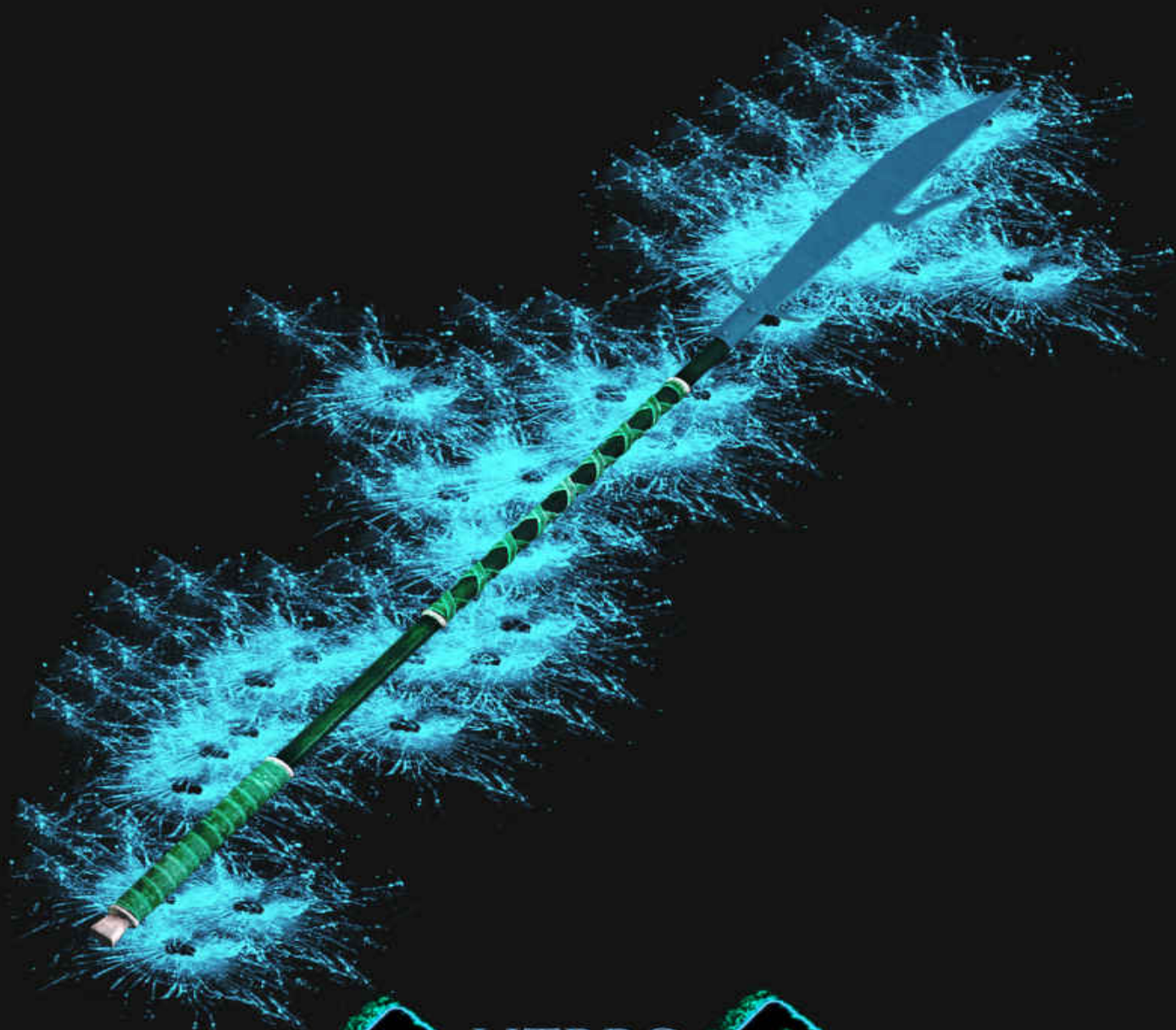


ROBYN WIDEMAN



# BROKEN BONES

NEW REALM ONLINE BOOK 2

# *BROKEN BONES*

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## NEW REALM ONLINE

Book Two

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[1](#)  
[2](#)  
[3](#)  
[4](#)  
[5](#)  
[6](#)  
[7](#)  
[8](#)  
[9](#)  
[10](#)  
[11](#)  
[12](#)  
[13](#)  
[14](#)  
[15](#)  
[16](#)  
[17](#)  
[18](#)  
[19](#)  
[20](#)  
[21](#)  
[22](#)  
[23](#)  
[24](#)  
[25](#)

[Author Notes](#)

# 1

Peace was an odd thing to wake up to after the past week. Actually, it was an odd thing after all my time in New Realm Online. I thought back to everything that had happened in the last few months.

After a horrific accident in with a truck cost me the use of my legs back in the real world, Terry, my best friend that I met in rehab, managed to score me a medipod and access to the game. For the first few hours it was an amazing experience. I could walk again. I could fight monsters, earn gold and experience from quests, and go on adventures! But then I made the biggest newbie mistake imaginable. I showed off a unique and powerful sword to a group of adventurers from the Braven guild. They seemed nice at first, befriending me but then murdered me! And then they spawn camped me, killing me over and over trying to get at that sword. Out of spite and indignation, I used one of my VIP options and rerolled my special, unique flavor of elf and started over from scratch. As a half dark elf. Which wasn't a bad option except for the seriously reduced stats as my punishment for rerolling. And to top it all off nobody likes dark elves and they like them even less when they're half something else.

Shaking my head, I had to laugh at my own foolishness. Who in their right mind traded a unique class out of spite? Especially when it had been my own idiocy that let the Braven know I had the weapon in the first place. Oh well, I'd learned my lesson the hard way, as usual.

After that less than auspicious start, I worked my butt off to earn skills and a good reputation in the town of Mara. I made friends with the amazingly lifelike NPCs there, and even joined up with Terry and the rest of his friends to form the Broken Bones guild.

That's when all the trouble started.

Guild wars aren't an uncommon thing for MMOs. Usually they're locked off to specific areas of the world to minimize collateral damage but that's not the case in New Realm. The level of realism in

this game allowed players to fight over villages, cities, and even entire kingdoms. If they were strong enough to wrestle power away from the NPCs or guilds controlling an area, players could lay claim to it.

Depending on who ruled things could get ugly. And there was a lot of ugly to go around.

It started with the Blackhearts invading Mara with an army of newbies. Most of their army were under level ten but when you throw a thousand anything at a starter town with only a couple of guards and players with a focus on trade skills levels don't matter much. When Sir Gideon messaged me, I had no idea the mess we'd gotten ourselves into.

While we managed to deal with Blackheart invasion, we weren't out of the woods yet. My old enemies from them Braven sent in a group of much higher-level players to take Mara for themselves. This left us up a creek without a paddle.

So, we embraced the oldest and noblest of brave, manly men, heroic strategies. We fought—to run away.

A few scouts tried to follow us and our numbers made short work of them, even with their higher levels, but that didn't make me feel any safer. For all the realism of New Realm Online there is no such thing as permadeath for players. Even if there was, those players could come back to the game with all their memories of what happened and where it happened.

I was already worried about any hostile guilds finding Liberty, our mine turned settlement, and now Braven had a clue as to where to look for us. Those monsters only cared about themselves and would turn every NPC and player here into slaves. They might even go as far as torturing anyone who refused to obey them, NPCs included. Where most NPCs died when killed, the ones in Liberty who swore fealty to me or the Broken Bones guild were allowed to respawn at the temple. Which seemed like a kindness at the time but on second thought I have some serious concerns about.

If Braven or some other guild finds us out here in the mountains my act of kindness would be twisted into a torturous one. Pain was a real thing here, and dying sucked.

Shaking my head, I quit reflecting on what had happened so far and switched to dealing with what was in front of me in the here and now.

I sighed to myself as I got up to gather my weapons. It was time to get the day started.

Hedwig yawned softly and turned to look at me while Dawn lay fast asleep against him in the blacksmith shop.

I smiled at them. My trusty oso companion, a mix of bear and owl into one creature that definitely leaned more toward bear, looked ready to get up after me. I shook my head and arms for Hedwig to lay back down so he wouldn't disturb Dawn, my.... Well, I guess she's my girlfriend now. That sort of felt awkward to think about. I was never one for long distance relationships but this world felt so life-like and real for us medipod users that I'm not sure it's fair to call it that.

Medipod users like me, Dawn, and every player member of the Broken Bones guilds are fully immersed in this world whenever we play. We feel, taste, and smell everything just as we would in the real world, except for pain. Apparently, that was toned down, but otherwise, I could hardly tell the difference between this world and the real one.

Hoping that he could move quietly, I motioned towards Hedwig. "Time to get moving Hedwig. We have a lot of work to do if we're going to protect Liberty from the guilds. As the leader of Broken Bones, I should probably set a good example for everyone to follow," I said softly, trying not to wake Dawn.

Hedwig grunted and got up to follow me.

I stepped outside with my spear resting on my shoulder to be greeted with a face full of Terry. He wore a big smile on his face that turned into a cheeky grin when he glanced past me at Hedwig and Dawn.

Terry swung his arm up for a high five. "Ryan, my man."

I rolled my eyes so hard they might have popped out of their sockets. But I smiled. "Nothing happened."

"Pfft, nothing happened he says." Terry laughed. "Come on, I know you two like each other a lot. Voz and the other NPCs can see that a mile away."

I opened my mouth to speak then shut it. Was I really that obvious? Voz had commented that I should try to get together with Dawn. Maybe that was his not-so-subtle way of telling me he knew. I sighed with a soft, amused laugh. No point denying anything. "Look Terry, just because you look like a horn dog doesn't mean you have to act like one." Terry let out an over dramatic gasp and clutched at his chest. "Me? A horn dog? You wound me, good sir!"

I burst out laughing when I felt an arm wrap around my shoulders. It was a purplish skinned arm.

Dawn smiled at us.

Terry waved at her. "Morning, Dawn."

"Morning."

"So, Ryan here tells me nothing happened." Terry waggled his eyebrows at me. "Isn't that rude? After how close you guys became."

"Well, I wouldn't call it nothing." Dawn slipped her arm off me and stepped toward Terry. She planted her knuckles on the top of his skull and ground down. "But it's definitely not what you're thinking, horn dog."

Terry's ears drooped as he groaned. "Heeey, easy! I'm a squishy druid. I can't take this kind of abuse."

I laughed and Hedwig squeezed out through the door beneath my arm. I patted the big oso's back. "So, what's up, horn dog? You didn't come to wake us up this early for nothing right."

Terry grinned. "You know that's probably going to be considered a slur against us Kitsunes right?"

I just placed a hand on my hip and stared at Terry.



Terry laughed. “Just kidding. Anyway, I was talking with the locals last night about the whole situation in Liberty with those other guilds. Voz and his crew think we should be focusing on getting stronger and Dwayne is thinking we need to bulk up the settlement first.”

“Strengthening our people would be a great benefit,” Dawn commented. “If we hadn’t taken so much time to train up our people, we might have lost Mara to the Brokenhearts.”

Terry nodded then looked at me. “So, what’s on the agenda today, Ryan?”

“I feel like everyone asks me that exact question,” I said with a hint of amusement.

“Well, you are our fearless and glorious guild leader,” Terry said.

Dawn tapped a finger onto her chin. “I thought it was guild president.”

“Guild president sounds really weird. Leader or master works. Anyway!” I dragged the conversation back onto the rails. “We’re going to do both. Dawn, you take whoever wants to work on their combat skills off to the spider dungeon. Terry, you work on the farms.”

Terry groaned. “Dude, I know I’m a druid but I’d like to have more adventuring time.”

I smiled. “That’s exactly why I want you working on the farms. Remember the skill progression in this game slows down the higher level you are, on top of the increased cost of progressing any skill the game already has. Since your druid magic works off of influencing nature, you working on the farm levels up all sorts of related skills that will make you a better druid than some druid who power leveled his way to fifty.”

Terry swished his tail. “Oh yeah. I keep forgetting how weird this system is. I guess old McTerry had a farm.” He turned on a heel and walked off. “You better not go off on an adventure without me though, OK?”

“What kind of adventure would it be without our party’s healer?” I said.

Terry pointed back at me with a big grin and went to work.

“Guess I should get started on organizing a dungeon run.” Dawn leaned in to peck my cheek. “Catch you later, fearless leader.”

“Looks like it’s just you and me, Hedwig.” I pet the oso’s head. Hedwig pressed into the pats and off we went.

On the way out of our settlement, I sent messages to everyone checking up on the status of the village. Specifically, I asked about growing and defending the town. With system points they could purchase all sorts of upgrades in that regard, whether it be improving the mines, their palisade walls into stone, and even hire some guards from the king provided a guild didn’t take them out yet. I preferred to leave those points in the hands of Nico who knew how best to use them. That didn’t mean they couldn’t make their own upgrades and additions to the town though. If they had the materials for it, and especially if they had blueprints made, they could make whatever they wanted.

As if he heard me thinking about calling him, Dwayne sent me a message. *Hey Ryan, are you up?*

*Yup, and heading out to gather some wood. A lot of the locals want their own homes so we’re going to need a ton of it. Might do some hunting while I’m at it too,* I replied.

*Cool, I was actually going to ask if you could get me some too,* Dwayne said. *Remember how I said I think I could make a ballista sized version of our repeating crossbow?*

I couldn’t help the excited smile creeping onto my face. If we had a weapon like that on our walls, we could take on all sorts of problems the other guilds could throw at us. Even some big monsters, if they decided to come start trouble for Liberty. *Ya? I remember.*

*Well, I’ve got three prototypes planned out. Three different ones actually. First is the repeating ballista which is the least complicated of my plans, then I’ve got a heavy repeating crossbow... Think of one of those old, hand cranked gatling guns and you’ll get the picture.*

I nodded to myself as we left the settlement and made a b-line for the woods. *Both of those sound amazing. What's the third one?*

*Well, this one's not really my own idea. Ever heard of a hwacha?* Dwayne asked.

*A what now?*

*Exactly lol, Dwayne sent. I was doing some reading outside my medipod, since I figured any outside knowledge we can bring into New Realm would help us out a ton and I found this hwacha thing when looking up strange ancient weapons. Basically, this thing is the MLRS's great granddaddy.*

I racked my brain for whatever MLRS could possibly mean. *In English?*

*Multi launch rocket system, Dwayne explained. Only instead of rockets we use arrows. Loads of them, strapped with bottle rockets to fire across a battlefield. The concept is actually genius and was used to great effect by Korea back in the day.*

To say I was skeptical would be an understatement. But I rolled with it as I got to work chopping down the first tree of the day. *Okay but where are we going to get the powder to make rockets?*

*I'm working on that. I have a friend who wants to be a master alchemist and he swears he can make this work. It's just a matter of logistics now to get the materials he needs, Dwayne said. And before you ask, no, guns are completely out of the question right now. We don't have anyone with the levels in metallurgy and blacksmithing, or even artificing to make one of those work.*

I moved on to the next tree with growing curiosity. *Hypothetically, what would happen if we tried that right now?*

*Nothing if we're lucky. But what would probably happen is the gun we make explodes and kills one of us, Dwayne answered. And you know respawns cost us experience, plus the materials lost on the prototype and any damage to our gear.*

*Huh, I guess guns are a lot more complicated than I thought.*

*You have no idea. There are so many things that can go wrong with them that I'd rather stick to bows for now. Besides, if Dawn*

*keeps working on her rune smithing we can put a lot of kick into any of our bows. Besides, even if the rockets don't work out, having the ballista alone is worth the effort.*

*Works for me, Dwayne. I'll get you and the settlement a mountain of wood to work with,* I sent.

*Thanks, Ryan. I'll tag along with Voz and get our pipe situation sorted. Between the few houses we have and our aqueduct plan we'll be busy all day,* Dwayne said. *I have people planting little markers where everything's going to go around town and from the lake too. Fingers crossed we can get started on the sewer system by tomorrow.*

I laughed at that comment. *Ya, the ye olde way of taking care of business isn't pretty.*

*And it smells even worse,* Dwayne agreed. *Catch you later, Ryan.*

*You too, Dwayne.* I smiled as I got to work, excited about the future of Liberty.

With Dwayne helping to plan the city and build defenses, I felt a lot more confident about our chances. Not only would our people be able to live comfortably but they would be among the best defended in New Realm Online. After all, not many players came into these sorts of games to be a dedicated crafter and fewer still came in looking to build towns and gadgets, and even fewer than that came with any kind of knowledge as to how to make any of this work. In a normal game that wouldn't be an issue, the system would have strict rules as to what you could and couldn't make at what point and skill level. New Realm allows you do pretty much whatever you wanted so long as you had the materials and skill. Outside knowledge was useful however, as he had learned from Dawn.

She may have started out with little to no fighting skills of her own but her experience in the real-world military made it a breeze for her to pick them up. Unlike me, who had to get murdered by vicious bunnies over and over again before I figured out which part of the spear was the business end. Looking back on it, that was a fun time.

Hilarious, stupid, and incredibly painful, but compared to the trials I faced since then, I couldn't help thinking back on those days fondly.

True to my word, I spent the rest of the day gathering wood for Liberty. There was a mountain of the stuff sitting in my bag of holding along with the acorns required to help regrow the forest. For a moment I considered planting them just so I could see if there was a forestry skill but I already had a wide variety to work with. What I needed to do now was focus on a select few. It was something my notifications were happy to encourage me to do.

**Congratulations hero! Playing with your wood all day has increased your strength and endurance. Strength +1, Constitution +1, Wood Cutting +1.**

I groaned. The level increases were great but the AI was still being a sassy toaster with them. Sure, it had eased up the verbal abuse compared to where it was when I rerolled but the snark didn't look like it was going to stop any time soon. Oh well. At least it was good for a laugh.

I took my mountain of wood back to Liberty. The bulk of it was in my bag while everything I could physically carry was mounted onto my back. I lunged and skipped the whole way back trying to score additional skill ups but there were no snarky notifications waiting for me when I arrived.

"Aye lad, there he is being ridiculous again," Voz said as I arrived at the settlement warehouse.

I glanced over as I offloaded all the wood I gathered. Cam and Lu were there with him. "These skills won't level themselves up." I slapped my thighs for emphasis. "What can I help you guys with?"

Cam, the huge barsone waved awkwardly at me. I tried not to laugh. Cam was built like the Hulk minus the green skin but where that jolly green giant was full of rage, Cam was a shy, timid guy.

Lu, the kitsune ninja, was not. She pushed Cam forward. "Come on Cam. This was your idea! Ryan's not going to bite your head off. He's too nice for that. I mean sure he murdered a bunch of players in their sleep but they were ass hats."

I couldn't help myself. The smile fought its way into my face and escaped with a loud snort. "Ya, well... I wouldn't do that to you guys. I like you too much." I gave Cam a smile. "What's up big guy?"

Cam tapped his huge fingertips together and looked away. I swear there was a blush on his cheeks. "I uh... see... uhm..."

Lu jumped up to swat him on the shoulder.

"I was wondering if you could maybe take the time to train with us, Ryan," Cam finally blurted out. "I mean. I know my fighting style is weird and dumb with the two shields but it worked out really good at that siege and you were really nice and helpful and—"

"Sure," I said as I put my hand up to cut him off. Cam really was too shy and timid for his own good. "I was planning on cutting wood all day to help the settlement but I could take a break. Besides, I'm excited to see what my new class upgrades are when I hit level twenty. A little training will help me get there sooner."

Cam lit up, "R-really?"

"Ya."

Lu smiled up at him. "See? I told you."

"Even if my fighting style is really dumb?" Cam asked with disbelief in his voice.

I tilted my head to the side with a soft smile. "Cam, your fighting style isn't dumb, it's unique. And you were actually doing pretty well for yourself during the siege. None of those Blackhearts could get around your shields. You were a huge part of our success holding back the enemy forces at the gates."

Cam's face brightened.

"So why don't we head on out to the dungeon. Maybe we can get you a set of tower shields your size," I said.

Lu jumped up and down. "See Cam? I told you. This is going to be awesome."

A thought came to mind. "Oh wait, I just told Dawn to train up people. Let me see if the mini dungeon is in cool down." I sent Dawn a message to which she replied right away.

*The dungeon is still up, we haven't touched it. The locals wanted to work on their stealth skills in the daylight, which I thought was a pretty good idea, so we've been out hunting, Dawn said. But I could go for hitting level twenty myself too. Want me to swing around with Terry?*

*Yes please. He's probably bored to tears right now working the farm.* I chuckled at the overdramatic image that formed in my mind.

*See you in a bit,* Dawn said.

Cam and Lu stared at me expectantly.

I beamed at the two of them. "Grab your gear, guys. We're going grinding."

## 2

### **Ryan Rosa Level 18 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 29**

**Agility 28**

**Constitution 29**

**Intelligence 23**

**Wisdom 23**

**Charm 9**

“Just over one and a half levels until twenty, when I hit my next class upgrade. If my math is right, that should take one, maybe two runs of the dungeon,” I said to my party gathered outside the mini dungeon entrance. It was the only dungeon whose location we knew. It was a tough one. I almost died the first time I came through here with Dawn and Hedwig but the loot and experience were totally worth the trouble.

Dawn smiled. “It will only take one,” she said with all the certainty in the world. “I’ve run it plenty of times with the acolytes. The dungeon’s difficulty scales based on party size. What we ran through with just the two of us was easy mode.”

“We better go in with our guard up then,” I said. “Cam, Lu, are you ready?”

Cam nodded with his pair of heavy shields. Given his huge size, they looked like they were a pair of oversized wooden bucklers on his arms. They provided plenty of cover when used together but on their own the shields weren’t great protection for him. If we took a pair of doors off their hinges, they would do a better job but I was pretty sure the people of Liberty wouldn’t appreciate that. So, I added that to my list of future projects if we couldn’t find any new shields in the dungeon.



“Let me check,” Lu said excitedly. She dug through her pockets and pouches, pulling out throwing knives, a handful of shuriken and ninja stars, her kusari-fundo, and blow dart gun. “Ready.”

Terry leaned over to Lu with an incredulous look over his face. “Where do you even keep all of that stuff?”

Lu smiled from ear to ear. “I wouldn’t be a very good ninja if I couldn’t hide my weapons. But I’m still working on it.” She pointed at the slight bulges protruding from her concealed pockets. “When I get really good at this no one will be able to notice me sneaking a small arsenal past them. Now if I could just get someone to make me some smoke bombs, I could really crank up the ninja tricks to eleven.”

I laughed, imagining Lu pulling all sorts of ninja moves I’d seen through the years. Between being so energetic and a kitsune, I couldn’t imagine Lu going unnoticed in a crowd. But I knew better. New Realm Online had a skill for everything with many more skills being hidden under special conditions like my own Shadows Lover which combined two different stealth skills to allow me to blend into shadows even in broad daylight.

“Alright, let’s go in,” I said and marched into the dark cave. Thanks to my dark vision, the lack of light wasn’t an issue to me. The others followed me in while I pulled the dungeon map open. “Huh. That’s weird.”

“What’s weird?” Terry asked.

Dawn answered for me, “Ryan hasn’t been here before. Not technically. The dungeon randomizes every time it’s refreshed and it’s bigger too thanks to our party size. You only have a dungeon map if the randomization happens to land on a configuration you’ve seen before.”

Terry swished his tail. “Woah, that’s cool. So, you can run a dungeon over and over and it’s always fresh?”

“Sort of,” Dawn said. “The core enemies and main boss are always the same with a few differences so it doesn’t get stale.”

Terry nodded. "Right on, right on." He snapped his fingers over his head and a ball of light appeared, illuminating the area around them. "So, anything we should be looking out for?"

"Everything," I said, leading the way in. "The little spiders have a nasty bite and their web isn't anything to laugh at either. If enough of the stuff hits you, you'll be stuck just the same as if the big spider boss at the end stuck you."

"There's spitting worm things too," Dawn said.

I nodded and glanced over my shoulder at Cam. "Keep an eye open for those, Cam. Your shields shouldn't have a problem with them."

Cam raised his shields and spoke with the voice of a mouse. "I'll do my best." That voice didn't fit a tank of Cam's size at all but he'd always been timid. Maybe if we keep taking him out on trips like this he can develop some sorely needed self-confidence. Most of the players in the guild had some sort of handicap in real life. I wondered if Cam's lack of confidence was a result of real-life trauma?

"And traps too, right?" Lu asked. "It wouldn't be a dungeon without traps."

Dawn smiled. "No, it wouldn't. The loot rooms love to throw traps in to ruin a greedy adventurer's day."

"Ya, I learned that the hard way," I admitted. "We had monsters swarming in on us from every direction when I went for that chest, but I still looted it."

Hedwig pushed up ahead and snorted. His shoulders tensed.

I threw my hand up for the others to halt and listened. Something was in the room ahead. There was a soft, chittering sound with heavy clattering steps.

*Alright everyone, get ready for a fight,* I sent through chat. The spiders already knew we were here but they didn't need to know that we knew where they were. *Cam, walk in with your shields up. Dawn and I will guard your flanks. Terry, back us up with your healing magic.*

The party sent in their acknowledgements.

*What about me?* Lu asked.

*Do ninja stuff,* I said.

*Got it!*

Cam took a deep breath and raised his shields. He was shaking as he stepped into the deceptively empty room ahead of the party. "Uhm, guys, I don't see or hear anything."

The heavy, skittering steps were dampened, like the spider was creeping up on its prey. It was no wonder Cam couldn't hear it. The steps were replaced by the hiss of a giant spider rivaling Cam and Hedwig in size dropped from the ceiling on top of Cam.

"Aaah!" Cam cried out, flailing his shields at the dropping spider.

The spider was flung off Cam at a wall with a wet crack. I ran in with my spear at the ready while the others followed. Our battle cries were answered by the chittering cries of spiders. A swarm of smaller bugs the size of a large husky came scrambling out of every nook and cranny in the cave.

"That's a lot of bugs," Terry shouted.

I rushed in and stabbed a spider out of the air while it was jumping for Cam's throat. "This is what we're here for."

Cam flailed his shields around, doing more to knock the spiders away than actually kill any of them. "Gross!"

"You're bigger than them, Cam," Dawn said as she loosed arrows into the swarm. "Smash them."

Cam gave a shaky nod, his broad swings of his shields turned into more focused jabs with the edges, followed up by stomps of his boots. Cam wasn't going to win any awards for his martial prowess any time soon, but he more than made up for it with raw strength.

"Mini boss," Dawn shouted as the larger spider scrambled back to its feet. She filled it full of arrows but it didn't slow the spider in the slightest.

It leapt for me. I raised my shield, ready to get flattened when Hedwig intercepted it midair. The two huge animals crashed to the

floor in a thrashing mess of claws, beak, and sharp spider legs.

“I got it,” I shouted and rushed for the spider.

The spider threw Hedwig off. Its carapace was covered in sharp claw marks and mucus green blood but that only made the spider mad. It roared at Hedwig before it noticed me. The mini boss spider turned its head toward me as I casted Shocker. My spear thrust down the bug’s throat and hit something soft, squishy, and hopefully important inside as electricity arced across the spider’s body. The spider shrieked in pain as its body went rigid then dropped. Its legs were still twitching. Hedwig wasn’t going to leave anything up to chance. The oso rushed over and clamped its beak down on the spider’s head and ended the fight.

**You have received 500 exp.**

“Miniboss down,” I cheered only to duck as a group of spiders came flying over my head.

Cam was starting to get into the groove of things but he wasn’t the one to launch those spiders. It was Lu. Swinging her spiked ball on a chain across the swarm of spiders. She was smashing swaths of the bugs with every swing, sending broken legs and pieces of carapace everywhere. This was the least ninja thing I’d ever seen a ninja do in a very long time. Which was good, those were my favorite kinds of ninjas.

Terry swung out his arm and a long, green, thorny vein went out with it. “Thorn Whip!” He announced the spell as he swatted a group of spiders out of the air. They fell over dead and punctured on the ground and not on Cam’s back where an unhealthy amount of the bugs were already crawling over him.

“Guys, help!” Cam flailed around as the swarm of spiders thinned to more manageable numbers.

“Stand still, Cam,” Dawn swung her bow back and forth to keep track of him but Cam wasn’t slowing down.

Cam slipped on a pool of spider gore and slammed down onto his back, crushing the biting spiders beneath his weight. “Ow...”

**You have received 1000 exp.**

“Nice one, Cam,” Terry said as he cast a heal on their timid tank.

Cam frowned. “Not nice,” he insisted. “Winning a fight by falling on my butt was really dumb.”

“Hey, as long as it works man.” Terry beamed as he helped Cam up.

I smiled. A thousand experience points for the first room? Going in with a full party was definitely better for grinding than going in a two-man group. I wondered if the dungeons could even be scaled up in difficulty somehow. I sent my question over to Cool Karen to see if she could find out the answer.

*I got someone researching dungeons and grinding,* Karen replied. *They’ll find out for us.*

*Thanks Karen,* I sent.

Lu swung her chain back around her wrist and caught the spiked ball in the palm of her hand. “That was awesome!”

“That was the easy part.” Dawn marched on ahead. “The boss is going to be three times bigger than that spider at least. And with a full party like this sometimes they spawn in adds.”

Adds was slang for additional enemies. Normally a boss was a huge fight on its own and honestly didn’t need any kind of help. A lot of times bosses that used adds felt like a cheap element to throw into such encounters. There was usually no lore or mechanical reason for them other than to artificially make a fight more difficult and they usually gave little to no reward for the added trouble.

But this was going to be different, I was sure of it.

New Realm Online could be pretty brutal and unforgiving but it also strove for realism. If there was one thing the game rewarded, it was hard work. A boss fight with adds was sure to be worth every drop of sweat and blood they spilled.

“So, what you’re saying is this boss could be some sort of spider queen?” I asked Dawn as we moved down the next hall.

Dawn peeked around the corner then moved forward. “Maybe. I’ve never seen something like that pop up yet. I’ve seen

Brood Mothers. Those are big, mama spiders that throw out egg sacs that spit out a bunch of the little ones.”

Cam shuddered, his shoulders practically shriveling in on themselves. “Groooss.”

“What’s the matter Cam, afraid of spiders?” Lu asked.

“I’m not afraid of them,” Cam said. “But all bugs are gross. All of them.”

“Even the cute little spiders you see on the internet?” Terry asked.

“Especially the cute little spiders,” Cam grunted.

I chuckled. “So, then we need to find a proper dungeon for something like a spider queen to pop up?”

Dawn shrugged. “Maybe. If it’s all randomly generated there might be a chance something like that could spawn. But I really don’t know if they even exist in this game.”

“How would they even be different from a Brood Mother?” Terry asked.

I rubbed over Hedwig’s back. “It’s probably bigger and angrier than the other spider bosses we could run into.”

Hedwig leaned into my hand before he stiffened.

“Stop,” I called out.

The party froze.

Hedwig cautiously stepped forward and sniffed at the ground. I kept my eyes on the tunnel ahead. It was covered in holes, almost like honeycombs if it weren’t for how round and messily made they were. Those were where those worm monsters came out of last time. But there were none this time around.

Hedwig grunted and pawed at the ground ahead of him.

“What’s the matter, Hedwig?” I asked.

Lu answered. “It’s a trap.” She ran up to Hedwig’s side and crouched down. “See? Right here.”

I followed her finger to an innocuous looking stone. Then I saw it, the slight elevation, the way the stone looked like it could sink

if someone stepped on it. This was a trigger for... something.

**Perception +1. Congratulations hero! It looks like you don't need glasses after all.**

I cracked a smile at the AI's comment but kept searching for what the trap could possibly trigger. Maybe it caused those worm things to spawn or maybe the room would fill with some sort of poison. But I couldn't see anything but two more trap triggers up ahead.

"Can you disable the trap?" Dawn asked.

Lu nodded. "I can try. Ninja is a more specialized type of rogue but dealing with traps is still part of our skillset." She pulled out one of her knives and carefully poked around at the trap until she carefully managed to lift the stone off the floor. She shoved a few smaller rocks in places then sat the rock back in. "Trap disarmed," she announced cheerfully and planted the full weight of her body on the stone.

Cam squealed and threw up his shields but nothing happened.

"Nice one, Lu," I said. "We have two more to go."

Lu nodded and moved on to disarm the second plate without a hitch. The third one didn't quite work. As she went to pull the stone free it slipped from her hand and sank to the bottom. "Uh-oh."

Grubs poured out of the holes in the walls. Big, fat, white things with black spots running along their sides and red heads full of teeth. They dropped down to the floor and scurried along toward us.

"I hate this dungeon," Cam groaned and got to work crushing the grubs. Each one was about the size of his foot and Cam had big feet.

"Don't let them get on you," Dawn said. "These grubs are easy to kill but their bite has a chance to stun and poison you."

"Entangle," Terry said as the swarm of grubs approached Cam. Thick vines ripped out of the cave floor to grasp all of the grubs within its area of effect. "Nice! I got them all."

“And me too,” Cam said as he squirmed with veins coiled around him from head to toe.

Terry grimaced. “Ouch. My bad.”

I was about to say it was no big deal when the worms from my first run through the dungeon poked their heads out of the walls. They didn’t waste any time throwing caustic globs at us. I caught one of the globs on my shoulder and hissed as it burned through my armor and into my flesh. “Damn it, Terry. Can you get Cam free?”

Terry shook his head. “I can’t. Not without releasing the bugs too.”

Lu rushed to Cam’s side with a knife. “Don’t worry Cam, I’ll get you out of there.” She was struggling to cut through the vines. If Terry kept working on that spell it would be a fantastic asset in the future. If he learned to aim it, in the future maybe he wouldn’t risk getting their party killed.

Dawn punched arrows through the spitting worms’ heads but she was only one archer. One fast, deadly archer who couldn’t keep up with the worms as fast as they poked their heads out. Worse, the grubs were starting to break free before Cam. “Ryan, do something.”

Hedwig was busy guarding Cam’s left flank, smearing grubs across the cave floor while more of the little biters climbed up his legs and back. They weren’t doing a lot of damage but all those little bites added up and increased their chances of poisoning and stunning the oso.

We were running out of time and I really wasn’t liking my options. “Everyone back up, I’m going to cast Chained Lightning.”

