similar to the Guardian Knights, gray iron, heavy sabers, iron shield and heavy lance.

Carter Brewster: Lance Sub-Leader of the Royal Heavy Cavalry Unit (Royal Lancers), level 46, brown short hair, brown eyes, clean shaven, large man, heavy-tanned skin, serious personality, 6'2", sent to inspect General DeKhayed's home.

Carlisle Cleaver: Guard Leader in Central Keep, level 45, pale skin, bond short hair, blue eyes, clean shaven, muscular but slim.

Valerie Trinder (Lady Trinder): Chamberlain to Queen Isolde, brown hair in a bun, gray eyes, older woman, severe bearing, used to having her orders followed. Level 32,

Helga Tanner: (Promoted to Scout Leader by Star) Sub-Scout Leader of Royal Light Cavalry Scouting Unit (Royal Scouts), level 46, female, dusty skin, blue eyes, straight-black hair, and strong face with high cheekbones, toned muscles with nearly no breasts, 5'9" - assigned to the heavy cavalry unit from Palnisdale of 500 being led by Sir Terrance Anon – Guardian Knight. Cedric DeKhayed has issue with Helga because her family came from Tanners, but her experience is so solid that she earned her current rank.

Marie Stonier: Royal Guard Leader, level 43, Swordswoman, 5'10", Human, long brown hair in a ponytail, green eyes, high cheek bones, muscular, and fit with a moderate chest. Guards the main gates into Palnisdale.

Olin DeKhayed (Grimblood DeKhayed): General, level 40, Swordsman,

(reborn as a Dil-Hilth level 50 (aka Brain Suckers)) Slaughtered family and nearly a hundred others, was able to get General Dell demoted

Zoe Gardner (nickname Zoey): Maid that brings us to the baths. Friendly, straight brown-hair, green eyes.

Godfrey Tasker: Male Chamberlain that runs out of the bath.

Giles Inman: Level 43 Guard Group Leader, male, gives Gregory Carter hard time, disrespects Fylreh.

Graham Cooper: Level 41 Guard Sub-Group Leader, male, laughs at disrespect.

Lillian Seales: Level 40 Royal Guard, female, argues for both idiots to stop disrespecting the men and Fylreh.

Angus Baker: Level 40 Royal Guard, male, calls Fylreh's breasts udders.

Gregory Carter (Gregor): ex-Royal Skirmisher, Skirmisher Leader, level 48, male, human, was forgotten on the streets until Star ordered all the released Royal Forces to be rehired again, leader of the group. Short, ruff-cut black hair, piercing blue eyes, strong face, heavy five o'clock shadow, tanned skin, muscular figure, and stands 6'2". Caught Iron Falcon Mercenary for Star to speak with. Had a one-night stand with Ulia. Old unit was Royal Voltigeurs.

Hartley Warner: ex-Royal Skirmisher, level 48, male, human, silver wavy hair down to his collar, green eyes, older (early thirties), goatee, light-colored skin, 6 feet, was forgotten on the streets until Star ordered all the released Royal Forces to be rehired again, sub-leader of the group. Caught Iron Falcon Mercenary for Star to speak with. Had one-night stand with Neristhana. Old unit was Royal Voltigeurs.

Legar Stoneguard: ex-Royal Skirmisher, level 48, male, human, 6'1", brown eyes, shaggy dirty-blond hair, heavy full beard, swarthy complexion, heavy-set, was forgotten on the streets until Star ordered all the released Royal Forces to be rehired again. Caught Iron Falcon Mercenary for Star to speak with. Large man. Had a one-night stand with Keela. Old unit was Royal Voltigeurs.

Durneth Greensborough: ex-Royal Skirmisher, level 48, male, human, was forgotten on the streets until Star ordered all the released Royal Forces to be rehired again. Caught Iron Falcon Mercenary for Star to speak with. Spent night in barracks. Old unit was Royal Voltigeurs.

Jannoth Branock: ex-Royal Skirmisher, level 48, male, human, was forgotten on the streets until Star ordered all the released Royal Forces to be rehired again. Caught Iron Falcon Mercenary for Star to speak with. Spent night in barracks. Old unit was Royal Voltigeurs.

Telrain (Human Capital)

Misty Raventhorn: Level 50 Swordsman – Assault Leader of the Royal Forces in Telrain - long-black hair in a ponytail, dark brown eyes, snow-white skin, 6’2”, statuesque woman, slim like a whip. Resurrected from the pit outside of Telrain by Krystal at Startum’s request. Upper class family, used to working with priests in Telrain. Sent to Darom.

Randel Tericius: Level 49 Swordsman – ex-Guard Sub-Leader of the lower city of Telrain – male – mid-shoulder length black hair in a ponytail, green eyes, clean shaven, sharp cheek bones, angular face, 6’2”. Sent to Darom.

Priests of Light (Temple of Light in Telrain)

Hugon Walt: Level 50 Reverent Priest of Light - old man – bald head, blue eyes, plump frame, friendly personality

Yasmina Silvarn: Level 50 Radiant Mage of Light – old woman – long silver hair, dark-almond eyes, olive skin, handsome older woman. Wields a two-handed staff.

Nard Fulrin: Level 50 Battle Priest of Light – old man – bald hair, dark-brown eyes, brown skin, very old. Wields and Ahlspiess spear and wears heavy armor.

Ger Luzanus: Level 50 Battle Priest of Light – old man – stringy white-hair, beady dark-brown eyes, leathery skin, 5’6”. Pompous asshole.

Gee Achronis: Level 50 Radiant Mage of Light – mid-forties woman – long-blond hair, cold blue eyes, severe face with high cheekbones, 5’7”. Evil bitch on the council of light. Has cleansing spell used against her to get her compliance to save the Telrain townsfolks.

Mihel Alfonc: Level 50 Reverent Priest of Light (neutral councilor) – mid-forties old man – full-head of short-gray hair, dark-brown eyes, dark tanned skin, gray soul patch tuft on his chin, scruffy day-old stubble and stood 5’10”. Aggressive when fighting for what is right.

Priests sent to Darom and later to BrokenFang Hold:

Natalie Pilner: Level 30 Priestess – female – white blonde short hair, amber brown eyes.

Marie Nundra: Level 30 Priestess – female – dirty-blonde short hair, dark-brown eyes.

Toran Dirk: Level 33 Combat Priest – male – bald headed, brown skin, muscular but over weight.

Narri Lane: Level 32 Priest – male – white long hair in ponytail, thin beard, clear face. Healing the refugees and training.

Sean Ander: Level 32 Combat Priest (journeyman) – male – brown short hair, clean shaven, overweight. Healing the refugees and training.

Lonna Mawl: Level 34 Light Mage – female – long brown hair in ponytail, olive skin, staff

Alex Quaiel: Level 42 Battle Priest (Advance) – male – spiky black hair, clean cut, blue eyes, and olive skin. Early-twenties.

Dread Pack (1250 members)

Apoxsee Neoauspex: Guild Leader – male – DPS Warrior / Flame Shield Mage – level 37 by book 9 (level 31 by book 8 (level 21 / dropped to level 33 during fight with Star – lost x levels at graveyard)) – dressed like Dante from the Devil May Cry 3 series. White-blonde spikey hair, pale-blue eyes, clean shaven, red padded-leather overcoat, bare chested, too tight brown leather pants, and black boots with an oversized two-handed bastard sword.

Amron Bungholio (Raymond): Level 26, Rogue Nightmare start

Fellblade Panzerfaust: Level 28, Warrior Nightmare start

Shuuk D’Poke (Adam): Level 26, Warrior Nightmare start

Kit Kat: Level 26, Rogue Advance start

Cadwell Jake: Level 27, Rogue Advance start

Khul Kusmar: Level 26, Rogue Advance start

PokeU Pettman (Dave): Level 26, Rogue Nightmare start

Lurge Mario: Level 28, Rogue Nightmare start

Arthur Marcelino: Level 30, Rogue Advance Start, Barn Darom scene,

Rasmussen Jestes: Level 30, Warrior Normal start, Barn Darom scene, (also lead attack against Phoenix side)

Tigner BaneForU: Level 30, Rogue Normal start, Barn Darom scene,

Jfire Pokemee: Level 30, Umbra Priest

Paul De’Grief: Level 30, Umbra Priest

Fatal Midnight of the Chaos Storm Alliance – (buffs and debuffs)

Jacob Mister-Griever Level 42 – Rogue - guild leader – (debuffed to level 35 during western graveyard fight at Domenic’s pull out – in charge of rogue ambush), Dark Elf, dual daggers, and a short sword.

Ortiz V: Level 40 – Rogue – guild officer – (debuffed to level 33 during western graveyard fight at Domenic’s pull out) Dark Elf,

Disciples of Anarchy (demon-like summons)

Rowland Ripper

Sea Orcs’ Bosses

Wutgarek Bonecrusher: Level 50 - Elite War Leader - male

Orc Elite Warriors: Level 40 - 50

Orc Elite Shamans(2x): Level 47 - Water and Air

Orc Elite Fire Mages(2x): Level 45 – 47 - Fire

Aussie Guild (Mates) 260 players (93 logged in when we meet) (Mix of Beast Kin and Dark Elf halfings)

Dangas Khan: Level 37 Warrior, guild leader, Dark Elf/Human,

Rassilon Tardis: Level 36 Ranger/Frost Mage, guild officer, Dark Elf/Dwarf,

Steph FoxFire (FIREfox): Level 35 Arcane Mage, guild officer, Red-furred Panda/Human. IRL name is Steph Potter, 5'2", dark brown hair and green eyes.

Toxi Croack: Level 35, Half-Orc male, Barbarian, boyfriend of guild officer Steph (semi-officer himself), big muscles, black dreads, clean shaven, massive two-headed axe with shield on back and four small throwing axes. 6'2", IRL name is Sam, private person who likes to mess with asshats.
Perth Supernova: Male Priest,

JT Cummins: Ranger

Daniel McConnell (nickname Bogan): Ranger

James Ross-Munroe (Queensland): Ranger, took temporary charge of graveyard survivors and did his best to save the Dark Elves dead.

Kane Wiblen (Queensland): Fire Mage

Uten Syn (unique Nightmare start with Nature Magic - 68 members total/38 Druids and 30 Wardens)

Krishna Uknuselig: Level 50 - Moon Elf – Warden - male - Guild Leader – close-cropped black hair, dark blue eyes, dark bluish skin, slim build, clean shaven, 5'8".

Angela “Angie” Vakker: Level 50 - Moon Elf – Druid - female - GL-girlfriend – silvery hair down to mid-shoulder, hazel eyes, bluish-pale skin, slim build, 5'6". Combat pet: Elite Molten Flow Striders named Burn.

Lyeneru Caivyre: Level 50 - Moon Elf – Druid - Angie Vakker's trainer – female - mane of silvery hair down to her mid-back, green eyes, blue-tinged skin, slim build with large breasts, statuesque face and stance, 6'.

Gaelin Caidove: Level 50 - Moon Elf – Warden – Krishna Uknuselig's trainer – male - short-cropped black hair, clean shaven, blue-tinged skin, muscular broad shoulders, forest green eyes, 6'0" tall. Combat pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolves named

Franky Marcella: Level 50 Warden, learned Nature Magic up to level 20.

Combat pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolves named

Amanda McClure: Level 50 Druid, black,

Sirena Carroll: Level 50 Druid, Spanish,

Juan Hernandez: Level 50 Guardian, man. Combat pet: Elite Earth Shock Wolves named

Julissa Cota: Guild Officer, close friend with Angie, Level 50 Druid, small Asian girl, black hair, Japanese ancestry. Ran into a group of players that acted like her friend but then used her friendship to find out where the castle was and what kind of forces would be needed to take it down.

Suman Kanuganti: Level 50 Warden – small man, silver hair, green eyes, dark blue skin, angry about sharing loot rolls for pets with people of The World. Added him to my watch list.

Noralys Chave: Level 50 Druid female,

Scott Shade: Level 50 Druid man

Valerie Gibson: Level 50 Druid, female,

Justin Ekis: Level 50 Druid man

Rohan Zaveri: Level 50 Warden man

Monica De La Cruz: Guild Officer, close friends with Angie, Level 50 Druid, has become aggressive, brown hair, Spanish ancestry.