“Are you serious?” Terry gasped. “That spell might fry us in here too. We’re too close together.”

“That’s why I said back up!” I started charging up the spell.

Lu cut Cam free, who turned around and ran back down the hall. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Right behind you,” Lu said as she followed Cam back but a group of grubs crawled up her legs and bit down on her. Lu crashed to the floor without so much as a grunt of pain. She was stunned and



if they didn't do something she was going to end up poisoned at this rate.

"Hedwig, pull her out of there," I ordered.

Hedwig whirled around from the front line and scooped up Lu by the back of her shirt. He dragged the stunned ninja away from the front line where Terry worked his magic on her and Cam crushed the grubs gnawing on her and Hedwig.

Dawn rushed to my side. Worm acid flew past her head, nearly hitting me in the process. "Fry them."

I cast Chained Lightning. A bolt of electricity flew out of my hand and arced from one grub to the next. With a hall packed so tight with enemies the spell's effectiveness was ridiculous. Grubs burst into splotches of green gore or fell over charred black. A few of the worms were unlucky enough to be in range of the spell but their brothers didn't appreciate that, not one bit. They focused their fire on me, hitting me with five caustic globs before I could cast a second shot of Chained Lightning, frying them along with the remaining grubs.

**You have received 1230 exp.**

Cam took one look at me and shuddered.

I had to agree with him. "Gross." My words came out pained from the caustic goop burning into my flesh. I wiped it off as fast as I could and cast a heal on myself. My mana was getting uncomfortably low by the time I topped myself off. Chained Lightning was a fantastic, powerful spell, but it was an expensive one to use. I hoped that it would level from using it on the swarm of ambushers but I wasn't that lucky.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked.

Dawn nodded. "After that little light show of yours I am. I really should invest in some AoE spells for situations like this."

"I'm okay, no thanks to Terry," Cam huffed.

Terry laughed. "Hey, I topped off your health. It's cool. Plus, I already said I was sorry."

“Just try to be more careful with that Entangle spell,” Lu said. “It was really hard to get Cam out of those vines.”

Terry rubbed at the back of his head. “I guess I could have aimed it better. But hey it’s a really cool spell, isn’t it? I bet we could hold down all kinds of baddies with it.”

I nodded with a grin at Terry. “That’s just what I was thinking. If you keep working on that spell, we might be able to even hold down a boss. Or a whole army.”

Terry wagged his tail. “Both actually! Every level of the spell increases the area of effect and the strength of the vines. Working on the farm has helped me with both of those attributes too. Oh, and another neat trick, if I decide to tighten up the area the spell affects then the vines get stronger too. This system has a lot of wiggle room for the way spells can be used and I love it.”

“That’s awesome,” I smiled. But I really should have known this by now. With the Convection spell I could start fires, cook meat, tan hides and more. So, there was no reason other spells couldn’t be applied to some creative problem solving. Maybe Dwayne could figure out how to store the electricity from my lightning spells to make something useful. But he could indulge that idea later. For now, we needed to press on.

We continue working our way through more swarms of small spiders, grubs, and those spitting worms. Deeper and deeper into the dungeon we went as the tangles of webs grew thicker on the walls. It was disappointing to see there wasn’t a single treasure room yet and neither my perception nor Lu’s was able to sniff out any hidden rooms. There were dead bodies though, lots of them, wrapped up from head to toe in thick webbing.

“Do you think there’s loot inside?” Terry asked while looking at one of the larger bundles of webbing.

I looked around at the dozens of corpses littered about. It was hard to tell what was what beneath the webs but several looked humanoid while many more looked more like deer and other local wildlife that had an unfortunate run in with the spiders. “I don’t know,”

I said with my hand resting on the hilt of my knife. "Should we find out?"

Dawn shook her head. "No."

"Thank you," Cam was quick to interrupt with clear relief on his face.

"Not because it's gross," Dawn said. "That webbing is a pain to get off you once it's stuck on. We would spend more time getting the web off our weapons than we would actually looting if we did that. Believe me, I've tried."

I frowned at the lack of loot but Dawn had a point. If they were busy trying to deal with the corpses and webbing, it would give the monsters lurking in these caves plenty of time to sneak up on us. I hadn't seen them do anything like that just yet but we were usually the ones doing the sneaking up on monsters, not the other way around.

"Good call, Dawn," I said and went on ahead. "How many more rooms do you think we have to clear before the boss room?"

Dawn ran a hand through her hair. "That depends on the dungeon generation. We've gone through at least five rooms so the boss has to be in the next three for sure."

Hedwig froze at the opening to the next room.

I peeked inside. "Or the very next one."

This was definitely a boss room. There was no way it was anything else. It was huge compared to every chamber they'd run past so far and even my dark vision had a hard time seeing the outer edges of the arena. It wasn't all that different from the first time I was in here but something about the darkness felt deeper. Dark vision probably helped me put that together though I couldn't begin to figure out how that worked. The webbing in this room was also far larger than anything I had seen before and there was this odd, wet pulsing. Almost like a heartbeat.

I leaned back to Dawn. "Does any of this look familiar to you?"

Dawn glanced inside. "Not one bit. This looks a lot bigger than any of the other rooms we've been in too."

Cam sighed. "It's going to be a giant spider queen, isn't it?"

"Probably," Terry said. "We talked about it enough for the universe to decide to mess with us."

Lu gave a nervous laugh. "We did kinda jinx ourselves, didn't we?"

I pulled out my shield and readied my spear. "Let's go Cam. We're on front line duty. You too Hedwig."

Cam took a deep breath and lined up next to me. Hedwig had to follow us in otherwise none of us were getting through.

There was an ominous silence to the room broken up only by the strange, wet, heartbeat. The webbing in this room was like the pillars of a building stretching across the chamber with countless bundles of webbing stuck to them. The spider's victims, or maybe food for the next, I couldn't really tell. The wet heartbeat grew louder the further in we went until we spotted a towering boulder bigger than a barn in front of us.

"What is all this?" Terry whispered.

Scattered beneath the boulder were hundreds of pulsing eggs made of a dark, fleshy grey color. They were slick with some sort of sticky, disgusting moisture with the stench to match. Most of these eggs were as big as the full-grown spiders, the ones that were roughly the size of a husky. A few others were the size of the mini boss spider.

It didn't take a genius to put two and two together.

"This is a nest," I whispered with growing dread in my voice. Where there was a nest there was usually one of two things. Some sort of queen monster, or her guardians. Sometimes both.

The boulder shifted.

"Holy shi—" Terry began.

The massive queen spider whirled about with earth shaking steps and shrieked across the cavern. That boulder was the queen's backside and the rest of the spider wasn't much smaller. On all eight of its legs the towering beast made each of them look like small children playing at Dungeons and Dragons.

I gulped. "Maybe we should have waited for Dwayne to finish a ballista."

The spider advanced toward them. Its steps were slow and lumbering as it put itself between them and the eggs. I examined the creature.

### **Level 22 Giant Arachnid Queen Elite.**

*Oh man, we really screwed the pooch, didn't we?* I thought but I couldn't say that out loud. I was the guild master. People can't see their guild master lose their cool. It was bad for morale.

"What's the plan here?" Dawn asked.

"Bravely run away?" Cam offered.

I considered the problem in front of us. The spider queen was going to be a pain to bring down, that much was obvious just by looking at it, but every boss had a gimmick to it. Tricks and mechanics that they needed to deal with in order to bring them down without relying on sheer brute force. With the spider queen protecting her eggs, I figured destroying those was the trick.

"Get the queen's attention off me," I said. "I'm going to take out those eggs."

"That's really going to make her mad," Lu said.

I pulled my lips into a tight line. "Probably. But I'm guessing if we don't take those eggs out we're going to have to deal with a metric ton of extra spiders. I have enough mana in me for one last use of Chain Lightning. If I can get close enough, I can take most of the eggs out in one go." Without another word I took off running.

"Got it," Dawn said. "Cam it's time to work on your taunting skills."

Cam grimaced. "You really think I can hold off that thing?"

Dawn smiled at him. "You're a big boy, Cam. You can handle it."

Cam breathed deep and slapped his shields together. "Okay. I got this. I can do this." He took off running for the big spider. "Come

here you big ugly bug. Get down here so I can smoosh you under my boots.”

The spider queen did not appreciate that at all. It lumbered toward him at full speed, which, thankfully, wasn’t very fast at all. They could easily run circles around it and kite it all day.

Dawn’s arrows proved that was a less than ideal strategy. They bounced harmlessly off the carapace. “Damn, this thing is tough. We need to target the weak spots.”

“Or make an opening,” Lu said as she ran at the spider, swinging her spiked ball on its chain with ever growing speed.

The spider queen suddenly lunged at Cam, closing the distance between them in seconds. Cam threw his shields up and dug his heels in. A loud thud echoed across the chamber as Cam slid several feet back.

He shook his arms out. “Holy—I can barely feel my arms after that.”

Lu rushed with the spider queen and slammed her spiked ball into the spider’s leg like a wrecking ball. A loud, sickening crack followed. The queen’s leg armor broke off but only a small trickle of sickly green blood flowed from the wound.

“Blunt attacks!” Lu shouted. “We can bust this thing open like a lobster.”

The queen raised her leg into the air and brought it down right on Lu. She vanished behind the cloud of dust and rocks raining across the arena.

I slid to a halt and shouted, “Lu!”

“I’m okay,” she said. The kitsune ninja was scrambling right up the queen’s leg. The queen let out an indignant shriek and tried to shake off Lu. She squealed and clung to the spider’s legs. “Guys, help me out here!”

Terry raised his staff in the air. “Entangle!” He shouted.

Thick, green vines shot out of the floor beneath the queen’s leg and wrestled the limb down to the floor. It caught the spider by

surprise and pulled it close enough to the floor for Cam to slam his shield in her face.

“Take that, ugly. That’s right. I said it. You’re a big, ugly, dumb bug, and your mother never loved you.” Cam berated the overgrown bug and pounded on its face with his shields.

“Bro, chill,” Terry said. “It’s just an NPC bug. I don’t think they gave it feelings too.”

“Sorry,” Cam said. “I’m just trying to do this taunting thing—”

The spider queen blasted Cam with a torrent of webbing. Our hulking tank was now reduced to a giant ball of immobile spider webbing right in front of the queen’s salivating mouth. If that wasn’t bad enough the queen’s saliva made the ground beneath her sizzle and melt away.

“Terry get Cam out of there,” Dawn said as she sent a Powershot into one of the queen’s eyes. The queen shrieked and recoiled.

“How am I supposed to do that?” Terry protested. “I don’t have any stren— Wait. I’m an idiot.” Terry rushed forward and swung his arm out again. “Thorn Whip!” The thorn covered whip appeared from his hand and coiled around Cam’s entangled body. If it weren’t for the thick webbing engulfing Cam those thorns would have dug right into him. Instead, they shredded the webbing as Terry pulled with all his magical might.

Cam came out of the bundle of spider webbing like a spinning top and crashed to the floor. He coughed for air and pushed to his feet. “Rude!” He shouted at the spider then charged.

I finally made it across the enormous chamber and reached the eggs with a fully charged cast of Chained Lightning glowing in my hand. I aimed for the central most egg, a mini boss one for sure from the size of it, and dumped all of my remaining mana into the attack. Lightning erupted from the palm of my hand and arced from the large egg to the smaller ones around it. It was enough to take out half the eggs there and scar some of the others.

**You have received 1500 exp.**

**Chain Lightning +1. Look at you moving up in the world. From guild master to bug zapper. That is one big career change.**

I ignored the AI's snark. "Hedwig, take out the big ones first," I said.

Hedwig grunted with delight and charged in after the eggs.

The queen whipped around, nearly throwing Lu off her back and let out an ear-piercing shriek that reverberated across the cave. Even at this range I had to cover my ears but the attack was worse than a temporary stun. It shook the rocks loose from the cave and they began to rain across the arena.

I scrambled away from the falling rocks and plunged my spear into the closest mini boss egg. It didn't die. I had to tear my spear free and spin around the egg for a follow up slash to avoid another rock crushing me. If not for the ringing in my ears I would have sworn the egg's strange heartbeat was picking up the pace. *That can't be good.* With a flurry of thrusts and jabs the egg finally collapsed on itself.

**You have received 500 exp.**

That brought a smile to my face. The mini boss eggs were worth just as much experience as if they had hatched.

The queen shrieked again. This time I fell over, clutching at my ears. I stumbled back to my feet and kicked my way across the arena floor as more boulders rained down on me, crushing some of the other spiders in the process. The shrapnel splashing out of those rocks was enough to cut through my leather armor to my skin. I was going to have to make something stronger than this soon.

But the queen had other tricks up her sleeve. It reared back with a titanic sucking breath then fired a jet of acidic spit right at me.

My eyes shot wide. I scrambled to my feet. "Get away from here Hedwig," I shouted.

Hedwig let out a surprised roar and scrambled. The jet of acid was closing in on us. Hedwig and I dove but the queen tracked us through the attack. At the last second the jet of acid swung away from us.



Lu had struck the queen's head with enough force to throw off her aim and take out another set of eyes while she was at it. The blow hit with such force the queen staggered to the side.

Dawn fired a volley of power shots into the queen's leg joints. The huge monster roared its fury and went in for the kill with a vicious stab of its leg. Cam threw himself in the way of the blow. His wooden shields shattered as they were both flung away but it seemed the queen had overcommitted to the attack. With her wounded leg she toppled over onto her side.

"Great work, guys," I called out and sprinted for the fallen queen but she was already fighting to get up. "Terry, hold her down."

"Ah-hah I'm not sure I have enough mana for that but I'll try." Terry raised his arms at the giant spider queen and cast Entangle once more. The vines spread out across the queen's body and held her down but just like Terry said, the bigger the area the weaker the hold. The queen struggled against the vines for a moment before she started breaking free.

But it was enough.

The vines held the queen long enough for me to climb onto the queen's head and start stabbing its skull with every ounce of stamina in my body. My double thrust skill was getting a good workout in. But the queen wasn't done fighting. It scrambled to its feet and promptly slammed her body into the nearest cave wall. I buried my spear in her skull but Lu was in the middle of another swing. The sudden shift flung her off.

"Ryan," Lu cried out.

I couldn't reach her in time but her kusari-fundo was swinging in my general direction. This was going to suck. I swung my arm out into the weapon's path and took hold of the chain. The spiked hammer bit into my bicep then tore free as the chain limply wrapped around my arm.

"I got you, Lu." I growled, bleeding profusely from my wounded arm and lacking any strength to pull her up. "Hurry up and climb."

Lu pulled herself up by the chain and onto the spider queen's head. "Thanks, Ryan."

I just nodded and did my best to ignore the pain. My mana had recovered enough to cast a healing spell. That would do the trick to fix my arm but I could also funnel it into a Shocker spell.

This fight had gone on long enough. I tore my spear out of the spider queen's skull as she prepared to slam herself into the wall again and plunged my spear into its skull once more. This time my spear punched through to its brain and unleashed a powerful current of electricity.

The spider queen's shriek was abruptly cut off as its entire body spasmed and gave out beneath its weight. It slammed down to the floor, its body tense and quivering from the shock.

"Damn, it's still alive?" I asked. That was the problem with killing anything with electricity. The bodies had a tendency to spasm and quiver long after death. I checked my notifications and sure enough there wasn't anything for killing the queen yet.

Hedwig fixed that problem. With a series of carefully placed bites he chewed through the stunned spider's neck, severing its head.

**You have received 5000 exp.**

**Congrats hero you have reached level 20! Skipping levels today, are we? And to think just a few weeks ago you were shoveling manure. They grow up so fast.**

As much as I hated to admit it, the AI's snark was starting to grow on me. It was starting to feel more like a friendly roasting than the mean-spirited jabs it was giving me when I was starting out my new life as a Druman.

Now I had six new attribute points to distribute and my choice between three different advancements. But I'd take a look at those later.

"Is everyone alright?" I called out.

Lu nodded. "I almost wasn't. Sorry about your arm, Ryan."

I grimaced at the reminder. "Ya, well. We can't be letting a bug squash us. That'd be downright insulting."

Dawn and the others ran around the huge spider's corpse. "We're better than fine. That experience was huge! I almost gained another level. Cam and Terry picked up one each."

Terry beamed with pride. "Yeah! I mean I did almost knock myself out with that last spell but it worked."

I grinned then noticed Cam's missing shields. "How're you holding up Cam? That looked like a nasty blow you took."

Cam gave a sheepish smile. "I might need you to make me those shields sooner than expected, Ryan. My old ones are over there, and there, and there's some splinters over there." He pointed out all the shattered bits of wood he could find.

I laughed. "Don't worry Cam, I'll make you some shields that fit you better."

"With the right runes we might be able to make them as strong as steel," Dawn said. "I'll have to check if I can make what we need."

"I appreciate it. Really." Cam looked down at his feet. "Sorry for all the trouble."

I clasped him on the shoulder. "We take care of each other in Broken Bones, Cam. It's what guilds are for."

"Well, except for those other guilds like Blackhearts or Braven," Terry said. "Those guys are kinda dicks."

"Only kinda?" Lu laughed.

Terry smiled. "Okay so they're total dicks but we don't have to get tied up in name calling."

I smiled and touched the spider queen's corpse. "Alright let's see what loot we picked up."

**Bow of the Purifier. +5 to agility. Imbues arrows with fire damage. Built from the finest dark ash, this ebony bow was made to rid the world of abominations such as giant arachnids.**

**100x Spider Venom Arrows. Deal caustic damage to the target. Made from giant arachnid venom glands, these arrows are perfect for those tough nuts to crack. Like this giant spider queen you just killed, or heavily armored knights.**

**50000 gold. Cha-ching. What? Were you expecting a better description? It's gold noob, spend it on getting good.**

"Huh, the loot drops really like you today, Dawn," I said. "All the gear that dropped was for an archer."

Dawn took the bow and arrows from me. "Nice."

"Man, that sucks," Terry said. "All that trouble and no loot for us. At least the XP was good."

I split the gold into stacks of ten thousand and handed them out to the party. Then, with a big smile on my face, I pulled out my skinning knife. "Oh, I wouldn't say that."

### 3

We spent the next few hours doing what Terry called a viscera cleanup detail. From the giant spider queen to all the smaller bugs, whatever was left of the grubs and snakes, we carved them all up for the raw materials they could provide. We received venom sacs, acid sacs, fangs, hides, and even meat we could apply to our different crafts.

"I am not eating this." Cam hefted up a slab of spider flesh. His face was turning green and his throat flexed, probably holding down the contents of his stomach.

Lu laughed. "Oh, come on Cam. Haven't you ever had lobster? They're basically sea bugs."

Cam shuddered then retched. "Grooooss," he whined. "Why do people even eat that stuff."

"Because it tastes good?" I shrugged, carving up another of the spiders' hardened carapace plates.

Terry hummed. "Maybe it's because the stuff is so expensive it just seems high class and people like it for that? But I've never had any."

Dawn grinned. "Oh, it's expensive alright. Just make sure you pick it up for a special occasion and get the good stuff or it's not going to be great." She hefted up a spider leg. "This stuff I'm not so confident about eating though."

I smiled at her. "Don't knock it until you try it, Dawn. Gorros look disgusting but their bacon is the best thing I have tasted in my life."

Dawn deflated and conceded the point. "True enough. But I'm not going to be your culinary guinea pig. Maybe Voz will volunteer for it."

I reached over to pat Hedwig's head. "My big, fussy owl-bear here will try it out won't you Hedwig?"

Hedwig let out an excited chuff. The oso didn't have any problem eating raw, uncooked food, but just like dogs in the real world he

preferred the cooked stuff us humans made. I couldn't blame him. Raw meat of any kind didn't smell particularly appetizing on its own.

"So, what's the plan with all those spider carapaces, Ryan?" Lu asked.

"Weapon and armor crafting. I'm thinking I might be able to upgrade my clothier skill this way too, especially if I throw in some blacksmithing into the mix." I took off a spider's leg roughly the length of Terry's staff. "The plating on these smaller spiders isn't as strong as the queens but it's still pretty tough and light. Maybe we can make you some sort of spider ninja armor, Lu, or some big, bad, tanky armor for Cam."

Cam shuddered. "No thanks. I don't want to be near bugs any more than I have to and I definitely don't want to wear them."

"What if I covered them up in steel, leather, and wood?" I asked. While I had no idea what kind of stats gear made out of these spider parts would provide, it had to be better than Cam's own mishmash of leather and rags. We really needed to work on outfitting our people if we were going to stand up to the guilds.

Cam frowned but gave a grudging, "Maybe." He crossed his arms. "Just don't tell me it's not made out of the bugs and cover it up alright?"

"I promise." I stood up with the last of the spiders carved up and looted. "Now let's get back to Liberty."

We headed out of the cave when Dawn said, "Didn't you hit level twenty?"

"I'm assigning my stats right now," I answered.

I spent one point on agility to catch it up to my strength and constitution then put another two points into intelligence and wisdom. Those stats had been lagging behind the others and if I was going to keep this flexible build up that was probably a bad idea. My final point was spent into charm. I still wasn't quite sure what that stat actually did for me but since it combined luck and social skills it couldn't hurt to throw it a point now and then. As a Druman, people naturally hated my guts until I proved myself. Supposedly Charm

helped that process along but it was no replacement for a solid reputation. If I was being perfectly honest, I was more interested in the luck aspect of the skill as better luck meant better loot drops.

**Ryan Rosa Level 20 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 29**

**Agility 29**

**Constitution 29**

**Intelligence 25**

**Wisdom 25**

**Charm 10**

“So, what class choices did you have?” Terry asked.

“I’ll look when we’re in town,” I said. “My AI always helps me make up my mind on class choices.”

Terry chuckled. “Because you’re totally not speeding down the master-of-none line.”

“Hey, being an all-around flexible fighter has its perks,” I said. “I might not be as good as a straight up fighter, rogue, or mage but I can use tricks from all of those classes and rangers too. So you could say I’m a specialist in my own right.”

Lu nodded. “Pulling out unexpected tricks in the middle of a fight is always fun. I remember when we were fighting with those Blackhearts guys, one of them thought he got an opening on me when I missed him with my kusari-fundo.”

“What’d you do?” Dawn asked.

Lu pulled out a handful of kunai with an innocent smile. “He never saw them coming.”

I smiled and focused on the journey back to Liberty. Lu definitely had a good point about unexpected tricks. In most MMOs I played there were strongly defined classes with little in the way of variation. A fighter was a fighter no matter who played them. They had a designated set of skills with little to no variety between players. It was up to the individual to maximize their class. In New Realm Online players could effectively develop their own custom class

based on the skills they focused on; the class changes were really more of a boost in whatever direction players wanted to go in.

When we arrived at Liberty we split up our resources. I took anything that could be cooked or forged into weapons and armor. Lu took anything even vaguely alchemical that we'd scrounged up and Terry went along with her to see if she could make something to help with the farms. Cam went to work in the mines saying he needed to increase his strength and constitution after that fight.

Dawn held up the bow and arrows we looted. "I'm going to be dismantling these."

I blinked. "What? Why?"

"You know how the game works. Loot drops are great but they don't have anything on quality crafted items." She held out the bow pointing out a rune on the weapon. "If I'm careful about studying these items and their runes I can learn how to make them myself. But the process involves dismantling whatever I'm studying in most cases."

I stroked my chin and nodded. "Okay so if you figure this out you can make us weapons imbued with fire or acid magic?"

"Or figure out some other applications. The rune smithing system is pretty broad in its applications. Like those runes we used on strengthening our bows or heating the water running into our houses," Dawn explained. "Those are pretty low-level runes."

"They are useful though," I said. "Well, I'll catch you later, Dawn. I have a class to pick and creepy spider armor to make."

Dawn grinned. "Try not to scar Cam for life with your creations, Ryan." She turned and waved.

"No promises," I said and headed for the blacksmith shop. I still had to figure out how to actually work these new materials.

Voz and Dwayne were already there hammering away at sections of the aqueduct.

"Ryan, how are you doing lad?" Voz asked.

"Pretty good. I hit level twenty and I have a ton of spider materials I'm excited to work on," I said.



Dwayne let out a low whistle. "Did you pick your next class?"

"I'm actually going to do that right now," I said as I sat down in a quiet corner of the shop with Hedwig at my back. He was a big comfortable couch that loved the attention but even I had to wonder just how big the oso would get. He was still young after and I had never seen a full grown oso before.

Dwayne nodded. "Alright, see you in a bit. Oh! By the way, I thought you should know the piping for those houses is in place and everything is working fine with heated plumbing and everything."

"Nice. Did you run into any problems?" I asked.

Dwayne chuckled. "A few beasts tried to bother us but it wasn't anything we couldn't handle. The good thing is the houses we worked on served as a test case for the larger aqueduct system. Now all we have to do is build it out to a large scale and we can grow this town as big as we like."

I beamed at that news. While we were trying to keep a low profile for now, it was inevitable that the other guilds would find us. The bigger and stronger we could grow before then the better off we would be. "That's awesome. I can't wait to see how it turns out."

Dwayne smiled and got back to work.

I shut my eyes and pulled up the class change notification.

**You have reached Level 20. You are eligible for a class change. Would you like to visit Alecia?**

**Yes.**

This time Alecia appeared on a mountain top overlooking a city. It was beautiful, peaceful, but listening closely to that silence I realized it was an illusion. The faint clash of metal on metal reached my ears. The shouts of combat and the woosh of spells were all there, a whisper in the wind.

"Hello Ryan," Alecia glanced over her shoulder with a wry smile. "You are progressing quite nicely. Are you here to select your new class?"

I stepped up beside her and nodded. "Uh, yeah. Fighting a giant spider queen will do that to a guy." I pointed down at the city below.

“What’s with the battle ambience?”

Alecia turned back to the city. Fires sprung up here and there without any sign of the fighting slowing down. “This is Heartfell, Ryan. A place engulfed in combat between guilds and the local kingdom vying for control.”

My brow furrowed. “But didn’t Braven already take control of the city?”

Alecia nodded. “They did but that does not mean the players or locals are in agreement. Right now all three sides are fighting for control and there is no telling which way the tide of battle will go.” Her gaze locked with Ryan’s. “It does not look like the locals will win.”

Looking over the new fires spreading through the city I frowned. Alecia was right. The locals, the NPCs of New Realm Online, couldn’t respawn. No matter how much stronger they were than the players, every casualty they took was an irreplaceable life. Meanwhile the players could throw themselves into the meat grinder and come back again and again. Each death would cost them more experience and items, sure, but every new wave cost the guards more stamina, mana, arrows, and ultimately health. It was a war of attrition without end.

“We have to do something to help,” I said.

Alecia smiled. “You can’t. Not as you are, Ryan. Broken Bones is a good guild, and so are the people of Liberty, but you are not yet strong enough to take on the likes of Braven and Blackhearts head on.”

“Then we’ll just get stronger,” I said. “Can I see my class options?”

“Of course,” Alecia waved her hand.

**You have reached Level 20! You may now advance your class, or choose another. You have opened three classes.**

**1) Elite Shadow Spearman: A warrior class specializing in the use of pole arms, shields, magical attacks and stealth. You gain bonuses to all pole arm weapons, formation fighting,**

leadership, and defense. An elite shadow spearman is a powerful ambush fighter good alone or in command of an army. Striking a decisive opening blow in combat scenarios, these warriors are feared throughout the kingdom for their martial and tactical prowess.

**2) Master Creator:** A crafter class that can not only excel but master multiple crafting and gathering classes. Gain 5 crafting skills and 10 levels to distribute among your crafting and gathering skills. Receive a greater bonus to all crafting experience and bonuses to intelligence. A creator's power comes from their creativity, a master creator's power comes from their ability to refine their craft to a level even the gods would desire.

**3) Mystic Shadow Ranger:** This unique class holds a diversity of talents. This warrior is at home in the shadows, whether they be in the woods or the cities. Fight with a variety of weapons, cast magic with the force to challenge any mage, and forge your own empire. There is no limit to what a mystic shadow ranger can accomplish. Explorers gain bonus skills in weapons, hunting and gathering, stealth, magic, and crafting.

It was a little disappointing to see effectively the same three classes as before but I couldn't argue with the perks. The game knew what I was going for and offered me a combat and craft specialist role on the off chance I wanted to ditch the master-of-all approach and one class that worked well with just about everything.

I had to admit the thought of becoming a badass spear wielding shadow warrior type was pretty enticing. From the chaotic scene below, it was something the world definitely needed. But I decided to pass on it. Master Creator was another fantastic choice but Broken Bones was already full of various different and overlapping crafting focused players which was as much a blessing as it was a curse. We

had all our bases covered when it came to crafting with plenty of specialists burning ahead in their chosen field but it also meant we required a lot more raw materials to help bring everyone up in level. As awesome as it would be to make the best gear for myself possible, I was certain someone else could do a better job than me on that front.

The choice was a no brainer for me. Mystic Shadow Ranger all day every day. Why? Because while the other classes gave access to new skills, skill ranks, and even damage bonuses to specific weapons, this class gave me the ability to level up any skills I wanted faster than anyone else. Since every level meant slower skill progression, this was an invaluable perk and skills were king in New Realm Online.

“You know, you said my choices would be different going forward,” I teased Alecia.

She let out a soft laugh. “Normally they would be. Players open up classes by focusing on different skills and some through special quests hidden in the world. But you have chosen time and again to focus on self-improvement with a focus on your spear and crafting skills.”

I scratched at the back of my neck. “Ya, I guess I am a little predictable there. Hey can I ask you a question?”

“I cannot answer any questions pertaining to the battle below, Ryan.” Alecia said.

“No, not about that. I figured that might be the case. It’s about the leadership and command skills. It says the spearman class line has access to them but I don’t think I’ve ever received a single level in them.”

Alecia nodded. “That is because you were a solo player until recently. Now you are a guild master. The skill will level up in time, faster if you continue to work in a party.”

“That’s good,” I said with a smile. “But what does it actually do?”

“Leadership improves the stats of allies within your party, up to a full raid by one percent per level,” Alecia said. “This includes

yourself. Command is a larger buff that applies to your entire guild and anyone who has sworn fealty to you. These effects stack but Command takes considerably longer to improve and requires a level in Leadership in order to begin training.”

I was already looking forward to playing with a party for a change but this was an awesome pair of skills I needed to have. “Does it have any fancy tricks tied to it?” I asked. “Like in dungeons and dragons there were some classes with leadership themed abilities.”

Alecia smiled. “You’ll have to find out for yourself, Ryan. Good luck.”

I waved before the world faded into darkness. When I awoke, I was back in the blacksmith shop. Voz and Dwayne were long gone. Hedwig was snoring behind me. “That must have taken longer than I thought.”

Carefully, I pushed myself up and went to work with the materials I took from the warehouse. The tough, spider chitin we collected was surprisingly durable. It had little to no flex to it and was resistant to all but the most dedicated slashes and thrusts. Smashing it with a blunt weapon cracked it open though so it wasn’t great for dealing with that type of damage but most people went for piercing or slashing attacks anyway. If I wrapped the armor in leather, I could reduce the damage of blunt attacks and preserve the armor’s durability. With an added layer of metal this set of armor would be a pain to break through.

My initial thought was to work on armor for Cam as he desperately needed the protection as their party’s tank. Using the heavier queen’s carapace for such a set would be ideal but I decided it was safer to make a few practice sets of armor first with the more common materials. After all, wasting elite boss materials on a first run would be a special kind of stupid and I had enough of that in my early days in New Realm.

I started out by making weaved leather armor as I had originally done for myself. It was a simple enough process of back and forth through the different patterns with a few key changes. I left the weave open in the places where I would attach the chitin plating.

Once the first set of leather was done I moved on to measuring out just how much spider chitin I was going to need. The problem was none of it was even vaguely human shaped or sized. Who would have guessed? So I had to get creative and wasted a lot of lower quality carapaces to figure out just how I would stick any of this together. At first I tried to glue it together but even with the use of Convection to speed up the hardening process the sections where the carapace was joined were weak compared to the rest of the spider armor. I layered over the material with leather to see if that would help. It did, mostly. When the pieces broke, they stayed together but that was a wobbly mess that wasn't going to protect anyone.

Drumming my fingers on the workbench I wondered what exactly I was going to do. Then I looked at the forge. "Could I rivet this stuff together?" I mumbled to myself then looked at the sleeping Hedwig. "Sorry big guy, but this is going to get noisy."

Hedwig groaned in frustration as I broke him out of his sweet dreams working the forge. Using metal bands, rivets, and a metric ton of elbow grease I cobbled together the first set of spider plating to go on a boot. It still looked like the dark gray carapace of an overgrown bug, which Cam was absolutely going to hate, but it looked far more solid than any of my previous attempts.

"Time to test this bad boy out."

I flailed the plates around to see if they would come apart, smacked them into every sturdy surface in the blacksmith shop. It was a good thing no one was around because I must have looked like an idiot, or a mad man, or both. Probably, definitely both. To add to my insane look I strapped the spider plate down to beat with a hammer. The plate cracked but it held together.

"Progress," I said with a growing smile.

I repeated the process again, reinforcing the armor with more iron and adding a thick layer of woven leather over it. With the rivets holding the leather in place it looked like I had just made a set of brigandine armor. Well, a piece of a set. The leather could probably use some hardening but it was as tough as I could currently make it.

It held up to slashing and stabbing well enough and once it was all put together it wouldn't really be an issue until the durability hit zero. But I just had to be sure. I repeated the smack down test on this latest plate, hit it with a hammer, and the armor held. I shook the plate around next to my ear and there wasn't a single bit of rattle or crumbling to be heard.

"Nice. But how much abuse can this thing really handle?" I asked myself. After seeing Cam's shields get turned to splinters before getting himself thrown across the boss room, I had to be sure the armor would hold up to some serious abuse.

Hedwig groaned like he knew exactly where this was going. He covered his ears in advance.

That was probably a good idea. I threw the armor plate down on the floor and picked up a sledge hammer Voz made. I swung the hammer down on the armor plate. It hit the corner and shot the plate out at a wall. The plate bounced back down to the floor.

I rushed up and picked it up. The leather was roughed up and the plate itself looked bent out of shape but it still held together. Taking my knife out I cut through the leather and found the spider plate was cracked but not enough to break. Once the whole thing was put together this was going to be some seriously durable armor.

Rubbing my hands together I got to work.

A couple of hours of grunt work later I finished the first set of light armor.

**Congratulations! You have made Light Arachnid Brigandine Armor. +35 to armor, +1 to agility and +1 to endurance per piece. Durability: 30/30**

**Notice: This is a set of armor. Wearing the full set increases armor by an additional 5 points and grants a 50% reduction to caustic damage.**

**Armor Smithing +2**

**Clothier +2**

That was awesome! I knew I had been developing my skills as a crafter but I never expected to make something this good for at least

another ten levels. Screwing around with all those experiments must have really bumped up my skills when I wasn't paying attention. It also seemed that clothier and armor smithing were related but separate skills. Clothier worked with anything soft and flexible like leathers and fabrics while armor smithing worked on hard materials like metals or the spider plates. Armor smithing didn't really work without clothier as I needed the knowledge of making clothes and human...ish anatomy required to make any of this stuff fit a person.

*Guys, I just made the first set of armor and it's awesome!* I sent to my party along with the stats on the armor.

*Me next, me, next!* Lu was the first to respond. *Make it all ninja looking with flowy bits and a scarf. A big scarf. Maybe a red one?* Lu had clearly been thinking out her ninja look for a long time.

*Wouldn't a red scarf be counter intuitive to the whole sneaking thing?* Dawn asked.

*It would if it wasn't the last thing our enemies would ever see. Bwuahahah!* Lu replied.

I shook my head laughing and jotted down her request. *I'll see what I can do. We don't exactly have any dyes laying around here.*

*Terry here. Lu's a little busy freaking out in the alchemy lab trying to make dyes right now. So you'll get your dyes,* he said. *I'm not super worried about playing fashion souls right now though so if you could make me some better mage armor that'd be appreciated man. Something that looks less like I'm running around in a bathrobe. This mage outfit kinda gets in the way when it's time to run.*

*I'll take something light and revealing if you wouldn't mind, Ryan,* Dawn added in her own request.

*So is that because you like dressing up like that or because it's required by your goddess, Lillianna?* Terry had to ask.

*Both,* Dawn said.

*I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a fan,* I admitted and jotted that down on my list of work orders. While I did find it silly that a game with such an emphasis on realism bent the rules when it came to sexy armor, I couldn't really complain. Maybe I'll return the favor to Dawn



later. If I could find a way to make that not look awkward. *What about you, Cam? Any requests?*

*Voz said I have to wear heavy armor if I want to be a tank, Cam said. So big, heavy armor please.*

*This should keep me busy for the rest of the day. Thanks guys.* I returned my attention to the smithy and got to work.

It may have taken a little longer than that. The afternoon sun was long gone and the moon started to peek over the horizon but the armor sets were done for everyone. I even took the time to make Cam a pair of tower shields out of what was left of the spider carapaces. Not that he'd ever know. I went through a lot of trouble to avoid any hint of bug armor for his sake more than the others. Cam may not have had a phobia of bugs but he sure wasn't a fan of them. I wasn't a fan either but armor was armor.

**Congratulations! You have improved your Armor Smithing and Clothier skills by +2. Keep this up and someday soon you too may terrorize the world with your terrible fashion choices.**

I looked down at myself. *This is the most put together I've looked since I started in New Realm!* I protested but it wasn't like the AI could respond. If anything, it was probably taking some sort of joy in messing with me and I just fed it plenty.

Sighing, I gathered up the armor and headed to our little tavern which really was a repurposed, ruined house we'd repaired. Someday soon we'd have a proper inn and tavern but that was just one of a long list of improvements Liberty needed.

Dawn and the others were there, gathered around the table, eating a plate of gorro bacon, eggs, and potatoes. I sank into the seat beside them and smiled. "So, who's ready for some new gear?"

"Me!" Lu practically jumped out of her seat.

Cam gently pulled her back down with a nervous chuckle. Lu's loud personality probably clashed with Cam's own quiet demeanor. But he'd get used to it, probably.

"No rush," I took the armor out of my inventory and passed it out to everyone in turn.

They all took the time to throw on their new gear and I couldn't help smiling. We all looked like we were wearing some sort of uniform. Hah. The Broken Bones official armor is made from the bones of giant spiders. At least I think that's what an exoskeleton is. I mused. "How's the fit?"

Dawn flexed her hands in the new bracers and gloves of hers. "Like a glove. How did you get my measurements this good?"

I smiled. "I have a spell from the clothier skill line that lets me make a sort of blueprint for equipment. Since I already used it on all of you guys it wasn't hard to get the measurements right. The neat thing is I can make a general blueprint for things I know how to craft and share the recipe. Then it's up to the crafters to adjust the gear to whoever they're building for."

"You should get those to the crafters right away," Terry said. "This new mage suit is awesome." He swung his hips from side to side, letting his new coat swoosh along with his tail. "No way I'm tripping over this."

Lu practically squealed with delight as she finished putting on her ninja outfit, with mask and unnecessarily long scarf and everything.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted a headband or the full head covering so I flipped a coin," I told her.

"The head band is great," Lu said. "The color's the only thing that needs fixing but that's on me and the other alchemists."

"Any luck making dyes?" I asked.

Lu brushed a burnt strand of hair out of her face. "Eheh... Not really, no. But I did sorta rush things."

Nodding Terry said, "You'll figure it out, Lu. Just take it easy next time, alright?"

"Maybe. I'm not actually sure we have the right stuff here to make a dye. I'll have to dig around the forums for guides," Lu said.

Cam sat back down. The hulking man covered in heavy armor made the bench groan and flex under his weight. To anyone who didn't know what I did the armor looked like a heavy set of dark, iron platemail. What they didn't know is that the armor was iron plates

layered over leather, arachnid chitin, and even more leather. Cam's armor alone was responsible for my last two levels in armor smithing and took the longest to complete of all the sets. But it was well worth the armor score it provided at a total of a hundred and fifty points. It also had the highest stat bonuses of any of their armors with a whopping five points in constitution and strength. It seemed the higher the quality of materials used in an item the better the results one could expect. Combine that with the gatherers' and crafters' level and you could push those results even further.

I really loved this game's crafting system.

"This is really nice," Cam said sheepishly. "And the shields too." He gestured at the two... Let's be generous and call them doors he had leaning against the wall. "Thanks, Ryan."

"The pleasure's all mine," I said, lifting a mug of water. Our makeshift tavern was sorely lacking in the drink department. "Now let's eat."

The door slammed open. Nico rushed in. "Ryan, we have a problem."

## 4

*Of course we do*, I thought while looking at my delicious plate of food. After a long day of grinding, I was actually looking forward to relaxing for the rest of the evening. But duty called. “What’s wrong, Nico?”

“Tasar was out in the woods to the south gathering lumber for the settlement. He said he saw strangers out there,” Nico began. “It seems they did not look the part of normal folks but rather like you erm...” She paused, searching for the right word.

“Players works,” I said.

Nico gave me a curious glance but rolled with it. “Right. They looked to be players such as yourselves. Tasar followed them for a time but the group split up. He says there were three of them but there could be more.”

**You have been offered a quest! Eliminate the scouts searching for Liberty. 1500exp. Do you accept yes/no?**

That quest was making the bold assumption that these were, in fact, hostile players. But that’s what Tasar believed he saw so it’s no wonder the system described it as such. If we were lucky, it would just be a group of lost players. If we weren’t, killing those players would buy us some precious time before a hostile guild inevitably found our home.

“That’s not good,” Dawn said. “I’ll call up the acolytes and dispatch some hunting parties.”

My stomach growled. “I’m going to stuff my face. Then, we’re going hunting.” I accepted the quest. “Are you guys with me?”

“Yeah!” Terry and Lu said in unison.

Dawn smiled. “I can’t let the acolytes do all the work.”

“But what if they’re really high level?” Cam asked.

“There are more important things than raw level in this game, Cam,” I said. “Your skills matter a lot more, and the application of

those skills too. If those people out there are really scouts for Braven or the Blackhearts, we'll take care of them. Even if we have to get a little bit tricky about it."

Lu beamed. "Let's go!" She scarfed down on her food and we all followed her example. The less time we gave those scouts to find Liberty the better we would all be.

We headed south to the last location Tasar saw the scouts. There were three separate trails, two of them headed off to the east where Dawn said her acolytes had gone off. The other headed north west. So far none of the scouts were going in the right direction to find Liberty but why risk it? Sure, you could argue that killing a bunch of lost scouts would only cement their belief that something was out here that didn't want to be found but it would take them days to get back to Liberty.

"These tracks aren't too old. If we're quick we should catch up to them in a few hours," I said. Unless the scout we were hunting have night vision, we had the advantage out here. Well, I did at least.

"We should light some torches," Cam whispered.

Lu shook her head. "No, they'll see us coming that way. Just let your eyes adjust to the dark."

"Or I could try my dark vision spell," Terry offered. "I have to cast it on everyone individually but it lasts about an hour."

"Plenty of time for us to catch our prey," Dawn said.

I nodded. "Do it, Terry."

Terry applied the spell to everyone then moved to me. I raised my hand and reminded him about my racial dark vision then led the way across the woods.

We followed the tracks deeper and deeper into the woods as they wound their way north and to the west. The scout we were following was going to miss Liberty by several miles but given enough time he'd find our quaint little mountain village. With its relatively isolated location in the mountains and a mine full of valuables, any guild would be crazy not to fight for it. As much as I loved the steady stream of raw materials, building my own village, and the promise of

trade in the future, none of that mattered next to protecting the people of Liberty. If a guild like Braven or the Blackhearts took over they would have a workforce of undying NPCs to use as slaves for the rest of their days and they would turn around and do the same to all of the members of Broken Bones.

I knew that New Realm Online is just a game to most people. It allowed them to excuse away all of their horrible deeds as actions without real consequences, especially for the degenerate monsters with darker tastes, but that wasn't the case for us or the NPCs. To me the NPCs of this world were real, living breathing people no different from any person you would run into in the street with their own hopes and dreams. And to us in Broken Bones, a guild made up exclusively of medipod users, this was a chance at a new life for us. In the real world I had a pair of broken legs, an inability to get work of any kind, and an insurance pay out that covered the bills with very little room for anything else. In New Realm I was an adventurer with purpose. I believed the others felt the same way about the game and we weren't about to let a bunch of ass hats ruin that for us or anyone else.

The set of footprints we followed were suddenly joined by a second set. I held up a hand to call for a halt and inspected the tracks. This new set of prints was wedged deep into the forest floor initially before carrying on with a similar depth to the others. "Someone dropped down from above," I whispered.

Lu leaned over my shoulder with a big nod. "That would be the ninja thing to do. Want me to do the same?"

"Can you do it quietly?" Dawn asked.

Lu clambered without a sound up the nearest tree then hopped across to the other. The rustling of leaves was impossible to miss in the dead silence of the trees.

"That's a no," Terry laughed. "But hey, maybe there's a skill for that too."

Lu appeared behind Terry's shoulder with a big grin on her face. "Maybe."

Terry jumped; hands clamped over his mouth to muffle his surprised yelp. "How did you get back there?"

Lu wiggled her fingers at Terry. "Ninja," she said in a sing-song voice.

Hedwig sniffed at the tracks then grunted. He moved on ahead of the party, stalking cautiously through the woods. "Whoever's out there must be close. Hedwig has picked up their scent."

The party nodded and stalked on after the owl-bear. It took several more minutes of skulking around the dark woods to get a glimpse of the two scouts. One look at them and my interface labeled them as members of the Braven guild. Their names were vaguely familiar too. Ruby Rod was one of them and I was pretty sure I saw her in Mara before we were forced to flee. The other name almost had me crying out with laughter. I clamped my hands over my mouth and let out a sharp breath. The second scout was called Sneaky Dickins.

After a breath to regain my composure, I grinned at the others. "I have a plan guys."

"I'm listening," Dawn said.

I patted Hedwig's side. "My lovely oso companion here is going to cause a little distraction for us by making a ton of noise. When those two take the bait we'll jump them."

Terry held up a finger. "But how do we know they're going to take that bait? Osos are pretty big, scary creatures. Most people would steer clear from them."

That was a good point. I turned to Hedwig. "Can you play dead, Hedwig?"

Hedwig flopped over onto his side with a dramatic shake of his legs then went slack with a strained whimper.

I grinned and rubbed Hedwig's exposed stomach. "Sweet."

Dawn chuckled. "If this works out we're going to have to get Hedwig an Oscar for best supporting actor."

Hedwig stared blankly at Dawn. He, understandably, had no idea what an Oscar was.

So I stepped in to explain. "You do this, and I'm going to get you a whole basket full of fish."

Hedwig hopped to his feet with a happy chuff and a wiggling of his short tail. The oso was going to give it his all that was for sure.

"Great. Now get over there and give us a show," I pointed off into the woods past where the scouts vanished.

Hedwig rushed ahead of us.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Cam asked.

"It's a gamble," I admitted. "But if it doesn't work, we'll break out the Benny Hill music and chase them through the woods."

"Benny what now?" Lu asked.

I shook my head with a quiet laugh. "It's an old meme. Don't worry about it."

We stalked on ahead and caught another glimpse of the Braven scouts. They were crouched down over something. I was tempted to open up on them but then I noticed they were looking at a set of oso tracks.

"What the hell is an oso doing all the way down here? I thought they were supposed to live way further north with the trolls and all that," Sneaky Dickins said.

Ruby Rod frowned. "I heard those things are nasty."

Sneaky nodded. "Very. But look at the size of those paws. It's a young one. I bet we can mess it up."

"I don't know, Sneaky," Ruby said.

Hedwig let out a pained hoot in the distance so convincing my heart jumped to my throat. His intact health bar proved it was just part of the act.

"Hear that?" Sneaky said as Hedwig thrashed about in the woods, hooting and hollering through the woods. "That thing's wounded. There's literally nothing that could go wrong with this plan. It is free experience."

"Way to jinx us," Ruby huffed.



Sneaky backhanded Ruby's arm. "Quit being a little bitch. This whole trip has been a waste of time all because some loser ninja got face rolled by some noobs. Let's at least grab a little XP."

"Fine, fine," Ruby conceded. The pair went on ahead after Hedwig, creeping after my oso just as we were creeping after them. This was going to be awesome.

Hedwig hooted and growled and I couldn't help grinning at his acting chops. We even caught sight of Hedwig ahead of the scouts. He was limping! Hedwig lumbered through the forest like he had a twisted ankle. It was honestly an impressive act.

Looking to my right I nodded at Dawn, my girlfriend and oh so very dangerous Lilac Priestess, to begin the attack. She grinned and readied an arrow. I signaled for the others to spread out for an attack while I activated my Shadow's Lover skill. The blend of two different stealth skills was incredible. As long as I had shadows around me, I would blend right into them. It was an incredible skill that turned me into a master of stealth and in this current low light situation I would be practically invisible.

Stalking toward the two players I signaled for Lu, Cam and Terry to go after Sneaky while Dawn, Hedwig, and I would focus on Ruby. If we could scatter them all the better.

Terry and the others went off to the left. I readied a hunting spear, pouring mana into the weapon. The Braven scouts drew their weapons on Hedwig. Hedwig dropped the act and whirled on them with a fearsome roar.

The scouts screamed and scrambled back. Sneaky bolted into the woods. Ruby turned and caught my spear in the chest. Electricity arced through Ruby's body.

**Successful sneak attack! Shocker attack and critical dmg. You have dealt 180 dmg to Ruby Rod Level 22 player.**

Ruby collapsed to the floor, spasming and quaking from the shock. He tore the spear out of his chest, coughing and wheezing. While I readied my follow up glaive attack, I spotted the other scout.

Sneaky had two arrows in his chest from Dawn. Her speed with the bow was impressive but he was still running at full speed.

*Don't let him get away,* I sent to Lu and the others.

Ruby Rod staggered to his feet, drawing a nasty pair of daggers. I carved his chest open with my glaive and followed through, whipping him across the face with the weapon's haft. Ruby was sent spinning through the air. Dawn filled him full of arrows before he hit the floor dead.

**You have defeated Ruby Rod. 800 exp gained.**

There may have been a two-level gap between us but superior skill and tactics gave me a clear edge over the stronger player. And to think I'd sacrificed three of my own levels not that long ago to earn a boon from a god. The very boon that allowed the local NPCs of Liberty to respawn. What I lost in levels and stat points I more than made up for in developing my skills and earning the trust of Liberty's people though so it was a fair trade.

I returned my hunting spear to my bag of holding.

Hedwig burst through the bushes too late to help in the fight. He let out a disappointed grunt and stared at me.

I patted his head and smiled. "Sorry partner, they didn't last long enough. Maybe next time."

Hedwig grunted and pawed at the dead player, hoping that he was only faking his death.

"Their hunters are getting braver, this is the farthest away from Mara we've seen any of them yet," Dawn said.

I nodded. "We'll have to do more patrols. The longer we can go without them finding Liberty the better."

That was easier said than done. We only had so many people between the members of Broken Bones and the NPCs living in Liberty. Most of them, players included, just wanted to live quiet, peaceful lives. We were honestly lucky that we hadn't had any major problems so far but with the town of Mara being held by Braven we couldn't afford to take any chances.

I pulled open my map and saw just how close we were to Liberty. Had these scouts headed more toward the east they would have spotted liberty in another hour or two of meandering around. Two more red x's appeared on my map far to the east of liberty. Those must have been the other groups of scouts Dawn's acolytes had hunted down.

**Congratulations! You have completed the quest: Eliminate the scouts searching for Liberty. 1500exp. Your people remain safe. For now.**

That oddly ominous line of text sealed the deal in my mind. Regardless of what the players or NPCs wanted they all had to dedicate more time to improving their combat skills. We had spent far too much time and resources to help build this settlement off the beaten path and made it a place safe for the NPCs and players alike to allow it to fall. And we especially couldn't afford to allow such a valuable mine to fall into the hands of a guild like Braven or the Blackhearts.

I sent Nico a message with my request and updated her on the situation. "At least the Braven have to keep their main players in Mara. Now that they hold the town they have to keep it. One slip up and the other guilds are going to swoop in like vultures.

There were larger towns and cities that were simply too well fortified and had too many guards and soldiers to attack reasonably. So while the big boys fought for control of prime real estate, smaller guilds like the Braven moved in to take villages and small towns. On its own a town like Mara wasn't much to brag about but it still served as a valuable base of operations for guilds to run quests and schemes out of. A small guild who held enough of these towns could even choke out the larger guilds if they cut them off from supplies.

But I was getting way ahead of myself. As we were, we'd be lucky to hold Liberty against Braven. We had to fight smarter and work harder to hold the line against the larger and stronger guilds.

"You think they'll be able to hold Mara? I heard that the Blackheart guild is pissed at them for sneaking in behind them and

intend to take the town from them,” Dawn said as we walked toward Lu, Cam and Terry’s location.

I shrugged. “Who knows. The Blackhearts have a lot more players, but most of them are lower level than the main guys from Braven. The Blackhearts also have other towns they have to protect. If they go all out against Braven then someone might challenge them for their bases.” I ran through different scenarios in my mind of different guilds maneuvering and countering against others. “The next couple of months are going to be interesting.”

“As long as they fight amongst themselves and don’t try coming for Liberty, I don’t really care who wins,” Dawn said.

I agreed. Not that I was too worried about them making Liberty a priority target while they didn’t know it existed. My guild had a dungeon to grind out levels relatively fast, skilled fighters among the NPCs that could train others, and crafters out of the wazoo who were constantly improving their craft. Maybe through sheer force of creativity and logistics alone we could stand up to anything the other guilds could throw at us. Whatever the case, Liberty was going to be a tough nut to crack for any guild and it was going to get tougher by the day.

After a short trek we found the rest of our party. “Good hunting?” I asked.

Cam stood over the dead Sneaky Dickins looking sick to his stomach. And I couldn’t blame him. The human body was just not meant to bend or twist in those ways. Definitely not at the spine.

Lu nodded excitedly. “Yeah! Cam rushed on ahead like a bulldozer and he cut this guy off with his shields. Cam was all like, ‘you shall not pass!’ but he didn’t say that cause he’s quiet and the Sneaky guy bounced off his shields like a rubber ball right into my spiked chain.”

“That’s friggin team work,” Terry said in a sing-song voice and exchanged a high five with Lu.

“And what did you do Terry?” I asked.

Terry looked back and forth then grinned sheepishly. "Supervised?"

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Cam, are you going to be alright?"

Cam nodded. "This game just gets a little too real sometimes."

He had a point. As much as I loved how realistic some aspects of the game were, especially the absolutely amazing food, there were others that seemed completely excessive for a game. But realism and immersion seemed to be the development team's goal so I couldn't really blame them. "Come on. Loot these guys and let's get back home. We have another busy day ahead of us."

It was an uneventful trip back to the village as we slowly headed back, making sure to cover our tracks. And while Lu was being a chatterbox Terry was uncharacteristically silent. I glanced back a few times but it looked like his mood was growing darker by the second. I held off on my questioning until we were behind Liberty's walls.

"What's up, Terry?" I asked.

Terry rubbed Hedwig's head with a deep frown. "You remember Betty from the rehab center?"

"Of course," I replied. After my freak accident with a semi-truck I had to go through two years of rehab. It didn't do anything for my legs but at least everything from the waist up was in working order. More importantly, it was there that I met my best friend Terry and Betty who I had unfortunately done a terrible job of keeping in touch with after my time in rehab.

"She's in the game now," Terry said. "But she ran into problems with a guild. She got forced into a contract that basically turned her into a slave. They have her in some kinda mining camp, and the guild treats everyone there like crap."

*How do you get forced into signing a contract?* I wondered then remembered my own spawn camping incident with the Braven. It was much easier to torture a medipod user that way than normal players. I frowned. Guilds could be assholes but this was a whole new level I hadn't experienced yet. "Which guild?"

“They call themselves the Black Wolf guild. I looked them up on the way here,” Terry said. Using the game’s interface, it was easy enough to pull up information on other guilds without heading out into the real world. “They have a decent number of players but none of their members are overly powerful. It looks like they are just taking advantage of noobs to build up their resources.”

From a mustache twirling evil villain angle, I could see that having more bodies would make building up resources go by faster. From a practical sense it was completely idiotic. If these guilds just worked to train up the newbies they were chaining up, they could have a far more powerful and efficient means of achieving the same ends without being a bag of dicks. *Damn noobs.*

“We should go get her,” Dawn said. “If she’s a medi-pod player then she should be part of our guild.”

“That was the plan,” Terry said. “But now she’s stuck with the wolves.”

“OK. We can’t afford to take too many players away from Liberty, it will have to be a small group,” I said. “I’ll take Dawn and Hedwig.”

“You sure that’s enough?” Terry asked. “They are a small guild, but they have at least a hundred members. They won’t be pushovers.”

“You forget, we have the blessing of a goddess,” Dawn said with a grin. “I can recruit Betty and any other ladies that have been caught up in this guild’s trickery.”

“We’ll level up on our way to Betty,” I said. “If we take out a few more of the Braven on our way, we can be even stronger by the time we get there. In the meantime, you three can work on your skills here.”

Cam nodded. “If you guys are sneaking in, you’re better off without me. I’ll let the whole world know you’re coming otherwise.” He jumped around to emphasize his point but I built his armor better than that. It barely rattled.

Lu frowned. “Fine. I’ll just have to talk Tasar into teaching me more sneaking tricks.”

I should have probably brought Lu along since she was a ninja. But between me, Dawn, and Hedwig, we weren't going to be the most inconspicuous bunch. Besides, Liberty needed all the scouts it could get. "Lu, you need to be here to make sure no Braven players find Liberty. Our local ninja needs to be here."

Lu sighed and nodded. "I suppose that is true. I can level up and have Tasar teach me. As much as a road trip sounds fun, I'll do better here."

"I guess just the two of you isn't a bad idea, besides Hedwig is turning into a real monster. He's probably worth a couple players in a fight," Terry said.

Hedwig let out a grunt of approval.

I laughed at my big oso companion and rubbed at one of his ears. "OK, where is Betty now?"

## 5

Cedar Springs. This was going to be a long walk.

Dawn, Hedwig, and I headed south west of Liberty to our destination but the path ahead was not going to be easy in the slightest. Outside of the long journey there was the problem of enemy territory to navigate. Between us and Cedar Springs stood Mara with its Braven actively searching the surrounding area. Beyond that was Galford, which I believe is currently controlled by the Blackhearts. If we stuck to the woods there was a good chance we could avoid detection by players, but that also meant we had to be smart about what we packed.

My bag of holding carried all the essentials for a hunting trip, rations included, so we were good on that front. Plus, we could always hunt and gather if we wanted something fresher. If all went well, we would arrive at our destination in a few short days, save Betty, and get back home.

Unfortunately, that wasn't to be the case.

We were half a day through our journey when we spotted them. Braven hunting parties. I say hunting rather than scouting because so far the scouts only ever stuck to groups of one. This wasn't that kind of group.

"Five players," Dawn whispered as she hugged a tree.

I activated Shadow's Lover and blended into the shadow of a tree while Hedwig crouched low to the ground looking more like a large strangely fuzzy boulder than an oso. "One tank, sword and board type, a mage and those two rogues we killed yesterday. Sneaky and Ruby." I reported. Squinting at the group I spotted another character. "Looks like they have a cleric too. A stealthy one over there in the back line."

"Should we take them on?" Dawn asked.



The experience would be worth the trouble, and it would be interesting to see how the three of us would fare against a full party but that's not what we were here for. We were on a mission and every second we spent not travelling was another second of torture Betty had to endure. Then there was Liberty's safety to keep in mind. A few scouts getting picked off now and then was one thing, a whole party getting taken out was another entirely. It would attract more attention than I was comfortable with.

I shook my head. "Let's steer clear of them. Besides they have a level thirty-five tank and that priest is thirty-three. That ranger's no slouch either."

*Quiet*, Dawn sent over our party chat.

The party turned in our direction. I hugged my shadow-covered tree tighter and adjusted my position as they approached.

"I'm serious! We got ganked by some players out here in the woods. Our death markers are just a few more hours this way," Sneaky said.

The plate-wearing tank snorted. "Bet you did. You damn rogues are always fucking off on your own and putting yourselves in idiotic positions." He let out a long sigh that must have been building up for years. "And you're always making my job and Nayla's harder than it needs to be."

Nayla nodded, adjusting her glasses beneath her white hood. "That's why I have a strict idiots get to die policy." She turned to Ruby and Sneaky. "So try not to be problem children, okay? I have my hands full as it is keeping Tarkus alive."

Ruby looked like he was about to blow. Sneaky quickly clamped a hand over his mouth and gestured for Ruby to be cool.

"Don't piss these guys off man, we aren't even worth their time. If it wasn't for the chance of PVP they wouldn't be here," Sneaky whispered.

**Congratulations hero! Your perception has increased by +1. Now you too can be a heavy mouth breather lurking outside your crushes window.**

I wanted to punch the AI for that jab but the new rank explained how I was able to listen in on them so clearly.

Ruby's look of pure outrage turned into a scowl then finally relaxed into a simmering rage beneath the surface.

The tank player had to be Tarkus because he looked back, probably grinning under the dark steel helmet. "Remember when we were squaring off against that iron giant?"

Nayla nodded. "Yes, yes, I remember. Cylas." She gestured at the ranger with them. "Couldn't stop screaming your name after you shoved that thing off the damn tower."

Cylas scratched at his neck with a light rosy tint to his cheeks. "You don't have to make it sound so awkward, damn. That thing killed us at least ten times before we beat it."

Tarkus laughed and turned away. "That iron giant shouldn't have tried fighting me on the edge of the arena." He lifted up his brick of a sword on his shoulder. "I may just be an ankle biter next to that thing but I pack a wallop."

Nayla rolled her eyes. "If you're done polishing Tarkus's... *sword*, we have work to do. The sooner we find out if these two were killed by some newbies wandering around or if there's actually a guild out here the better. There have been a concerning number of deaths among our scouts in these woods."

Cylas nodded. "Right? I know they aren't the toughest classes in the world but it is a bit much."

I frowned at this. Maybe we were being a little overzealous in protecting Liberty. Every kill we scored, no matter how trivial it seemed, was drawing more attention to our location.

Tarkus pointed his sword down at the oso tracks. "My money's on, probably, just the local wildlife killing the scouts. Those are oso tracks. Those are some nasty critters and I hear there's trolls roaming around these parts too since that guild up north took over. What was their name again?"

The others shook their heads.

Nayla shrugged. "Guild politics don't matter one bit to me. Let's just get this done so we can get back to grinding. The devs weren't clear about there being a level cap and I want to find just how far we can go."

The group of Braven players slipped right past us without even glancing in our direction. I waited for them to be out of sight before I let out a breath. "That could have gone really badly."

"Those level thirties backing up the twenties would have been a nightmare to fight," Dawn agreed. "They sound like they have some idea of how to fight too if they were able to take on a giant boss like that."

"I wonder where that boss is. It sounds like a fun fight," I couldn't help asking.

Hedwig huffed at the question. How were any of us supposed to know that, right?

"Still, it's nice to see even Braven has some players that aren't completely terrible people." I started back on our long journey to Cedar Springs.

Dawn smiled. "How could you tell?"

I held up my hand and counted things down. "First off they seem like a regular bunch of players from the way they talk. They wanted to focus on grinding out levels and getting in some more PVP in for the fun of it. Oh, and most importantly they don't care about the guild politics."

Dawn frowned. "You realize we're effectively living here now, right? And the NPCs are more like people than anyone thought possible for a game."

"That's all true but you have to realize us medipod and full immersion players are in the minority here," I countered. "That stuff is prohibitively expensive. Your average player is going to be someone on a normal VR rig. They see all of this as just a game and probably haven't given the NPCs a fair shake. Just thinking back on my own time gaming, I usually skipped the NPC dialogue and picked up quests to move along with my level grind. They didn't matter

because they said the same thing no matter who talked to them or how many times their quest had been resolved. So they didn't matter. Most players are coming in with that mindset, I'm sure of it."

Dawn sighed. "I guess it's easy to lose track of that when this is your new life." She gestured at the woods around them.

I had to agree there. If my parents knew how much time I was spending in New Realm Online they might start having some concerns. Then again, I couldn't exactly do much outside of it.

"Maybe they'll realize New Realm isn't like other games after a few months," Dawn said after a moment. "But by then this whole world is going to be a different place."

"A better one," I said optimistically. There may have been a lot of aggressive guilds and even bad ones, but I was certain there was no shortage of friendly guilds and players out there. We just had to find them, like Sir Gideon. I wonder how he's doing after Mara fell.

We slipped past several more hunting parties like the one with Sneaky and Ruby before we were in the clear. At least from players. The wildlife was still there to harass us but it wasn't anything we couldn't handle. If anything, they added to our supplies as we collected gorro meat, hides, and other materials on our journey. My hunting, skinning and double thrust skills all went up a level before we started seeing scouts again.

These were single scouts like the ones I had grown accustomed to hunting around Liberty, but we weren't anywhere near our settlement. I pulled up my map just to make sure we weren't completely lost. As it turned out we were west of Mara by a fair distance. Actually, we were closer to Galford.

Dawn spotted one of the scouts looking right at us. Thanks to our stealth skills the only thing he saw was an arrow flying into his skull.

As we slipped past another group of scouts I bumped into another. I didn't hesitate to act. I coiled an arm around the scout's mouth and with the other I thrust my dagger up and between his ribs,

twisting every time I withdrew my weapon. Tasar's assassination classroom was really paying off.

We looted our kills and moved on, trying our best to avoid any more unnecessary encounters. I checked my map again trying to see where these scouts were headed off to.

A sharp, short gasp pulled me from the map. The sound of bone breaking filled the air just as I spotted Hedwig chewing on an enemy scout's skull. I flinched at the sight even as my heart thumped against my chest.

That was close. Too close.

Hedwig eating the scout didn't do my stomach any favors though. Having a powerful oso companion was amazing but I had to admit I could do with a lot less realism when it came to feeding time. The ripping and tearing of flesh and bones had my stomach doing spinning backflips so I looked away before I threw up my gorro jerky lunch.

"That's the third scout today," Dawn said with enthusiasm. She wasn't nearly as squeamish as I was about Hedwig's dietary habits. I probably shouldn't be either, given everything I'd seen and done in New Realm so far, but that wasn't convincing my stomach.

"I wonder why they have so many scouts in this territory," I said.

"Either they have another village they plan on attacking or they're watching for another army to attack them." Dawn said. "At this point I think either option is a reasonable one. I've seen rumors that the mods don't like how easily the guilds have been able to take over villages and towns. They plan on making things harder in the future, so all the guilds are trying to capture as much territory as they can before the rules change."

I considered this new tidbit of information. It made sense that the game masters wouldn't be fans of the more aggressive guilds abusing NPCs. They were far too lifelike for anyone to abuse once they realized this. It truly was amazing, even if it could be a bit much with the horrors I'd seen the people of Bastion subjected to at the

hands of goblins. I really needed to work on my weak stomach. This harsh, gritty world made it a liability. But back on the topic of game masters, I did have to worry about too much interference from them. New Realm was a sandbox and too much controls from GMs or developers would only hurt the game. Hopefully they wouldn't do anything to kill the game or all of us medipod players were going to have to find a new world to call home.

"As long as the Braven and all the other guilds leave Mara alone, I'm happy to stay in our little corner of the world," I said.

Dawn snorted and shook her head.

I frowned. "What?"

"You. You're so obtuse sometimes."

Laughing, I replied. "Tell me something I don't know. Now, what did I say this time?"

"That you are happy to stay in your little corner of the world. Yet here we are sneaking across enemy lines, infiltrating the territory of another hostile guild to rescue someone." Dawn grinned. "Do you really think this is going to be the last time something like this happens?"

"Probably not," I grudgingly admitted. Was that really a bad thing though?

"Terry and the others picked you to be the leader exactly because you're like this. You'll drop everything to help out someone in need. There are going to be other medi-pod players that get screwed over just like Betty. Hell, you'd go out of your way to save regular players in the same situation too. This won't be the last trip like this we make."