Victor Francis: Level 50 Druid

David Brinegar: Level 50 Warden -

Hemal Jariwala: Level 50 Warden –

Rob Dunn: Level 50 Warden –

Krushu Desai: Level 50 Warden –

Ernesto Salas: Level 50 Warden –

Randy McBride: Level 50 Warden –

Sean Randall: Level 50 Warden –

Brandon Reed: Level 50 Warden –

Jeremy Gabel: Level 50 Warden –

Billie Jo: Level 50 Warden –

Justin Ekis: Level 50 Warden –

Midnight Sun Guild (old friends from Chaos Online currently 40 members – mostly family and IRL friends)

Zedic ZStat: Level 31 – Human – Ranger / Healer – (uses a bow and martial arts – iron-knuckles) – male - wavy short-blond hair, full beard, blue eyes, 6'2" sturdy build, animal companions is a Wild Dog (shaggy white fur coat) named ZTop.

Zyndi ZStat: Level 31 – Human – Ranger / Healer – (uses bow and daggers) – female – long dirty-blonde hair, hazel eyes, stacked figure, 5'4", animal companion is a Lynx (gray fur with black tiger stripes) named Zweety.

Beastkin Player Zeven's Group (800 ghost warriors and two hundred farmers – Mistborne is also a family name in the clan)

Zeven Al'Zaric: Level 49 – Badger-Kin – Essence Shaman / Warrior – (Spirit Lochaber of Chieftain Diongmalta, dirk, throwing hand axes, and magic) – male - 6'2" Silver-gray coat, silver-blue eyes, and black-tipped ears. Brown-leather peasant shirt, thick-wool kilt, leather armor chest and heavy wolf-hide tunic. Nightmare quest gives a type of Spirit Shaman tree. Current Title: Spirit Hunter. Focused on enchanting using runes. Blaidd Ogof Hold. Chieftain of House of Bruic Diongmalta. Has Low-Light vision. IRL name Stephanie Weber, engineering officer (looking to get into research and development), medically discharged from Navy. Lives in Yorktown, Virginia. Had Loss of power from an April ice storm that kept her out of the game for a week after completing her Nightmare quest. (Combat Pet name: Bright Claw of the Azure Sky (nickname is B.C.) – Grizhawk – black fur and feathers with a silver star on forehead. - “Bbbwwwaaa gggrrr bbbaaaa ... Bbbwwwaaa gggrrr bbbaaaa!”) Has a thousand ghosts from the clan in his chest. 200 farmers, four hundred warriors, two hundred archers, hundred mages, hundred various merchants

and general workers. Called Ridire Zeven by the Clan of Hammertoe. Mountain Strider Mount is Prima.

Nahimana Tor’Narc: (companion of Zeven / Nicknamed Nahi) Level 40 – Daughter of village Elder - Hunter / Essence Shaman apprentice – female – 5’ 8” Silver fur with black highlights, green eyes. Low-Light vision.

Torrac Tor’Narc: Level 50 – Badger Kin – Tracker / Essence Shaman – (staff, magic, bow) - male – 6’5” Elder of tribe, father of Nahimana, friend of Zeven, died during attack. Low-Light vision.

Big Red: Level 25 – Red Wolf-Kin - Warrior – male – 6’ 1”. IRL name Tony Weber, brother of Zeven, from Fox River Grove, Illinois. Low-Light vision.

Beathan Bruic: level 38 – Badger Kin – Warrior – War Leader of the Clan’s Guards – died protecting the clan during their escape from AAA PKers.

Arcturus Guild (Guardians) / Norwegian group (32)

Arcturus Borknager: Level 38 – Wolf-kin, Warrior – male – Guild Leader - black fur with silver highlights and sky-blue eyes. Shield and Long Sword with Two-handed blade on back. Anders, Norwegian group, friends from Chaos Online

Bjørn Hansen: Level 37 – Wolfkin – Rogue – Officer – Bow and daggers. Brown and black Wolf-kin with brown eyes,

Liv Kristiansen: Priest – Officer – Silver Wolf-Kin with black highlights and golden colored eyes. Staff with glowing white gem topped by a blade. Pointed base to be used by fighting. Friend of Anders.

Triple “A” (PKer guild part of Chaos Storm - Ice Nightmare Tree)

Leerianne Rastleer: Guild Leader – Light Elf-Human – female – Shadow Thief, blonde shoulder-length hair, green eyes, stacked, black leather armor with silver high-lights, black leather pants, white blouse crop top, thigh-high leather boots, dual short swords. 5’10”, IRL name Kuel Chokemiln/man.

Brent Cadenach: Guild Officer – Light Elf-Human – male – big boned – Shadow Warrior, blond crew-cut hair, blue eyes, two-handed sword, bronze

breastplate, and pauldrons, bronze poleyns that cut off at knee, leather-chain armor as padding, brown leather knee-high boots. 6'2", IRL name Mike Chadfield/man

Aven Taurig: Guild Officer – Light Elf-Human – female – Dark Priest, brunette shoulder-length hair, brown eyes, slim build, single dagger, skull-headed staff, black-cotton pants, blood-red blouse, suede leather knee-length boots, 5'7", IRL name Kathy Tyson.

SoDak Jilling:

Nacario Deathreaver: Level 40 – Rogue – Leader – Captured Head (+10 Agility)

Xxnos Copexx: Level 40 – Rogue – Captured Head (+10 Agility)

Stannis Dickatheon: Level 39 – Rogue – Captured Head (+9 Agility)

Carebear Slayer: Level 39 – Rogue – Captured Head (+9 Agility)

Muhrder Piehole: Level 39 - Rogue – Captured Head (+9 Agility)

Lester McStealy - level 35 – (Group Leader of five that came from the Beast Kin area) – male -Human - Rogue – daggers – kidnapped

Biggee McGee - level 33 – (came from the Beast Kin area) – male -Human Ranger – bow, sword, dagger

Yochen Holzig - level 33 - (came from the Beast Kin area) – female – DPS Warrior – two-handed sword

Pheeltip Choker - level 33 – (came from the Beast Kin area) – male – Fire Mage - staff

Antye Barbour - level 33 – (came from the Beast Kin area) – male – Priest – mace and chain mail armor

Felix Teper - level 32 – (camping Töten's stronghold) -

Becker McPecker - level 32 - (camping Töten's stronghold)

Wischi Martin - level 31 - (camping Töten's stronghold) - Team Leader – male – Human – Rogue -

Zwicky Holger - level 33 – (camping Töten’s stronghold) – Raid Leader - male – Human - DPS Warrior – dual wielding hand axes

Rochow Cadabum - level 30 – (camping Töten’s stronghold) – Team Leader - male – Human - Thief Ranger

Andrew Patrick - level 30 – (camping Töten’s stronghold) -

Vain Pruisen - level 31 - (camping Töten’s stronghold) – male – Human - DPS Warrior

Daniel Yantan - level 32 - (camping Töten’s stronghold) -

Sascha Rivolr - level 30 - (camping Töten’s stronghold) - Team Leader – female – Human – Ranger -

Gunther Sonoko - level 31 - (camping Töten’s stronghold) -

Ferry Crew between Lonsalindel and Tulduroc on the ship Paddlewhirl
Gokmit Clubelvest

Roadkill (PKer guild part of Chaos Storm)

Lizzie Short: Rogue level 43, 5’2”, short brown pixie haircut, human, pale skin,

Alliance Zero (PKer guild part of Chaos Storm)

Hazug Blackbane – Level 42 – male dwarf – artillery gunner – Warrior

Orc that made agreement with Julie: (yani is sex slave / grug is food)
Kug Bloodreaver:

V-MMORPG

Alon Müsk: The owner of V-MMORPG

Admin Team:

Beth Matters: V-MMORPG Online Help Representative – female

Doug Rudd: V-MMORPG Supervisor for the in-game Admins. Rani Lamkin’s boss. (Known in-game as Protectors of Nordic)

Frank Whitfield: V-MMORPG Lead Infrastructure Engineer that looking into the hacking that has affected the game. Finds Rani credentials used in

the log files.

Jules Verne: V-MMORPG Admin that Captains the Nautilus flying ship.

Justin Mayfair: V-MMORPG crazy developer that always were going on about how the NPCs in The World were actually the first digitally created people ever made. A prodigy in AI development.

Laura Jones: V-MMORPG CIO

Niles Mulliner: the admin taking money to help Julie cheat in The World.

Rani Lamkin: Level 38 Swordswoman - Human – sub-skill – Rogue – ex-Royal Investigator – (Nordic Guardian) brown shoulder-length hair, hazel eyes, unremarkable face (girl next door) and stands 5’7”. Brown leathers and a charcoal gray cloak. (Star knows that she’s an admin.) Born in California.

Susan Suckles: V-MMORPG Admin Team Lead that’s looking into the respawn issue.

Tony Martinez: V-MMORPG Information Assurance Chief.

Les enfants Terribles (Canada):

Solivann - level 38 - guild master of LET (Les enfants Terribles) (yeah, its a metal gear reference and the guild my friends and i always run with). Dark Elf - Priest / Rogue - male - dirty blond rough-cut short hair, green eyes, 5'11" - Dagger, longsword, black skin-tight leather armor with iron reinforced plates sewn into chest and back. IRL name Eryck Brisson. Canadian software sales rep. Solivann is too curious for his own good and likes to think he can talk his way out of anything, he also tends to talk too much and get his foot in his mouth. LET is a content clearing guild trying to achieve world first on dungeons and climb the leaderboard. They used to play in PvP servers of every MMO coming out, reveling in the open world PvP. The happening of The World quickly became a full-time job for them, being an already cohesive unit. They aren't your typical nice Canadians; they are out for blood and loot.

PixelBomb - level 38 - Dark Elf - Essence Shaman - male - shoulder-length

black hair, light brown eyes, 6'0" - brown leather reinforced with chainmail - dual hand axes - IRL Name Renaud Lavergne Mayer professional game designer, first officer of LET, is an elemental shaman, old aficionado of the "boomkin" in wow. He has a mischievous attitude and tend to act before thinking, his luck getting him out of trouble most often then not. Watching him go makes you believe there's a god for impulsive hot heads.

Adelya (Olsen) - level 38 - Tiger Grimal Kin - Warlock - female - short spiky hair, sexy robes with bone ribbed breastplate holding breasts, skull helm, bone gauntlets, leather thigh-high boots, sword, and dagger, plays as a female, Summoner of some kind if possible - IRL name Jean-Francois Olsen (nickname Olsen) IRL occupation construction tool salesman. In every game, he is the person that goes for the crafting system, supporting his team with all kind of gear and contraptions. Adelya is also one mean grinding machine. He will put in more time in a game then anyone i know. He is the analyst he LET, in every game we play, he is the one that was looking for the most optimal path to take. He is positive guy, but tend not to be too loud, doing his own thing. Class wise, is there is a summoner or a necromancer in a game, he will build the meanest, biggest army of pets and let them roam.

Assen - Dark Elf - Guardian Priest - male - long dirty blond hair, green eyes, 6'2", IRL name Remi-Piere, occupation Sysadmin. He is the main tank of LET, playing a paladin. effortlessly charismatic and detail oriented, people tend to flock to him easily. He is a bit short fused and does not tolerate idiocy and incompetence. For him, tanking is Both a science and his art. He wants to be recognized as the best in what he does. Say's "Eh" a lot.

Alocer - Dark Elf - DPS Warrior - male, wavy rough chopped shoulder length hair, blue eyes, breastplate armor, shoulders, and legs, dual wields long swords, IRL name Alexandre, Sysadmin. Alocer was the one to bring up The World to LET when it first came out. Alocer eats and breaths PVP. Jumping from game to game to try their PvP system, watching countless rotation videos to perfect his art. He lives for that adrenaline rush you get when you are facing other players on the battlefield. In the world, he finally found a place where he could live that rush. He is a really positive person and hype easily on every new thing, contributing on the guild moral and

motivation.

Nikina - Dark Elf - Priest - female - long brunet hair down back, gray eyes, sexy robes, bikini top, high stockings/knee-high boots, plays with a double-iron-tipped staff, plays girl in-game, IRL name Julien. Admin in the videogame industry. Julien is playing Nikina, a woman healing paladin. Nikina is always big on vanity gear and fashionable characters. He is probably the person amongst LET who has tried the most MMORPG and he always come back to this Nikina healer character. Nikina is a thrill seeker and revels in the healer's role as each second is a crisis he must manage. Socially, he is a chameleon that will fit with everyone. Everyone loves Nikina.

Dwarves from the Mining Town of Kragrock

Male:

Borear Hammertoe - Blacksmith - gray beard, bald head, gray eyes, wields a large hammer (same one he uses to smith)

Savrulir Bristletoe - Mine Leader

Grobrut Cavebuster

Strokhhot Coalshoulder

Nurakdrin Silverbraid

Kukuil Blackspine

Skorgaeth Kegjaw

Female:

Thilaelydd Flintgrog - Sub-Mine Leader

Dalofruni Smeltmane

Erirrangrid Grimbelt

Olgilsia Redchin

Skonmeginn Bronzeback

Kuggulynn Flintgrog

Children:

Mutoline Hammertoe - female - Clan Hammertoe - Blacksmith's granddaughter - dusty-skinned, dark brown eyes, her long brown hair is set into five braids - two in front to either side of her head and one large main braid that ran down to her mid-back. A leather cap was tucked over her head that matched the simple dark-green leather pants and brown leather tunic she wore with Celtic-like designs woven into the sleeves and cuffs. A plaid tartan-like sash hung diagonally across her chest. Zeven guessed her at around 10 years old. Belt at waist with a small pouch and simple iron dagger. Now that her grandfather died, she is now the Tánaiste (heir apparent)

Doufalyynn Flintgrog - female - Clan Hammertoe - Sub-Mine Leader's daughter - her long dirty-blond hair was set into two braids that ran down the front of her chest and were intertwined with soft gray strips. She had very pale skin with blue eyes and rosy cheeks and was wearing a gray leather tunic and brown leather pants with similar Celtic designs on her cuffs and sleeves. A matching plaid tartan-like sash hung diagonally across her chest. Zeven guessed her to be between 6 to 8 years old. Belt at waist with a small pouch and simple iron dagger. (Zeven gave her The Devastator two-handed hammer from her mother's death)

Lokuth Kegflayer - male - Clan Hammertoe - an unruly mane of red hair roughly chopped short, dark-olive skin, green eyes, and wears dark-brown leather pants and a light-brown tunic. A matching plaid tartan-like sash hung diagonally across his chest. Zeven guessed his age to be that of Doufalyynn, aka 6 to 8 years old. Belt at waist with a small pouch and simple iron dagger. (Given Steel Blade of the Crusader that was owned by his mother. Has a baby Combat Pet named Tusky (Death Tusks) that's a Stone Tusked Boar Charger the clan uses for mounts.

Aeroch Nor:

Avna Hammertoe - level 48, DPS Warrior, female Dwarf - gray eyes, pale skin, loose shoulder-length auburn hair, freckles around nose, 5' tall, solid build, heavy armor, uses a two-handed war hammer, Blacksmith's daughter, and new Chieftain for Clan Hammertoe

Belkar Kegflayer - Cavern Ranger - level 52 - male Dwarfling Dwarf/Gnome/Beast Kin - 3 1/2 feet tall, broad, and muscular, bald head,

brown short dual-braided old Dutch beard, dark brown eyes, casual morally ambiguous attitude about violence, dual wields spirit-edged daggers, mini-mechanized crossbows on each wrist, larger crossbow on back. (Watches over Zeven shopping) (Shrelark sister and Karbel brother)

Droman Dhonic Cragguard - level 67 - gray-beard Hammer Warrior, looks to be very old and decrepit, Steward of the home of Hammertoe Clan Chiefs, messy Viking grey beard with chin-braid, brown eyes, gruff but friendly, helps with cooking, rough-spun linen shirt, simple kilt with sash, dagger and hammer at waist, brown knee-high boots.

Therdac Warfury - level 46 - Captain of the Clan's Guards, Defensive Warrior, black hair, black Klingon beard, green eyes, heavy plates over chain, large heater shield, bearded one-handed axe, two-handed axe on back, leads five troopers.

Aeroch Nor Shops

Graymail's Superior Weapons and Armor -Ran by Skovreck

Graymail - Advanced Smith - Level 58 - balding forehead, wild black hair held back with a silver band, wild black beard, dark brown eyes, 5'1", boots, blue kilt, leather apron over it, sleeveless.

Grunhilda's Leather Boutique ran by Strorgouni Craghide - Girdler / Ranger - level 38 - right red braids down back, young face, claw scratch scar over right eye, blue eyes, dark-black furry-leather shoulder pads made from Shadow Fox, mid-dark ornate leather chest piece, mid-dark leather armor skirt with wide equipment belt, and leather boots, skull necklace, clan kilt around waist and shoulder.

Merryfinger's Exceptional Threads - ran by Girroc Silvertouch - level - 42 - Journeyman - Tailor - blue eyes, long bald head, snow-white beard, with silver bands hanging from mustache, matching thin silver band around head, long white robe, vest, and sash around waist is in plaid colors of clan, very effeminate, hates to be dirty, but good with dress shirts and jackets and kilts.

Lightbraid's Luxurious Leathers - ran by Lornurra Lightbraid - cobbler - long blonde hair, green eyes, thin 5'1" and classy looking, long kilt, white elegant long-sleeve shirt, wrapped in clan traditional ruana (wrap), Sgian-

Dubh dagger at waist, leather equipment belt.

Badruc's Beasties and Gear (catchphrase- Get Mounted Here) - Badruc Blazingbreaker and Groubihulda Steelbane:

Badruc Blazingbreaker - level 47 - Ranger / Beast Trainer - male Dwarf - reddish brown long ruff hair, full beard with three braids held with iron rings, brown hard eyes, weathered face, mix of steel plates, and plaid clan colors across chest, kilt, heavy leather boots, 5' tall, bow and two-handed war axe, one-handed bearded axe. He has a combat pet that's a Stone Gore Bear called Crusher.

Varfaline Steelbane - level 41 - DPS Hammer Warrior / Journeyman Smith - Dwarfling Dwarf/Human - brunette hair, wears in a bun, brown eyes, super muscular and thick bodied, immense chest and arms, 5'7", typically works in brown leather apron that barely fits around chest, no shirt, tight brown leather pants, and knee-high brown boots. Also likes to wear a brown leather choker. Has scar across bridge of her nose. No nonsense and gruff while on duty. She's good at armoring monsters. Treated poorly due to mixed blood but better than a slave due to her smithing.

Thongrewynn Wyvernbraid - level 33 - Hunter - Dwarfling Dwarf/Dark Elf mix - red long hair, green eyes, white painted war marks on face, leather chest piece (tub top), bone necklace, bone embedded in armor, leather shoulder pads, furry loin cloth, heavy leather gear belt, bow, one-handed bearded axe, two-handed bearded axe. She's treated like a slave due to her skill set and mixed blood.

Kotgrulim Caskgut - Squad-Leader - level 35 - DPS Warrior - dark-brown braided beard, dark-brown mohawk, green eyes, scared left cheek, large iron spiked shoulder pads, iron breast plate, leather gauntlets, belt, and pants, with iron shin guards, wields an oversized bastard battle axe.

Sits below Grabar Frostmour the Dwarven hero that is said that founded Aeroch Nor. This is Founder's Park. Statue is called "Grabar Frostmour bends the mountain to his will."

Mary's Gies - Serving the best Brat Pies and Blackberry Mead in Aeroch Nor - ran by Mary Firebrane and Nadealynn Firebrane.

Mary Firebrane - level 48 - DPS Hammer Warrior / Cook - Dwarf male -

long blond hair pulled back into a ponytail, full blond beard with single braid, bushy eyebrows, blue eyes, heavy with big belly and massive arms, leather kitchen apron, ragged dirty linen sleeveless shirt, kilt, brown leather ghillie shoes, plaid kilt hose.

Nadealynn Firebrane - level 27 - Essence Shaman / Waitress - Dwarf female - daughter reg long hair with two side braids, clan gold clasps on ends, Blue Essence Mark across right eye, smiling and pleasant, thick bodied but sexy, large breasts, loose white sleeveless top, plaid long kilt, Arisaid wrap around shoulders, brown leather ghillie shoes, plaid kilt hose.

Domina's Enchanting Dreams - Slashing Prices for your pleasure

Herbs, Flasks, and Things

Cavern Trekkers Emporium

Mountain Breakers

Jargaet's Gems Galor

Hilda's Hidden Trinkets

Thosgruri Oddities

Deep Hollow Plunderer's Guild - We get into all the tightest holes, adventuring guild.

Skagribela Butchery - you stab them we slab them.

Flintgravel's Smithing Haven - ran by the Gravelcoat Clan.

Goldenmane Leathers - Flintlarmour Clan

Aeroch Nor ambushers

Clan of Slagsmith

Thrakulck Denshide - male - level 45 - Group Leader

Themragith Denshide - female - level 44 - Group Sub-Leader

Snagril Embergrain - male

Arroginn Embergrain - female

__Tries to attack Zeven in Aeroch Nor__

Grakhick Denshide - male - level 41 Leader DPS Warrior

Webithra Embergrain - female - level 40 Essence Shaman

Dimbraids Hilldelver - male - level 39 Mountain Stalker

Mungraeck Denshide - male - level 38 DPS Warrior

Bragolin Hilldelver - male - level 39 Mountain Stalker

Aeroch Nor Guards (Guardians of Aeroch Nor)

Nodraic Grimaxe - male - Guard Leader

Notmure Hetbrewer - female - Guard Sub-Leader

Bafoc Thunderbeard - Sergeant

King and Royal Family

Aralgoul Shatterfist

Spiral - massive column with ramps-roads that go up and down the center cavern of Aeroch Nor.

Guards that let Zeven go after the fight.

Krakhid Greatshield - level 55, Cave Defender

Clan of the Rautt Drekar (253 NPCs)

Byrnwulf Undaunted (Red Lord or Rautt Drottinn): Level 36 - Red Draconian-Human - Barbarian Berserker (upgrades to Riddara at 40, and Battlerager at 51, Battle Lord at 76) - long blonde hair in ponytail, blue eyes, reddish-tinged skin, red horns coming from forehead, red scales around neck and in the shape of a V down the upper middle of his chest, red scaled gauntlets that go up to his elbows and ends in clawed fingertip (natural armor part of Nightmare tree), 6'2". Short fangs. Coarse dark-brown leather boots, dark brown leather pants (not armor), dark-brown sleeveless leather vest (not armor), dark brown leather stripes wrapped around his upper arms, and wearing a coarse brown robe with hood. Wields a massive two-handed axe with dragon-wing spike (epic Nightmare weapon) Glows with heat and causes fire damage on successful hit. Has armor piercing effect. (named Great Axe of Rautt Drottinn) Clan of the

Rautt Drekar. Mölbrotinn Horn Stronghold (Shattered Horn Stronghold). Grants 75% Fire Resistance. 10% Elemental Magic resistance. Short bio: Young guy (23 or 24) from Minnesota. As a gamer he likes PvP (not PKing but more dueling and large scale fighting). Single. Is more interested in being a "champion" than a general. Past experience with MMOs involved running solo and joining pick up for dungeons and mostly going into "matched" and "ranked" PvP instead of being a PKer. Is pretty laid back and is usually the one who runs head first into dungeons and raids. Prefers mobile builds with a good amount of DPS. (Race features: maybe natural armor that scales with level equivalent to medium armor of that level. Can't wear armor as a trade off. Possible decent magic resistance?) (Nightmare magic tree: Draconic magic. Personal buffing such as enhanced strength, toughness, and speed. Nothing too strong just enough to give a slight edge to start, Area of effect elemental breath weapons, and possible flight.)

Igtra Raktizu: level 36 - Red Draconian-Human - Wild Shaman - green eyes, long dirty blonde hair in ponytail, reddish-tinged skin, red horns coming from forehead, red scales around neck and in the shape of a V down the upper middle of her chest, red scaled gauntlets that go up to her elbows and ends in clawed fingertip (natural armor part of Nightmare tree). Coarse dark-brown leather boots, dark brown leather pants (not armor), dark-brown sleeveless leather vest with bare midriff (not armor), and wears a coarse brown robe with hood, 6'2". Short fangs. Wields a spiked mace, round shield. Brusque attitude, supercilious, and thinks most other species are inferior. Spells - Burning Heal, Fiery Blast / Seeking Flame Strike, Fire Shield, Blazing Weapon, Phosphorus Web, Attribute Boosts, Primal Strikes, Scale Armor pieces.

Shadowfell Village - is on the northeastern edge of the Crevice of Shadows.

Dalton Thatcher - level 65, old Adept-level Adventurer that retired to the village. Widower, uses a massive long bow to fight.

Lucille Taverner - level 75 Professional Mayor - Professional Distiller / Alchemist

Carter Lorimer - Village Protector level 71 Champion Battle Master

Giles Taverner - Level 55 Expert Defender

Jessica Purcell - Level 65 Adapt Rune Stalker

Helen Tasker - Level 68 Adapt

Claude Collier - Level 71 Professional

Hollow Cove Village that is on the northwestern side, but it too far away to help or warn.

Shadow Thorn Village that is on the southern side, but is too far away to help or warn.

Hamlet of Hardfall (outside of Lodenburg) Gigantic
Grandma Drea Dmaw: Barkeep of The Lazy Stag Pub

Cheliferidae Risso Infestation Dungeon.