As I absorbed Dawn's logic, I scratched at my jaw. She was right, and it was something I should've known. I had already felt the pull to go to the aid of NPCs across New Realm but the fear of dragging my guild into a fight they weren't committed to stopped me dead in my tracks. My initial plan of hiding away in the mountains and developing Liberty into a full-blown city was unrealistic. The bigger Liberty grew the more resources it would require and the

harder it would be to hide from the world. Sometimes I wished I could be more self-aware but that was a super power I wasn't gifted with.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your wisdom by +1. Careful now, if that skull of yours gets any thinner you won't be able to use it as a weapon.**

*Smart ass*, I thought as I read the comment from the AI. There wasn't a single time I could remember headbutting someone in the game. That was a mistake I intended to correct and filed it away under 'dirty tricks for emergencies'.

"I suppose you're right," I finally admitted. "The question is, what do we do about it?"

"Get mounts, all this walking is overrated," Dawn said. "That and get stronger. Who knows what kind of troubles we'll get into when we find Betty and her friends?"

I looked at Hedwig, who was licking his paws clean like a cat who'd just eaten a field mouse. "Somehow I'm not too worried about trouble finding us."

Dawn chuckled. "Having Hedwig eat all your enemies isn't going to work."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"So, think you can tame a wild horse?" Dawn asked.

I looked around. "Have you seen any horses out here?"

"Hey you never know, there could be one right around the corner," she said.

I rolled my eyes, grinning. "If we're going to pick up mounts, we're going to need to find a town. Preferably one that isn't full of hostiles." Opening up my map I scanned for one such place. "But it doesn't look like there are any."

"Small towns don't show up on the map until they're discovered, remember?" Dawn said. "We didn't see Bastion mines on our maps until we arrived."

“That’s true but Mara was a small—No that’s not right. Mara was a starter town and a frontier one at that. Small sure, but big enough to be on the map.” I looked around the map for any nearby location that looked suitable for a town or village to pop up. “Here,” I sent Dawn a map marker. “The plains between Heartfell and Galford. It’s surrounded by thick woods and mountains to the south. It’s also on our way to Cedar Falls. That’s where I would put a village if I was a game dev.”

Dawn nodded. “Or the NPCs themselves started one. That’s always a possibility with how lifelike they are.”

“True,” I said. “Hopefully there’s a friendly town there with mounts for sale. Otherwise,” I looked at Hedwig. “We’re going to have to develop our own cavalry.”

Hedwig perked up at this. He did not look thrilled by the idea.





## 6

It took us another two days of skulking through the woods to reach the plains on my map. Luckily for us, the town I had been hoping to find was right there at the heart of it all.

The small town was secured by a wooden wall patrolled by guards. Past it there were a couple of farms in the middle putting up stone walls but other than wheat, I couldn't quite tell what they were growing. But that was all standard fantasy village decor. What wasn't were all the ragged tents outside the walls. More concerning still was the sight of NPCs pointing right at me and Dawn, before scrambling within the walls with panicked cries.

Dawn looked at me. "Did we do something wrong?"

"I don't think so." I shrugged and looked back at Hedwig. "Hedwig's pretty clean too so that couldn't be it."

Hedwig huffed and turned up his head in offense.

"Sorry, Hedwig," I said with a laugh. "But most people think you're terrifying when you've had a fresh kill."

At this comment Hedwig looked himself over for any traces of blood.

"So do you think this town has mounts?" Dawn asked as we approached.

The town's name popped up across the top of my interface. It was the town of Bellmare.

"With a name like that I'm sure they have mounts," I said.

Guards scrambled up to the walls aiming bows and crossbows down at us. "Halt!"

Dawn and I exchanged a nervous glance then threw our arms in the air. Hedwig mimicked our gesture.

Among all the guards was a man in heavier plate armor than the rest. A knight if I had to guess. While he looked to be in charge, he

didn't fit in with the much more rustic armor of the town guards. He leaned to the guard and whispered something in his ear.

The guard nodded and shouted. "What guild do you belong to?"

"The Broken Bones guild," I shouted back at them.

Dawn leaned over to me. "Are the NPCs starting to mistrust all players?"

I gave a slight nod. "With all the guilds scrambling for territory it makes sense. That looked like a refugee camp outside the walls."

"What business do the Broken Bones have with our small town?" The guard asked. His crossbow was pointed right at my face. He could probably make the shot too if they were anything like Beorn.

"We were hoping to find a place to rest, pick up a mount or two and move along to our destination," I said. "If there's anything we can do to help your people in the meantime, we'd be happy to lend you our aid."

The knight spoke again and the guard looked less than thrilled about what he was just told.

"Very well then," the guard shouted. "You will be allowed inside to speak with Captain Ragespire. Don't you try anything stupid and we can all get along." He turned to the side. "Open the gates!"

The guards lowered their weapons as the gates opened but I could still feel every one of their eyes were trained on us. I exchanged a concerned glance with Dawn and gestured for us to go forward.

"So, what's the plan if things go south?" Dawn whispered.

I took a deep breath, wanting to think more optimistically than my girlfriend clearly was. "They won't go south. This captain wants to talk so we'll talk. If we can work something out, cool, if not... I'm not really looking forward to killing NPCs."

Dawn nodded. "Me neither. But I will if it comes to it."

"Keep an eye out for escape routes. Just in case," I finally said.

We entered the town of Bellmare and were greeted by the knight I spotted earlier. His armor gleamed in the sunlight and the lance in

his hands he wielded like a spear looked like it could punch through a dragon's hide. On either side of the entryway guards with swords, shields, and spears stood at the ready for things to go terribly wrong. Their levels were all in the mid to high thirties, a few were in their forties. If fighting broke out, running would be our only option.

I looked for any way out but the town wasn't exactly sprawling with shadowy alleys to slink off into. The largest building had to be the town warehouse or the local inn. The few houses around were sparse with broad dirt roads spacing them out. It was clear to me they were planning on expanding thanks to the wooden stakes marking out locations for new structures but their priorities had changed.

### **Captain Sesan Ragespire**

#### **Level 50 Cavalier**

"Adventurers," the captain said with ice in his voice that didn't fit his name in the slightest. "What brings you to Bellmare?" The town gates slammed shut behind them at the question. Ragespire held up a finger to stop us from answering. "And please, do not waste my time with lies or word games. I am a very busy man."

Dawn looked at me like we'd just walked into a death trap.

I relaxed instantly. "Oh, is that all? Sure, I can tell you what we're planning. Dawn and I are on our way to Cedar Springs. One of our friends there was enslaved by the Black Wolves guild, and I'm guessing a bunch of other adventurers were wrapped up in the same schemes. Maybe even some of the locals were tied up with the Black Wolves as well." I stopped to consider what to tell him about our plan so we could avoid getting lanced in the face and decided honesty was the best policy. No matter how stupid it might make us look. "We don't have a specific plan as to the how, but I'd bet my coin purse it's going to involve killing a lot of bad adventurers."

Hedwig grunted with a big nod.

Ragespire pulled back, like he was taken aback. I wasn't quite sure since that beautiful helmet with red plumage made it impossible to read his face. "You would risk your life to save humble towns folk

like these?" He gestured at one of the buildings where a cowering bundle of people peeked at them from a window.

"Locals, adventurers." I paused to look at Hedwig then ran a hand over his back. "Big, fluffy murder machines. I'm not super picky about who I save so long as they're good people."

The guards exchanged confused glances.

One of the guards shouted. "They're lying, Sir. The Black Wolves said they came to help us in Cedar Springs before taking over."

Another piped up. "That wasn't the case at Galford. The Blackhearts there simply attacked us after fighting broke out between them and another guild."

*So, the Blackhearts own Galford now. With their numbers that's going to be a problem if the Braven don't keep them tied up, I thought.*

Ragespire held up a hand to silence the guard's squabbling. "If that's the case then you would not be opposed to proving your good will."

"Not at all," I answered quickly. A quest would be a welcome change of pace from all this walking and sneaking around and warming up to the locals was always a plus.

"Good," Ragespire said. "I presume you saw the camp outside on the way in?"

Dawn and I nodded.

"Those are refugees from the guild wars that have broken out since you adventurers arrived in mass," Ragespire continued. "We have people here from Galford, Cedar Springs, Heartfelt and Blackmoss. While the guilds in control of each of those towns wage war on one another they do not see us as anything more than another territory to claim. This makes gathering the supplies we need difficult."

"So, you want us to go hunting?" I asked.

Ragespire nodded. "Yes. We need meat to feed our people and hides to make tents of a higher quality than those rags we have been forced to house the refugees in. Wood and stone would be

preferable to build the structures but gathering those would attract far too much attention. Twenty or thirty bullferos should serve our needs.”

“What’s a Bullferos?” Dawn asked.

The guards laughed.

Ragespire carried on his explanation. “Imagine a bigger, stronger cow with a thick, brown hide and even thicker and darker fur on its back. These creatures stand about twice the height of a man, their horns are deadly and the thick armored shells on their backs make them difficult for inexperienced hunters to slay before they can flee.”

“Thirty of those would provide plenty of food for the refugees for sure,” I said just imagining how big those creatures would be in person. “Alright, I’m in.”

Ragespire tilted his head to the side. “But I have yet to offer you any rewards or assigned a quest.”

“I don’t need a quest to help people,” I said. “And if this helps you see that not all of us adventurers are a threat then all the better.”

“Interesting,” Ragespire said under his breath. “Still my honor demands I offer a reward for this service. Should your hunt prove successful I will teach both of you the Ride and Mounted Combat skills. Sadly, we do not have any mounts to spare but your oso companion looks to be big enough to carry both of you.”

Hedwig looked with growing concern at Ragespire then me.

“Bring us what we need and I will make sure you can craft your own saddle,” Ragespire finished.

**You have been offered a quest! Hunt 30 Bullferos for the town of Bellmare. 3000exp. Do you accept yes/no?**

I hit yes without a second thought. “Consider it done.” I turned on a heel then right back around. “Where exactly are these things?”

“South west of here,” Ragespire answered with amusement.

“Got it.” I turned right back around and left with Dawn and Hedwig in tow.

“So much for a warm bed and a mount,” Dawn said. “At least we’ll see some interesting new wild life.”

I nodded. “Exactly, and the skills we’ll learn after this quest will go a long way toward defending Liberty.” I paused to think for a moment. “Hey do you think we could get the locals here to come back with us? It would be safer than letting them sit here just waiting for one of those guilds to come starting trouble for them.”

“It would but that town looked like it had a few hundred people with all the refugees there,” Dawn said. “Ignoring that we don’t have anywhere near enough space for them and the mountain is way too cold for simple tents, getting that many people through Braven and Blackhearts territory is going to be a nightmare.”

“Maybe, but I’d like to make them the offer regardless,” I said. “Those people need a safe place to call home and we need all the help we can get turning our settlement into a proper city.”

Dawn sighed. “Things would be a lot easier if we could extend that boon of yours to other towns and cities. Maybe if we built a temple there it would work.”

I pursed my lips wondering if that was even possible. “I’d love to ask my godly pal if that is even a possibility but I don’t exactly have his phone number.”

Dawn chuckled and pressed on ahead. Whatever we ended up doing about Bellmare, we needed to focus on the hunt ahead if we were going to build any kind of trust with the locals. The faster we completed this quest the sooner we could return to our mission of saving Betty.

It took a few hours to find a pack of bullferos. Ragespire seriously undersold how big these things were. Each one was the size of a small house, looking more like a buffalo on steroids with armor stolen from some sort of dinosaur. Their furry heads had big, heavy horns that looked capable of skewering me through Hedwig and my armor. Their tails were nothing to sneeze at either with their own spiked ends to whip at enemies.

“This is going to be a lot easier said than done,” Dawn said.

“At least they look soft and squishy in most places,” I said. The bullferos had armor on their backs and their feet looked reinforced to do some serious damage should they decide to fight. Every other part of their bodies was just covered in fur and hide. “If we could score a few critical hits, I bet we can bring one down easy.”

I looked at one of the creatures in detail.

### **Bullferos, level 21**

“They aren’t that much higher level than me either.” I pulled out one of my hunting spears. “We can do this, Dawn.”

Dawn pulled out an arrow. “Sure, I could go for a few more levels in stealth and archery.”

I signaled for Hedwig to come with us. He followed quietly and low to the ground as we stalked through the pack of beasts. Ragespire said they would run if startled but the bullferos didn’t look like the type of creature to run. They were more like the type of creature to run me over and keep knocking trees down along their path after they were done with me.

“So... Head, throat, or heart?” I asked, pointing at each general area of the creature.

Dawn mulled the question over while the bullferos casually ate grass without a care in the world. “If their skulls are as thick as that back armor, we’re not going to hit anything important. Maybe if we hit the eyes?”

The eyes on a bullferos were big, dark brown orbs but at this range I was pretty sure even Dawn would struggle to make that shot. I shook my head. “Let’s not. What about the heart?”

Dawn waved an arrow at the general chest region of one of the creatures. “It’s in there somewhere but the question is where?”

“True. We won’t know where anything is until we relive high school biology,” I admitted. “Then we aim for the throats.”

Dawn nodded. “It’s our clearest target. This won’t be a clean kill but if we can bring just one of them down we can figure out what we’re dealing with. If they start to run, aim for the legs to slow them down.”



I readied my hunting spear. "Ready when you are."

Dawn drew back her string and waited for the bullferos to give us an opening. One of the creatures turned in our direction but missed us in the trees. The bullferos leaned down to eat the long, overgrown grass then raised its head to gulp it down.

That was when we struck. Dawn unleashed a quick volley of arrows into the creature's throat and I hurled spear after spear into it. The bullferos retched and gagged as arrows and spears punched through its thick hide. It bled profusely from its wounds even as it let out a gurgling cry. The rest of its herd turned to run west while it tried to follow. The bullferos made a valiant effort. Bleeding as it was, it still managed to outrun us and Hedwig who sprinted after the creature. Dawn aimed for its leg but her arrows bounced off the thicker hide there. I hurled another spear, this one imbued with Shocker. The spear barely wedged itself into the creature's back leg and sent a shock through its body.

The bullferos crashed onto its side spasming.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your spear throwing by +1. Someday soon you might just make that long distance relationship of yours work out.**

I groaned inwardly at the AI's remark.

"Quick, finish it off," Dawn said.

We sprinted for the stunned creature. Its breaths were rough, ragged, and it looked at us with fearful eyes. But we had a job to do. I slashed the bullferos's throat wide open with my glaive. There was too much blood spilling out for the creature to maintain its struggle. Its eyes drifted shut and the monster stopped moving.

"Not going to lie, I felt pretty bad doing that," I had to admit.

"That's why I prefer clean kills," Dawn said. "You don't have to look the critter in the eyes while it's dying." She pulled out a knife. "Now help me out here, we have to find out where we're aiming."

We got to work for the next hour or so dissecting the bullferos. Unlike normal skinning, this wasn't a quick and clean process handled by the system. It was disgusting with a foul odor to match

but our only other option to find out how to quickly kill these creatures was trial and error. I didn't know how long that would take and I didn't want to leave Betty suffering at the hands of the Black Wolves any longer than we had to.

After splitting the creature open we discovered the bullferos's heart was indeed in its chest. It was a large organ, bigger than my head at least twice over and hidden behind the thick bones of its rib cage.

Dawn frowned. "We aren't shooting our way through this at our level," Dawn said pulling the thick hide around the bullferos's chest. "Not with enough punch to reach the heart and definitely not with enough strength to break those bones."

"My spear throwing skill went up so maybe we have a better chance now," I offered.

"My archery went up too," Dawn said. "But I still don't like our odds."

We moved on with the rest of our autopsy. The creature's skull was thick enough to serve as a makeshift wrecking ball but once inside, hitting the brain was a trivial thing. An attack going through the eye would do the trick, or a spear down a bullferos's gullet. The thick plate on the creature's back would be great to work with for armor, maybe even weapons, but they weren't breaking it up now.

"I think that's everything we can learn about these creatures right now. Go ahead and skin it," Dawn said.

I got to work running through the skinning process. It took far longer than with a deer or wolf but it wasn't nearly as bad as the spider queen we killed in the mini dungeon. "So any thoughts on how we're going to make this hunt go by quicker or are we going to be at this for days?"

Dawn wiped her hands clean on the grass, about as well as she could at least. "Do you have a shovel in that bag of holding?"

I nodded. "It's part of my camping supplies so it fits."

"Nice." Dawn smiled. "So here's the plan. We're going to dig ourselves a nice, deep trench and fill it with spikes. It has to be big

enough and deep enough to catch the bullferos and the spikes have to be strong enough to punch through them.”

I frowned at the thought of how long that was going to take. But it certainly beat chasing down overgrown buffalo on foot. Even if I knew how to ride Hedwig into battle right now my oso couldn’t keep up with our prey. “So you want us to chase them into spike pits?”

“Basically,” Dawn said. “It’s not exactly an ideal situation but between the trench and the spikes we should be able to finish this quest a lot faster.”

While looking at my inventory I saw the notification of harvested materials.

**100x Bullferos meat. 33x Bullferos hide. 3x Bullferos shell fragments. 1x Bullferos shell.**

This hunt was going to be well worth the trouble. “Let’s get to digging.”



## 7

“Let’s get to digging,” was a bold statement on my part. As soon as I had my shovel ready Dawn told me where she wanted me to dig, how deep the trenches needed to be and left to hunt our prey. I sighed and started working right away.

Each trench had to be at least twelve feet deep but I dug down to fifteen just to be safe. Bullferos were about the size of a single-story house after all and we were going to need a big drop if our plan had a chance at all of working. While I worked, trees were occasionally in the way but that wasn’t a problem. I needed to work on my wood cutting skill anyway and what better way was there to do that than carving out sharp, wooden stakes.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your strength by +1. At this rate you might actually be able to fill out those sleeves!**

That was uncharacteristically complimentary of my AI but I kept working through the day while Dawn kept me up to date on the herd’s movements and any changes I might have to make to our plan. There wasn’t much, thankfully, other than pushing around all the loose dirt I dug up into rough walls to try and funnel the creatures into the trenches.

The sun was already starting to sink into the horizon when I finished the fifth and last of the trenches. With an exhausted breath I went over to my pile of chopped up and knocked over trees and started cutting them up into the wooden spikes for the pits.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your construction skill by +1. Look out Bob The Builder. There’s a new foreman in town.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your construction skill by +1. You really enjoy playing with wood don’t you?**

There it was, the snarky sass I'd come to expect from my AI. I was starting to worry it was malfunctioning. That had to be worse than the attitude the AI gave me for every level up I received. After a few more hours of work the trench was nearly finished.

*Ryan, are you done with the trenches?* Dawn asked over our party chat.

*Just about done,* I said finishing up the last bundle of spikes. I tossed my rope down the trench and started planting them in.

*Pick up the pace. The herd's coming your way right now.*

*Now? What? Why?* I asked, shoving spikes into the ground as quickly as I could. The earth fought my attempts to fortify this position and my exhaustion wasn't helping. I seriously needed a break.

*Something spooked them. I don't know what but the bullferos are running faster than when we attacked them,* Dawn said.

*That can't be good.* Something big must have terrified those armored steak houses and I didn't want to be in the trenches when they came running by. *Trenches are done. I'm on my way out.* I used the rope to climb up, ignoring the exhausted aches and pains racking my body. Once free of the trench I wiped the grime off my face. I needed a bath.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your stamina by +1. You're going to need it for all the running you're about to do. Just like you'll need a new pair of pants!**

That was an oddly specific comment. But the AI was right. I needed to get to cover.

Dawn was coming in from the north west and from the distant rumble and shake of the Earth, the herd of bullferos was going to come stampeding through any minute now. I looked for a place to hide. Behind the earthen walls seemed like a particularly stupid idea. Those would *maybe* slow a bullferos down but they wouldn't have a chance at actually stopping one. I hadn't built them thick enough or sturdy enough for that. Behind the trees was another option but I had

seen the creatures smash through trees, no questions asked. Staying on the move was my best option but I was exhausted.

So I settled for the next best thing.

I took Hedwig deep into the forest, hiding behind at least two earthen walls and a tree about as thick as Hedwig was wide. It wasn't perfect but it would buy me time if things went really wrong really fast. In the meantime I pulled out a handful of Gorro jerky to chew on and passed some to Hedwig who was happy to chow down.

*Almost there, get ready,* Dawn warned.

I scarfed down the rest of my jerky and chugged down my water in a desperate attempt to regain my stamina. *Ready,* I replied and drew my hunting spears.

The ground trembled beneath my feet and soon enough I was pretty sure there was an earthquake happening. The cries of spooked bullferos tossed that silly idea right out of my head. I watched as the huge, stampeding creatures trundled through the field of trenches I had dug up. The earthen walls were working like I had hoped, funneling the bullferos into the first of the trenches. The huge creatures collapsed into the holes with pained cries, causing the rest of the herd to shift their heading to avoid landing into more trenches. It didn't work of course. Thanks to Dawn's suggestion I had spaced out our traps enough to maximize the damage we could inflict. Another group collapsed into a pit then another.

And then a bullferos burst through my two earthen walls like the damned Kool-Aid man.

"Crap, crap, crap!" I shouted while scrambling out of the creatures way.

Hedwig and I barely cleared the tree when the bullferos smashed through it like the karate kid smashed two-by-fours. I whirled about and hurled a spear infused with electricity at the monster's leg. The spear head dug deep through its thick hide and its body erupted with arcing blue energy. The bullferos crashed onto its side and barrelled straight through two more trees before it came to a stop.

“I got another one,” I cheered when the distinct snapping of wood pulled my attention to the side. The bullferos had clipped another tree on its way past us and it was coming down right on top of me and Hedwig.

We threw ourselves out of the way just as it smashed behind us.

The shaking earth vanished into the distance and I was left looking around for any signs of more bullferos coming our way. There weren't any. But what I did have was a small mountain of notifications.

**You have killed Bullferos, Level 23. 1500exp.**

**You have killed Bullferos, Level 20. 1200exp.**

**You have killed Bullferos, Level 21. 1300exp.**

And on and on they went. Those notifications were far less interesting than these two.

**Quest updated: Hunt 30 Bullferos for the town of Bellmare. 21/30.**

**Congratulations hero! You have learned the skill trapper. Through the clever use of dastardly know how and your environment, you may hinder or slay your enemies without lifting a finger.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your trapper skill by +1. Dirty deeds dirt cheap is the name of your game.**

I had to laugh at that. I was almost at level twenty one thanks to that stunt. So was Hedwig. Between the bullferos we had left to kill still squirming about in the trenches and turning in the quest, we were about ready to earn ourselves a level.

“Are you guys alright?” Dawn asked.

The stunned bullferos twitched as the arcing electricity covering its body dissipated. “Doing great,” I said as I shot to my feet and drew my glaive to finish the job with a second application of shocker. Sadly the skill didn't level up but it was one more bullferos for our hunt.



“How about you, Dawn? How was your hunt?” I asked, winded and caked from head to toe in dirt and now a fresh splash of bullferos blood.

“Better than you by a long shot.” She smiled. “As soon as we get to town you’re getting a shower.”

I sniffed under one of my arms and grimaced. “Maybe two.”

“Come on. Ryan. Let’s finish up here before you stink up the place worse than Hedwig,” Dawn teased.

I chuckled and got to work. Finishing off the remaining Bullferos earned us the final kill for the quest but we still had to spend a lot of time carving up the huge creatures. Magically assisted skinning or not, it took a great deal of time to carve up nearly thirty of them. My inventory was filled to bursting with bullferos meat, hide, and shells. I set aside a small pile for myself so I could experiment with cooking the meat, working the leather, and figuring out what if anything could be done with the shells. Maybe it could be used to reinforce a town’s walls or even be carved up into armor.

Dawn clambered out of one of the trenches once the final creature was looted. “Finally done.”

“And it only took us all day,” I grinned staring up at the moon glowing high in the sky.

Dawn grimaced. “You don’t think it’s dangerous out here do you?”

“Couldn’t be that bad,” I said. “Most places just get wolves running around at night but nothing like the goblins in Bastion mine or the spiders in our mini dungeon.”

Dawn nodded. “You’re probably right.”

A warped howl pierced through the night air sending the trees leaning away from the source accompanied by the crackle of electricity.

I held my glaive shield at the ready. “What was that?”

Dawn moved to my side, her bow pointed to the north western forest where the bullferos had stampeded through. “Nothing good.”

Hedwig tensed and growled in the direction of the howl. Then he stopped. The oso sniffed at the air then looked back at me with what I could only describe as fear.

Before I could ask Hedwig what was wrong, the trees ahead of us blew apart into splinters and a huge beast that looked to be a cross of a wolf, a jackal, and maybe a badger burst into the scene.

“What the hell is that?” I asked.

Dawn shook her head.

Hedwig pawed at me to get running.

Me, an absolute genius, stopped to gawk at the thing.

**Wurgen, Level 45 region boss.**

My mouth fell slack as my gawking only intensified. The wurgen was covered in white fur and blue tiger stripes resembling lightning more than anything else. It stopped to bury its head in one of the trenches where the bullferos had stampeded to their deaths and swung from one side to another.

“We should go,” I finally said.

“Very quickly,” Dawn agreed.

Before either of us could start running the wurgen had discovered its prey was stripped bare. We really didn’t leave anything behind but bullferos blood and the wurgen was not pleased. It stared right at us then howled once more.

Dawn and I were sent flying back over the trenches. Arcs of electricity zapped us mid air. We crashed across the forest floor, twitching and spasming through the effects of shock. Hedwig barreled toward us and jerked us to our feet then took off running toward town.

That was a fantastic plan.

Dawn and I started sprinting back to the town of Bellmare with that rampaging boss on our tail. Not at all amused by our traps, the wurgen skipped over all of them in a quick series of hops before clearing the field of trenches. It sprinted right for us. Trees and rocks were no match for its size and sheer strength.

We ran faster. It was really all we could do but the wurgen was still gaining quickly on us.

I swapped out my glaive for my crossbow and fired a power shot infused with shocker at the wurgen. The impact of the crossbow forced the creature to shake its head but the electricity had no effect.

*Duh, the wurgen's throwing out electric attacks,* I scolded myself.

The wurgen replied with a furious roar. A sphere of energy formed within its maw and lashed out at us, rending the forest apart as we threw ourselves out of the beam's path. Molten earth and blazing forest greeted us when we scrambled back to our feet.

"We need a plan," Dawn shouted as we went back to running.

I opened up my inventory and threw out a piece of bullferos meat. The wurgen ignored it and chased us down. "I'm open to suggestions!"

Hedwig let out a fearful cry, running ahead of both of us. I should probably be mad my pet was abandoning us in fear but considering our current situation I thought I'd be lenient on him. I had bigger concerns to worry about. Like the small kaiju trying to eat us.

"Stealth?" Dawn offered.

"Hedwig has Shadow Beast, that could work," I said. "Wait you don't have Shadow's Lover. If we do that then you become the wurgen's target."

"If it can see me through my own stealth," Dawn said.

I shook my head. "No. We are not doing that."

Dawn smiled at him. "I'll just respawn Ryan, it's no big deal."

"Respawn all the way back at Liberty and probably a level or two lower. Forget it," I protested.

"What else are we supposed to do, Ryan? That thing's gaining on us quick," Dawn said.

If we tried fighting it we would surely be killed. We could dodge its attacks all day but as soon as it hit us with a lightning attack we were done for.

“Bellmare’s not far now, Dawn, we can make it to safety,” I said.

“How do you know it’s safe?” Dawn asked breathlessly.

That was actually a very good question. I had no idea whether monsters could attack towns or not and dragging something this big back to Bellmare was a death sentence for the town if the worgen could attack it. But we didn’t know, we had no way of knowing unless we tried.

Hedwig vanished through the tree line and shrubbery. We followed him through into the plains around Bellmare.

“Too late to turn back now,” I shouted as the forest erupted with lashing tendrils of electricity.

Dawn, Hedwig, and I were thrown across the plains as the earth was ripped apart beneath our feet. The worgen stood over us victorious and vicious, its fangs bared and crackling with lightning.

We were dead.

The ringing of a bell in the distance tore the Worgen’s attention from us and dragged it to Bellmare. I glanced back to see the figures of men moving to man the walls. It had to be the town guard.

A single figure stood outside the town, glinting in the torch and moonlight with plumes of crimson coming up from his head. It was Captain Ragespire.

“Attack,” the man bellowed, swinging his lance forward at the Worgen.

A volley of crossbow bolts and arrows rained down from the castle walls. The worgen roared in response.

I rushed to my feet and hauled Dawn and Hedwig up. We were only level twenty. The Captain was a level fifty NPC and the guards were in the high thirties to low forties. This was absolutely not our fight.

That didn’t stop us from being caught up in it.

We had to dodge through arrows and bolts meant for the wurgen as the beast pulsed out waves of electricity. Most of the bolts and arrows burned away to ash and slagged metal. Those arrows that made it through stuck deep into the wurgen's flesh but the creature was only enraged by their attacks. It resumed its run right for us.

"To me, adventurers," Ragespire shouted, his horse galloping at full speed right toward us.

I had the sneaking suspicion he wanted us to bait the wurgen right into his lance and I was more than happy to comply. "Run for the Captain, Dawn," I shouted, scrambling through my bag for a hunting spear.

More arrows rained on the wurgen but it seemed that the ability the creature had used to shield itself was on a cool down. It was turned into a pincushion, but without something on the level of a ballista or an enchanted strike, the wurgen wasn't going to slow.

I felt the creature's hot breath approaching the back of my neck. My every hair stood on end not only from fear but the static electricity radiating off the monster. Glancing over my shoulder I saw the blue maw arcing with electricity approaching me. I threw myself forward and turned mid air, throwing my spear at the dangly thing in the monster's throat with a power shot. Which turned out to work just as well for thrown weapons.

At the last second the wurgen snapped its mouth shut and caught the spear on its snout. Its head was turned aside but it quickly regained its focus on me while I tumbled across the grass like an idiot. That stunt was about to cost me my life.

The thunder of galloping horse steps interrupted my slow motion death as Ragespire charged right into the wurgen's chest. His lance wedged deep into the monster's chest and detonated with a fury of fire. The wurgen snarled as it recoiled onto its back.

Ragespire came back around and scooped me onto the back of his horse. "Don't you adventurers know how dangerous it is to be outside of town at night?" he scolded me.

“I’m used to wolves and really angry gorro, not giant lightning beasts!” I replied as we sped over to Dawn.

Ragespire scooped her up by the back of her cloak and tossed her behind me. He then turned to Hedwig who was barreling toward town. “Make haste oso. We do not have much time.” The captain pointed his spear at Hedwig and his body was engulfed in a warm, golden light. Suddenly Hedwig took off like a rocket, easily maintaining speed with the Captain’s trusty steed.

Behind us, the wurgen regained its composure and howled. Beams of lightning cleaved open the plains as it tried to take us out but Ragespire swung us away from each blast. The heat radiating off each arc was enough to burn my ears.

Hedwig was the first one to make it through the town gates. He dug his clawed paws into the town’s dirt road and turned himself around.

Ragespire followed, throwing me and Dawn off his horse’s back. We barely landed on our feet.

“What do we do about that thing?” I asked.

Ragespire frowned. “We scare it off,” he answered simply, turning his horse back toward the gate. “That monstrosity may be powerful but it is no fool. It will not fight to the death if it can help it.”

The Captain darted back out the gates, casting the same speed buff onto himself that he casted on Hedwig. Dawn and I scrambled up to the walls to watch and support Ragespire, shooting arrows at the wurgen along with the guards. The wurgen burned our volley out of the sky but in that brief moment of distraction, just as the sphere of electricity around it came down, Ragespire lanced the wurgen’s leg with another detonation of flames.

The wurgen crashed to its side, its white fur scorched and starting to catch flame. Yet the monster rolled to its feet and fired a beam of electricity across the plains.

“Everyone use power shot,” I shouted to the guards.

“Not all of us have that skill, boy,” protested one of them.

“Use it if you have it,” Dawn shot him right down.

A fresh volley of arrows and bolts launched from the wall, some with far greater speed than others. The much louder twang of their weapons was a dead give away that someone had used power shot and the air visibly ripping around the arrows made it impossible to miss. The powered volley of bolts and arrows beat the rest to the wurgen. Their combined force knocked the wurgen's aim off as it burned a path through the forest.

Ragespire came around, lancing the wurgen's rear leg and knocked it to the ground one last time. The huge creature howled in agony. This time the rushing winds carved a crater around it. Ragespire was nearly caught in the blast and the wind was almost enough to fling him off his horse but he held on.

The wurgen staggered back to its feet, glaring back at Ragespire and the town then jogged away into the shadows.

"We did it!" I cheered along with the guards.

Dawn hugged me tight as we jumped around with joy. We didn't get a single drop of experience or loot out of that fight but we were alive. More importantly, Bellmare was still in one piece.

Ragespire returned through the town gates and we rushed down to meet him. The cavalier's armor was marred by dirt and his crimson plumage scorched black around the edges, but he was otherwise unharmed.

"Are you alright, Captain?" I asked.

Ragespire climbed off his horse. "I'm fine, adventurer."

"Ryan," I said. "And this is Dawn and Hedwig. I don't think we introduced ourselves earlier."

"You did not," he answered without much amusement in his voice. "I presume you have yet to complete your quest."

I exchanged a grin with Dawn. "Actually we did."

"You hunted thirty bellfeross in one day?" Ragespire was shocked. "How?"

"It was less hunting and more digging holes," I said. "Trenches really, full of spikes. I guess you would call them pitfall traps minus the leaves to cover them up."

Dawn nodded. "I did most of the hunting, keeping an eye on the herd. But I didn't see any sign of that wurgen thing." She pointed a thumb over her shoulder. "Is that thing normal?"

Ragespire grunted in displeasure. "Unfortunately yes. The locals say the beast has always roamed this part of the woods but up until the population exploded, thanks to the refugees, it left Bellmare alone. Now I believe the creature sees the town as a tasty morsel to feast upon." He rested his lance on his shoulder. "Of my unit of cavaliers that survived contact with the guilds at Galford."

I frowned. "They died fighting the guilds?"

Ragespire nodded. "Do you have what we requested, Ryan?" He asked, clearly trying to avoid the topic. I didn't have to see the man's face to see he was still grieving his brothers in arms. That much was clear by the way he tensed and the hardened edge to his voice.