Dreadmaw the Ravaging Matriarch – Boss - level 63

Toxic Stalker the Noxious - Mini Boss - level 58

VaporStrike the Ravenous - Mini Boss - level 61

The Goats Guild in Hardfell Hamlet

Basic Start Players

Gillam Goreman - lvl 32 / Warrior

Owen Robin - lvl 31 / Rogue

Anna Neville - lvl 31 / Frost Mage

Connor Forcinas - lvl 31 / Ranger

Shawna Jacobsen - lvl 30 / Priest

Advanced start players Random Group in Hardfell Hamlet

Pyralis Kirk - lvl 36 / Ranger / Human (complete ass - dies early)

Samantha Buller - lvl 35 Defensive Warrior / Dark Elf - (belligerent but gets better)

Kevin Beeker - lvl 37 / Ranger / Dark Elf (warry but fair)

Alan Vans - lvl 35 / Fire Mage / Dwarf (gruff but fair)

Laura Mac - lvl 35 / Priest / Human (too nice and gets eaten)

Ron Malone - lvl 34 / Fire Mage / Human (pyromaniac and big talker)

Advanced start The GOAT guild players in Hardfell Hamlet

Gillam Goreman – level 32 Human Warrior

Advanced start Raising Cane Guild players in Hardfell Hamlet

Andy Lambert – level 22 Human Priest

START OF DOM's NPC's (Domenic's notes / 24 Paladins, 240 Dwarves at arms, 50 non-combatants, 1 Gnoll companion =315 NPCs (324 Domenic, Gnoll, NPCs and players / 270 Water and 270 Earth Elementals=540)/players: Daniella, Tony, Kat, Glen, Jimmy, John, daughter, and her boyfriend)

Tony Tomohiahya: Anthony, Virginia, Human, Hunter, male, bear pet.
Large Rock Bear

Fluffy Tomohiahya: Danielle, (Danny) Virginia, Human, Hunter – female,
bear pet, Large Rock Bear

Runartin Stonehammer: Glen, Texas, Dwarf, Warrior – male

Lena Stonehammer: Kitty, Texas, Dwarf, Priestess – female

Nuthar Inurface: Jimmy, Florida, Gnome, Priest / Bruiser – male, 3'2", bald headed, brown eyes, long goatee,

Daiza Karrath: John, Florida, Human, Warrior – male – cheated on Julie while we were dating,

Rinaquenon Karrath: Julie (John's daughter), Florida, Human, Fire Mage – female

Aegis Karrath: Kenneth (Julie's boyfriend), Florida, Human, Warrior – male
-

Bruddol Jadepike: Level 49 NPC Male Dwarf (CLASS TBD) Expert Miner / Architect

Gutirrg Rotfist: Gnoll Blood-brother.

Oksana Oakenstaff: Level 49 - Female – Half Dwarf-Human, Earth Shaman (Twin Sister of Iolas Oakenstaff) and love interest.

Gala Ranit: Level 49 NPC Half Dwarf-Gnome Bard (Will become my Master Scribe and a Lieutenant)

Madori Bryce: Level 49 NPC Female Half Dwarf-Dark Elf - Ranger - Blacksmith from Dwarven Capital Aeroch Nor –

Lieutenant Iolas Oakenstaff: Level 49 Male Shaman - Half-Dwarf-Human, Paladin (Twin Brother of Oksana Ironwood.)

Ferox Ironwood:

Gorran Carabineer: Level Sword Trainer – Half-Dwarf from Telrain.

Lexi Ngwen: Level Half Gnome Female Paladin from his clan.

Lorna Lightstorm: Level Human Female Priest at Telrain (sick of the Human Politics and left the Human area)

Kurin HellHammer: Level 49 - Male Dwarf – Guard Commander at Dwarven Capital Aeroch Nor.

Vudune Tortoris: Level 49 Male Dwarf Warrior (friend of Karin's 2nd in command) at Dwarven Capital Aeroch Nor.

Pounce: Level (Same as Player) Male – Blink Lynx cat companion + eventually a mount

City of Haldale

Tyhra Wulf – Level 37

Race: Dark Elf

Class: Rogue

Profession: Cat Burglar Thief:

5'3, fit build, decent-size bust, shoulder-length dirty-blond hair kept in a tight ponytail, blue eyes, light bronze skin, parkour & gymnastics, fights with lots of daggers and moving around, short-sword strapped across back.

The Thrifty Harbor - Tyhra's shop is called - Halfling children under her care:

The Halfling Brigade:

Deress - Gnome-Human - level 9 - male - wild brown hair, brown eyes, pale skin, coarse white peasant blouse and brown pants. Lanky too-thin body

and is wearing dirty sandals. Has an old busted pair of goggles that lets him see in the dark. Recently joined the group of Gnome-Dark-Elves. Thankful for their help and is showing them the ropes of the city on how to find stuff. While generally friendly and easy going, has a strong distrust for city guards and anyone else other than a halfling.

Hulvyp - Gnome-Dark Elf - level 10 - male - black cropped hair that hangs in eyes, grey eyes, sharp features, short pointy ears, scar that goes down face and across mouth, wearing too-thin coarse green tunic, coarse brown pants, and wearing sandals. Wary of non-halflings, life of hard knocks but tries to protect his friends.

Lignos - Gnome-Dark Elf - level 11 - female - long white-blonde hair, green eyes, pointy ears and sharp face, and lanky body. Dark bronze skin, rail-thin simple off-white dress that too thin for the weather and cuts off at the knees and dirty sandals. Distrusting of anyone except halflings. Mature for her age due to a hard life. Learning her way around the city a bit quicker than Hulvyp.

Juvuss - Gnome-Dwarf - level 9 - male

Shambo - Gnome-Dark Elf - level 11 - female - I used her play wooden sword.

Glippas - Gnome-Dark Elf - level 12 - male

Ifigni - Gnome-Dark Elf - level 11 - female

Assassin's Guild:

Password given by Mike: Tyranus - Unlock all force powers, from the game The Force Unleashed.

Crippled Burrick Pub:

The entrance faces the Plaza of Cinzor Smawunboon, a great Gnome hero that fought off the Northern Raiders shortly after Haldale was founded. The plaza divides the old from lower city.

Lady Ashanti Tuin'Dyrr - level 50 - Dark Elf - Dark Assassin - Leader of the Crippled Burrick pub - f - Elegant - mane of mid-shoulder length brunette, blue eyes, dark bronze skin, white leather chest plate, blue fitted leather pants, brown Celtic-cut leather hooded cloak, brown leather half-skirt, brown shin-high boots, multiple daggers strapped to chest and waste

and in the small of her back.

Garrett Keeper - level 41 - Slayer Assassin - Gnome - m - black-hair, dark-brown eyes, mutton chop mustache, elegant dark-blue, rune-gear leather eyepatch, high-neck leather robe, silver inlay on shoulders, sleeves and collar, brown leather inlaid armor chest, brown four strapped leather girdle, long sword and slim-long dagger, brown shin-higher leather boots.

Altair DeGrand - level 40 - Dark Thug - Gnome - m - whip-cord thin body, older, rough-cut blonde hair, green eyes, physically fit with large arms and V-shaped waist, dark-red leather vest, white long-sleeve dress shirt rolled to elbows, red-leather wide girdle, brown leather armored gauntlets to elbow with steel glove, shoots out poisoned stiletto blades on impact, pinstriped black leather pants, black leather strapped knee-high boots, and dual long daggers on waist.

Ezio Firzene - level 41 - Shadow Slayer - Gnome - black short-cropped hair, boxed beard, dark-brown eyes, black-rune goggles, leather dark-brown top hat, dark-brown leather duster cloak with blood-red interior, ornate blood-red flock coat with inlaid copper lace and buttons, dark-brown knee-high steel-toed boots, dark-brown steel-laced gauntlets wielding a long sword and wide-bladed dagger. Has multiple wide-bladed daggers inside duster cloak.

Pigni Evarwarm - level 21 - f - Gnome - Bartender/Cutpurse - long-blonde hair tied up in a waist-length braid, light-brown eyes, cutie-expressive face used to flirt and being playful as she pickpockets, very-low cut white apron-like top with her large tits nearly falling out, lots of skin, it buttons down to a short black mini-skirt and black-laced sandal. Rune tattoo on her left shoulder that goes down to her forearm.

Drinvik Crusher - level 28 - m - Half-Orc - Bouncer - short pointy ears, gray skin, scraggly shoulder-length dark brown hair, puffy oversized face, hard yellowed eyes, bottom fangs sticking up from lip, six-foot-five, heavily muscled, boiled leather armor, high collar, yard-long thick one-handed cudgel. Gruff and dislikes everyone. Has no sense of humor. Enjoys pummeling people.

Winjas Glilkoo - level 35 - f - Gnome - Cutthroat Assassin in training - long

shoulder-length red hair, green eyes, striking beautiful face, 4' in height, brown leather armor tight fitting, green long-sleeve tunic, iron shoulder pads, buckle gauntlets with daggers hidden in wrists, brown fingerless gloves, wide belt, green leather pants, brown boots, long sword and dagger. Cocky and thinks she's quite cool. Cold blooded attitude and used to winning.

City of Haldale's Gangs:

Bone Breaker Gang - (harasses the workers in old town) Shnepot's calls them the Sewer Suckers.

Julbre Clamboss - level 27 - m - Bruiser - boss - black beard, buzzcut, hard square face, 4'2" in height, golden nose ring, muscular, blocky rune tattoos across neck, chest, and arms, loose dark-brown leather tunic, fur-edged wristbands, heavy leather belt with silver belt buckle, loose leather pants and fold-down pirate boots. Has multiple daggers but mostly pummels his enemies to death - aka brawler.

Ragbeest Klikmort - level 24 - m - officer - Footpad

Shiglos Flammun - level 23 - f - officer - Robber

Henkoog Scaddwast - m

Zimhap Scompek - m

Norip Knimjar - m

Hapbem Mekatpee - m

Gylban Thagneda - f

Shade Makers Gang - (at odds with the Bone Breakers)

Shilnor Blutodleth - level 28 - f - Cutthroat/boss - Dark-Blue hair, dark brown eyes, blue lips, hard face with high cheekbones, burnt scar on left cheek, dark-brown leathers, three-buckle girdle, cross-strap with multiple throwing daggers, short sword, and more daggers at waist, with folded-down pirate boots.

Slopreck Ceddneck - level 23 - m - officer - Robber

Smyndik Timiddwug - level 22 - m - officer - Footpad

Prancing Pony Inn - (where Star and friends are staying at - make joke about the choice)

Jesnep Scoobamwep - Gnome - Bartender - male - fit V-shaped, 4'1", dark brown short-trimmed hair, trimmed full beard, strong handsome face, bright

green top hat, bright green leather vest with double line of copper buttons, baggy dark-grey leather pants, dark-brown boots. Dark-brown leather shoulder strap for coins and an iron-wood Billy Club.

Fogniss Ravukul - Gnome - waitress - female - delicate doll-like features, young face, waving neck-long brown hair, gray eyes, pale skin, brown leather sleeveless bodice, white skirt, strapped brown leather boots who is very friendly.

*Dark Mage Tower - (back northeastern side of temple) - The Dark Spiral Rierimot Penzbec - level 33 - Gnome-Human - Dark Mage - male - short black hair, dark brown eyes, and goatee, 4', magic-tech goggles, blood-red leather flock coat, wool vest, dressy white shirt, and grey leather pants, dark brown boots, one-handed staff with mana accumulation crystal.

Monalkiss Smooddoss - level 50 - Gnome-Dark Elf - Warlock Dark Spiral Supervisor - female - white bangs and black neck-length hair, grey eyes, 3'10", low-cut black leather breast plate with decorative iron bracing, breast and right shoulder cutout that goes up to a high laced neck, ornate steel right shoulder pauldron that wraps around the neck but leaves left shoulder bare. Full black leather sleeves with decorative iron reinforcements. Black leather skirt covering thighs and groin along with decorative iron thigh-high laced black leather boots. Wears dangling earrings of mana accumulation crystals with one large ring on her right hand. A slim long sword and curved dagger at her waist. Intelligent, beautiful, and capable. Likes power and is interested in Star's unique Dark Magic tree. Tries to get him to teach her in trade but accepts when he simply pays for the lesson.

Derwur Clynsmyr - level 103 - Gnome - Warlock Knight - Master of the Dark Spiral in Tulduroc - female - dark-brown long hair in an elegant bun, almond brown eyes, high cheekbones, 3'11", tight fitting short white leather jacket with golden stitching with long sleeves. Matching white leather gloves fingerless gloves. Light-blue leather corset for breastplate that shows off her round breasts. Wide white leather belt with black highlights where potions, dagger, and black pouch sits. Black leather pants with gold stitching and matching black boots.

*Fire Mage Tower - The Burning Spiral - (eastern side of temple)
Tigbusol Slellboom - level 42 - Gnome - Fire Mage - female - long blonde

wavey hair, blue eyes, intense engaging personality with eyes that miss nothing, not a fan of halflings. Wears a loose off-white peasant blouse, wide brown leather girdle with iron reinforced squares holding mana accumulation crystals in the center, brown leather armbands on upper arm and wrists, brown leather pants and boots. Wears a shoulder sheathed long sword with a white-bone hilted dagger at waist.

*Frost Mage Tower - The Frozen Spiral - (western side of temple)
Dufirtit Smalabbriec - level 40 - Gnome - Frost Mage - male - blonde wavey hair, dark brown eyes, rakish beard and mustache, physically fit body, fitted iron chain mail shirt under a dark blue leather frock coat, dark blue leather pants and black boots. Wears long sword and dagger at waist. Serious and capable attitude but doesn't bat an eye at the halflings. Helpful to Star due to his skill and level.

*The Codex of the Magi Spiral - (across the street from the entrance to the temple of light)
Blibbnihil Tigbusol - level 17 - Gnome - Librarian - female - blonde long hair with decorative braids running down each side of her head, blue eyes, fair skin, looks very young, shoulder-less dark green leather dress that laces over breasts and goes down to her knees. Poofy white sleeves go from her upper arm to upper wrists. White tight-fitting tights and ballerina shoes. Friendly and shy but very interested in adventures and skilled magic users. Wants to be a mage.

*Arcane Tower - The Arcane Spiral (back northwest side from temple)
Wabnurt Snokpodert - level 41 - Gnome - Arcane Mage - male - long curly brown hair with streaks of grey, beady brown eyes, scruffy beard, mustache, and eyebrows, still physically fit with wide shoulders. Ornate leather brown and black jacket with poofy arms that hangs open, brown leather vest, brown and black pants, and black leather boots. Wears a ornate long sword with a mana accumulation crystal in hilt on waist. Dashing older Gnome but is overbearing about the Arcane magic tree and refuses to teach Star the tree. He doesn't believe it's a practice halflings should be allowed to learn.

Tunsny Blaiddylaam - level 30 - Gnome - Arcane Mage - female - shoulder-length blonde hair with a ornate braid going down the right side of her head, brown eyes, fair complexion, black choker, elegant face, mana accumulation crystal necklace, black leather jacket reinforced on arms.

Brown shoulder pads with a heavier V-shaped thicker portion of jacket over low-cut front of the jacket. Wears black leather pants and boots. Holds a short staff with a mana accumulation gem on the top.

Temple of Light's Arboretum

Frakwiss Scymhadwym - level 40 - Gnome - Defender Priestess - female - white blonde braided hair, blue eyes, red-cloak that wraps around neck like and falls down back, iron-chest plate, shoulder, and arms. Legs are protected by greaves and red leather boots. Wields a glaive and has a long sword and dagger at her waist. Hard faced, doesn't care for halflings but doesn't have an issue with Dark Magic.

Nedrak Sprognacke - level 43 - Gnome - Sub Leader - Defender Priest - male - tells Frakwiss to do her job.

Leenglem Nukomleen - level 60 - Gnome - Reverent Priestess of Light - female - blonde hair with dual long thick braids that go down to her waist, warm light-brown eyes, older but clear face without lines. Slim with a determined gaze that seems to look into the soul but strong and treats Star fairly even though her assistant doesn't like halflings. Wears a white wool robe gathered at the waist with a blue sash and has a heavy white-fur around her shoulders.

*Squad Leader Zafollbeg is guardsman that is called with his squad to arrest us.

Eastern Gate Guards

Phipni Gladnop - level 43 - Gnome - Squad Leader - female -

Frilbuc Meddnip - level 43 - Gnome - Sergeant - male -

Celwiem Mudeelbis - level 43 - Gnome - trooper - female -

Meddnip Piledbast - level 43 - Gnome - trooper - male -

Mavin Winsmose - level 43 - Gnome - trooper - female -

Zepnoost Phinomwith - level 43 - Gnome - Knight - male -

Clekot Hunimsnest - level 43 - Gnome - Knight - male -

Shnepot's Meat Sticks - (located in Old Town)

Fenagle Shnepot - old female Gnomeling - large wart on nose and cheek. Horrendous looking but very nice and friendly. Used to work in the factories.

She serves:

Boiled Dungeness Crab Legs (Giant Sewer Roaches)

Grilled Sewer Rats (most expensive meat)

Deep Fried Muck Skeeters (a type of tentacle eel called Sewer Muck Skeeters cook in rancid oil)

Other possible meals, slug surprise, mystery stew, spider legs,

Piddigyc's Imbus Cart - (located in Mid City near the inns)

Only serves

-Stuffed Allium-Cream Monster Pockets with flat bread stuff and flipped over.

-Honey Mead - sells Mead Skins to go.

Remtet Piddigy - Gnome - male - boisterous and friendly. Older with gray-brown wild hair, bushy eyebrows, and scraggly beard, light blue eyes, big nose, and talks really loudly. Dressed in an apron and tight-fitting t-shirt with green leather pants. Is missing an arm but now has a mechanical arm that he uses to cook with and has different attachments he uses instead of a hand. Wears green-lensed goggles.

Viscount Fendano Hollysharp the fourth - Gnome, GMT (Golem Magic-Tech) Assault Leader of the Eastern Region's Imperial Forces), wife was a Dwarf, has lands and a mansion outside of Haldale (big farming and military city.)

Duke Dukey - (Livery red and black, symbol is a stack of iron ingots - looks like a pile of shit)

Vicnu Ranzeck - Sub Leader of Dukey's Dark Fist - level 45 - Dark Elf - Shadow Swordsman - Black long hair, thin mustache, beady dark brown eyes, thin and muscular, with a rat-looking face, foppish attitude of a lowborn noble,

Ghorli Biengus - level 43 - Dark Elf - Shadow Scout - female -

Curshala Shruvriar - level 43 - Dark Elf - Shadow Scout - male -

Curshala Nulzih - level 43 - Dark Elf - female - rear door Squad Leader

Bhicoul Pierthuzuh - level 43 Dark Elf - male - front door Squad Leader

Slaifaddwuck's Grill - (located in Upper City) - (meeting Lady Ashanti and her magic engineer researcher for magic seeds/G.O.A.L.M.s at 8 sharp in the morning)

Hignor Hurkoort - magic tech engineering on planting and G.O.A.L.M.s

Tulduroc:

Tulduroc Guard Patrol:

Piknat Jeeniddwig (G.O.A.L.E.M.) - Guard Squad Leader –

Military Button Flock Coat Red, black pants, and boots

Gilvick Kininzbaget (G.O.A.L.E.M.) - Basher Guard - male -

Haibner Manerock (G.O.A.L.E.M.) - male - Basher Guard

Smaagla Piveensnut (G.O.A.L.E.M.) - female - Cadarea Crossbowler

Cidarwart Asillnort (G.O.A.L.E.M.) - male -

Zymboc Pevolnip - Team Leader of the city guards

Players pissed off at Brat Pack at the Guzzling Goose:

Kair Nawka - Gnomeling (Dark Elf/Gnome) - female -

Samuel Uffta - Dark E

KaPir Rivoir

Samuel Lianthus

Zwicky Andreas

Player pissed at the Slippery Shaft:

Marie Mona - Gnomeling (Dwarf/Gnome) - female -

Player Killers (Goon Squad):

Juntalr Crusher - level 45 - Human - Defensive Warrior - male - Goon Squad - large War Hammer and Shield.

Grymmy Utron - level 44 - Dark Elf - Shadow Priest - male - Goon Squad -

Girnak Seinvru - level 44 - Dark Elf - Shadow Ranger- Female - Goon Squad -

Neldor Farblaster - level 45 - Human - Fire Mage - male - Goon Squad -

Eldia FrostBlade - level 45 - Dark Elf - Frost Mage/DPS Warrior - female - Goon Squad - used two-handed greatsword

Northern Gate City Guards:

Gnigbec Sleemjavat - level 50 - Gnome - Scribe - female

Cenjic Didanzbist - level 60 - Gnome - Knight Leader - male

Manjess Gnoobrat - level 55 - Gnome - Knight - male

Pooddla Klykier - level 55 - Gnome - Knight - female

Wunbuc Ridarbem - level 55 - Gnome - Knight - male

Nyddwe Jaahikmom - level 55 - Gnome - Knight - Female

Leader of the city guards in Tulduroc:

Baron Blufopwur Phidwawoop

Noble in charge of the daily management of the City of Tulduroc:

Count Hever Habubbror

Codex of the Magi Spiral:

Nelkit Phummivir - level 37 - Gnome - Librarian / new Fire Mage - male - clerk at countertop - brown wavy hair, hazel eyes, clean shaven, white peasant shirt and brown leather pants with a gray frock coat, friendly but shocked to see a well-dressed Halfling asking for the master of the tower.

Thidli Blulaakmar - level 57 - Gnome - Librarian Supervisor - female - Arcane Mage - Dark shoulder-length hair, blue eyes, white and purple colors for leather pants and loose peasant blouse, with leather frock coat, nice but has the prejudice of low expectations from Halflings - expects that Star is wanting to purchase his class.

Lord Pewyrkot Linienkkaack - level 112 - Gnome - The Codex of the Magi Spiral Master / Battle Mage - male - white crazy wild hair, bushy mustache, and pointy imperial beard - beady dark-brown eyes, bushy white eyebrows,

imperial - gold and silver inlaid robes, is an arrogant bastard and can't imagine Star would have the right skills, believer's he's trying to purchase the class with his money. When he finally looks at his classes, he's in shock and self denial. Then tries to block Star via requiring a ridiculous sum of Lesser Eldritch crystals.

Clolvuc Mylimdart - level 107 - Gnome - previous Battle Mage / Arcane Mage - male -

Snyunklur Fnaselbis - level 130 Gnome - Magi President of the Academy of Technomancy -

Great Library ground floor Librarian:

Scemzast Glohieppai - level 53 - Gnome - Librarian / Frost Mage - male - dark brown hair with gray highlights around ears, salt, and pepper goatee, piercing blue eyes, hates Halflings and most other races but his racism is offset by desire for others to learn, not part of Azure Skull Mage Cult but knows they keep watch over certain sections of the library, tries to dissuade research into spacial magic, teleportation, or portals.

Gátt - search word used in the Phonograph looking machines to find information on Portals.

Azure Skull Mage Cult:

Phewelbe Lamwuss - level 63- Gnome - Sub-Leader Arcane / Frost Mage - female - shaved head, green eyes, frost queen beautiful, wields dual wands, Sister of Tigbam.

Frenjac Baimdist - level 57 - Gnome - G.O.A.L.E.M. Squad Leader - Swordsman - male -

Loress Flubappiel - level 55 - Gnome - Basher Guard (G.O.A.L.E.M.) - female -

Nelkit Phummivir - level 60 - Gnome - Assistant Sub-Leader / Frost / Arcane Mage - male - slicked back dark brown hair, ponytail, brown eyes, short beard, blue and purple leather robes, and blue leather pants, two-handed staff

Smulmar Rabkamaac - level 57 - Gnome - G.O.A.L.E.M. Squad Leader -

Swordsman - male - working with Nelkit.

Lallmaivir - level 58 - Gnome - Another Mage Assistant Sub Leader - male

-

Klivynklarm - level 59 - Gnome - Another Mage Assistant Sub Leader - female -

Azure Skull guards for the secret entrance:

Gankost Gnavubnist - level 58 - Gnome - Assistant Sub-Leader -

Frost/Arcane Mage - Male -

Smipwis Clihedlar - level 55 - Gnome - G.O.A.L.E.M. Swordsman - male -

Azure Skull at he guard desk in the center of the facility:

Cavedbas Weemdidido - level 63 - Gnome - Assault Leader - Frost/Arcane Mage - female -

Pogbem Gnyfebnim - level 60 - Gnome - G.O.A.H.A.M. Spell Knight - male -

Part of Mage Group patrolling invisibly inside the corridors:

Jaddack Hoserbort - level 59 - Gnome - Assistant Sub-Leader -

Frost/Arcane Mage - male -

G.O.A.L.E.M. Knight in center of Cavern:

Tigbam Lamwuss - level 65 - Gnome - Elite G.O.A.H.A.M. Spell Knight - male - Brother of Phewelbe.

Researcher Mages:

Blebla Fleenbum - level 60 - Gnome - Elite Researcher Supervisor -

Arcane/Frost Mage - female -

Gnykist Bemjobooss - level 60 - Gnome - Elite Researcher - Arcane/Frost Mage - male -

Azure Skull Prisoners:

Yesnia Umevalur - level 23 - Gnome-Light Elf - Scrounger- looks like Zinn. long honey-blonde hair, pale blue eyes, wearing rags. Star stops her from being pounded to death by Mage Snefelbess.