"Of course." I dropped down a thick stack of bullferos hides with another, thicker stack of meat right on top of it. "There's a lot more where that came from, a lot more. We just need somewhere to drop it off."

Ragespire clasped my shoulder. "Thank you for this, Ryan. I was starting to lose hope there were any good adventurers left in this world. We all were." He gestured at the guards gathered around them.

"You and me both," I agreed, remembering every terrible run in with players we had and the future ones that awaited us.

"Come with me, I will take you to the warehouse and your rewards," Ragespire said.

Dawn and I exchanged a high-five since I was still too disgusting for a kiss, let alone a hug. After dropping off everything we had gathered, outside of my own little experimental stash, Ragespire took us to the inn where we could get cleaned up.

**Quest completed: Hunt 30 Bullferos for the town of Bellmare. 3000exp.**



We met Ragespire at a table in the corner of the room. The man was still wearing his helmet.

"You never take that off, do you?" I couldn't help asking.

Ragespire chuckled. "No one needs the nightmares of seeing my face, boy."

Dawn smiled. "It can't be that bad."

Ragespire simply stared at her then turned back to Ryan. "Now, I believe I owe you some skills."

That was clearly a touchy subject and I was going to go right on through avoiding it. "Riding and Mounted Combat I believe," I said.

"And the designs for a saddle," Dawn added.

Ragespire nodded and reached out to touch both of our heads. A surge of pain shot through my skull and Dawn grimaced as our minds were filled with knowledge.

**Congratulations hero! You have learned the Riding skill. Now you know the basics of getting a mount to go where you want it. But don't get too cocky, the stronger the mount the feistier they get.**

**Congratulations hero! You have learned the Mounted Combat skill. Now you may fight from any mount with a reduced chance of knocking yourself on your derriere.**

I rubbed at my head and smiled at Ragespire. "Thanks. Do you have to do anything to Hedwig so he can be a mount?"

Ragespire glanced over at the oso who lay flat on the inn floor, defeated at his fate of becoming bear cavalry. "No. Hedwig is a mature enough oso now that he can be ridden like any other mount. All that is required for you to ride a creature is that they be classified as a mount and that you have established a good rapport with them. For you to have an oso as a pet tells me that you already have a great relationship with Hedwig. But he could certainly use some encouragement to become a mount."

Dawn pulled out a strip of jerky. "Don't worry hedwig. You're going to be the best mount ever and we'll give you extra food for

being such a good boy.”

Hedwig perked up at the mention of extra food. He snatched up the jerky and pressed his head into Dawn’s palm for attention.

I rolled my eyes. “I think we have that covered.”

“Good.” Ragespire reached into his satchel and spread out a group of design scrolls. “Here is your saddle design and a bonus of oso armor patterns as a bonus for your speedy quest completion and assisting us in fending off that wurgen.”

“Wow, thanks,” I said. “But we would have helped you fight that thing off regardless.”

Dawn sighed. “Not that we were much help. We should really be thanking you.”

Ragespire nodded. “True enough.”

I wasn’t sure if I should be insulted by that but it’s not like we were going to fight off the wurgen on our own.

“However you are the first good adventurers I have seen in a long time.” Ragespire pushed the design toward us. “And I would prefer to keep you that way. Consider this a gift for your ongoing efforts against the Black Wolves and any other guild damaging these lands.”

I took the patterns and nodded. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Now, is there anything else we can help you with, adventurers? Or would you rather stay to aid us?”

Dawn shook her head. “A safe place to sleep will be more than enough for us, thank you.” She held up a hand. “And we’re paying too. We aren’t a bunch of freeloaders here.”

Ragespire chuckled. “Fair enough. But if you or any of your Broken Bones guild mates wish to aid our small village here, your kind will always be welcome in Bellmare.”

“Speaking of helping,” I said, wondering how my request was about to be received. “I was wondering if your people would like to come join us up at Liberty.”

“Ryan,” Dawn warned.

I smiled at her then turned back to Ragespire. "My guild has carved out a safe place in the mountains to the north for good adventurers like us and good, hard working locals like yourselves looking to get out of these guild wars. More importantly, it is a place where you and the others can be resurrected at our temple should you fall in battle."

Ragespire leaned back into his seat then looked at Dawn. "Did your boy suffer one blow too many to the head while you fled the wurgen?"

"Maybe," Dawn had to agree. "But he isn't lying. Ryan was offered a boon by a god. He could have used it to grant himself great power but he decided to allow anyone who swore fealty to him or the Broken Bones guild to respawn at Liberty."

Ragespire turned back to me.

"I'd prove it to you but it's a long walk back and we didn't bring Voz with us," I said.

"That is a mighty boon indeed. One might even say a curse if you cannot hold your lands," Ragespire said.

Dawn pinched my cheek and tugged me around by it with every word. "Which is why I'm surprised Ryan here is talking so freely about it."

"Ow, ow, ow!" I swatted lightly at her hand until she let me go. "Look, I can't help it that I see people in need and want to help. It's like my kryptonite or something."

"Krypto-what?" Ragespire asked.

"Don't worry about it," I said.

Dawn chuckled. "The point is that the bigger the population gets at Liberty the more attention we draw to it. The more attention we draw to it the bigger our chances are of getting attacked by the bigger guilds." She took a deep breath and leaned onto the table. "When that happens, I'm not really sure we can hold against them."

"A fair concern. I presume your guild is a small one then?" Ragespire asked.

"About a hundred members," Dawn said.

Ragespire let out a breath. "The Blackhearts alone have thousands at their call."

I nodded. "Ya, I know. We fought them off at Mara. Their players were all low levels so we wiped them out. We would have gotten away with it too if it weren't for the Braven showing up. So we settled for evacuating the town."

"Which wouldn't be an option here," Dawn said. "Bellmare is too far away through too much enemy territory for a caravan to go unnoticed, Ryan. You know that."

Ragespire held up a finger. "But if what you say is true, we only have to die to reach your town of Liberty?"

"Not without leaving your possessions behind," I said, staring down at the table. "We won't be able to replace valuables, homes, or anything you don't carry on you and even then there's a chance you will drop it when you die. But we would be able to offer you a fresh start at life."

Dawn rattled off what we had to offer. "We have farms going, plenty of hunting and fishing grounds, a crazy valuable mine, a dungeon to level up anyone who comes with us." She paused then looked at me. "Am I missing anything?"

"Running water, plumbing, hot showers," I added. "And we go out of our way to develop everyone's skills whether they be crafting, gathering, or combat related. The stronger each of us is, the stronger Liberty will be."

"It is a tempting offer, I must admit that," Ragespire said. "A caravan would be preferable to our people but if that is not viable..." he trailed off and stared into the people gathered about the inn. "I will consider it. I cannot make any promises but should you return after freeing your friend we will have an answer for you." Ragespire pushed himself to his feet. "Get some sleep, adventurers. I have a feeling the path ahead will be a difficult one."



## 8

Bright and early in the morning, before Dawn and Hedwig woke up, I snuck out to the village leather working shop. I needed to make the saddle for Hedwig, and making a set of oso armor just sounded awesome. If I was lucky, Hedwig's excitement for extra jerky would be enough to let us ride him around. *But that's a problem for future Ryan.*

Sitting at the table I pulled out a couple of rolls of bullferos leather and spread out my designs. I figured I'd start out with the saddle since we needed to make up for lost time.

Woven leather was all well and good but this type of leather was far thicker, stiffer, and harder to work with than the leathers I used before. On its own this bullferos hide was probably as tough if not tougher than the current wolf and deer leather I was using and if I tried to weave it like I did all the other leathers it might be a bit unwieldy for riding, at least with how big Hedwig was so far.

"Trying to make an armor out of bullferos hide huh?" an old man asked with more wrinkles on his face than waves of sand in the desert. His eyes were so narrow thanks to his wrinkles I could barely make out the light brown irises inside.

I smiled. "That's right. And a saddle too. The only real technique I know for this type of armor is weaving though."

"Weaving? That's fancy and time consuming." The old man stroked his white goatee to a point. "Ever tried hardening leather?"

"That's what tanning does, doesn't it?" I asked.

He shook his head with a chuckle. "Not at all. Oh! I forgot to introduce myself. Name's Jack." He held out his hand.

I took it with a firm shake. "Ryan."

Jack smiled. "Oh we all know who you are. You're the adventurer that brought us enough meat to last us through the season at least."

I thought all the meat we brought would last a lot longer but I was still happy to help however I could.

“Now back to business.” Jack scooped up one of the thick hides. “First thing’s first. You have to use the normal tanning method.”

“So no magic?” I asked.

“You have a spell to help?” Jack said with a grin. “This will go a lot faster then. Magic is fine to use and works fine for the normal method but we have another method using fae powder in the process. This makes a soft, supple leather which is tough enough if you want to make something light and flexible that can handle a bit of abuse. But if you were spending time with good ‘ol Ragespire and wanting to ride that oso of yours, I’m thinking this won’t be for fancy gallops through the forest.”

I couldn’t help the laugh slipping past my lips. “Not at all. We’re going to be doing a lot of fighting in the coming days, maybe months. If we had more time I’d try to get some cavalry training from Ragespire but our friends are in a bit of a bind.”

Jack nodded. “That business with the Black Wolves is down right terrible. Bad enough that they’re enslaving the locals but adventurers abusing other adventurers is downright unheard of.”

I scratched the back of my neck. “It’s a lot more common than you think. Or I’ve just been incredibly unlucky thus far.”

“Well, you’ll be wanting your oso to be tough as nails and this bullferos leather is actually perfect for that.” Jack gestured at the tanning racks. “Start by tanning the hides. I’ll find you a nice, dark brown dye to go with your oso friend’s fur. What is it the adventuring kids say? It’ll pop?”

“Sounds about right,” I agreed with a chuckle and loaded up the tanning racks with bullferos hide. Using the convection spell I took them through the tanning process. I was about to reach for the oils and waxes to finish up the leather when Jack placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Easy there, hardened leather is a bit different to make, lad,” Jack said. He dragged over a tub. “Fill that up with water. I need to get the

frame's ready."

I blinked but did as the man asked, going out to the well and running buckets back in. It took a few trips but by the time I was done, Jack had finished the first of his frames.

"So uh, what are we doing here?" I asked.

"We're boiling the leather," Jack said. "It's one of the ways to harden it. You could use wax but that has a lot of ways to go wrong like leaving soft spots if the wax falls off. Baking is another option and my preferred method but the bakers have all the ovens tied up right now." Jack said. "Effectively we soak the leather, shape it on one of these frames here," he pointed at the thin metal frame he made for Hedwig's leg armor, "then we throw it in an oven or use your convection spell."

Nodding along to his explanation I couldn't help agree that sounded way easier than covering leather in hot wax. "How is boiling different?"

"Take that tanned leather of yours and throw it in the tub to boil for a bit," Jack said. "Well, not quite a full boil. If you heat up the water too much the leather will shrink more than we need it to."

I followed along his instructions, bringing the water temperature up with my convection spell, glancing back and forth between Jack and the tub.

"That's good," he said when the water was steaming and letting out the occasional bubble. "Now we let the leather sit there for twenty minutes. That bullferos hide will come out supple enough to shape properly."

I raised a brow. "I thought we were hardening the leather."

Jack shoved a metal frame into my hand. "What do you think the frames are for boy?" He laughed. "Now shape these to fit the different armor pieces you need. That should take up the time we need to wait, and we can make the seat for your saddle as well."

"Makes sense," I agreed and got to work.

The metal frames were made of thin, flexible iron. It was easy enough to reshape with my enhanced strength but getting the shape



just right took a bit of effort, precision, and several attempts. Jack couldn't help himself but tease me through my struggles but we eventually had all the frames made. Hedwig would have a suit of hardened bullferos leather to cover his body from head to toe and we would have a solid saddle to ride him into a glorious battle with.

*Hedwig's going to look awesome in this stuff*, I thought.

"Alright, let's make the seat for your saddle," Jack said.

I put up the next patch of bullferos hide on the rack.

"Now see how thick this leather is? When we tan with fae powder that's going to give your bottom a nice bit of cushion." Jack handed me a small pouch.

"So I just sprinkle it on?" I asked

Jack shook his head. "Rub that powder on thick. You want every inch of that leather covered before you use convection on it."

Nodding, I did what he asked, rubbing on the powder like one of those barbecue chefs I saw on TV seasoning their ribs. It was a mess of white, sparkling powder but once finished, Jack gave me the go ahead to tan. With another cast of convection the seat leather was done.

Jack inspected the leather with his hands. "Very nice. You're quite good at leatherworking with your magic aren't you?"

"I've had good teachers," I said.

"That's good. Now come here." Jack gestured with his head for me to try out the leather.

I touched the leather and gasped. It was soft and supple to the touch yet firm. With the saddle's seat made out of this we weren't going to be in for a rough ride at all. Well, maybe if Hedwig was as cooperative as he seemed yesterday when we offered him extra jerky.

"Nice, isn't it?" Jack said.

"Very," I agreed.

"Now let's finish up the rest of this armor."

Jack walked me through the rest of the process, shaping the bullferos leather over the different frames and securing it properly. I spent the next few minutes using convection to harden the leather into proper armor, going through the dying process, and finally securing all the straps we would need for Hedwig to wear it.

**Congratulations hero! You have leveled up your convection spell by +1. Who needs campfires when we have you around?**

**Congratulations hero! You have leveled up your clothier skill by +1. I really didn't think making bear armor would work for this. The more you know!**

"There we go, all done," Jack said. "This should fit and protect your oso nicely, but keep working on that skill of yours and you can do far better than this."

"Any tips on that front?" I asked.

Jack stroked his goatee. "Well, there's all sorts of tricks you can use. Leather itself is light but not the best material for a main suit of armor. There are ways to strengthen it however with the hardening process we just went through. You could harden the leather further into solid plates but then you lose the flexibility of the material."

"Could I maybe make a coat of plates from hardened leather?" I offered.

Jack nodded. "That would be one option if metal isn't available. Rune smithing is another viable means of supplementing your craft as well, and of course, there are better materials to work with out in the world."

A thought came to mind. "Like the bullferos plate?"

Jack chuckled. "Breaking those down to a size us humans can use takes a great deal of effort, but yes, it is a step up from basic steel. Most towns with access to these beasts use it to reinforce their walls as it is far easier than making anything useful out of them."

I pursed my lips in thought. "That's actually a really good idea. I have quite a few of those shells laying around my inventory."

"I'm surprised they fit at all," Jack said.

“Me too.” I stuffed Hedwig’s armor into my bag of holding then hefted up his saddle. “Thanks for all the help today, Jack.”

“Thank you for the meat and hides.” Jack waved. “And good luck with your oso.”

I grinned. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Dawn and Hedwig met me at the town center. “Morning, Ryan.”

“Morning, Dawn.”

Hedwig looked happy to see me until he spotted the saddle. The oso grew concerned, looking back and forth between me and the fancy piece of craftsmanship I spent all morning putting together for him.

“You ready to be bear cavalry, Hedwig?” I asked with a warm smile as I hefted up the saddle.

Hedwig let out a concerned grunt and looked to Dawn to save him.

“What? You’re big enough for it. And we were going to feed you more jerky too, remember.” Dawn turned to face me. “And we can even fry up some of that bullferos meat. It smells just like beef but the really good high grade stuff.”

My stomach growled with excitement at that. “Hear that, Hedwig? The faster we get this on you the sooner we get to feed you a delicious steak.”

Hedwig looked off to the side, like he was running some careful calculations in his mind. Then he approached, slow and cautious.

“Don’t worry big guy, it’s going to be fine, and I even made you armor so you can look even awesomer than you already do,” I said as I lifted the saddle into position.

That was probably not the right thing to say. Hedwig bolted immediately and bulled me over. I hit the ground hard and sat up.

Dawn reached down and pulled me up by the back of my shirt. “Ryan... You know he doesn’t want to wear the saddle to begin with. Why would you tell him he has to wear more stuff?”

“Because it looks awesome?” I replied with a laugh and took off running after Hedwig.

Dawn joined in on the chase. We sprinted through the town of Bellmare’s quiet, morning streets chasing down Hedwig. The townfolks and refugees bolted out of Hedwig’s way faster than we could catch up to the fleeing oso. They wore terrified looks on their faces and I couldn’t blame them. If I saw a strange oso barreling toward me I’d be pretty terrified too.

This plan of mine wasn’t working.

“We need to split up and box him in,” I said.

Dawn broke left. “Got it.”

We chased Hedwig for a few more minutes, earning the grumbles and glares of guards at the ruckus we were making. At this rate we were going to get ourselves thrown out of town.

“Come on Hedwig, don’t be like that,” I shouted as we ran.

Hedwig replied with a grunt, probably arguing about how oso’s weren’t meant to wear armor, or saddles, or anything but the fur on their backs.

“Horses wear armor and saddles all the time,” I replied. “Are you telling me you aren’t as tough as a horse?”

Hedwig grunted and huffed louder at that but he didn’t slow down any. Not until Dawn dropped in front of him. Hedwig slid to a halt then made a sharp turn to the right. Before he could get away I tackled Hedwig, which was like slamming into a pillow covered brick wall. Still, I slapped that saddle down on Hedwig’s back and clutched his thick fur.

“Hah! I got you. Now sit still so I can tie this down,” I said.

Hedwig huffed and chuffed in displeasure before he flopped down onto his stomach, looking back at me with the best pout his beaked mouth could manage.

Dawn laughed and knelt down beside Hedwig, rubbing at his cheeks. “I know, I know, you’re not a fan but we promised you lots of food didn’t we?” She kissed the top of Hedwig’s head.

Hedwig huffed again and like an angsty teenager who failed to get his way. He rose to his feet.

I climbed off his back and strapped down the saddle and gave it a testing tug. "There we go. Nice and firm. How's it feel, Hedwig?"

Hedwig looked at me then at Dawn, then back at the saddle like he was making sure we actually put it on. Hedwig took a few trying steps and wiggled about then ran around us and even stood on his hind legs. He was testing out the saddle, making sure it didn't get in the way. After a little bit more of confirmation he waddled up to me and dragged his tongue over my face.

I laughed and did my best to ignore the awful oso breath. "G-glad you like it. Now do you want to try the armor on?"

Hedwig looked thoughtful again then shook his head. He shoved his beaked snout at my bag then looked back up at me expectantly.

Dawn snickered. "Looks like he's expecting you to pay up front for this."

"Fair is fair," I admitted and pulled out a bundle of gorro jerky to feed Hedwig.

A trio of guards finally caught up to us with halberds and crossbows in hand. "Are you three causing trouble for the town's folk?" The lead guard with a halberd demanded.

"Hedwig wasn't too excited about becoming bear cavalry," I said. "But the situation is under control."

Hedwig gave a big nod at the guards with a mouthful of jerky.

The guards stared in disbelief at us then at each other, then back at us.

"Are you seriously planning on riding an oso into battle?" the crossbow-wielding guard asked.

"Why shouldn't we?" Dawn asked.

"They aren't the fastest mounts out there by any means," the lead guard said. "Horses are far faster creatures. They can get you in and out of trouble in a hurry just as Captain Ragespire displayed last night against the wurgen."

I nodded. "Ya, I get that. But we can't get a horse here, and even if we did I don't think a horse is going to let Hedwig ride them."

Hedwig gave a happy hoot as I fed him another strip of jerky.

The second halberdier leaned forward. "An oso mount would be great to wade into a fight with though." He looked to the other two guards. "Think about it. They can take a beating, knock over any idiot stupid enough to get in their way, and as soon as you dismount they're clawing and biting at anything stupid enough to stick around."

"That's what I was thinking," I said with a grin.

"Still defeats the purpose of cavalry being hit and run tactics," the lead guard said. "But I guess osos would make for decent heavy shock cavalry. Still, I would work on your riding skill. Try to get that spell the Captain used to speed your oso up. It'll come in handy when the fighting gets too heavy for you."

"How exactly do we get that spell?" Dawn asked.

"A trainer or an experienced rider like Captain Ragespire would normally be the one to teach it to you but it requires a sufficient level in riding for that to work," the lead guard said. "There is a chance you can earn it when you hit level ten in riding or you could find a spellbook in a dungeon or market. Either way you will need a minimum level of five in riding to learn the skill."

"That shouldn't take long," I said.

The crossbow guard laughed. "Simply riding your mount will earn you a level or two but after that it takes an eternity to increase it that way, Ryan. You're going to have to push Hedwig here to run, jump, climb, and any other challenging riding task you can think of to improve your skill as a rider and his as a mount."

"I figured it might take something like that," I agreed. "Well, sorry for the trouble guys. We're going to get Hedwig here armored up and get out of your hair."

The lead guard shook his head. "You're lucky all you did was spook a few people. Otherwise you'd still be our problem. Good luck with your quest, adventurers." He strode past with the other guards in tow.

Waving at the guards I pulled Hedwig's dashing new outfit and grinned at my oso companion. "So, ready for that armor, Hedwig?"  
Hedwig groaned.

## 9

Thankfully, getting Hedwig into his armor was a far less interesting debacle. He huffed and puffed, and grumbled about having the suit of leather armor put on him but with the promise of freshly cooked bullferos and his experience with the saddle, Hedwig was far more cooperative.

I made sure to cook for us after we left town and made camp deep in the woods, turning our bullferos into steaks and jerky for the journey ahead. We had a long journey ahead of us and there was no reason we couldn't enjoy our spoils in the meantime. "Wow. This really does taste like top tier beef, and I've never had the good stuff."

"It can get pretty expensive," Dawn agreed. "What's the best you've had?"

"A local mom and pop diner," I said. "I've always wanted to try Outback though."

Dawn laughed. "If we ever decide to venture outside of our medical pods together, I'm going to take you to a real steak house."

Leaving the medipods was something I hadn't considered doing in a very long time. There really was no need to either. The pods kept my physical body fed, healed, and New Realm Online was no less real to me than the actual world outside. But if I said I preferred the real world over this I would be lying.

"Maybe someday. If you really want, that is," I finally said.

Dawn smiled. "You're already attached to this world like me, aren't you?"

"Ya, just a little bit," I admitted. "There's nothing really waiting for me back in the real world. Sure I have my family to visit from time to time but otherwise I sit around in my dreary box of an apartment and surf the web. Here I have purpose, goals, dreams, if that's not a real life I'm not really sure what is."



Dawn nodded. "So if you could have your real body fixed like new tomorrow, would you go back or stay here in New Realm?"

"Maybe," I said. "After my accident it was a little hard to keep my hopes and dreams afloat. The bills alone prevented me from doing anything but I could barely function as a human. Terry and Betty helped me out there with rehab but by that time I had already forgotten what I wanted to do." I chuckled. "Not sure if that was because of the accident or because I lost hope so badly for a while there."

"That's terrible," Dawn said. "But I get what you mean. The things we had to suffer through to land ourselves in a medipod can be soul crushing."

I sighed. "Ya. But I'd rather not get hung up on the negatives. It doesn't do anyone any good. At least in my experience when I focused on the bad stuff I started spiraling into a dark place. Terry and Betty taught me to focus on going forward, and that's why I'm going to shove my boot up every single Black Wolf's ass I see when we get to her."

Dawn laughed. "So back to my question..."

"Maybe I would go back to the real world long enough to move in with a certain Lilac priestess." I blew Dawn a kiss.

Dawn swatted at me, her cheeks flushing bright red even through her purple skin. "Stoop."

"Look at you getting all bashful." I reached over to pinch her cheeks and she swatted me again, laughing harder.

"You're terrible at this," Dawn said.

I grinned. "I'll have you know I have a whopping ten points of charisma. If that doesn't make me a ladies man I don't know what does."

Dawn fell over laughing. After catching her breath she smiled up at me. "I appreciate the thought though. That you would come all the way to be with me in the real world even if we'd spend all our time together in this fantasy land."

I shifted to lay beside her and laced my fingers with hers. "What can I say? It's a magical place with a magical girl."

Not being one to be left out, Hedwig came over and laid beside us.

I grinned and patted his side. "I couldn't live without you either big guy."

Hedwig gave a happy little chuff and dragged his tongue over both our faces.

"So what's the plan tomorrow?" Dawn asked.

"Walking and riding, I have a new skill I have to level up" I said. "We still have a long ways to go before we hit Blackmoss and then it's on to Cedar Springs from there."

"The sooner we get to the exciting part the better," Dawn said. "New Realm is a beautiful walking simulator but it has a lot more fun things to be doing. Like dungeon crawling."

"I wonder how many of those we passed on the way here," I said.

Dawn shrugged. "Probably a dozen. We have covered a lot of ground and it's not like the map tells us where they are."

"We'll make sure to take a look around once we're back at Liberty." I patted Hedwig's side. "So now that we've bribed you with delicious steaks, are you finally ready to go?"

Hedwig looked thoughtfully at the woods then plucked me up with his beak and swung me onto his back.

"I'll take that as a yes."

~

"Are we there yet?" Dawn asked in a singsong voice.

I laughed at her dedication to sounding like a frustrated kid on a road trip. The journey from Liberty had been a long one with only a few breaks for actual adventuring and while we were getting closer we weren't quite done with our journey.

"No but there is a village ahead. The map says it's Black Moss," I replied. "We can take the day off to rest with a hot meal and a few

drinks then pick back up in the morning.”

Dawn gave him a big smile. “Oh, I like the sound of a bed,” she said with a wink.

I looked straight ahead to hide my warming cheeks and let out an exhale louder than I meant to. My relationship with Dawn might be rather new but the sparks were flying. It only took one look from her to get my blood boiling. “Yes, it sounds like a good idea,” I answered far more stiffly than I would have liked.

“It is fairly early in the day though. Perhaps instead of just sitting around in the inn, we should see if they have a quest or two available. We haven’t exactly been racking up the experience points this trip.”

I thought back to our trip so far. Outside of a few PVP kills we scored on the Braven, and that quick quest we did for the town of Bellmare, we hadn’t exactly been focusing on the experience points. But the road hadn’t been full of too many challenges and we were doing our best to make good time. Completing a good quest or two before the day was over sounded like an excellent idea and any levels we could gain before we hit Cedar Springs would help us in our upcoming fight against the Black Wolves. I nodded. “Let’s see what we can find.”

We approached the village of Blackmoss and were immediately greeted by a guard. I braced for the worst and expected to have to prove ourselves again if we expected to stay in town. A wooden palisade surrounded the village with only two entrances leading inside. It was a good, defensible position, provided nothing came around that could knock down the wooden walls. After Bellmare, it was pretty obvious to us that the towns were only as safe as their guards and walls could keep them.

“Greetings travelers,” the guard said as we approached the gates to the village. He was surprisingly friendly, even if the guard had to look twice at Hedwig, our majestic oso mount. Thankfully the guard didn’t say anything. It was obvious he’d dealt with unique pets before.

“Hello,” I replied as we arrived at the gates. I examined the guard to see how strong he was.

**Stephen Level 30 guard.**

*I should have probably done that with those guards that stopped us for making so much noise at Bellmare,* I thought. Still, I couldn't help raising a brow at the guard's level. His rank was far higher than some of the main guards from Mara and Blackmoss looked quiet enough to have avoided the guild wars the guards of Bellmare had experienced. This area had to be one of the higher end questing zones.

Dawn noticed the same thing. “You're rather strong,” she said to the guard with a smile. “Are all the guards of this village at the same level as you? We haven't encountered many guards above level 20.

Stephen's chest puffed out at her praise. “I've only recently reached this level, and I'm currently the highest-level guard in the village, but several others are close. We've had quite a busy time with bandits and rogue adventurers trying to capture our village. But we've held our ground.”

*Rogue adventurers? That's not good. Good thing it only seems to be the random skirmish here and there,* I thought. “Is that so? Can you tell us more about these rogue adventurers?” I asked.

Stephen's face darkened. “Those rogues belong to a group calling themselves the Black Wolf guild. Pheh, they aren't like wolves at all. They scare too easily. They are more like flea bitten coyotes. They aren't strong enough to defeat us in a straight up fight, despite multiple attempts. Now they spend most of their time harassing and killing our hunters and farmers.” Stephen sighed. “We have to send out village guards to the surrounding lands to keep the village safe. It's great for our farmers, but it makes hunting and gathering almost impossible. We're strong as long as we're behind our walls, but out in the fields and forest the Black Wolves can swarm or trap people faster than we can get reinforcements to them.”

“Sounds frustrating,” Dawn said.

“Yes, it is,” Stephen agreed. “On the other hand, every time those idiots attack us I gain experience and the loot they drop isn’t terrible. Killing adventurers while defending the village is the quickest way for a guard to level up outside of a monster surge. If it weren’t for the fact that we could use some fresh meat to eat, I’ll be happy if the idiots keep coming for us.”

Dawn looked back at me and smiled. “Hmm. The village is short of meat? Do you think your mayor would give us a quest to provide you with a fresh supply?”

I had been hoping for a more adventurous line of questing than another hunting trip but maybe we’d have easier prey in these parts.

“We don’t have a mayor,” Stephen said. “We have a clan elder, but if you speak to her, I’m sure she would give you a quest. Just be careful, the woods are full of those dirty little coyotes.”

I grinned. “Maybe she’d give us a quest to deal with the bad doggies.”

Stephen snorted. “If you’re capable, ask for it. Anything that helps weaken them helps us. Elder Shavonne is in the big house at the top of the hill. You can’t miss it. Just head into the village and follow the hill to the top.”

“Thanks for the help, Stephen.” I tipped my head in thanks to the guard and headed up the hill with Hedwig.

After a few days of riding Hedwig, the oso had stopped fussing about his new role as a mount. If anything he was starting to enjoy it, like I learned to enjoy all the seemingly menial tasks I engaged in across the lands. Hedwig, just like Dawn, me, or any of the others in New Realm, enjoyed having his stats climb. Carrying around two adventurers all day earned him an extra point in strength and constitution. Speaking of, when I leveled up I had completely forgotten to give Hedwig his own attribute points. He had six to spend so I split them between strength and constitution like I normally did. Then I reconsidered. If we were going to use Hedwig as a combat mount as well as a companion in fights, shouldn’t we train up his agility? It made sense to me at least. Hedwig could get in

and out of trouble faster and there really wasn't much more terrifying out there than a rampaging oso speeding towards your face. I dumped all six points into agility to make up for the lacking stats.

**Hedwig: Level 20 Oso**

**Strength 33**

**Agility 23**

**Constitution 34**

**Intelligence 15**

**Wisdom 15**

**New Skills Available**

**Rending Claws: Melee attacks from your pet have an increased chance of inflicting the status effect as well as reducing an opponent's armor.**

**Fearsome Roar: Your pet roars, causing surrounding enemies to flee in fear and have their attributes reduced by 2 points. Current duration 30 seconds.**

*Nice*, I thought. Hedwig was scary enough already but now not only was he a tanking machine but he could play a strong support role by debuffing enemies and placing a damage overtime effect on them. And like anything else in New Realm, the more he used his abilities the stronger their effects would become. I took a deeper look into how Fearsome Roar worked though as these skills had a chance to be resisted.

**Fearsome Roar: Your pet roars, causing surrounding enemies to flee in fear and have their attributes reduced by 2 points. Current duration 30 seconds.**

**Fear effect can be resisted. Stat debuff can be resisted. Increased levels in Fearsome Roar increases the range, duration, and intensity of the effect as well as increase the chance the skill will take effect.**

That was a skill we were going to have to work very hard to train up. A well timed Fearsome Roar could turn the tides of any battler. Whether that be in making the enemy flee or just making them easier

to take down for a few seconds. With the guild wars spreading across New Realm, we were going to need every edge we could get our hands on.

At the top of the hill we found an elderly woman waiting for us. She stood erect with her head held high. Her long silver hair flowed behind her with the wind. The sun behind the woman gave her an almost otherworldly appearance.

“Greetings adventures, I hear you are looking for quests?” she asked.

I raised an eyebrow. There was no way she’d heard us talking to Stephen. Did NPCs have a chat systems like our guild or was she some type of special NPC? It seemed a little out of place given the game’s heavy leaning toward realism, even if it was a fantastical realism.

Elder Shavonne noticed my look and chuckled. “Sorry, I’m a vain old woman and I love to play the mysterious sage role.” She moved out of the sun, and a small bird landed on her shoulder.

“It was an impressive show,” I said with a grin. “How did you know?”

“A little bird told me,” Elder Shavonne said.

The tiny bird, the size of a sparrow, squawked. “Adventures coming to see you, want quests for food and to kill the coyotes.”

I smiled as the saying was quite literal in this case. “That’s an impressive little messenger system.”

“Yes, as long as the messages aren’t too complicated,” Elder Shavonne said. “But Stephen has developed his own shorthand and refined it to be a rather effective tool. This is one of the longer messages he’s sent me, but we don’t get many adventurers asking for quests to fight other adventurers.”

“Then you haven’t made the rewards high enough,” Dawn said with a laugh. “Make the quest worth enough and some adventurers would fight their own mothers.”

I wanted to argue I would never do such a thing then immediately had a few dozen examples of people I had met who would do just

that. She had a point.

"I'm not sure I'd want to hire adventurers willing to do that, but I see your point," Shavonne said. "Unfortunately, we aren't a rich village, so we can't offer too much. What we do have are some valuable alchemy ingredients that we harvest locally. And with the Black Wolf Guild raiding our traders we haven't been able to trade as we normally would."

"That is a problem we'd like to help with," Dawn said.

"And you would do this for our herbs rather than coin?" the elder asked as if we were a bunch of drunks offering to solve all of her problems.

I nodded. "Of course. Alchemy is a valuable trade and one of the many our people back home are trying to improve."

Elder Shavonne looked us over closely, taking a particularly long look at Hedwig. "I do believe you might be able to help. I haven't met any adventurers with such a powerful beast companion before."

**Elder Shavonne has offered you a quest! Bring her wild meat to feed the village and kill any members of the Black Wolf Guild that try to stop you. Receive 10 silver and 1 bundle of alchemical ingredients per carcass and kill.**

*Ooh an open ended quest.* I accepted it immediately. "Any areas that we should be focused on?"

"Yes, the forest to the south of town is rich in wildlife and is our normal hunting grounds. The Black Wolves guild operates a base there from which they attack us and where they patrol to limit our ability to supply ourselves with food."

"Shall we go hunting?" Dawn asked with a grin.

I smiled and nodded at Elder Shavonne. "It was a pleasure to meet you. We'll be back with some supplies in a few hours."

"If that is the case, we'll have a feast awaiting your arrival," the elder said with a warm, hopeful smile. "We have a few local dishes that are famous in the kingdom. If you supply fresh meat, it will be a meal to remember."



Considering how good the food tasted in the game, I had no doubts that this feast would be amazing. I vowed to myself that we'd bring back plenty of meat. Maybe nothing quite on the level of that bullferos haul we pulled for Bellmare, but more than enough to get the locals through the week.

Leaving Elder Shavonne, we headed back down the hill and out the gates. There, we found Stephen waiting for us with a little bird sitting on his shoulder.

"I'm glad Elder Shavonne thinks you're up to the task," Stephen said.

"We hope we are, but one never knows until they try," I said. After all, the Black Wolves may be a situation like the Blackhearts. Masses of low level players that could overwhelm us with a few heavy hitters for support. Things could go very wrong, very fast if we got careless.

"Very true. Now as you head south, you'll see a trail going into the woods." Stephen pointed off in the trail's direction. "Follow that path and it will lead you to our hunting grounds." He rubbed at the back of his neck with a grimace. "And more than likely an ambush. Do what you will with that information, adventurers."

I hopped off Hedwig's back and looked at Dawn. "Let's go for a walk."

Dawn followed me down and laughed. "Why do I feel like I'm about to be used as bait?"

I grinned. "Because we are the bait." I looked over to Hedwig. "When they attack us, Hedwig here is going to attack them, aren't you buddy?"

The massive, armored owlbear huffed and clawed the ground before heading into the woods. They'd done this before where Hedwig was the bait, and it seemed the owlbear was rather glad to take his turn as the hunter.

As we walked through the forest I noticed the abundance of plants that held medicinal properties. The further we went into the woods the richer the herbs became. I could see why any guild would

make a play for this village. While small, the surrounding resources were ample and valuable. Any guild with aspiring alchemist's could make a fortune off the surrounding resources if they wanted to. Depending on what effects these different plants had, a guild could turn this forest into a source of potent potions to buff and replenish their players.

"We're going to have to make sure to establish a trade route with this village," I said. While I had yet to see a teleportation system in game I seriously doubted it would be convenient enough to let us take trade goods across vast distances.

Dawn agreed. "For sure. I wonder if these idiots ever thought of just trying to establish trade instead of trying to conquer them?"

I nodded and started running through the logistics that running such an operation would require. For it to really be worth the trouble we'd need a large caravan with plenty of guards. Maybe some of the players in Broken Bones would like to take up guard duty as a break from their normal crafting grind. They would certainly appreciate the coin we'd pay them. But there was the larger problem of hostile guilds standing between us and Liberty.

"That's not very nice," a voice rang out from the trees to my left, snapping me right out of my musings. "Talking poorly of your betters is rather unseemly." A player stepped out of the woods, a wicked looking bearded ax in his hand.

"I don't consider anyone who hides in the trees listening to other people's conversations, to be anyone's betters," Dawn replied.

"That's not true," I said. "They could be better than Red Belly Slime-Slugs. You remember those things? They were awful." Those were disgusting creatures, but anything even vaguely slug-like was disgusting.

"But the slugs served a purpose. Their slime was an excellent anti-septic," Dawn said as she shook her head.

I sighed loudly. "Dang that's right. Sorry, mister. I have to agree with my friend, everything is your better."

The man's brow furrowed as he stepped forward. "Bunch of comedians, are you? You'll regret coming here. This is Black Wolf Territory!"

"Wait, did you say Black Wolf Territory?" Dawn said, sounding shocked.

"That's right," a second man said as he came out of the woods on Dawn's side of the path.

Behind us I heard more of the Black Wolf ambushers trying to sneak into position. In truth, they weren't nearly as sneaky as they thought. Frankly, I wasn't even sure I needed my perception to be as high as it was to hear them stomping through the woods. But that high perception did help me spot them well before we stepped into this so-called trap of theirs.

A slight breeze picked up and the bandits upwind of us had an unpleasant odor. I coughed and pinched my nose. "Ugh. Apparently personal hygiene isn't a requirement for joining the Black Wolf guild."

The second man raised his sword. "You've got a smart mouth boy. I wonder how smart it will be when I cut your tongue out."

Suddenly there was a scream from behind us. Right where our not so sneaky ambushers planned to strike from. Both of the players in front of me and Dawn shifted their eyes to the source of the scream.

*You dumb bastards*, I thought as I casually turned toward the screams. But I wasn't looking at Hedwig's handiwork, I was pulling my glaive out of my magical bag of holding as the screams behind us intensified. The ambush squad hidden in the bushes was no match for Hedwig as he picked them off one after another.

I suddenly turned and thrust my glaive in one swift motion. I stabbed the ax-wielding player clean through the chest. Dawn filled the swordman's throat and head full of arrows. The critical attacks hit them so fast they never realized the danger they faced wasn't from the oso going bump in the woods but their so-called victims right in front of them.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your power thrust ability by +1. I'd make a joke but that's just too easy.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your spear skill by +1. Speaking of jokes, you're becoming a master of spear handling.**

I had to snort out a laugh at those two poorly timed notifications and followed through with Shocker, double thrust, and power slash to finish the job before my opponent could even think about retaliating.

But the ax man, still dealing with the effects of Shocker, was still able to respond. "What? How are you so strong?" he demanded through a cracking voice that quickly turned to pleading. "Please don't kill me!"

I continued the onslaught but allowed myself a brief bit of hero dialogue. Or villain. I guess it really depended on who was listening, and probably the receiving end of my glaive. "You idiots think that joining a guild that spends all its time harassing NPCs and newbies is going to make you strong? How about you play the game the right way and you won't die so easily."

The player's eyes went wide with fear from the coming killing blow. Or maybe the stars and planets had aligned just right and he'd reached an epiphany about his play style. I wasn't really sure nor did I care. I finished him off with a double thrust. "Get good, noob."

**You have defeated 4theLolz Level 15 player. 500 exp**

**Hedwig has defeated 3 players (Lvls 12, 11, 8) You receive 350 exp.**

I looked over at Dawn who was smirking at me. "What?"

"Play the game the right way and you won't die so easily?" Dawn snorted. "Get good, noob? When did you start playing a self-righteous, smite the wicked holy paladin?"

Chuckling I replied, "OK, maybe it was a bit much, but I was monologuing. He was obviously a noob that got sucked into playing with a lame guild. Maybe getting his ass handed to him, along with a smite, the wicked rant will make him look at how he plays this game. New Realm Online is so much more than just a regular game, these

bone-heads are missing out on half of the experience by treating the NPCs like garbage rather than learning from them.”

Dawn nodded. “I suppose that’s true, but come up with a better tagline. That was cheesy as hell.”

I laughed at Dawn’s assessment of my heroic monolog. It definitely needed work. Maybe a writing team or two behind it. “I’ll come up with something better.”

Hedwig came through the bushes, face covered in blood but a satisfied twinkle in his eyes. His armor didn’t have a scratch on it and while I was happy to see my big owlbear unharmed, I was curious to see how the armor I made him would hold up in combat.

“Come on, you can work on your cheesy kill lines while we hunt,” Dawn said while we looted the players’ bodies. “We have a mission to finish and a guild base to clear out.”

## 10

Finding the Black Wolf outpost wasn't difficult. In fact it was laughably easy. The absolute geniuses decided to take up a hunting lodge the villagers at Blackmoss had set up for their hunters deep in the woods. It had plenty of space for maybe five people with all the facilities necessary to stack up animal carcasses and bring them back to town. There was also a scattering of tents, probably for those guild members who were too low level to earn themselves a proper roof over their heads.

Dawn and I spread out across the woods to scout out the place and counted out another five players among them. My Shadow's Lover skill and the thickly wooded forest gave me plenty of cover to get in close and look inside the hunting lodge. There was no one inside but a stack of clothes, weapons, and trade goods the Black Wolves had been gathering since they set up shop here.

*Looks like the highest level is the boss man at level twenty,* I said to Dawn as I came around to perch myself on the corner of the hunting lodge. The Black Wolves were gathered around the campfire and their leader, Bardy McBardBro was strumming away on his lute. The rest gathered around him were anywhere from two to three levels behind him and the usual rogue, fighter, and mage types most parties could expect to fight.

*Why is he a bard though?* Dawn asked. *That seems like the most useless class outside of roleplaying or—*

*We all know what kind of reputation bard's have,* I sent back. *Focus on burning down the mage. I'll take the bard, Hedwig will get in the middle and use his Fearsome Roar and Rumble.*

*Using Fear on them and then tripping them back to back?* Vicious, Dawn sent. *Ready when you are, Ryan.*

I looked over at Hedwig skulking around in the woods. I could only tell where he was thanks to our link as pet and owner, otherwise

Hedwig blended right into the treeline. That was honestly terrifying to think about. That such a huge killing machine could just blend into the background. Good thing Hedwig was our big, fuzzy killing machine.

Drawing one of my hunting spears I infused it with mana for a combination of Shocker and Power Throw. *Go!* I sent as I threw my spear and caught the bard in the chest.

The bard crashed onto his back, rolling through the ground but his grip on his lute never left. At the same time Dawn's arrows rained on the mage, dropping the squishy, lower level player before he had a chance to react. The others scrambled to their feet, drawing their weapons just as Hedwig rolled into the mix with Fearsome Roar. The remaining Black Wolf guild members let out frightened cries and turned to run, but not before Hedwig used Rumble to drop them all to the ground.

At first glance it looked like everything was going according to plan. First glances can be deceiving.

As I rushed in to finish off the rogue with my glaive, the bard staggered to his feet and tore my spear from his chest. "Sneaky little buggers aren't you?" He strummed his lute aggressively like that blonde guy from El Dorado. "But not sneaky enough."

"Not sneaky enough?" I laughed as I tore my glaive out of the now dead rogue. "I think your friend here might have something to say about that."

Bardy kept on strumming away on his lute, a soothing melody picking up into an aggressive rhythm. "Oh I bet."

"Ryan behind you!" Dawn called out.

I took a mace to the back of the skull. It cracked as I slammed to the ground, my health dropping to half and a stun effect racked my body. I was fully conscious of everything going on around me. The splitting pain pulsing through my skull, the sound of the mace wielding warrior coming to finish the job, Bardy McBardFace's shifting beats and rhythms that had to be buffing him and the other

surviving player, who was a ranger of some kind. But I couldn't move my body at all.

From the corner of my eye I saw the mace wielding fighter catch Hedwig across the face as he charged. That slowed Hedwig down for a fraction of a second and saved the fighter from catching an angry oso beak to the skull. It didn't save him from having Hedwig's full weight running him over like a bulldozer as they both tumbled out of sight. If the aggressive ripping and tearing I was hearing was anything to go by, that fighter was on his way to being very dead.

The ranger returned fire at Dawn. She was quick to duck into the trees but not before she caught an arrow to her shoulder. As showy as the armor she had me make was, it still covered critical areas and the shoulder was one of them. The arrow forced Dawn to stagger out of cover but didn't actually penetrate. But being out in the open made sure she caught a second arrow to her exposed midriff.

I clawed at the dirt, feeling the effects of stun wearing off of me.

"Hahah! You should have worn some real armor, little skank," Bardy taunted with a giddy little tune from his lute.

Dawn replied with an arrow through the ranger's eye socket as he lined up another shot.

"Oh fucketh me," Bardy said then pulled his lute up for a quick finishing strum of his lute. "Well time to run, kids. Ciao!"

The stun wore off on my body and I threw myself to my feet after the Bard. My arms still felt like they weighed a ton after that blow so throwing a spear wasn't going to work. I swapped my glaive for my crossbow and fired, missing Bardy's cheek by millimeters.

Bardy whirled about with a quick flick of his fingers across his lute. The note that came out was not one I expected. It was a loud, deep note that sent a shockwave flying back at me. I staggered and hit the back of my recently smashed skull on a tree branch but not before I fired again, catching Bardy in the shoulder.

The bard clutched at the bolt, coughing up blood. "W-w-what? How? You didn't reload that crossbow. You cheater!" He spat as he dropped to a knee.



I cycled the crossbow and brought another bolt to bear on Bardy's face. "Repeating crossbows are a hell of a thing." I grinned and sent a final bolt through the Bard's head.

Bardy crashed to his back, dead, as I did. Only less dead.

**You have defeated Bardy McBardFace Level 20 player. 1000 exp**

**Hedwig has defeated 3 players (Lvls 18, 17, 18) You receive 650 exp.**

**Congratulations hero! You have reached level 21 by preying on those weaker than you. You're the monster you swore you wouldn't become now.**

I didn't remember swearing anything of the sort, nor was I opposed at all to pvp. But the AI had to take another stab at me. That seemed to be its whole point ever since I rerolled. Still I took my level up and distributed my points to strength, agility, and constitution to bring them up to thirty. I would have to bring up my intelligence and wisdom later. They were starting to fall a little too far behind.

**Ryan Rosa Level 21 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 30**

**Agility 30**

**Constitution 30**

**Intelligence 25**

**Wisdom 25**

**Charm 10**

Dawn rushed up to my side along with Hedwig. "Ryan are you alright?"

"Can I get a new head?" I groaned. "This one is a little busted."

Dawn just laughed at me.

Hedwig applied the finest in oso medical care and licked at my head in a less than effective attempt at making me feel better. The hot, sticky saliva was making my wound sting more if anything.

I pressed a hand to Hedwig's head and pushed him back as I sat up. "Thanks Hedwig," I said even as I slipped a hand behind my

head to cast Healing Hands. The soothing relief spreading across my skull as it fixed itself was heavenly and I could think again. “They didn’t hurt you too much did they, Hedwig?”

Hedwig shook his head and showed off his bruised cheek. The helmet I made for him took the brunt of the blow and other than a few scratches it looked to be intact. But it didn’t do much to blunt the impact. That was one of the downsides of leather armor. It could stand up to piercing strikes and make it harder to cut but it wasn’t great when it came to providing padding against blunt attacks on its own. If we had access to some weavers I could have added a layer of cloth padding to help against blunt attacks but by that logic I could have also added in a layer of metal armor to protect Hedwig. All of that involved going back home to Liberty. I added it to my ever growing list of crafting projects; Hedwig’s plate armor.

*I already worked it out for Cam so why not Hedwig too?* I thought to myself. I cast Healing Hands on Hedwig to fix him up then checked his level. He’d gone up a level just like me. I put another three points into agility to help that stat catch up to the others. Hedwig was going to be the fastest oso alive at this rate. If his initial stat block was anything to go by at least.

**Hedwig: Level 21 Oso**

**Strength 33**

**Agility 26**

**Constitution 34**

**Intelligence 15**

**Wisdom 15**

I turned to face Dawn. “Are you doing okay?”

Dawn looked down. “Oh this?” She pulled the arrow from her stomach like it was just a splinter. “It barely even bothers me.”

I furrowed my brow in confusion and started healing her next.

“I know, it’s weird. But the goddess gives us all kinds of perks. Having tougher bodies makes up for the requirement of showing a little skin.”

I laughed. "A little?"

"What? You don't like it?" She pouted in mock offense.

I stammered like an idiot. "Well I—uhm. Err." I had no idea what to say that wouldn't get me slapped.

Dawn leaned down to boop my nose with her finger tip. "The answer is yes, you do like it." She read me like a book and followed up with a quick kiss before helping me to my feet.

"Y-ya, of course I do. I mean, how could I not?" I smiled.

Dawn chuckled. "You could be one of those silly boys who thinks sexy women are terrifying, or worse, those white knights who just can't stand to see a woman flaunting her stuff. But if that was the case I would have left you back at Mara. Those types are just as bad as the open creeps. Worse actually. At least you know where you really stand with a creep."

I really appreciated how playful Dawn could get sometimes, and how she wasn't a prude about her outfit. Then again, it probably helped that she chose the outfit for herself rather than had it forced on her by the game. New Realm had options for both men and women to look as realistically or fantastically armored as they wanted. Full plate banana hammock included. Maybe I'd rock that one day for the memes, when we didn't have such serious problems to tackle like player on player slavery.

Wrapping an arm around Dawn's waist I pulled her into a warm embrace and cast Healing Hands on her. "Come on, we have a feast to get to."

"Like I would let you forget," she grinned.

We spent the rest of the evening hunting down whatever wild game we could find. It was mostly elk with the occasional pack of boars. The boars usually reacted in one of two ways when they spotted us, they ran, or they charged. So flexing my new trapper skill I set up my hunting spears and tried to bait a few packs into them. It worked a few times and by then we had enough kills between us for a few dozen gold.

Returning to Blackmoss as the sun was setting, Stephen greeted us at the gate. "Welcome back adventurers. Did you have a good hunt?"

"Very," Dawn said and strode on past with big, proud steps.

I chuckled. "We cleared out the Black Wolves in the woods, and at that hunting lodge. It was around ten of them total."

"That's fantastic news, adventurer," Stephen said. "Maybe our people will be able to reclaim the lodge."

"I hope so," I said. "We left all the ill gotten gains of the Black Wolf guild there at the lodge too. I know it doesn't make up for the lives and trade you've lost but it's the least we could do."

Stephen clasped my arm. "That's more than we expected, adventurer. I will have some guards head over there right now."

"Just be careful out there. I have no idea how many Black Wolf guild members are actually out there," I said.

Stephen nodded. "We'll keep that in mind."

I followed Dawn to the well where we cleaned up as quickly as we could then headed up to the inn where the villagers were preparing a feast.

"Adventurer's, you're back," Shavonne said with a warm smile. "How went your quest?"

Dawn grinned. "I'm sure a little bird will come by any second now to tell you. So where do you want these animals stacked up?"

Shavonne smiled as a bird found its way onto her shoulder and explained the situation to her. "Take them back to the kitchen dear. I have your reward ready."

After we dropped off our hunt, Shavonne was amazed to see how much we had gathered for the people of Blackmoss.

"Maybe I should have been a little more specific in the number of kills we wanted," Shavonne admitted with a nervous laugh. "This is far more than we expected from you."

"Did we overdo it?" I asked. "We can hand in less if you'd like. We don't want to bankrupt your village."

Shavonne shook her head. "No, no this is quite alright. We can afford to pay you your reward, it's more the storage situation I worry about."

"That's a good problem to have right?" Dawn asked.

Shavonne chuckled. "I did promise a feast. It will just have to be a bigger one. Here adventurers."

**Quest completed: Bring wild meat to feed the village and kill any members of the Black Wolf Guild that try to stop you.**

**Reward: 24 gold and 240 bundles of alchemical ingredients.**

The gold was a fantastic, valuable asset but the bundles of alchemical ingredients were a real treasure. The herbs inside covered everything from cooking spices to medicinal herbs and others we could use to create buffs. The question was whether or not we actually had the alchemists with the skills to properly put these to work. I typed up the list of materials and sent them over to Cool Karen and asked if she knew anyone these would be helpful for.

*We have three alchemists who can use these effectively. Another two who will be there in another week's worth of grinding, Karen replied in the middle of our feast. Oh and there is a way to increase the difficulty of dungeons, mini ones as well. It turns out they are locked behind two requirements. The first is a completion requirement. You can't play the hard mode dungeon if you haven't cleared the regular dungeon. That requirement must be filled by every single member of the party. The second requirement is level. That varies from dungeon to dungeon but every party member must meet the minimum level requirement before they're allowed inside.*

*That's good to know, Karen. Thanks for all your help, I said.*

*It's what I'm here for :)*

"So adventurers," Shavonne spoke as we feasted on too many different new and exciting dishes for me to wrap my head around, "what brings you to our neck of the woods?"

"We actually have some business to take care of with the Black Wolf guild," Dawn said. "They've enslaved a friend of Ryan's and a

bunch of other adventurers.”

“And plenty of Cedar Spring’s locals too I’m guessing,” I added.

Shavonne nodded. “That would be just like that guild. We have been hearing terrible stories from the Cedar Springs area. The guild numbers there are far larger than what we have to deal with here at Blackmoss. Are you sure you three will be enough to handle them?”

“Of course,” Dawn said without hesitation.

“From what we know of the Black Wolf guild, most of their members are lower level than all of us. More importantly, they have been neglecting their skills,” I said. “We at Broken Bones prioritize the development of our member’s skills above going up in level, that includes the towns folk we come across that want to join us.”

“You allow commoners like us to join your guild?” Shavonne asked.

I nodded. “We try to be friends with all the towns folk we come across. It works out better in the long run for our skill development and trade.” I took another bite out of a delicious meat pie. “I’m sure that just came out all kinds of cynical but that’s not the most important reason to me.”

“What is then?” Shavonne asked.

“I just can’t stand seeing good people getting hurt,” I said. “I know it’s naive, unrealistic, and a special kind of idealistic, but whenever I see someone in need every fiber of my being demands that I do something to help them.”

Shavonne leaned over with a chuckle. “It helps that you can respawn whenever you die.”

That took the wind out of my sails but I had to laugh. “Yeah, jumping into a suicidal situation is a lot easier when you can just come back from the dead. But I’d rather not lose any of my hard earned gear or experience if I can help it. You can lose levels if you die enough times, you know.”

“Oh yeah that is a thing that happens,” Dawn said before taking a swig of mead. “You know if we can spawn camp these assholes they won’t be a problem for anyone.”

“True but then we’d be just as bad as them,” I said. “Plus you have to think about...” I stopped myself before I mentioned this world was a game to the locals who were very much real people to me. “...think about stretching ourselves too thin. Even if we grind them back down to level one we can’t be everywhere at once,” I said. Even if we could do what Dawn suggested, doing so successfully had the potential to scare off players. If enough of them left, that would be an anticlimactic apocalypse for this world. The developers would just flip the off switch and this world would be gone. I wasn’t sure if that was a fate worse than letting guilds like Braven or the Blackhearts run unopposed.

Dawn nodded. “True, we don’t have nearly enough people to pull a stunt like that. And honestly it sounds pretty boring.”

“Well,” Shavonne spoke up, “if you are indeed heading to Cedar Springs to deal with the Black Wolf guild I can tell you of a road they frequent. Carriages and caravans come through there regularly, even under threat of the guild. So if your goal is to fight them you will find no shortage of opportunities to encounter the guild along this path.”

My map opened and marked out a road heading down to Cedar Springs. It was a thickly wooded area with no shortage of great ambush points. It wouldn’t hurt at all to take out as many of them as we could along the way. Every Black Wolf we killed was one less that we had to deal with when we freed Betty and the others. That was, of course, assuming that they didn’t have a spawn point nearby.

“Thanks for that, Shavonne. We’ll make sure to pay them a visit,” I said.

“Anything for you two,” she smiled warmly. “After all you have done for my town in the short time you’ve been here it’s really the least I could do.”

“Maybe in the future we could do more for you,” Dawn said. “Like trade routes up north after things calm down a bit.”

Shavonne nodded. “My people would appreciate that. And if you take care of the Black Wolves we would even be open to giving you

a discount.”

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your charisma by +1. Look at you winning the hearts and minds by being a dark elf boy scout. It’s disgusting.**

“Consider it done,” I grinned.



Morning came and we were off down the road to Cedar Springs. If Elder Shavonne's information was right there were supposed to be ample opportunities for us to deal with the Black Wolf guild along the way.

So far that proved not to be the case.

"We've been roaming out in the open for hours and nothing," Dawn said as she scanned the woods around us.

I sat my hands on the back of my head. "Do you think it's because we're being a little too obvious just walking out in the open like this?"

Hedwig grunted in agreement.

Dawn laughed. "A scantily clad woman roaming the woods with her halfbreed lover and an oso don't make the most appetizing target."

I clutched my chest dramatically. "Ow, hurtful." Then I grinned.

Dawn rolled her eyes, unable to fight the grin. "Sorry, sorry. I mean my dashing half druman boyfriend."

"That's better," I said with a mock air of satisfied smugness.

Hedwig groaned at me.

"Anyway." Dawn smiled. "Maybe we should take to the woods. If this road really is as dangerous as Elder Shavonne said it was, we should have at least noticed the Black Wolf guild members hiding out. The ones we cleared out weren't the sneakiest bunch in the world."

I agreed. "It makes me wonder if they've moved on after our attack. I know the Black Wolf guild is pretty big in numbers and a few players getting killed isn't much of a blip on the radar but Blackmoss is a valuable asset. Do you think they ran off after the thrashing we gave them?"

“They don’t strike me as the run away with their tails between the legs types,” Dawn said. “If anything something like that should have earned a response in force.”

I pulled my lips into a tight line and considered that. “If that’s the case we need to hurry up and free Betty and the others before we have a siege to fend off at Blackmoss. Elder Shavonne might like us but I doubt she’d appreciate us causing her people trouble.”

“True,” Dawn nodded. “But she seems wise enough to know how things could have gone wrong when she asked us to intervene. People complain all the time about life being unfair and only being given bad choices, but sometimes the bad choice is the only way forward.”

“Sometimes,” I agreed. “If we hadn’t stepped in the villagers would have started starving pretty soon. At least this way they can maintain the strength to keep fighting any advances by the guild. But just to be safe we should send them a very clear message.”

“Godfather clear or beat down clear?” Dawn asked.

I blinked at her. “What? No! I would never do that to a horse, even a virtual one. Beat down is what I’m leaning toward. A nice, thorough one to give the Black Wolf guild a heavy set back, maybe sow some doubt among the membership about just how great their guild really is.”

“The leadership is going to see it as a challenge. It’ll rile them up,” Dawn said with a smile.

I shrugged. “We were going to lock horns with them sooner or later. Why not sooner? At least in this case we can do it on our own terms.” I took us off the road into the woods.

“Do you think that we might unite all of these smaller guilds against us if we keep making enough trouble?” Dawn asked.

I considered the question for a long moment. “That is certainly a possibility but that’s why we’re strengthening ourselves back in Liberty. I like to think that by the time we’ve made enough noise to be noticed we will be more than capable of holding our own. Better

yet, I like to think we'll catch the eye of the other good guilds out there in New Realm."

"Do you really think there are any? So far I haven't seen them," Dawn said.

I nodded. "I've played enough games to know there's always guilds of players trying to be the most evil, dastardly villains just as there are plenty of them wanting to be the goodest and purest paragons of goodness the world has ever seen. And there's plenty more people in between who just want to be left alone and play the game. The problem is the more aggressive guilds stand out like a sore thumb. Just look at us for example. Nobody knows who we are, not even in the forums."

"Plenty of people in the medipod community know about the Broken Bones guild, actually," Dawn said.

"And that is a very niche, small community," I replied. "We make what? Maybe five percent of the total game population?"

Dawn frowned. "That might be a little too generous."

"Exactly," I replied. "The last time I was on the forums someone asked if we were supposed to be a guild of roleplaying as incredibly bad pirates."

Dawn snorted. "New Realm Online is a little too land locked for proper piracy."

I nodded with a dejected sigh. "Some day my dreams of becoming a pirate king will come to life... But alas."

Dawn shook her head with a growing smile before her hand pressed to my chest. "Hear that?" She asked, her body frozen solid as she listened.

I strained my own ears to make out what she heard. Fighting in the distance soon reached my ears accompanied by the faint shouts of people. "I think that's our party."

"I think they'll forgive us for being fashionably late," Dawn smiled and took off running.

We sprinted through the woods as fast as we could. Riding on Hedwig would have made this whole process much faster which my

fine oso companion realized before I could call him over. He lifted me up onto his back suddenly and I had to flail about for a moment to steady myself on the saddle before I pulled Dawn up behind me.

Through the thick forest I saw a cart being assaulted by players. There was a wounded old woman with an arrow in her and a younger looking man with a strange spear like weapon trying to keep the Black Wolf guild members at bay.

Dawn drew her bow back. I leaned forward onto Hedwig's back as Dawn sent an arrow through a rogue's eye. She hopped off soon after and rushed forward firing arrows at a lightning pace.

I took a page out of Ragespire's book and brought out my glaive. When another fighter ran up on us I drove it through his chest and clean through the otherside.

### **Critical hit! You have dealt piercing damage 35x4**

The notification was a little obnoxious popping up like that but I really wanted to know where the multiplier came from. Unfortunately I had a dead body hanging off my glaive and a battle to distract me. My natural instinct was to flail the weapon free but Hedwig had already reached his first victim of the battle.

Hedwig ran over the player trying to stab the young fighter in the back, snatching him up with his beaked maw and flinging him to the ground where he tore into him with his claws.

In the visceral melee I less than gracefully dismounted Hedwig and tore my glaive free from the dead fighter. I took a second to dig deeper into the notification I just read, not just to disable it but to find out how it came to be. Besides the normal double damage from a critical hit it turned out that the mounted combat skill could do more than allow me to fight on a mount. If a mount was traveling fast enough, like Hedwig had just been, a successful strike from a mount would apply a multiplier of two to any damage dealt. This multiplier increased based on a combination of the mounted combat skill and the mount's speed. There was probably an entire skill line involving lances and cavalry style combat I hadn't even considered up to this point.

*That's good to know,* I thought as I disabled mounted combat notifications. An arrow snapped past my head. I ducked too late to make a difference and turned to the level ten archer. "Rude! I was checking out my skills."

"Sorry! I won't miss next time," the archer replied with a mischievous grin.

I chucked my spear at him infused with Shocker as he loosed the arrow. It bounced off my chest plate like a nerf dart as the poor newbie fell back spasming with arcs of electricity racking his body.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased the Shocker skill by +1. One could say you have a shocking effect on people.**

*Okay that was just bad,* I thought.

One of the few remaining fighters rushed to cover his friend and I had no weapon on hand. So I took a page out of Cam's book. I pulled my shield out and blocked a blow. The fighter swung for my guts but I stepped back, allowing the blade to glide just past my abdomen. The fighter's eyes widened as realization sank in that he overcommitted to his swing, but not as wide as when the edge of my shield cracked the side of his skull open.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your Shield skill by +1. As my daddy always said. The best offense is a good defense.**

*I have so many questions.* The fighter fell over in a daze. It was enough time for me to recover my glaive from the archer and finish him off. By the time the fighter was back on his feet and looking pretty upset about the whole shield to the face thing.

**Jason, Level 23 Brigand.**

Unfortunately for Jason, Hedwig had finished off his last meal and loomed over him like a monster from a horror movie. He was covered in blood and everything.

I couldn't help myself. Giving Jason a pained grimace I pointed past him at Hedwig. "Might want to look behind you, buddy."

"Not falling for that trick, mate." He readied his sword just as Hedwig's enormous, clawed paw planted his face in the dirt. Flesh

and blood were torn off the Black Wolf guild member's back as Hedwig ended him.

"I tried to warn you, *mate*," I said and scouted the surrounding area. There were no more players around except for this older looking woman called Jean, a very wounded looking Randy, the strange young man with an even stranger spear weapon, and Elm, an NPC who was at death's door.

Jean was already taking care of Elm so I ran up to Randy and started casting Healing Hands. "Nice weapon," I said, half jokingly and half serious that the weapon even held up to the fighting Randy had to have endured up to this point. "I'm Ryan."

Randy looked up to me with a pained smile that relaxed as the healing magic worked its—well—magic. "Randy," he said. "And that's my Stabby Basher."

I tried, desperately, not to laugh at what was clearly a hand crafted weapon which exactly fit that name. But I couldn't help the smile fighting its way onto my face. "You are exceedingly creative with the names, aren't you?"

Randy laughed. "You should have seen what I was doing before I made Stabby Basher."

"What was that?" I asked as I finished topping off his health.

"Punching and kicking toads and snakes in the swamps," Randy smiled. "At least until I figured out hitting them with rocks was way better."

"You're a regular caveman aren't you?"

Randy laughed. "A Weird Weaponsmith actually."

I took another look at Randy's weapon, then back at him. "Ya, I'd say the name fits."

Suddenly tense, Randy looked around. "Kato!" He took off running before I could ask what was going on. He found a wounded man on the ground then pulled out a pair of potions to pour down his throat.

I followed Randy over.

“How is he?” Jean, the older woman, asked as she knelt beside them.

“I gave him two potions,” Randy said worriedly. “He’s starting to look better. How are you guys?”

“Same,” Jean said. “Did you get a potion in you?”

“Ryan here healed me up,” Randy said. “Still hurts but my stats are good.”

I waved, earning myself a suspicious glare from Jean. It was probably for the best that I keep my mouth shut, so I did.

“They’ve got prisoners,” Jean continued after breaking her gaze away from me. “I saw them tied together when we approached.”

I glanced around for any sign of prisoners but there was nothing but a jumbled mess of tracks and disturbed plants. Dawn, Hedwig, and I could track any one group of them to their destination but figuring out which tracks belonged to prisoners and which belonged to the Black Wolves was not going to be a simple task. As soon as we were sure the wagon and its people were safe, our hunt would continue.

“Where are they now?” Randy asked.

“They must have escaped during the fighting. As soon as we are able we will have to go after them,” Jean said as she looked around. “What the hell is that thing?” She pointed at Hedwig who was currently busy licking his bloodied paws and armor clean of Black Wolf guild member blood.

“I don’t know but it saved my life,” Randy said as he looked up.

Jean just stared at my oso, like she was trying to wrap her brain around how such a creature would even work.

I couldn’t keep quiet anymore. I smiled and pointed a thumb back at my oso companion. “That’s Hedwig, my battle mount, pet, and biggest, fuzziest friend in the world.”

Jean shot me another hard and suspicious glare. It was like she was trying to tear me down and figure out what made me tick. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t send a shiver up my spine but it was very

controlled. Not one ounce of fear or awkwardness showed on my face.

Jean stood up and readied her weapon

Randy held his hands up. "Wait Jean. I think they're friends."

"I sure hope so," I said. "I'm a little tired of running into hostile and terrible pla—adventurers in my journeys." It felt a little weird to refer to myself and others as players around NPCs. It was like telling a living, breathing person they weren't real and their life didn't matter. Which they technically weren't but they were a little too convincing for my brain to accept that. "It looks like we came in just in time to clear out that Black Wolf ambush. Are you all alright?"