Ebrika Yinzumin - level 24 - Gnome-Dwarf - Scrounger- thick curvy figure

- dark black shoulder-length curly hair, green eyes, wearing rags.

Fraddak Eilrona - level 17 - Gnome-Light Elf - Scavenger- dirty blonde hair, hazel eyes, clean shaven face, younger male.

Thunglet Cavechin - level 31 - Gnome-Dwarf - Cook - ratty brown hair, light blue eyes, rough, weathered skin from a harsh life.

The Pillagers Rest:

Gilwos Nomegni - level 33 - Gnome - Waitress - Gearhead (Student at the Academy of Technomancy) - curly blonde hair puffed up into a bushy ponytail held with a wooden headband, blue eyes, white long-sleeve blouse, brown leather pants, cross-shoulder sheath that holds a long dagger and an empty sheath for her oversized wrench, complex equipment belt with pouches, blue lensed goggles, brown leather apron. Gearhead Mechanical Helper - She has a mechanical arm strapped to the left side of her back that functions as a third arm. 3'8" tall. Friendly but over into gears and building mechanical constructions, but talks too fast in a high-pitched voice as she serves food.

Coat of Arms Shop for purchasing Crests and Banners:

Lady Ifiebnol Phoiemmus - level 63 - Gnome - Lower Noble Administrator - older lady, shoulder length black hair, blue eyes

Auction House in Tulduroc:

Torir Knansmuss - level 70 - Gnome -Trader - male -

90 Death Lepus/Killer Rabbits - Rani's people:

Inar Nikmal (Admin name - Rani Lamkin) Level 38 Swordswoman - Human – sub-skill – Rogue – ex-Royal Investigator – (Nordic Guardian) brown shoulder-length hair, hazel eyes, unremarkable face (girl next door) and stands 5'7". Brown leathers and a charcoal gray cloak. (Star knows that she's an admin.) Born in California. Starts as a Nightmare Tree / Race of Death Lepus or Killer Bunnies.

Death Lepus:

Shyriane Inorlagar - level 27 - Death Lepus - Huntress - female - the first female adult that Rani meets and saves.

Nemorsha Mazlarn - level 8 - Death Lepus - Child - female - the first girl that Rani meets and saves after being stabbed.

Grynneth Igarixar - level 8 - Death Lepus - Child - female - one of the girls that Rani first meets and saves.

Ynisova Grularax - level 8 - Death Lepus - Child - female - one of the girls that Rani first meets and saves.

Vylysh Fyznear - level 8 - Death Lepus - Child - female - one of the girls that Rani first meets and saves.

Elrinera Voxyx - level 8 - Death Lepus - Child - female - one of the girls that Rani first meets and saves.

Southmore Village (Outside of Myathlune):

Scarlett Trenton - Level 31 - Light Elf Rogue/Swashbuckler - female - amber red shoulder-length hair, fit and slim, blue eyes, v-cut brown leather vest, leather underwear, Pteruges skirt and shoulder pads, dual short swords, backup dagger, and Bandolier of Iron Knives. IRL: Kelly Folz, single in story, working as a data entry supervisor in Lombard, Illinois.

The Tasty Grotto:

Luvon Jovyre - level 40 - Bartender / Warrior - Light Elf - male - graying blond hair, green eyes, and clean shaven. An older Light Elf with several old battle scars and a limp. Pleasant and easy-going attitude. He's the Headman of the small village.

Nushala Liaphyra - level 37 - Barmaid / Ranger - Light Elf - female - graying brunette, short hair in a pixie cut, and blue eyes. An old Light Elf with a pleasant but no-nonsense attitude. She's blind in the left eye and has scarring down the left side of her face.

Yinphyra's Smithy:

Sundamar Yinphyra - level 41 - Blacksmith / Warrior - Light Elf - male - black shoulder-length hair, blue eyes, clean shaven, weathered skin, very muscular and lean. Middle-aged, he's not a big talker but easy to get along with as long as not ignorant or pushy.

Lierin Rohice - level 39 - Assistant Smith / Rogue - Light Elf - female -

dark brown shoulder-length hair, hazel eyes. Middle-aged, she's married to Sundamar, smooth tongue, and might pickpocket rude customers.

General Store:

Sorisana Rohice - level 31 - Shop Keeper / Farmer - Light Elf - female - long sandy-blond hair, brown eyes, curvy figure used to hard work. Savvy but rough country peasant personality.

Old fortress stronghold of Watch Hill's ruins Goblin Mini-Bosses:

Stirk BoneSplitter - Level 41 - Goblin - War Leader of the Ravaging Slayers - male - six foot tall - muscles and scars, bald head and red eyes with enchanted fetish skulls hanging from his crude iron armor. Uses jagged axe of blood letting.

Glulsolx Rotlung - level 39 - Goblin - Air Shaman - male - older with black mow hawk, red eyes, and enchanted bone armor, finger bones pierced through the flesh of his chest. Skull-topped staff with feathers and bones with a mana accumulation crystal.

Haheasb Fleshkeeper - level 37 - Goblin - Slave Master - male - overweight with greasy black scraggly hair, red eyes, red slaver banded armor, jagged slaver's blade.

PUG Scarlett runs into during quest:

Mahouneko Bilihten - level 30 - Light Elf - Warrior - male - dark brown ruff-cut hair, goatee, and hazel eyes. Weapons: daggers, long sword, shield, bronze breastplate, bronze thigh pads, brown leather pants and boots.

Trynne Naughtymoon - level 31 - Light Elf - Priest - female - shoulder-length sandy-blond hair, blue eyes, two-handed healing staff, dagger, and white-brown leather/linen robes and brown boots.

Fanger Surreally - level 29 - Light Elf - Rogue - male - short blond hair, brown eyes, short trimmed beard, dagger, short, and sword with a short bow over his shoulder. Wearing dark brown leather armor and pants.

Ulfhednar Guild (Vikings):

Jarl Vánagrandr (nickname Vana) – level 45 - Dark Elf-Frost Giant – male – Battle Shamans (house also has Runic Warriors and Weapon Smiths) - black rough-cut shoulder-length hair, dark-brown eyes, full black beard, 6'1",

dark blue-black skin, horned Viking helm, V-shaped, iron breastplate, chainmail-leather armor mesh, Jötun's Bane is capable of changing shape between a two-handed war axe, or two large one-handed jagged War Axe, has major bleed effect that can't be healed until it runs its course, freeze effect that stuns on a successful hit for a second and has Berserks in fights. Two Savage Hand-Axe of Bloodletting. Star asks for them to be his mercenaries. Combat Mount Giant Frost Wolf - Hati and two summoned combat pets Geri and Freki are Ice Wolves, IRL name is Colton, ex-military, special forces, Airforce. Aggersborg. IRL name is Colton Geyer.

Oldman Athos - level 43 - male human – battle shaman - advanced start makes jokes about how old he is (age 83) like meeting Jesus, drinking wine with Caesar, always remembers the plan forgets what he had for breakfast fighter/healer heavy armor polearm basically paladin make up IRL name if needed 5'10, peppered hair and beard, light brown eyes, average body build.

Ursa Ironballs – level 44 - female – Oni-Elf – Valkyrie Warden - nightmare start extremely high urge for money, fashion souls, take jokes and dish them out, would learn most skills unless really tedious to level (like would get healing but not nature) prefers defense spells Fighter one-handed axe always has a gold chain, mostly black medium armor gold decals everywhere make up IRL name if needed white hair red tips dreadlocks, 6'7, hazel eyes, moderately buffed.

Legate Vargr - OFFICER of Bear Squad – level 45 - male - beast-kin wolf – Berserker - advanced start Anti-social with new people, do what's needed, extreme in-depth knowledge of Warhammer40k, focused spear and heavy shield with backup sword fighter/summoner anything with summons really, he enjoys making his own mobs for fights, Heavy armor make up IRL name 6'4, black as midnight fur, purple eyes, muscular build

Merek Frostborn – level 44 - male - 25yo 6,3 210lbs blonde long ponytail and braided beard. Race: Human Class: Battle Shaman - uses a Halberd and a short sword. Skills: Holy Light (blinds enemies for a short period of time) Sacred grounds (Any undead near Merek will become drastically weaker and take passive damage allies will gain a passive defense and health buff while in the circle) Personality: witty and obnoxious but serious when the time calls make up IRL name

Odin Eriksson – OFFICER of Wolf Squad (nickname Dan) - male – crayon eater of Stockmar Beeswax Stick - light elf/frost giant – Battle Shaman - nightmare start Viking and Norse Pagan, leader when the time calls for it, would learn basically any skill he could access and level, jack of all trades type of guy, ex-military Marine Infantry, will use ice magic in PVE and if used on him otherwise hates it dual wields Dane axes with hammer head on the backside, back up weapon Great Sword, carries throwing axes for range and rope drat grapple, jack of all trades for skills (will learn anything) once able he crafts all his own weapons and gear Thick Medium armor, bear hide cloak, armored hood normally otherwise open face helmet to show off beard, black and silver with blue trims 7'3, thick braided black hair with long black braided beard, muscular build with blue tinted skin and scar across left eye (but can still see), frost blue eyes, if it matters large dick lol real life name Dan Romins. Wants a centaur mount!

Tyrese Thesavior - male - Dwarf – Battle Warden - advanced start hatred for all cavalry so normally the best for anti cavalry fights will still use a horse if needed, fear of life like statues the more life like the worse it is, youngest for the group so doesn't know a lot of old jokes pike and tower shield (for dwarves) shirtless all the time heavy armor, healing and fire magic make up IRL name makes him as tall as he can, muscular arms, dark brown dreads with thick beard, brown eyes (edited) Maximus

Quagmirus Dark Elf-Frost Giant- male - Battle Chanter - advanced start loves to flirt around, normally starts up songs, usually has games of whack fuck played on him when he says something stupid Bard if he can find one a piano, but normally violin, crossbow and mace, light armor anything that has an open chest make up IRL name 5'9, athletics build, black hair with white tips

Sophia Bailey - female – Valkyrie - if possible, wants to be a half elf otherwise Light Elf-Frost Giant - said whatever start you wanna give her basically a tomboy, strong woman that won't take shit from someone she doesn't know, very blunt, normally smacking Maximus, is bi ranger/archer class always goes for fancy looking bows and longsword med armor loves sneaking said "the author can make her IRL name I'm too lazy for that" 5'2, strong woman with long black hair to her waist light skin tones fine toned ass and perky breast (edited) Having sex with Jarl. (Has the hots for

General Dell and fights Kenzie for him)

Vitalis Murwood – female - Race Frost Giant-Human Valkyrie - part of the amazons Class archer. Personality sassy and funny but ruthless like she will kill you but will have a sassy and funny little statement about it. She is attuned to the forest and can track better than anyone thanks to her Amazon ancestors. Very earthy. Gear a cross bow and wrist guards, a leather breast plate and a round shield Real world name: Lorelei Patterson ... tall medium toned skin dark brown curly hair pulled back and cascading down her back. Sexy but not overt green eyes Almond shape high cheek bones pouty lips (A bit of a whiner puss about being a hardcore team player)

Anthony Grimhawk – male – Berserker - kind of crazy guy that tends to spend all his time in MMORPGs crafting of find ways to mix and match spell to find op combos. James Deathridge he was a drill Sgt in the military and tends to come off as a hard ass.

Smash Bro - Chris – male – Battle Warden - he doesn't care how you name him in game or out of game Super space marine fan boy who always covers himself in heavy armor and basically, raises Str, Dex, and Con mainly, big ass axe, sword, or hammer whichever does more damage and if he can get away with it and still move easy a tower shield always makes his chars tall and built like brick shit houses. He hardly ever says anything but when he does its something helpful or a short sentence of something important.

Tyr – (added guildmate) – Frost Giant – male – Battle Shaman

Freyja – (added guildmate) – Frost Giant – female – Valkyrie

Tinkers Guild and House of Demiurge;

Braid Born - Level 38 – Gearhead Engineer/Trader Merchant/Rune Crafter – Gnome-Hogboon – black scruffy hair, black trimmed goatee, crazy green eyes, wider pointy ears and very small 3'4", bulbous reddish-tinge nose, a slight reddish cast to his skin, slim with high Agility, brown leather social work-pants, knee high heavy iron-toed boots, brown leather social dressy long-sleeve shirt, heavy black leather social frock coat with red strip over buttons, backpack of holding, iron bucket helm with mana light, equipment belt of a workman, bunch of tools hanging from it, compound crossbow with two arrows, hand slider crank (like guards) and a long dagger on the

end. Wears either green gearhead goggles or a full-face plague doctor mining mask.