Jean was reluctant to let her guard down but replied after a tense silence. "Yes, thank you. We are going to track the prisoners as soon as our friends have healed," Jean said.

"We can help with that," I said "I'm Ryan and this is Dawn." I patted Hedwig's back. "And you already know my oso companion, Hedwig, here."

Hedwig sniffed around after he finished cleaning up and approached the edge of the woods. His sharp sense of smell likely could tell the Black Wolf guild members from the prisoners Randy and Jean were talking about, which would make our lives so much easier.

"We've heard about you," Dawn said.

I leaned over to Dawn and asked, "We have?"

Dawn nodded. "At the feast, remember?"

"I may have been a few drinks too deep by the time that story came up," I admitted with a quiet laugh.

Dawn let out an amused huff then turned back to Jean and Randy. "You've been protecting the wagon train against the Black Wolf guild, right? You've got quite a reputation for throwing knives," she said.

Jean looked at Randy with concern clear on her face.



Randy was having a hard time not staring at Dawn. I couldn't blame him too much for staring. She was showing off plenty of skin and I was quite a fan of the view myself. If I got up in arms for everyone who stared I would have a very long trail of bodies left in my wake. So long as Randy didn't do anything to make things awkward I wouldn't have to feed him to Hedwig. And that would really make things awkward. Saving people just to feed them to your pet owlbear was not a great way to make friends.

Jean rolled her eyes. "This is Randy, he has been helping too," Jean said.

"With that fantastic Stabby Bashers of his, I noticed," I said.

Randy snapped out of his gaze at the mention of his name and stood straighter. "Y-y-yes! I've been helping. Well. Jean has been doing most of the work but she has been teaching me how to defend myself."

"That's good," I smiled. "I wish my early days in New Realm had gone so well but sadly they didn't. Anyway, we are on our way to help rescue a friend of mine from the Black Wolf slave mine. I imagine those escaped prisoners were heading there." I looked around at Jean, Randy, and the NPCs in the wagon. "Are you open to working together? Taking out a guild operation like that won't be a simple thing, even for us two."

Jean stared intensely at me, Dawn, then at Hedwig, weighing her options. Eventually that gaze softened then she turned to raise her eyebrows at Randy.

Randy nodded.

"I also have someone special held under a bad contract at the mine. What did you have in mind?" Jean asked.

Kato sat up after the healing potions Randy poured down his throat finished their work. "Whatever you guys are doing, leave me out of it. I want to get these wagons to Cedar Springs and head for home. I've had enough fighting in the last few days to last years," Kato said as he brushed himself off.

Jean nodded. "Kato is right, our first priority is getting the wagons to the city. Then we can strategize our attack on the mine."

Dawn and I exchanged a glance. We were close enough to our goal now that delaying a little bit to make a proper plan wouldn't be an issue. More importantly, it would make things go much smoother.

"Fair enough," I said.

"I will check to see that everyone is OK. We move out in five," Kato said as he nodded to the drivers to get back into their seats.

We followed the wagon train into Cedar Springs. No attacks came for the rest of the trip and we didn't hear any movement in the woods either. I had to wonder just how big the initial attack had been if that really was all the Black Wolf guild members in the woods. Then again the bulk of their forces were probably concentrated at the mines. Alchemical ingredients were all well and good but gold, iron, and even gems were much more immediately useful for a growing guild. It was, after all, one of the biggest reasons why the mine at Liberty was such an asset and such a tempting prize for anyone who found out about it.

The people on the wagon were quite grateful for our escort. They thanked Jean and Randy for all of their help then thanked us for our timely arrival. Kato and his people unloaded the supplies they carried and finished up the contracts they had with Jean and Randy.

"You have time. Why don't you go finish your quest?" Jean said to Randy.

Randy nodded and asked the stable manager if he knew where he could find Analise Restwater.

"Analise? Aye, she is usually down at the school," he said in response.

"Maybe I should go with you?" Jean said. She was still on edge and waiting for an attack.

"I shouldn't be long. I will meet you and the others at the Inn," Randy said as he walked away.

We watched him walk away and then turned to find the Inn.

"So what's Randy's quest about?" Dawn asked.

Jean pursed her lips. "He is returning what remains of Mrs. Restwater's husband to her. I know I shouldn't feel as bad about her loss as I do, she is an NPC and none of these people are real but... They feel real." Jean looked to me and Dawn. "It's silly isn't it?"

Dawn shook her head. "If more people were like you the guild wars situation would be way different than it currently is."

I smiled at Jean. "Don't worry Jean, you aren't the only one who feels that way. In fact, we have a whole guild of people who feel the same way. It did take a bit of convincing on my part to get them to give the NPCs a chance though."

"That's good, I think," Jean seemed doubtful, even hesitant about accepting that there were others who agreed the NPCs were so life-like. While I still felt it was weird, I thought it was one of the more awesome parts about the game.

"So shall we discuss our plans?" I said as we stepped into the inn.

The discussion was fairly basic at first. We discussed the location of the mine and what we knew about the Black Wolf guild so far. Essentially the mine was near a river and the slaves, mostly players, were split into two groups. Miners who worked the mines for whatever ores they could find and gold panners who searched for gold in the river. Our conversation wasn't exactly quiet and we soon found the local villagers joining in on the conversation. A few had even gotten glimpses of the mine in question. It wasn't any good for an exact battlefield plan but it was enough to get us the mine's location and at what times they operated. We even had a few rough estimates of the total guards we were going to deal with. It was definitely a good idea we teamed up with Jean and Randy for this job. With just Dawn, Hedwig and me, we were going to be incredibly ninja about how we handled ourselves.

*We really should have brought Lu,* I cursed inwardly. She may not have been the quietest or the sneakiest ninja I had ever seen but she was probably better trained than any of us at hiding in plain sight.

Randy arrived with a smile after a few minutes. After a bit of scrounging around for a seat he joined in and listened.

"I heard them talking," one of the villagers said. A dwarven man who put the stout stockiness of other dwarves to shame. "They have gathered all the guild members from the area to the mine. Apparently they've been having issues there and they have heard of some adventurers causing trouble for them in the area."

"Whoops," Dawn said with a smile.

"You weren't the only ones," Jean said as she casually sharpened her ax.

The villager continued, "They are going to make a strong stand against you if you try to meet them head on."

I looked thoughtfully at the dwarven villager. I had an idea but I wasn't sure anyone would agree to it. "Would you or any of your fellow villagers be willing to join us in the rescue mission? We hope to dismantle the guild by taking the mine away from them." I said, reading the crowd for any sign of immediate rejection. There was some concern and fearful mumblings but no one shot it down just yet.

"The rightful owner is this man, Elm," said one of the other villagers.

The dwarf stroked his beard. "Yes. I believe many villagers would welcome a chance to get the mine back into the right hands. We depend on the mine to bring people to our town and to provide stable jobs. Those Black Wolf guys caused nothing but trouble for most of us in town," the villager said with a confident nod of his head.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your Charisma by +1. You smooth operator you.**

"Great, so this is what I propose." I started laying out the plan to the group.

Jean sat back listening to my proposal, nodding along. As the minutes passed her tense guard began to drop and I swear I even caught the faintest hint of a smile on her lips. This was good. For my

plan to work out we were going to need everyone to work together in unison.



## 12

We slipped deep into the woods around the mines like ghosts in the wind. Along the way we ran into a couple of patrols but killing them right away would have done more harm than good. It was a pretty safe bet all of these players were in parties, maybe even a raid group. Damaging or killing any of them was a guaranteed way to let the rest of the mines know something was up before the rest of our merry band of villagers, guards, and a couple of players, were ready to wipe the Black Wolf guild off the face of the map. Even if killing the patrols would go unnoticed, the players would just respawn and tell everyone where they got killed. That was a part of the realism I desperately wished New Realm had some means of maintaining. Sadly, we had to work with the situation at hand not the situation we wished we had.

It took us a few more minutes for the guards and their heavier armor to position themselves at the rear of the mine, at least relative to us. Dawn, Jean, Randy and I were at the front of the mine where we could easily see over the creek full of gold panners and right through the opening to the mine. There were several dozen players scattered about. Most were anywhere from level seven to the mid-teens with the occasional stand outs around twenty. So long as we hit hard, fast, and without hesitation, we could overwhelm them before they could muster up a good defense.

A woman threw a rock at the water near another, one of the gold panners, then gestured with her head in our general direction. Dawn and I immediately vanished behind the trees but not before I had a good look at both of them. One of them was named Daphne and the other Sarah, Jean's granddaughter. Both of them were below level ten but being stuck as slave labor for some stuck-up players would stunt anyone's progress.

"What are they doing?" Dawn asked with a low whisper as Jean and Randy shifted further down the creek.

I spotted Daphne making some sort of signal then I noticed the weapons hidden on their bodies. My eyes widened. “They’re going to get themselves killed.”

Guards shouted in the distance and I grimaced. One of the villagers or guard groups must have been spotted. *So much for the element of surprise.*

Gesturing at Dawn I pointed at the guard closest to us.

Dawn drew back her bow and loosed an arrow.

The low-level guard caught the arrow to his head and sailed across the air into the creek. Guards screamed and shouted across the camp and forest as our ambush was sprung. Behind us the patrols were taken out by parties of villagers armed with anything from axes and pitchforks to the occasional spear and sword owned by the villagers. I seriously wished they had a forge so I could make them proper weapons but the village just smelted their ores before shipping them out and brought back any tools they needed from neighboring towns. It wasn’t the smartest set up in my mind but we weren’t here to play town mayor for Cedar Springs. We were here to evict a pack of flea ridden coyotes.

I rushed out of the forest, hurling a hunting spear at another guard desperately looking for where the attack came from. Imbued with Power Throw, the guard plunged into the creek as the waters turned crimson with the blood of fallen Black Wolf guild members.

Around us the gold panners were shocked into one of two actions. Run and hide, or loot the weapons of the fallen guards and turn on their former masters. From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the slaves, Abraham, steal the sword from a fallen guard and took on a lower-level guard. The guard was too busy dodging Dawn’s arrows to realize Abraham was on him until it was too late. The former gold panner cut the guard down in a flurry of blows. The man lacked training but I had to give him an A for effort. Plus, dead was dead. I could hardly argue with those results.

“Do you think there’s a berserker class?” Dawn asked.



“No idea. But he might find it if he keeps fighting like that,” I commented.

Abraham took the sword and ax from the fallen guard and tossed it to the other gold panners. They cheered and went to join the fighting against the Black Wolf guild. For every guard that went down, another of the panners found their spine and took up arms against their former masters. No contract was going to hold them back from dealing out justice.

But not all was well. Some of the panners took nasty wounds during the fighting. One man's arm was barely hanging just above the elbow. Another had caught an ax to the face. In all the chaos I wasn't sure who were players and who were NPCs but I couldn't stop to sort that out now and I had even less time to deal with the wounded.

A trio of guards rushed me. Drawing my shield, I blocked the first two then threw my hunting spear through another's face. “Have you newbies considered wearing helmets?” I asked as I drew my glaive. The two guards exchanged a worried glance. “It really helps keeping this sort of thing from happening.” With a short grip on my glaive, I used double thrust to take out one of the guards. The other dropped his weapon and ran, screaming.

Hedwig tackled him to the ground, turning another patch of the creek crimson. Fortunately for the contents of my stomach, the water obstructed the grizzly details. With a fearsome roar, Hedwig drew the attention of all the guards and every bow and crossbow turned their attention on the huge, bloody, armored oso. At this point Hedwig was bigger than most of the guards and stood, on all fours, as big as the largest among them. Between his high health pool and impressive strength, any enemy Hedwig ran into was slaughtered.

But there was no shortage of the Black Wolves.

I swapped back to my hunting spears and started flinging them as fast as I could. Dawn joined in my ranged assault, doing our best to keep the rushing guards from engaging with any of the panners. There were too many coming too quickly to keep them all off of us but that's what Hedwig was for. Using his Fearsome Roar ability he

made the weak-willed among them flee in a panic while the stronger ones suffered a debuff that made them easy pickings for our spears and arrows.

Without me realizing it, Randy had joined the battle with his strange Stabby Basher weapon. It worked like some sort of whip he threw out and caught his enemies in the chest with before pulling back on it to retrieve the weapon. When enemies engaged in melee with him he knocked them around with a rock on one end of his spear then finished them off with a flurry of stabs and slashes. It was like an unnecessarily complicated version of Lu's kusari-fundo and I couldn't help thinking Randy's returning spear would be much better served by some sort of enchantment or rune.

Jean was nowhere to be found as far as I could see but her granddaughter was here. There wasn't a chance such a driven woman would just leave her granddaughter hanging. When their planning talks died down the previous night they had a chance to get to know each other better. It turned out Jean had been a lawyer in the past and she was just as old as she looked. When she found out the abuse her granddaughter was suffering in New Realm Online she dropped everything, her incredibly lucrative career and all, to come save Sarah.

A familiar voice yelled in excitement. "Yes! I knew you would come!" It was Betty.

"I couldn't leave a friend in a mess like this," I said with a big smile.

Then I spotted Jean flying out of the woods like a bat out of hell. Dressed in leathers and covered in bandoliers full of throwing knives she struck down guards left and right with deadly accurate throws. Much like Dawn turned the Black Wolves into pincushions with her arrows, Jean did much the same with her throwing knives. Whenever Jean wasn't tied down fighting or ruining another Black Wolf's day, her eyes darted around desperately in search for her granddaughter.

"Grandma Jean?" Sarah's voice called out.

“Sarah?” Jean questioned as she looked at the petite girl with large eyes.

The girl nodded and pulled Jean into an embrace. The two had moved just in time to avoid a flying arrow.

I threw a spear through the archer’s chest. “Don’t interrupt a tender reunion,” I shouted at the shocked archer before Dawn finished the Job.

Hedwig was trundling forth out of the creek toward the main camp while their guard and villager reinforcements moved in from the surrounding woods. This looked like a mop up operation now.

“Are you OK?” Jean said as she looked her over.

“Yeah. What are you doing here?” Sarah asked while crouching down low with her grandmother. Her head was on a swivel, watching out for any additional incoming attacks.

“Rescuing you!” Jean smiled.

“Did you bring them with you?” Sarah asked, nodding to us.

My distraction with the happily chaotic family reunion earned me a volley of arrows to the chest. A pair found their way through the leather padded spider chitin into my soft, tender flesh beneath. I grit my teeth and put up my shield, moving to protect Sarah and Jean.

“Yes and no, let’s talk later. Right now, I need to get some knives back,” Jean said as she scanned the area for her weapons.

“I can help,” Sarah said as she used a magic ability I had never seen before. With a wave of her hands she controlled the waters like an opera conductor and sent a jet of water at a guard moving in on them.

It gave Jean the opportunity to dash out and grab a knife. “Wow, you know magic?” She asked.

Sarah nodded, using her magic to clear a path for her Grandmother’s hasty collection of various throwing weapons. Even those weird, pointy darts she called torpedoes. Which were pretty disappointing since they didn’t actually explode.

With Jean fully armed again I was able to leave Betty, Sarah and Jean to fend for themselves while Randy moved in to support them. “We’ll catch up later, Betty,” I said. “Have to clear out the rest of this place first.”

I ran straight into a formation of the highest level Black Wolves in the area. Five of them, level fifteen to twenty. If their fancy armor and weapons with the much more ornate Black Wolf emblems emblazoned prominently on them were anything to go by, these were the guild leadership.

They had a healer with them, maintaining a ring of healing over the group. A tank with a spiked shield and a nasty looking flail bashing away any former slave who decided to get too ballsy, was knee deep in bodies. Then there was a mage keeping the guards at bay with fireballs setting the forest ablaze. A second warrior with a longsword was busy fending off a dedicated group of former slaves and villagers but all they were doing was delaying their deaths by seconds. Last of all was Bardy McBardFace.

The bard’s eyes widened and his melody stopped as he pointed right at me. “Y-you! You’re that psycho that murdered me!”

“Keep playing, Bardy. You’re the only thing keeping my healing going,” the healer said.

“You should have played a better tune,” I said and hurled a spear with all my might at the healer.

The tank easily shifted to deflect the spear and swung his flail in my direction. My breath caught in my throat as I spun from that flail mere inches from my face. It was almost as big as my upper torso. The strength score requirement for that thing must have been absurd. “Back off runt,” the tank spat at me.

### **Goliath, Level 22 Shield Brother.**

A quick volley of Power Shots from Dawn had Goliath putting his shield up high and his heels sliding back across the dirt.

It was the opening I needed to pull out my spear and thrust it into their healer’s stomach using Double Thrust. Each time I twisted the spear to increase the damage before tearing the weapon free. The

healer crashed to his knees, his healing circle dropped as his attention turned to healing their violently ripped open stomach.

**Lenny, Level 19 Cleric.**

“Can’t keep going like thi—”

The longsword-wielding warrior spun on me with his sword but not before I severed Lenny’s head, ending their party’s healing potential on the spot.

**Gladius, Level 15 Champion.**

Gladius’s sword tore deep across my chest and sent me reeling back. I would have been rather upset by that had the sudden change in position not saved me from another flail strike.

“Hedwig, get them!” I shouted.

Hedwig rushed into the fray with Fearsome Roar. None of the party ran away in horror as Bardy strummed his lute like a madman. But there was a blue set of double arrows pointing down that appeared over each of their heads. They may have resisted the fear but all of their stats had dropped by two points.

“Kill that bear, that’s the real danger,” Bardy warned and sent out a powerful note at Hedwig. It kicked up a wave of dirt but it didn’t stop Hedwig from barrelling into Bardy nearly as effectively as Goliath stepping in the way with his spiked shield.

“God damn you’re a fat, smelly, bastard,” Goliath growled. Only a few of his spikes found their way through Hedwig’s armor but the amount they drew was concerning.

With a running leap I used Leaping Power Slash to split Bardy down the middle before he could recover his composure. Gladius nearly caught me with his longsword at my throat but I stopped his blade with the edge of my shield, punching it off course. Dawn turned him into a pincushion before I could do anything about him. I had bigger fish to fry.

Goliath roared as he shoved Hedwig off him by only a few feet. His metal armor was too thick with few gaps for a glaive like mine to effectively get through but that was hardly what I needed to do. I

needed to give Hedwig an opening. So I cast Power Slash and bonked the back of Goliath's skull with my glaive.

He whirled and growled at me. "Still alive, runt? I'll smear you across the floor before this low rent owlbear." Goliath swung his flail around, building up momentum.

"Hit him now, Dawn!" I shouted.

Dawn slammed Power Shot after Power Shot into Goliath. Each arrow knocked him the slightest bit off balance. It gave me the opportunity to take a short grip of my glaive and bury the blade into one of the gaps sending Shocker's electric touch through his body.

Goliath, being a tank class, shrugged off most of the damage we threw at him but Shocker's effect had him locked up for a few seconds. At least until an effect like breaking chains erupted around him. Shocker's stunning effect was dispelled and that flail was on a crash course with my face.

Hedwig slammed Goliath into me. We rolled through the ground and I felt the sharp spikes from Goliath's shield bite into my torso. When I rolled free from the tumbling mass of fur and metal I saw Hedwig rip Goliath's shield off him. Hedwig's rending claws tore sharp gouts of blood from the tank and stripped away his armor with each swipe. Mechanically speaking, each successful attack by Hedwig lowered Goliath's armor value. Hedwig's assault would eventually carve out plenty of new openings, but that wasn't the most valuable effect of Hedwig's attack. Oh no. There was something deeply, psychologically traumatizing about being on the receiving end of an oso mauling. Just watching it I couldn't help but feel bad for the guy. I was afraid for him, and when the splashes of blood intensified I felt I needed to turn away.

Goliath screamed as he put his arms up in a desperate attempt to defend himself. He punched uselessly at Hedwig but the owlbear kept mauling him. Being a tank class with high armor and a high health pool made the ordeal drag out far longer than it had any right to go on for and the remaining Black Wolf guild members either dropped their weapons and surrendered or fled before they could meet a similar fate.

I didn't want this to go any longer and rushed in to finish the job. Hedwig's assault knocked off Goliath's helmet and I thrust my glaive into his skull, ending his suffering before it got any worse. Goliath and his guild may have been horrible people, but I didn't want to go anywhere near their level. *You can thank me for the mercy kill later.*

The fighting was over and I threw up my glaive with a victorious shout. Villagers, guards, and the freed slaves all joined in. It was a hard fought victory, and we lost people we weren't ever going to get back, but the mine was returned to Elm, its rightful owner, these people would be free to live their lives, or their game time in New Realm, how they saw fit.

We got to work on cleanup after the fighting was done. Healing first through potions and magic, then looting the dead. We talked with the different panners, miners and the like to find out what sort of playstyle they were going for and distributed gear accordingly. At least as available as it was. Players dropped gear when they died but they didn't drop everything. Weapons, equipped ones especially, were usually the more common drops along with a portion of the coin they had on them. Armor and enchanted jewelry was much more rare to drop so we didn't exactly have a well-equipped army of freed slaves. But they were armed now, for the most part, which was a massive improvement over their prior situation.

With Hedwig's help, Dawn and I set out to track any deserters to finish off. The guards helped secure the mine, and with a bit of help from the former slaves we discovered where their respawn point was set to. So any adventurers turned slaves who died during the fighting we were able to help before any remnants of the Black Wolf guild could turn up to do any more harm.

"Now as long as you can hold this mine, the Black Wolf guild is effectively done for," I said when we returned to Elm.

"That won't be a problem," Elm said. "They left me plenty of points to fortify this location with. And the guards have gained a few levels themselves. Just as you and your friend did. We won't be caught unaware by adventurers again."

I shook Elms hand. I was glad to see that he wasn't afraid of the adventures and was going to stand up to them. With a good defensive setup and enough guards it would be significantly harder for any guild to try to take the mine again. And after this loss, the Black Wolf guild would likely be looking to new territories. They weren't as strong as they'd thought, and I suspected they were going to lose players who realized the folly of their guilds play style. Following up on Elm's comment about levels, I looked at my notifications.

**Congratulations hero! You have reached level 22. Don't think you can ignore me just because you're getting to be all high and mighty now.**

The AI almost sounded hurt that I missed its notification. It was an improvement over the constant jabs it took at me but I wasn't feeling too guilty about it. I distributed my points into Intelligence this time with the plan to level up my Wisdom the next level I picked up.

**Ryan Rosa Level 22 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 30**

**Agility 30**

**Constitution 30**

**Intelligence 28**

**Wisdom 25**

**Charm 11**

Hedwig had, of course, leveled up with me and I took care of his stats by catching up his Agility to his core two stats by adding another three points into agility.

**Hedwig: Level 22 Oso**

**Strength 34**

**Agility 29**

**Constitution 35**

**Intelligence 15**

**Wisdom 15**



With one more level's worth of attribute points into agility, I was far more comfortable spreading points between those top three stats for Hedwig. He could, just like all of us, gain additional attribute points by working on his skills after all. The extra point he had in Strength and Constitution came from us riding him like a mount after all.

There was one more notification for me to deal with which I had missed.

**Congratulations hero! You have learned the Leadership Skill. For some reason people think it's a good idea to follow you around. We all make mistakes but this is just impressive.**

I shook my head. There it was. Just when I thought I was safe from the AI's taunting it slips another one in under the radar. I wasn't sure what stung more, the insult directed at me or the one at everyone with the sheer audacity to follow me.

I shook my head with a smile and went around thanking everyone for the help taking out the Black Wolf guild. Pitching membership into the Broken Bones guild right then came to mind but it seemed a little poorly timed, given the death and destruction around us. Especially with how heavily concerned a lot of the players were about the contracts they signed with the Black Wolf guild. There was naturally only one solution to the predicament I found myself in.

"So, who wants drinks on me?"

## 13

After a quick sweep of the mines to make sure the Black Wolf guild was cleared out, we gathered up our people and returned to Cedar Springs village. I took everyone to the inn full of rescued slaves and paid for their food and drinks myself. There was a jubilant air to the inn as they enjoyed a proper meal for the first time in weeks.

With everyone busy eating and relaxing, I headed to the back of the inn with Dawn, Hedwig and Jean. Her granddaughter, Sarah, and Randy came along. We laughed as Randy handed Sarah a whip he had and tried showing her how to use the strange weapon. The chair Sarah was aiming for was completely safe from the whip's thorns but the walls and floors around it were covered in scratches from her attempts.

"Come on Sarah, you have to hit it at least once!" Randy encouraged her.

"Forget it Sarah, stick to magic and bows." Silas, one of the few Black Wolf members to turn out to be a good guy, laughed. Apparently he and his brother had no idea how bad their guild really was and they especially had no idea about the NPCs being so life-like. We fixed that last part by showing Silas and the others around Blackmoss.

"I will hit the chair before I quit," Sarah said with determination.

Jean turned back to Ryan. "Tell me more about Liberty."

On the way back I had started my pitch to get the people we freed from the mines to join us, but holding a conversation while staying on guard for any sort of retaliation wasn't a great way to go about it. "Well, like I said, we are a new settlement with a nice mix of tradespeople and warriors. The mine is producing well, our trade

channels are developing, and we're growing every day. We have a beautiful guildhall and a temple for the gods," I said with pride.

"A temple?" Jean asked.

"That's right. It started as a temple to Liliac but we discovered a temple doesn't have to be limited to a single god. So it's open to any gods our people wish to worship. We have found it to be a source of great boons and wisdom. Dawn can tell you more about it."

Dawn looked at Jean. "I'd love to. Would you like to join my acolytes? We can always use more strong women players."

"You're coming on a little strong there, Dawn," I teased.

Jean shrugged. "Perhaps you should tell me more about your guild first."

"We're all medi-pod players. Most of our members wanted to be left alone to craft, trade, adventure, and make money in this world they could transfer to the real one," I explained. "But we were forced to defend ourselves against the other guilds. Now even our crafters have to learn to fight in case they ever find Liberty."

"Which will be sooner rather than later," Dawn chimed in.

Jean nodded along in understanding.

"But it's not all doom and gloom. Liberty's doing great and now any NPC that swears fealty to me or the Broken Bones guild can respawn like any of us players," I continued. "It's really helped bolster our defenses with NPCs that are basically adventurers in their own right now." I paused and held up a finger. "But only in the Liberty temple. They can't bind to other respawn points like we can."

"Really? That is amazing, is it something other guilds do?" Jean questioned.

"Not that I am aware of. A god offered me power beyond my imagination and I chose to protect my people instead." I smiled and leaned back in my seat.

“It was an expensive deal. It cost him three levels,” Dawn said.

I leaned back in my seat, smiling. “Nothing a little grinding didn’t fix.”

Jean gave another understanding nod. “I don’t know that much about how the game works or how it is going to evolve, but I like some of the unorthodox decisions you have made,” she said sincerely.

“Thanks,” I said. “We would be happy to have you join us in Liberty.”

Jean pulled back, mulling the decision over.

“Come spend some time with us, Jean. I promise it will be way better than anything you’ve seen or heard about guilds so far. We have plenty of knowledge and ideas to share and I think you would really like Karen. She is an incredible asset to how we run things, especially the connection between the real world and the game,” I added on.

“I don’t know. I will have to talk to Sarah,” Jean said as she looked at her granddaughter.

Sarah finally clipped the side of the chair and cheered. “I hit it!”

Randy whooped next to her. “Awesome!”

“I bet I can hit it better this time,” she swung out the whip again and nicked the backrest.

Randy laughed. “Sure, why not?”

My lips pulled into a tight smile when I spotted a strange man enter the room. He wore thick black robes and carried a wooden staff. It looked like a wizard NPC or player, but the powerful aura of authority said otherwise.

This was a Game Master.

He banged his staff on the floor to get everyone's attention. "By now you should have received a notification on your interfaces. If you were responsible for taking the workers of the Cedar Springs Mine, you will hand over the workers immediately. Those of you who signed contracts with the Black Wolf Guild, you are still obligated to fulfill your agreements. Please make your way back to your areas. A representative of the guild will be there to confirm your agreement."

That couldn't be real. I pulled up my notifications and sure enough there it was, stating everything the GM had said. "That is bullshit," I said as the man spoke.

"Yeah," Dawn joined in. "We freed these people through PVP combat and won decisively. That's like us taking over a castle and having you GMs step in to say no."

The GM looked her way. "Territory control is one thing but contracts are different. Players do not suffer permadeath in this world thus the contract is still in place and enforceable. The mine is yours to do what you wish but these players signed on the dotted line."

"Who is he?" Jean asked.

"A game master. They are representatives of the company tasked with enforcing the rules of the game and maintaining order within those rules. They have a lot of power to decide things in the game," I answered.

The man stood in the door of the Inn as everyone checked their messages and started talking at once. Worry turned into fear and fear grew into panic among the people we just saved. But what could we do against a GM? Even if we maxed out every single stat and skill a GM could just snap their fingers and kill our character or simply ban us from New Realm all together.

Jean stood up and walked over to the messenger. "Hello. My name is Jean. Could you please tell me who I need to talk to about these contracts?"

I tensed as Jean walked up to the GM. “What is she doing?” I whispered to Dawn.

She shrugged. “Lawyer stuff? Remember she retired from her firm to come save her granddaughter. If anyone can figure out a way out of this mess it’s her.”

Nodding, all I could do was watch.

“You talk to me,” the GM said with authority.

“Great, that will save time. May I see copies of all the contracts?” Jean asked with a smile.

“No.”

“No? Why not?” Jean asked.

“You are not a representative,” he said.

“OK, how do I become a representative,” Jean asked patiently.

“The person who is under contract must assign you authority,” he said as he looked down his nose at her.

“Great, thanks for your help,” Jean said as she walked away.

My brow tightened with growing confusion and curiosity. Then it all clicked together.

“Sarah, do you have a copy of your contract?” Jean asked.

“I think it is saved in my interface. I will share it with you,” Sarah said as she sat down.

“While you are in the file, make me your representative,” Jean said as she waited for the file to be shared.

Jean clicked her tongue as she read through the document. The woman shook her head with growing disappointment spreading across her features. “Really, this is just terrible work. Honestly, they

should be embarrassed. Sarah, what are these handwritten add-ins?" Jean inquired.

"My contract was up. They renegotiated with me to stay on until my friends were released," Sarah said, sounding worried her grandmother would disapprove of her actions.

"I understand. Give me a few minutes to work this out," Jean said as she combed through the contract again. She must have been looking for a loophole to get Sarah out of the contract. Hopefully it was a loophole they could use to get everyone else off the hooks. Jean walked back to our table.

"Can you get me in contact with your Karen? I have some digging to do," Jean asked as she sat down.

"Of course. I will message her and give her your contact details." I pulled up my interface and sent it. "You should see a notification in a moment."

Jean received a message from Karen within a few minutes. Jean was visibly impressed by Karen's speed. She looked up at Ryan. "You were right. I do like her. She is as good as my David, and David is good."

"I thought you would appreciate her skills. She is also a really interesting person," I said.

"I look forward to getting to know her," Jean said sincerely. Jean nodded along to the conversation she was having with Karen and then stood up.

Jean made her way around the room interviewing the still technically and legally enslaved people we freed. She found that there was a common theme in their cases. Most of the slaves had been promised things verbally prior to signing and then pressured into signing documents that did not match what was promised. Other prisoners were forced against their will into contracts by threats. So far, no one in the room had heard or met anyone who had been released from their contracts or received what was promised. Now

they just needed some hard evidence. Jean had everyone assign her as a representative.

Getting comfortable in my chair I fed Hedwig a piece of gorro jerky and munched on some myself. I didn't realize when I woke up this morning that I would be in an episode of Law and Order.

Jean received more information from Karen and smiled. After a bit more back and forth she approached the GM still patiently waiting at the door.

"Excuse me, but as the assigned representative for all the contracted players here today I would like to officially state that the contracts are null and void," Jean said confidently.

"No, they aren't," the GM said.

"Yes, they are," Jean countered with all the calm and confidence in the world. "For several of my clients it is based on capacity. For example: Sarah here is only fourteen years old. She cannot legally sign any document without an adult's consent. For many others it is based on false representation. I have video evidence of at least twenty players being verbally promised one thing and then denied it once under contract. For others it is based on mutuality, the Black Wolf Guild has yet to live up to its promise of offering levels and experience in exchange for work with adequate food, shelter, and comradery. In addition, not one person has been released from the contracts to verify the guild's promises. Therefore, the Black Wolf guild is in breach of all contracts. Legally, I could pursue compensation for each contract. I also have statements and legal documents stating that any player who commits acts, such as those committed by the Black Wolf Guild can be banned from the game." Jean let her words sink in.

"I will need to take a moment to verify your accusations," the GM said while leaving the Inn.

Jean shot him the faintest smile. "Take your time, dear."



Sarah approached Jean and watched as the man left the Inn. "Are we free then?" she asked.

"Not yet, but when they realize the problems they have created they will be very willing to negotiate," Jean said. "What do you think most of our people here want?"

"I think most of us just want to get back to playing," Sarah said simply.

"Yes, that was what I thought too," Jean said as she gave Sarah a hug. "What about you? What do you want to do?"

"I think I want to go with Ryan. We have all been talking and it sounds like a good place. I like Ryan's style. Did you know he wrote his own guild contract?"

"Guild contract? I should have a look at it," Jean suggested.

"Yes, you should. Ryan also wants to make sure it is fair and legit. I am sure you could help him with the wording," Sarah said with a nod.

Hearing Sarah say she wanted to join the guild was great news, even better when there were others willing to go. Now with Jean's help I could make sure their guild contract were not only fair and just to the members of Broken Bones but that it was air tight.

It was another few suspenseful minutes before the GM walked back into the inn. He banged his staff on the floor for attention. Everyone stopped to look at him.

"Your contracts are null and void. However, the leaders of the guild would like you to know if anyone would like to voluntarily come back to work for them, they will be welcome. Interviews for positions start tomorrow." The GM shook his head, obviously he thought the same as we did about the obscurity of anyone actually wanting to rejoin the Blackhearts. He sighed, turned and left the Inn.

A cheer broke out and I ordered a fresh round of drinks for everyone. Someone in the corner started playing a lute and

stomping their feet. The tense mood from just a moment ago cleared, replaced with the happy, festive one the GM had ruined earlier.

“That was awesome,” Dawn said.