Tethys – level 38 – Assistant / Melee Fighter – Shoggothian – female – dark blue – humongous breasts, glowing yellow eyes, multiple tentacles for hands, legs, feet, hands, and fingers. Companion of Braid Born.

Mechanoids of House of Demiurge:

Benajah Emanuel – level 35 - Sub-Leader Warrior – Mechanoid – male - meets Braid at gate in book 13

Abiel Eugene – level 33 – Lead Gearhead Engineer – Mechanoid – female - talks to Braid about the new G.O.A.H.E.M. construction plans for a Steel Mechanized Army.

Virgil Sterling – level 31 – Head Admin / Personal Butler – Mechanoid – male – meets Braid at the stronghold to bring him food and information.

Abimael Arthur – level 36 – House Keeper / Head Chef – Mechanoid – female – cleans rooms and makes meals for Braid.

Timothy Mannerings – level 30 – Guard – Mechanoid – male – guarding door to keep.

Augustus Cuttle – level 30 – Guard – Mechanoid – male – guarding door to keep.

Mavromichali Lucke – level 33 –Gearhead Engineer/Smith – Mechanoid – male - preparing new armor parts for the new G.O.A.H.E.M.

Myathlune Sewers:

Gnager Nezume – level 33 – Rat Kin – Plague Shaman – Class: Spider Heretic - grey-silver fur, green eyes, dressed in red, white, and brown silk robes. Skull topped staff with fetish charmed bones, feathers, and gems, and bone daggers. House: Order of the Sunlit Web. Spider Combat Mount: Sherry. IRL name is Jonathan.

Lonsalindel

Crimson Bite Clan

Big Red: Level 37 – Red Wolf-Kin - Warrior – male – 6’ 1”. IRL name Tony Weber, brother of Zeven, from Fox River Grove, Illinois. Low-Light

vision.

Berion Graypelt - level 36 - Wolf Kin - male - Shadow Hunter -

Koray Coldtooth - level 37 - Wolf Kin - Essence Shaman - female -

Brady GiantFang - level 36 - Wolf Kin - male - DPS Warrior -

Bertulf Mooncoat - level 35 - Wolf Kin - female - Shadow Stalker (Rogue) -

Lonsalindel Guard Patrol

Arcadius Onyxmane - level 45 - Bear Kin - Squad Leader - male - Sword Striker -

Thorben Boldpaw - level 43 - Panther Kin - female - Blade Striker -

Burney Growlers - level 43 - Wolf Kin - male - Blade Berserker -

Orbjorn Bloodmaw - level 43 - Bear Kin - female - Guardian -

Blackfell Lockjaw - level 43 - Bear Kin - female - Guardian -

Wolk Kin Bard Troupe - The RabidClaw Troupe of 11 - Shadowbite Clan:

Telaris Paletooth - level 53 - leader - Bard -

Mikain Paletooth - second in command

Redicur Madfur

Lucdak Paletooth

Tauroneo Madfur

Loerick Paletooth

Macenik Madfur

Nikkoen Halfpaw

Embry Madfur

Deboule Halfpaw

Rodernek Halfpaw

Squish Bean - Michael - level 32 - Dhampir- Sahn'Ghuin (Light Elf - Human) - female - Mesmerizing Huntress - 5'2" - straight black long hair, violet eyes, black leather pants, black iron shoulder pauldrons, fingerless gauntlets, purple breastplate, black-leather Victorian Ruffled Dress, thigh-high black leather boots, dark gray front opening hooded robe (Jedi Robes),

Daggers, ocarina (flute), Mortalitas Blade-Lyre of Sanguinarian (violin - bow/axe/dagger/Wire Rune-Blade), Combat Pet- Hobbs - Frost Tiger - level 24, weakness in sun, Spell- Charming Mez, Blood Domination (limit to 10 before having the second part of their Nightmare quest completed=,

Dracul Apep - Ray - level 32 - Dhampir Sahn'Drau (Dark Elf - Human) - male - black wavy hair, violet eyes, black goatee, horrific muscle-grizzle face/body, clawed fingers, black leather frock coat, purple silk shirt, black leather pants, iron-toed dress boots, dark gray frock coat, dark gray top-hat a black funeral veil over face. This will be covered with blood red-plate armor crafted from his own blood (can recall at any time), Blood Knight - Coven of Sahn'Draughein - Night Blade of Lord Sanguinarian (two-handed oversized red blade) - Combat Pet - Rend – Deep Jackdaw - level 24, weakness in sun.

Splaet-VonDuekey

From Haldale Raid (20):

Vicnu Ranzeck Sub Leader of Dukey's Dark Fist - level 45 - Dark Elf - Shadow Swordsman - Black long hair, thin mustache, beady dark brown eyes, thin and muscular, with a rat-looking face, floppish attitude of a lowborn noble,

Patrol (2)

Ghorli Biengus - level 43 - Dark Elf - Shadow Scout - female -

Curshala Shruvriar - level 43 - Dark Elf - Shadow Scout - male -

Rear Guard (4)

Curshala Nulzih - level 43 - Dark Elf - female - rear door Squad Leader
Additional 3 troopers - 40, 41, 40

Front Guard (4)

Bhicoul Pierthuzuh - level 43 Dark Elf - male - front door Squad Leader
Additional 3 troopers - 40, 40, 41

Survivors from Thyflumoor Village - (Dark Bane Troopers)

Dhunvohe Shrailnumiud - Level 50 - Dark Elf - Assault-Leader Shadow
DPS Warrior - male - Baernathrad Panther mount named Scar,

Kerve Shrigruth - level 49 - Dark Elf - Shadow Assassin - female -

Ocimu Beirsa - level 49 - Dark Elf - Shadow Assassin - female

Mashori Nonvriun - level 48 - Dark Elf - Shadow Priest - male -

Group of Shadow Rangers and Shadow Swordsmen in Barracks:
Irudro Telzoth - sub leader

Dracrod Wiumrie - level 48 - Dark Elf - Sub Leader Expert Shadow Stalker
- female -

Molve Weromot - level 46 - Dark Elf - Squad Leader - Specialist Shadow
Stalker - female - blonde cornrolls in a tight short braid with blue eyes.

Okzos Eerdroc - level 46 - Dark Elf - Specialist Shadow Stalker – female

Ushrohi Pinrit - level 46 - Dark Elf - Specialist Shadow Stalker - female

Donvys Chienvri - level 46 - Dark Elf - Specialist Shadow Stalker - male-
blonde cornrolls in a tight short braid with blue eyes.

Indrais Sudivreth - level 46 - Dark Elf - Specialist Shadow Stalker - male-

Dyrlo Kulra - level 46 - Dark Elf - Squad Leader - Specialist Shadow
Stalker - male

Bhazrot Kannel - level 46 - Dark Elf - Squad Leader - Specialist Shadow
Stalker - male - blonde cornrolls in a tight short braid with blue eyes.

Byrre Pegilnith - level 46 - Dark Elf - Specialist Shadow Stalker - female -

Grulra Cidondiu - level 46 - Dark Elf - Specialist Shadow Stalker - female

Ruklol Ilvah - level 47 - Dark Elf - Fire Mage - female

Ohumvi Meisunni - level 47 - Dark Elf - Fire Mage - female

Ghunoss Crisiesh - level 47 - Dark Elf - Fire Mage – male

Mage in charge of Vines and victims

Irunvo Niuldragis - level 57 - Dark Elf - Arcane Mage - female -

Ocmir Zardror - level 51 - Dark Elf - Fire Mage - male - Assistant

Duke Dukey's Steward

Ecokla Mevnee - level 65 - Dark Elf - Steward - purchases supplies for stronghold

Gate Guards

Nershobe Sivriur - level 60 - Dark Elf - Knight Commander

Ocmir Zardror - level 55 - Dark Elf - Heavy Men-at-Arms - male - Crossbow, long sword, and shield.

Bucnomi Wigro - level 55 - Dark Elf - Heavy Men-at-Arms - male - Crossbow, long sword, and shield.

Assadu Biurian - level 55 - Dark Elf - Heavy Men-at-Arms - male - Crossbow, long sword, and shield.

Moklamu Khundri - level 55 - Dark Elf - Heavy Men-at-Arms - female - Crossbow, long sword, and shield.

Bhusecu Shiegerai - level 55 - Dark Elf - Heavy Men-at-Arms - female - Crossbow, long sword, and shield.

Grubbing Boar Inn

Drielra Sedruc - level 32 - Dark Elf - Shadow Stalker Ranger/Bartender - male - brown eyes, long stringy hair, brown skinned, lean and scarred body.

Daksome Sedruc - level 31 - Dark Elf-Human - Essence Shaman/Barmaid - female

Vyrzie Sedruc - level 13 - Dark Elf-Human - Barmaid/Tailor - female/Daughter

Uknh Cizisa - level 36 - Dark Elf-Dwarf - farmer/smith

Khenca Cizisa - level 15 - Dark Elf-Dwarf - son of Uknh.

Thoronjhi

Count Khothrurth Dhomidel is in charge of running the city for king and queen.

Countess Bhidrur Dhomidel

King Thukleth Nozru

Queen Ghebude Nozru

Princess Phodonva Nozru

Prince Bhyguth Nozru

Thoronjhi Western Gate:

Mornoli Thundrian - level 73 - Dark Elf – Scribe

The Gruuting Mage

Tobazco Davnurot - level 21 - Dark Elf - Waitress - female - tired and worn-down looking but friendly.

Thoronjhi Codex of the Magi Spiral

Anuha Bizainrot - level 47 - Dark Elf - Librarian / Frost Mage - female - clerk at countertop - brown pulled back hair in a bun, blue eyes, ice blue robes. Cordial but shocked to see a Halfling with the title of Battlemage. Requests manager to approve our access to upper levels of the library.

Anriha Pholdish - level 63 - Dark Elf - Librarian Supervisor - male - Arcane Mage - Short black wavy hair, blue eyes, blue and purple robes, looks down at me and is prejudice thinking I purchased my title. Part of the Azure Skulls. Grudgingly allows me access to upper levels of the library when he sees Braid's Spell Knight with Azure Skull colors and even gives us special access to the level we need via a freight elevator.

Thoronjhi Great Library:

Drubsourn Khesri - level 55 - Dark Elf - Librarian Receptionist - Arcane Mage - female - long white hair, purple eyes, blue and purple robes of an Azure Skull.

Azure Skull Raid Leader that stops us in the tunnels:

Idrane Craget - level 57 - Dark Elf - Sub-Leader Arcane / Frost Mage - female - Expert Azure Skull –

Meekwood Village outside of Amyalneas

Rosanhi Iarroris - level 21 - Light Elf - female - Waitress / Herbalist - young and cheerful, long-brown hair, green eyes.

Jhaeros Iarsandoral - level 41 - Light Elf - Male - Bartender / Retired

Warrior - gruff and friendly, stringy-white hair, blue eyes, clean shaven, on the older side.

Southmore Village

Scarlett Trenton - Level 33 - Light Elf Rogue/Swashbuckler - female - amber red shoulder-length hair, fit and slim, blue eyes, v-cut brown leather vest, leather underwear, Pteruges skirt and shoulder pads, dual short swords, backup dagger, and Bandalier of Iron Knives. IRL: Kelly Folz, single in story, working as a data entry supervisor in Lombard, Illinois.

Local Quest:

Clear out the Goblins that have made a stronghold in the old fortress of Watch Hill's ruins.

Stirk BoneSplitter - Level 41 - Goblin - War Leader of the Ravaging Slayers - male - six foot tall - muscles and scars, bald head and red eyes with enchanted fetish skulls hanging from his crude iron armor. Uses giant two-handed jagged axe of blood letting.

Glulsolx Rotlung - level 39 - Goblin - Air Shaman - male - older with black mowhawk, red eyes, and enchanted bone armor, finger bones pierced through the flesh of his chest. Skull-topped staff with feathers and bones with a mana accumulation crystal.

Haheasb Fleshkeeper - level 37 - Goblin - Slave Master - male - overweight with greasy black scraggly hair, red eyes, red slaver banded armor, jagged slaver's blade.

Southmore Village - The Tasty Grotto

Luvon Jovyre - level 40 - Bartender / Warrior - Light Elf - male - graying blond hair, green eyes, and clean shaven. An older Light Elf with several old battle scars and a limp. Pleasant and easy-going attitude. He's the Headman of the small village.

Nushala Liaphyra - level 37 - Barmaid / Ranger - Light Elf - female - graying brunette, short hair in a pixie cut, and blue eyes. An old Light Elf with a pleasant but no nonsense attitude. She's blind in the left eye and has scarring down the left side of her face.

Southmore Village - Yinphyra's Smithy:

Sundamar Yinphyra - level 41 - Blacksmith / Warrior - Light Elf - male - black shoulder-length hair, blue eyes, clean shaven, weathered skin, very muscular and lean. Middle-aged, he's not a big talker but easy to get along with as long as not ignorant or pushy.

Lierin Rohice - level 39 - Assistant Smith / Rogue - Light Elf - female - dark brown shoulder-length hair, hazel eyes. Middle-aged, she's married to Sundamar, smooth tongue, and might pickpocket rude customers.

Southmore Village - General Store:

Sorisana Rohice - level 31 - Shop Keeper / Farmer - Light Elf - female - long sandy-blond hair, brown eyes, curvey figure used to hard work. Savvy but rough country peasant personality.

PUG Scarlett runs into during quest:

Mahouneko Bilihten - level 30 - Light Elf - Warrior - male - dark brown ruff-cut hair, goatee, and hazel eyes. Weapons: daggers, long sword, shield, bronze breastplate, bronze thigh pads, brown leather pants and boots.

Trynne Naughtymoon - level 31 - Light Elf - Priest - female - shoulder-length sandy-blond hair, blue eyes, two-handed healing staff, dagger, and white-brown leather/linen robes and brown boots.

Fanger Surreally - level 29 - Light Elf - Rogue - male - short blond hair, brown eyes, short trimmed beard, dagger and shortsword with a short bow over his shoulder. Wearing dark brown leather armor and pants.

Southmore Village - Rescued female Light Elves:

Ava Roric - level 28 - Light Elf - female - farmer -

Mylaerla Ilineiros - level 27 - Light Elf - female - Hunter

Yrathea Oricaryn - level 31 - Light Elf - Swordswoman/guard

Irhaal Ludithas - level 31 - Light Elf - Swordswoman/guard

Siraye Magqen - level 33 - Light Elf - female - Tinker Trader

Phyrra Lukian - level 26 - Light Elf - female - Herbalist - mousy-looking

Sillavana Biren - level 24 - Light Elf - female - Gatherer

Daethie Luxisys - level 26 - Light Elf - female - farmer

Rosanhi Aezumin - level 32 - Light Elf - female - Potter

Yalanue Mirasandoral - level 33 - Light Elf - female - Enchanter

Ealirel Kelsys - level 34 - Light Elf - female - Rogue/Thief

Ciradyl Vabella - level 30 - Light Elf - female - Warrior

Keya Uriqirelle - level 22 - Light Elf - female - Apprentice Tailor

Halanaestra Fafaren - level 34 - Light Elf - female - Spice Trader

Geminara Qinhorn - level 26 - Light Elf - female - Sailer

About the Author

Jason A. Cheek, the author of The World & The Last Paladin series, works in Germany due to his current job assignment. He lives with his wife and daughter, along with their two dogs Monty and Melow (rescue dogs from Greece). Originally from West Palm Beach, Jason lived most of his early life in Florida, except for when he was serving in the military or traveling for his job.

Always feeling like he was born out of time from an early age, Jason's interested ran the gauntlet of martial arts, swords, archery, Dungeon & Dragons, the SCA (Society of Creative Anachronisms), reading Sci-Fi, and Fantasy. After leaving the service, Jason taught himself computer support and networking by his hobby of computer gaming.

Working eighty plus hours a week as a waiter, Jason put himself through college, studying to be an Occupational Therapist Assistant. In the end, he ended up becoming an Information Technology Professional due to his many hours of playing first person shooters and strategy games at LAN parties around the United States or logged into Anarchy Online and World of Warcraft leading his guilds.

Excelling in his career as an Information Technology Specialist, Jason was able to get a job traveling the world. During that time, he became interested in motorcycles, skydiving, white water rafting, scuba diving, and other extreme sports. Moving to Germany after meeting his Polish wife, he taught himself German and Polish, settling down in Europe with his current job and started writing books.

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Book Nine – Into the Breach

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Epilogue

(Thursday, May 15th / Day 25 of The World.)

(Femdi Deepwater on the deck of the Doon as they sail past Darom.)

“Captain, do you really think they’ll be safe traveling through the Kingdom of Ocilimma?” Nuroor, the Doon’s Pilot, asked from where she stood at the wheel.

“W-What?” Femdi stammered as the Gnomeling’s question started her out of her contemplation of the coastline the ship had been passing. Mentally catching up in the blink of an eye, a frown turned down the corners of her mouth at the other female’s question, “While I’d like to have them here on the Doon with us, you should know as well as any that safety is an illusion. You’re only as safe as your personal skill, ability, and grit can make you.”

“Aye, and sometimes even that is not enough,” Nuroor gruffly agreed.

Femdi recognized the haunted look that momentarily flashed in the Gnomeling’s brown eyes. It was the same one that was regularly reflected in her own. Those times were usually after a particularly nasty nightmare from the time they’d been captured by the Meer-Lizard spawn. Unconsciously, her hand went to her flat stomach as an unconscious shiver ran down her spine while the Pilot continued.

“I was just thinking that Lonsalindel is not known as the safest port in the Nordic Region for a reason.”

“Only because the purebloods tend to hate Beast Kins and like to cause problems,” Femdi barked, before turning serious again, “But as cities go, I’ve personally never had any major problems with the Beast Kin when in either port.” Looking over her shoulder, a grin came to her lips. “If anything, I’d have to say their general attitude toward Halflings is better than most port cities where I’ve dropped anchor.”

“There’s that,” Nuroor grunted while silently considering the Captain’s point.

“That’s also why I sent nearly all of our onboard Marines with them to

keep them safe,” Femdi explained as she went back to watching the Kingdom of Kader’s coastline. She let out a dark chuckle, “The last thing I need is Overlord Ironwolf breathing down my back for losing his adopted daughter and personal companions.”

“Would Overlord Ironwolf really hold you at fault if something happened to them?” Nuroor asked in an alarmed tone. Before the Captain could answer, she gruffly continued, “Except for the brief conversation I had with him while his Goblin slave cleansed those monsters from me, I don’t know much about his personality.” She swept an arm toward the bow of the ship. “Only what I’ve overheard in the way of conversations from the crew, ya know.”

“That’s hard to say,” Femdi admitted, pausing to gather her thoughts, “As nobles go, the male is unlike any blue-blood that I’ve ever met. Maybe, that’s simply because he’s a newfar and not a person of The World. It’s hard to know why he’s the way he is. All that I can say is that he’s always treated me fairly or I wouldn’t be the Captain of the Doon.” She frowned as the Pilot’s words reflected some of her own anxious thoughts about the Half-Elf. “From the rumors I’ve overheard, you don’t want to be on his bad side or he’ll cut you down like a cold-blooded killer.”

“And you let the Brat Pack head off on their own knowing that?” Nuroor demanded with a look of horror.

“Not on their own, far from it,” Femdi barked in amusement at the Gnomeling’s reaction, “And rumor also has it that he is overly protected of all of his vassals, not just a select few.” As the Pilot turned around to stare at her in surprise, her face turned suddenly serious, “Captain Lightouch explained to me himself how all of them made it out of the Darom harbor. Those Chaos Storm Alliance newfars had more or less blocked all of their ships’ escape. Overlord Ironwolf sacrificed his life and that of his Goblin companion to buy them the time they needed to reach open water. He even released an undead Flying Serpent to keep the enemy distracted.”

“Why would he do that?” Nuroor demanded as her eyes bulged at her Captain’s words, “Didn’t he take a massive hit to his reputation by releasing that Ghast?”

“Aye he did,” Femdi solemnly agreed, still amazed that Overlord Ironwolf had made that choice, “Captain Lightouch assured me that was the only way for all of them to escape. Otherwise, they’d have lost hundreds of

refugees to those Chaos Storm Alliance newfars.” She sagely shook her head. “Now, those individuals are a bunch of nasty bastards!”

“The stories I heard about what they did to the townsfolk of Darom and Telrain,” Nuroor agreed while shaking her head, “It makes them as bad as any Northern tribe.”

“Aye, that it does,” Femdi sagely nodded.

“So, the real reason you let the Brat Pack go on their quest was so that they could tell the true story of Overlord Ironwolf’s adventures?” Nuroor asked after a moment of thought.

“Who better than a troupe of Bards to set the record straight for those newfar fools?” Femdi agreed with a stern nod.

“What do you mean, Captain?” Nuroor asked, looking back at her in confusion.

“In Londshos, Thystaur, Tulduroc, and even Lonsalindel the rumors are all the same,” Femdi explained as anger flashed in her eyes, “Overlord Ironwolf destroyed Telrain and slaughtered all of the townsfolk. Overlord Ironwolf enslaved half the townsfolk of Darom and killed the rest with a train of high-level monsters. Overlord Ironwolf is a menace that needs to be stopped and his lands forcibly taken from him.”

“But none of that is true!” Nuroor protested as she spun around from the wheel to look at the female Halfling in horror, “I heard it from the refugees’ own mouths that Overlord Ironwolf worked day and night with his friends to Resurrect as many people as possible in both Darom and Telrain. And wasn’t it that female Halfling, Cristiane Sekhmet, that destroyed Telrain?”

“Captain Lighttouch heard it from General Dell’s own mouth,” Femdi replied through gritted teeth, “Besides saving Princess Isolde and her brother from being executed by that same evil bitch!” She let out an explosive breath. “Besides removing the Dil-Hilth that had nearly taken over the Citadel. If that last stronghold had fallen-”

“The entire Isolde Line would’ve fallen,” Nuroor exclaimed under her breath.

“And the Orc Hordes would already be ransacking the southern kingdoms,” Femdi finished as both females nodded at the implications that would mean.

“No wonder you agreed with Alanah and the others to get the true

story out about what really happened with Overlord Ironwolf!” Nuroor said in sudden understanding.

“It wasn’t an easy decision,” Femdi admitted as she gazed out at the deepening shadows of the rocky shoreline, “But to let those lies grow without trying to combat them after everything Overlord Ironwolf has done for us,” she firmly shook her head, “That I could not be borne.”

“Let’s just hope Blolnat and her Beast Kin Marines keep them safe,” Nuroor said while doing her best to make sure to keep the wind at their backs, “I’d hate having to explain that something happened to his adopted daughter.”

“You and me both!” Femdi said, throwing her head back in a hearty laugh, “That would royally-”

Femdi’s voice instantly died away as the walls of Darom came into sight. It looked as if some massive insectile monster had made the city its home. There were thick webs clogging the streets and covering entire buildings while other parts of the city seemed to be covered in a goo-like substance.

“By the dark, what is that disgusting gunk covering half the city?” Femdi demanded under her breath as the Gnomeling slipped a rope over the wheel and joined her at the railing.

“Is it alive?” Nuroor asked in a fearful voice as she leaned over the railing for a closer look, “It’s pulsating and moving like-”

“I-It’s larva!” Femdi exclaimed while her heart filled with dread, “The Crevice of Shadow monsters are making Darom their home!”

“A whole city was taken over like that?” Nuroor gagged while shrinking back from the railing as if the monsters could reach them, “I’ve never seen anything that disgusting before!” Her eyes turned to the Captain’s, “Not even when the Goblin made us puke out that black gunk.”

“You’re telling me!” Femdi shivered inside her coat at the inhuman nightmare that Darom had become, when her eyes caught sight of a hulking stomping through the streets, “Look on the south side of the arena. Isn’t that monster one of those Hulks that Captain Lightouch was telling us about?”

“It must be,” Nuroor agreed in an awed tone, before pointing toward another hulking shape that was striding past the castle in the middle of the city, “Look, there’s another one there!”

The Doon shuddered as the keel suddenly scraped over a shoal nearly

throwing both females off their feet. Without needing to be told, Nuroor threw herself at the wheel and began steering them further out into the Strait of Icelus. A second later, she was at the Gnomeling's side as her eyes searched the dark waters ahead.

"Keep on this course for another minute before going back to following the coast," Femdi said in a tight voice.

"Sorry, Captain," Nuroor apologized while keeping a white-knuckled grip on the wheel, "I shouldn't have let those horrors distract me like that."

"You're forgiven," Femdi said with a sharp shake of her head, "It's not like it didn't have the same effect on me." With a hurried glance over her shoulder at Darom, she went back to scanning the waters ahead of the ship. "I'm sure Overlord Ironwolf is going to want to know all about that!"

"Good thing we're heading back to Auris Shaeras so you can let Prustine know what's happened to Darom," Nuroor helpfully added. Seeing her Captain's questioning look, she smirked, "That way you're not the one reporting the bad news to him."

"She's gonna love that," Femdi agreed, unable to stop the smirk that came to her lips as she pictured the Gnomeling's face once she realized that.