I couldn’t agree more. “Next time Jean does something like this I’m bringing popcorn.”

Dawn laughed. “You don’t even know that recipe.”

“Then I’ll make it up as I go.” I grinned.

“It is official. You can choose your next move,” Jean said to Sarah.

“Thank you Grandma Jean! You’re the best!” Sarah said as she hugged both Daphne and Betty, who were crying tears of joy. “What about you? Will you stay with us and go to Liberty?”

“I don’t want to step on your toes or make things weird for you,” Jean said hesitantly.

Sarah busted out laughing. “Are you crazy? I have a badass knife throwing grandma who is super hot, by the way. I would love to have you come with us.”

Dawn leaned in close to whisper. “The hot grandma comment is super weird.”

I leaned back and whispered. “Right? But they’re having a moment. Let them be weird together.”

“Well, maybe I will meet you there. I have some business to attend to,” Jean said with a smile.

“Oh? Like a ‘general store’ kind of business?” Sarah said suggestively.

“Actually, I need to help Elm do the paperwork to officially get his gold claim back, a lawyer’s work is never done” Jean said as she

waved to Elm across the room. The hopeful look in his eyes was impossible to miss. Jean couldn't let him down.

"OK, so after that then?" Sarah asked as she handed Jean a pint of ale.

"After that I have some general store business to attend to, then, I will follow you to Liberty. And for god's sake don't sign any contracts or swear fealty while I'm gone."

"What's this general store business about?" I whispered to Dawn.

"Apparently Jean has a thing with the NPC that runs it," Dawn answered.

I thought about it for a moment and decided it wasn't the weirdest thing in the world. NPCs were, for all effective purposes, real people in this world us players could interact with.

"Deal," Sarah said as she raised her glass. She then turned to Randy. "What about you?"

"I'd like to join the guild too," Randy said as he looked hopefully at Ryan.

I laughed. "I'd love to have all three of you join the guild. I have the perfect job for the three of you."

Jean raised an eyebrow. "Oh, and what would that be?"

"Chaos. I need a group who specializes in terrorizing a guild full of jerks. A real goon squad if you know what I mean."

Jean laughed as she looked at Randy and Sarah. "The three of us together fighting bullies and ass-hat guilds? It didn't sound bad at all. Tell me more about this goon squad."

The Goon Squad plan was pretty simple on paper. A nice, tight knit, group of adventurers like Jean, Sarah, and Randy would head out into the world and cause trouble for the less than friendly guilds out there.

With Randy's Weird Weapon Crafting he could make all manner of strange weapons for the Goon Squad to use that most players would simply struggle to adapt to. Plus, Randy wasn't a half bad fighter. With some proper training and levels under his belt he could really become a force to be reckoned with.

Sarah was another valuable addition to the team. As a healer, she was fantastic. As a combat mage she was better at crowd control than actual damage but with practice she could work out some fantastic spells. The problem was her skill set was entirely dependent on water being available for her. If we could find some way around that particular issue Sarah would be all set. Maybe higher levels of her water magic would allow her to make it rain over an area or siphon water from her surroundings. On second thought, that last one sounds terrifying.

Then there was Jean. With her odd mix of blade throwing and knife fighting with an ax for extra kick, she was the Goon Squad's designated fighter and rogue. She could sneak around, lay ambushes, get in that first critical strike to turn the tide of a battle before it began and stay deep in the thick of it. All we needed to do was make sure she picked up several more levels so she wouldn't get run over by stronger, infinitely less skilled players. Coupled with her lawyer abilities, Jean alone was an incredibly chaotic force to unleash on any guild who decided crossing the line was a good idea.

After we had a look at the Broken Bones guild contract and cleared up a few things, we parted ways. Jean still had the mine situation to sort out along with her general store business and we had to move a couple dozen newly freed players back through

enemy territory without being detected. That wasn't going to be great but at least we could try to grind out some skills for the newbies along the way.

Elder Shavonne thanked us once again for our help and we set up a trading agreement before we left. Her people decided not to swear fealty as they believed the danger to Cedar Springs had passed. I sincerely hoped that was the case as we headed out to Bellmare as our first stop.

"So how do you know Ryan, Betty?" Sarah asked as we trekked through the woods with a wagon full of our first shipment of herbs. I couldn't afford to armor out all the new players that came with us but I could and did get them all out of their rags and into some decent clothes.

Betty smiled. "We met through Terry at the rehabilitation center. Ryan was in an accident where he was hit by a truck and he wasn't nearly as cheerful and confident as he is today."

"And you were all sunshine and rainbows even if you were on the same boat," I said with a laugh. "That accident broke me in more ways than one but you seemed fine with everything."

"Well, I did put on a brave face for a lot of it," Betty admitted. "I was in that rehab center for much longer than you guys were and I saw how much of a difference your state of mind makes."

"How's that?" Randy asked.

Betty pulled in a breath. "I saw all kinds of people there, but there were usually three types. The ones who went with the flow, the ones who gave it their all, and the ones who gave up all hope."

Randy grimaced. "This isn't a happy story is it?"

"It's not sad either, Randy," Betty said. "It just is what it is. See there were people who gave up all hope after whatever threw them into the rehab center. People who were in much better shape than me and for the most part they didn't make any sort of recovery. They decided, just as the fight was starting, that everything was lost and so their bodies acted accordingly."

"Harsh," Sarah commented.

“Then there were those who went with the flow. They usually recovered but it was never anything impressive. That was for the ones who gave their rehab everything,” Betty continued. “I’ve seen people with missing limbs go through that rehab center, told they would never walk again even with a prosthetic, and they proved those doctors wrong. That’s when I decided I would be one of the people who would hold their head up high and give the world my all.”

“And how’d that work out for you?” Randy asked.

Sarah swatted him. “Randy!”

“What did I do wrong? It was a genuine question,” Randy protested.

I was about to scold him but then remembered this was a kid I was dealing with. “It came out pretty badly worded, Randy, so it sounded like you were making fun of her.”

“Oh.” Randy looked at Betty. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Betty laughed. “It’s fine. I know people hear me talking like that and think I’m some naive girl who thinks people can just magically get better with happy thoughts and sunshine.” A soft sigh escaped her. “I wish that was the case.” She flexed her right hand. “Walking was never something I was able to do again but I did get my arm working almost as good as new. That was more than I could ever hope for when I was in my deep, dark pit. Had I stayed there I don’t like to think about where I’d be today.”

Dawn hugged Betty. “Nowhere good. I’m glad you crawled out of there.”

“Mhmm,” Betty smiled. “So when I met Terry’s friend and saw him in the same hole as I had been I did everything I could to help drag him out.”

“That funk was a pretty rough few months,” I admitted. “The hard part was keeping myself from falling back into that hole. But all that’s changed now. I’m way happier now, especially with New Realm.”

Betty beamed. “I’m glad to hear it. So are you still doing your therapy exercises back home?”

Looking away like a kid who just got caught with his hand in the cookie jar I answered, "Erm... No?"

"No?" Betty frowned.

I let out a nervous laugh. "I may or may not be spending an excessive amount of time in New Realm Online."

Betty shook her head, fighting down a smile. "Your time here must be really good compared to what we had to deal with under the Black Wolf guild."

"And now it should be just as awesome," Dawn said, patting Betty on the back.

"I hope so," Betty said. "But I'm still going to head out into the real world to work on my real body. At least before I can make enough money here to get myself fixed up."

I nodded at the idea. Betty had been making slow progress through therapy alone to get back on her feet. Whether or not the medipod would provide any help with that process was anyone's guess but I didn't have the heart to tell her I'd already given up on my legs working ever again. The damage was simply too severe. Short of winning the lottery or earning a rich benefactor, I doubted I could ever earn enough money in New Realm Online to get the problem fixed. Besides, if I could snap my fingers and have all my problems fixed tomorrow I would still play New Realm. This world was amazing compared to the one I left behind. As a medipod player I could live here while others had to experience it through screens or VR helmets and with plenty of breaks to take care of their real world needs. Since my insurance covered everything, this may as well be the real world for me.

That was probably a really sad way of seeing things and I wasn't going to push that on anyone, especially not Betty.

Along our journey we took the time to grind out sneak, hunting, and basic combat skills. It probably wouldn't do all the low levels we freed any favors if a higher level group of players ambushed us but it served to show them we weren't anything like the Black Wolf guild.

Broken Bones was actually interested in their growth and making sure they could take care of themselves.

Dawn and I broke off from the main group to hunt a few bullferos now and again. I figured Ragespire and his people would appreciate the meat and we could keep some for our journey. More importantly, we'd have materials to outfit the newbies with quality leather armor.

"Ryan, you're back," called one of the Bellmare guards as we approached the gate. "And you brought friends."

I pointed my thumb back at the wagon. "These are the people I told you about. The ones the Black Wolf guild was using as slaves."

The guard glanced back. "Open the gates," he called out before leaning against the wall. "I don't suppose you brought anymore of that bullferos meat did you?"

Grinning, I patted my bag. "What kind of friend would I be if I didn't bring gifts?"

The guard smiled and came down to greet us with a small detachment. After the long journey on foot the players were happy to take a break. While Hedwig was our main go to when it came to pulling the wagon, we rotated him out for the other players so they could work on leveling up their strength. There were also more than a few questions when I had everyone lunging and skipping their way across the forest to help raise some more skills, like jumping. I still felt silly every time I did this but it was well worth the trouble.

"Ragespire's out on patrol with a few of the other guards," Garteth, the gate guard said as we delivered the last of the bullferos meat. "He should be back early in the evening, before the Worgen comes out to hunt again."

"That's fine. Has he talked to you all about my offer?" I asked.

Garreth nodded. "About pledging fealty to you or your guild, yes? He has. The offer sounds amazing to me. We wouldn't have to leave Bellmare would we?"

"No but if you do die you will be waking up in Liberty," I answered. "There's no way around that as far as I know and the gods haven't reached out to me about it either."



Garreth chuckled. "I still can't believe you actually talked with a god."

"Ya, that wasn't something I was expecting to ever do either." A soft laugh escaped me.

"Well, I cannot speak for everyone but I personally would, should the rest of the town agree," Garreth said. "You've done a lot for us when you had no reason to."

"I couldn't exactly leave you starving. It was the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do and what's best for you do not always align, Ryan. But I appreciate that you lean toward the good," Garreth said. "After we lost our king we lost all hope that there was any good left in this world but with you here... Perhaps we can come back."

Raising a brow I asked, "There are no heirs left?"

Garreth shook his head. "Not that we know of. The royal family was killed to the last man, woman and child. There may be a bastard prince out there but none of us know who or where they might be."

I smelled a quest in the air about this. One that I definitely wasn't going to be able to take care of with a whole caravan of people to take back to Liberty. But it was an exciting one. Restoring a kingdom to its rightful place was one of my favorite kinds of adventures at least when that kingdom was a good one. Judging by everything I saw of New Realm Online prior to my run in with the Braven, it had to be. "Maybe I can help with that, if anyone knows about it."

Garreth chuckled. "Oh I wouldn't know who, Ryan. Maybe Captain Ragespire does? But we have been fairly isolated here. No one comes out to bother us in these parts."

"Except for that wurgen," I pointed out.

"Yes that creature is a troublesome one," Garreth agreed. "Captain Ragespire was hoping to track it down to its lair before it recovers fully. Whenever we force the wurgen to retreat it usually takes about two weeks before we see it stalking the woods once more."

My eyes were probably sparkling at the thought of all the loot a boss like that would drop. "I want in on that hunt. My people would

appreciate the experience too.”

Garreth gave a nervous chuckle. “I am certain they would get quite a great deal of loot and levels from them but...” He glanced past my shoulder, through the warehouse doors at the players out on the street. “Most of your friends are under level ten. The wurgen is at least forty.”

“Which does pose a bit of a problem, yes,” I admitted. “But if we take the brunt of the fighting away from them we could rain arrows on that thing.”

“I appreciate your eagerness, Ryan, I really do, but our guards couldn’t do anything about the beast. How will your fellow adventurers fare any better with vastly inferior levels?” Garreth asked.

I pulled out a roll of bullferos leather. “Gear maketh the adventurer, Garreth.” Patting him on the shoulder I turned to leave. “Talk to you later. Let me know when Ragespire is back in town alright?”

Garreth shook his head with a soft smile. “Oh the Captain will want to hear this alright.”

Dawn intercepted me halfway to the first group of adventurers we freed. “Uh-oh. I know that face.”

“What face?” I asked.

“The ‘I have a plan so terrible it just might work face’,” Dawn answered. “What are you scheming?”

“A power leveling adventure, if Ragespire can find the Worgen,” I answered sheepishly.

Dawn looked back at all the low level players. “You want to take them with us? Ryan I know they need to get stronger, especially if we run into any trouble on the way to Liberty, but this is going to get them all killed.”

Nodding I sat on a rock wall overlooking a section of the city that had been filled with bullferos leather tents for the refugees. “That’s why they will set their respawn point to Bellmare. If they die their low level will only cost them a bit of experience and we won’t have to go

back to Cedar Springs to pick them up. In the meantime I'll have them make preparations to boost up their skills."

"Like what?" Dawn sat beside me.

"Crafting and combat training. We have plenty of guards skilled in various weapons here to learn from. I'm sure I can talk a few of them into helping us out," I answered. "And I have all the designs we need to make the same crossbows we made to defend Mara. With your improved rune smithing skill they should be even stronger."

Dawn considered this for a moment. "Wouldn't the Worgen be back to full health by now?"

"Garreth said it comes back roughly every two weeks after it's been beaten back. And it definitely hasn't been a week since we last saw that thing. It's probably close to half health by now but with our help Ragespire should be able to bring it down," I said.

Dawn frowned. "That may be true but if these people don't swear fealty to you or our guild they will die."

Pulling my lips into a tight smile I nodded. "Ya. But if we leave that thing running around it will burn down Bellmare sooner or later. If the people here don't want to come with us to Liberty and they don't want to swear fealty, they will always be at risk as long as the worgen is out there."

Running a hand through her hair, Dawn sighed. "And you just can't say no to someone in need can you?" She leaned over and placed a quick kiss on my lips. "Alright I'll get started on the runes. The blacksmith here isn't as good as the one back home but it should do for what we need." She pushed up to her feet.

"Thanks, Dawn," I smiled back at her before Hedwig shoved his face into my gut, demanding love and attention. "Ya, I love you too you big fur ball." I laughed and rubbed his ears.

Dawn laughed. "What's the plan if Ragespire comes back tonight and hasn't found the worgen's lair?"

Taking off Hedwig's helmet I scratched between his ears. "We can grind out more levels and skills for everyone here at least until

the two week window comes up. Then we either defend here or go back to Liberty.”

“My vote is to go back to Liberty,” Dawn said. “Talk to you later, Ryan.”

I could understand Dawn’s desire to return to Liberty as soon as possible, but there was a good opportunity to level up our new friends before we had to go through evil guild territory. I fed Hedwig a piece of jerky. “Well, time to get to work, big guy.”

My work started with asking every one of the people we had rescued what sort of fighting style they wanted to go for. The tough and tanky fighter, a quick and noble rogue or ranger, or a caster or a hybrid build. I felt everyone deserved to make their own choices, but we’d do what we could to make sure they understood the benefits and drawbacks of whatever class they wanted to build. Noting down the answers from everyone I made sure to write down what sort of weapons they were the most excited to use so I could line them up with the right trainers for the job.

Sarah wanted to be a mage thanks to her ability to manipulate water. When I found her hanging out by the town well she was trying to solve the water supply limitation of her magic, by making it rain. It wasn’t much, just a small cloud dripping over her head but it was a start. When I asked her what she wanted her mage robes to look like she said, “I want something sexy and flashy like Dawn has.”

I laughed. “You can ask that from someone that doesn’t know you’re a fourteen year old.”

“Why’s that a problem?” She pouted.

“Because that’d be more than a little creepy for me,” I answered. “How about I make you something like mage robes or something like a battle dress. Besides, unless you join Dawn’s acolytes, something that shows skin is going to be shit armor. Maybe a flashier version of a military uniform that doesn’t make me feel like a creep making it for you?”

Sarah sighed. “Fine. A battle dress would be nice. A blue one. But I want some sexy leather knee high boots.” She then gave me

the puppy eyes.

I laughed. "That sounds like a fair compromise. I'll ask around and see if they have any dyes here otherwise we'll have to wait on the color," I said. "Any weapon you'd like to carry around? Knives, swords, staves?"

"I have my bow and that whip Randy gave me." Sarah smiled. "I'm starting to get decent with it and I hope I can use my water magic to replace it in the future."

Blinking, I couldn't help asking, "You can make weapons out of water?"

"I can make anything out of water."

"Nice," I said with a nod. "I'm not sure there's any whip trainers around here but if I find one I'll let you know. How's the whole water problem coming along?"

"There aren't any mages here but I did find someone who knows of them," Sarah began. "It seems water mages like me can make it rain with a high enough skill level but that isn't super useful. Depending on what I'm trying to do I need a lot of water fast. There's supposed to be a skill book that lets me open up a gate to an elemental plane and pull things out of it but it's extremely rare."

I couldn't help whistling at that. "If you could access an infinite supply of water on demand I don't think most people would be able to stand up to you."

Sarah laughed. "They probably could. They say it's an incredibly expensive spell to use and hard to bring it up to a useful level."

"That doesn't really do us a whole lot of good at the moment," I admitted.

"No, but if you could spare a few gold, I have a faster solution," Sarah said.

Normally I would turn down a new player begging for gold and help them out in other ways instead, but Sarah was a pretty unique case. Not only was she way too young to be playing the game after a horrible virus essentially sentenced her to life in a medipod or suffer

a slow, withering death, but her magic was extremely situational in when it could be used. "OK, let's hear it."

Sarah took a deep breath and looked at me with those big eyes of hers. "The general store merchant has a waterskin of holding. It's only a two dozen gold and I can carry tons of water in there."

"Did he actually say tons?" I asked.

Sarah pulled back. "Well, no, not exactly. But he said the stranger who sold it to him said he almost drained a lake with it trying to find the limit."

"And he's only selling it for a couple dozen gold?" I asked with intense disbelief in my voice. "Something like that sounds invaluable, even for regular use."

Sarah gave a big nod. "That's right. He said it's a steep discount since we're your people. He had a sister with children among the refugees. He tried to keep them well fed but with all the guild wars and strain on supplies they were all starting to starve. They said you brought a ton of food that turned their situation around and all you wanted in return were some skills."

"The Riding and Mounted Combat skills have been pretty useful so far," I said. "Didn't think I'd be getting a discount out of this too. So this thing is really real?"

Sarah smiled. "I may be fourteen but I'm not dumb. He let me pour out a few pitchers full of water then let me try my magic on it."

Blinking at how awesome that must have looked I had to ask, "And it worked?"

"Yup! It's like when you reach into your bag of holding with my hand only I do it with my magic. So long as the lid is off I can access all the water inside and stuff it back in."

I could have just given her the money but I wanted to see this for myself. "Let's go see this thing."

Sarah smiled and ran off to the general store in question.

"Welcome," the store owner smiled at us then gasped. "Is that Ryan?"

“Last I checked,” I smiled as the store owner rushed over to hug me.

“I can’t thank you enough for what you did for our village sir. Were it not for your timely intervention our people would surely be starving by now,” he said then pulled away and dusted himself off. “Ahem, pardon my lack of manners. My name is Otis, at your service sir.” He bowed to us.

I patted his arm. “Don’t worry about it, Otis. It was my pleasure to help out the town.”

“So what brings you to my humble store?” he asked but one look at Sarah cleared it up right away. “Ah, yes. The waterskin of holding. Young Sarah was most enthused by it.”

Otis led us to the counter before he slipped behind the store. It took a moment but he returned with a large, wooden lockbox covered in intricate designs. I couldn’t tell by looking at it but it was probably magically enchanted to be far stronger than it appeared. Otis popped the box open and showed us the water skin. “And here we are, sir. A magical waterskin of holding with an unknown limit. The container itself appears to be ordinary leather but I can assure you it is hardened and enchanted to maintain its durability even in hectic scenarios.” He held up the waterskin. “Please, try it.”

Curiously I hefted up the container. I was impressed to feel it didn’t weigh much more than a regular water bottle and the leather itself was nice and tough. “Do you have a big bowl or something to try it out with?”

Sarah smiled at me. “We don’t have to. Just pop it open and I’ll show you it’s real.”

I glanced at Otis. He nodded and I removed the lid.

Sarah held out a hand and channeled her mana. A stream of water flowed out of the bottle like rope, gathering in the palm of her hand into a ball. At first the process was slow as Sarah made a ball of water roughly the size of my head then sped up the process to quickly make one bigger than my torso. “See? It works but there’s still plenty of water in there if you want me to try.”

Grinning, I said, "I don't think Otis here would appreciate us making a mess of his store. Put the water back and I'll buy you this item."

Sarah poured the water back into the waterskin with a big smile.

I put the coin down on the counter as soon as she was done. "It was twenty-four gold right?"

"For you, twenty," Otis smiled as he collected his coin. "Is there anything else I can help you with, sir?"

I thought for a moment. "You don't happen to have any fabric or ingots I could work with around here do you?"

"Of course, sir."

"Fantastic. I'll be back as soon as I finish up my shopping list. You take care, Otis." I waved and headed out with Sarah.

Sarah secured the waterskin to her belt and smiled up at me. "Thanks again, Ryan. This is really going to help a ton."

"That cost a small fortune so I hope you make use of it." I chuckled. "Keep practicing with your magic and whip. I'll see about getting you that armor."

"Yes sir." Sarah beamed.

"Do you know where Randy is?" I asked.

"Last I heard he was going to the training yard to practice," Sarah said.

With a nod I took off in that direction. Randy was indeed there with a very confused guard who didn't know what to make of his strange weapon.

"So you see I poke them with the pointy end and I whack them with the smashy one." Randy explained. "This whip part here lets me throw the weapon and pull it back. It's really great but my throwing skills aren't all that accurate."

"Well, I can help you with each of those skill sets individually, but as a single weapon I'm afraid I'm out of my depth, Randy," the guard, Bert, said.



Randy grinned. "That's great. If I learn all the basics I can combine them that much better."

"Hey Randy, can I steal you for a minute?" I asked.

Bert looked relieved as Randy strode up to me. "Of course, Ryan. What do you need?"

"Nothing too big, I'm crafting armor for everyone while we're in town and I figured I'd ask what you wanted. Light, heavy, medium armor? Maybe I can make you a weapon," I offered.

"Light armor works," Randy said. "The heavier stuff would just slow me down and my Stabby Wacker doesn't really work if I'm slow with it."

Nodding, I added that to my list of things to craft.

"I'd like to keep making my own weapons if you don't mind, Ryan. I know this one's weird but I like it."

I laughed. "Well maybe I can teach you to make it better with the lumberjack and blacksmith skills. That way your weapons can be as weird as you like with better materials."

Randy jumped with excitement. "Really?"

"Really."

"Yes please. I would love that."

I chuckled. "Well, meet me at the shop in a couple of hours after you finish training here. If Captain Ragespire's found the monster he's hunting we're going to help him kill it. If not, I need you guys to be ready in case our trip up north doesn't go as smoothly as it has so far."

For the rest of the day I got to work making leather armors for everyone. Thanks to Otis's supplies I was able to incorporate fabrics into my work, adding an extra layer of padding to the armors as well as making them much more comfortable to wear. For the fighters I went with a coat of plates made from hardened bullferos leather. I considered making them a sort of plate armor like I had for Hedwig but with the limited number of frames we had to work with that would have taken too long. To help speed things along I recruited all the players who wanted to be clothiers to help me out in the process.

This earned them some valuable skill levels as well as practical experience to actually craft what they would want in the future.

But I didn't stop there. I delegated crossbow crafting to the lumberjacks and blacksmiths in our group while Dawn and her little group of future runesmiths worked on crafting the runes to add all the kick we could to our weapons.

The guards saw a few of our pieces and asked if we could make some bows for them as well. So I bargained. Free training for my people in exchange for a set of crossbows and compound bows for the guards. This more than doubled our workload but I believed it would be well worth the trouble in the long run. The better equipped the guards were, the better Bellmare would fare against the wurgen, whether or not we were there for the encounter.

Randy helped us with the crossbows while I took the time to walk him through the process on the wood and metal working ends of the process, as well as the tinkering required. He was like a sponge, absorbing every little detail I gave him and throwing out a million questions in response. I was happy to answer all of them. Randy may have been a Weird Weapon creator but knowing the intricacies of normal weapons would improve his skill for whatever insane mess of a weapon he would come up with next. After we finished up, I sent him off to work with Dawn on rune smithing. Randy insisted on learning this craft as he wanted to tackle every step of the weapon making process himself. It didn't matter how many times I told him he could just ask someone for the runes or parts he needed, Randy was very adamant about every weapon he made being a hundred percent of his own make. Admirable as I found that, I thought it was pretty unnecessary, especially with so many weapons to make. At least he didn't argue when it wasn't one of his own weapons.

The moon was high above in the sky by the time I was done with crafting for the day. I had worked up quite a sweat and hunger but I had a stack of notifications to clear before I did.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your clothier skill by +2. Slowly but surely you are developing a fashion sense that doesn't make me want to vomit. And that's the real reward.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your blacksmithing skill by +1. Those arrows actually look like they could take an eye out.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your leadership skill by +1. By some strange miracle people are still following you. Are you using charm spells? Because that's cheating.**

I chuckled at the skill notifications and moved on to check the attribute ones.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your charisma by +1. Helping the poor and helpless out of the kindness of your own heart goes a long way doesn't it?**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your constitution by +1. Working all day makes Ryan a dull boy. Take a break, nerd.**

The AI did have a point. Working all day on crafting skills did get a little mind numbing after a while. Luckily, I had no shortage of fresh crafters that needed guidance and that kept things interesting. Still, I was proud to see my skills and stats climb. I pulled up my stats to take stock of how my stats were shaping up.

**Ryan Rosa Level 22 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 30**

**Agility 30**

**Constitution 31**

**Intelligence 28**

**Wisdom 25**

**Charm 12**

A stat point here and there wouldn't make a world of difference but every little bit helped. I cleared my interface of the character sheet and headed into the inn.

After a bath and dinner, I was ready to drop face first into bed. Garreth stopped us.

"The Captain's here sir. And he needs to speak with you," Garreth said in a rush.

Dawn and I exchanged a glance then got up. "Let's go see him," I said.

Ragespire and his guards were gathered at the town center. The red plumage on his helmet was singed and the guards who went out with him were barely on their feet. "Ryan," he greeted us in a weary voice. "How was your quest?"

"Good. We freed our people and brought them here," I answered.

"What happened to you?" Dawn asked.

Ragespire grunted. "We found the wurgen's den. The beast is badly wounded but it can still fight. It nearly killed us on our withdrawal."

"So where is it?" Dawn asked.

"In the mountains southeast of us. It lurks in a cave there but our scouting force was too small," Ragespire said. His gaze met mine. "When I heard you had arrived I was hoping you could join our efforts to slay the wurgen."

I began casting healing hands on Ragespire and his men. "I took the liberty of starting preparations for that. But it will be a few days before my people are ready."

Garreth frowned. "Most are under level ten sir."

Ragespire glanced back at me. "Ryan you are level twenty-two. This beast is level forty. It is foolish enough for me to ask for your aid but this is too much."

"It probably is," I admitted. "But if it works me and my people get a huge jump in levels. More importantly, the people of Bellmare will have one less problem to worry about."

Ragespire looked down in thought for a moment. "And what is your plan?"

I started counting things off on my fingers. "First, we arm and equip our people with better equipment. My armor crafting skills might not be a match for the equipment the guards wear but our crossbow and bow designs are far superior. So we're making you a bunch too."

Ragespire glanced at Garreth for confirmation.

"It's true sir. Their crossbows kick like none other that I've seen. And they repeat as well. In the time we could fire one bolt these ones can fire two," Garreth explained.

Dawn chuckled. "That's because you're slow working the reload mechanism. Back home our people can empty a magazine long before you're ready for the second bolt."

"Impressive," Ragespire commented.

"Next is training, but we already started on that too. I don't know when you want to kill this thing but we need to make sure our people can fight," I said as I finished healing Ragespire's men. He would take far longer to top off but it was valuable experience for leveling up Healing Hands. "Getting my people to learn to use the bow and crossbow is easy enough. The hard part is teaching them how to aim and shoot quickly."

Ragespire stroked his chin through his helmet. "Then we will run drills tomorrow morning at first light. As for the time, the sooner we slay the wurgen the better. We briefly engaged the creature but we have only slowed down its recovery to full strength."

"That's where the third part of my plan comes in," I said. "See, while we were hunting the bullferos for you I picked up a handy skill called Trapper. It lets me make all kinds of traps and I have no shortage of ideas to use on this creature. But those will take at least a few days to set up."

"How long do you need?" Ragespire asked.

"Two days if we rush," I answered. "But that really depends on the terrain we're working with."

Ragespire nodded. "The terrain is no different from what you dealt with while hunting the bullferos. If I provide you men to assist in your efforts can we speed things up?"

Speeding things up was not something I was fond of. If we made any mistakes with the traps they could come back to bite us. But I understood Ragespire's concern. A wurgen at full strength would be no easy beast to bring down. "Anyone you can spare would be a

great help, villagers included. Hunters, trappers, people who know the land. All of them would go a long way to make this plan work.”

“I am hesitant to order villagers into danger, Ryan,” Ragespire said.

“Have you tried asking for volunteers?” Dawn offered. “You’d be surprised how eager and willing to help people can be when their homes and families are in danger.”

“Far too eager,” Ragespire agreed. “Very well. We will follow your plan, Ryan. In two days’ time we march on the wurgen’s lair and slay the beast once and for all.”

I balanced out the amount of mana I was pouring into healing Ragespire’s wounds with my own mana regeneration. “If you like you and your people can swear fealty to me before we go. That way anyone who dies will come back to life in Liberty.”

Ragespire shook his head. “I will not, at least not yet. If our hunt is successful then I will swear fealty to you, Ryan Rosa. But not a moment earlier. The others I will allow to do as they wish.”

“Why wouldn’t you swear fealty?” Dawn asked.

Ragespire sighed. “This old heart of mine still holds out hope the royal family yet lives. It is a foolish hope, I am aware. But the kingdom was a good and noble place under their rule. If they are truly gone, I will only swear fealty to someone I know can live up to their standards.”

“Speaking of the royal family,” I began. “Do you know if anyone made it out alive? We could help restore the kingdom if there is an heir somewhere.”

Ragespire shook his head. “I am no master of shadows. If there is a secret heir to the kingdom that is knowledge I am not privy to. My role has always been on the front lines beneath the sun’s golden radiance.”

I nodded and sighed. I was really excited for a quest chain like that.

“But if you are truly as noble as you appear to be, I am certain word of your deeds will reach the right ears eventually,” Ragespire

said. "At least, if any of the royal family yet live."

I finished healing Ragespire and still my Healing Hands hadn't leveled. But it was close. "Good to know." I stretched. "So, anything else before we go pass out? I am beat from crafting all day."

Ragespire chuckled. "See you in the morning, Ryan."





## 15

The next day I headed out with one of Ragespire's scouts to go see the wurgen's lair. It was going to be a long journey so I left the newbies to handle the crafting preparations. While they were slower than Dwayne or any of our more experienced crafters back home they grasped the basics quite well. With the designs I left for them, they were going to be just fine making the weapons and armor we needed.

*Quality might suffer a little bit though,* I thought with a wry grin after we'd already left town.

It took us most of the morning to arrive at the wurgen's cave on foot. We could have ridden Hedwig the whole way there but I figured an oso sprinting at full speed through the woods would give us away. Hedwig was much faster than he had been thanks to his growing agility stat and skill as a mount, but there was no way he was beating a war horse any time soon, let alone a rampaging wurgen.

We stuck to watching the cave entrance from deep within the forest for safety's sake. The entrance looked artificial, its walls too smooth for anything nature to make. They were a bit lopsided though. It was like the wurgen had carved out a home for itself from the mountainside using that lightning beam attack it spewed from its mouth. And it was definitely not an artist.

Focusing on the cave entrance I tried to use my dark vision to see inside but that was a dumb idea. We were outside in the sun and the cave was well out of my dark vision's range. Still I didn't feel bold enough to look inside so I pulled back.

Johnathan, the guard, spoke once we were clear. "Phew. That was right terrifying, that was."

Blinking at the guard, my face asked my question for me.

"The wurgen's lair. That creature could have burst out and ended us at any moment," Johnathan explained.

“That’s why we were sneaking,” I replied with amusement.

Johnathan grumbled but grudgingly agreed. “So, got any ideas jostling around in that head of yours adventurer? This creature won’t be like any bullferos when it comes to trapping. It’s smart and cunning.”

“Those were just basic pitfall traps without any sort of covering,” I insisted. “But we can do better, so much better. My question is if lightning in this world, even magical lightning, follows the laws of physics.”

“Laws of physics?”

“Don’t worry about it Johnathan. I’m really not qualified to be talking science,” I said. “But I have a plan. Part of that plan might not work but the rest of it should work wonders against the wurgen.” I gestured for Johnathan to follow me. “Let’s take a look around before we head back to town.”

The first thing I did upon returning to Bellmare was find Dawn and her rune smiths. “Hey Dawn, do you think lightning rods work on magic lightning?”

Dawn just looked up at me from her work like I’d been drinking too much, too early in the day. “What?”

“You know how a lightning rod basically takes the kick out of a lightning bolt.” I shrugged. “We might even be able to use them to misdirect that wurgen’s shots but we might have to supersize them.”

Dawn thought for a moment. “I don’t see why it wouldn’t. Magical fire still burns and spreads like regular fire long after the spell goes away.” She blinked. “Wait, you aren’t thinking about gambling people’s lives on this theory are you?”

Shaking my head I answered, “No, but I thought we could use it to supplement the rest of the plan. If it works, fantastic. We can reduce the danger to our people a little. If it doesn’t then we have a bunch of sharp, metal sticks to throw at the wurgen while our people keep moving from position to position.”

“Positions?” Dawn asked.

“Mhmm. We are going to turn that forest into a death trap. Speaking of death traps. Have you figured out that flame rune?”

Dawn nodded. “It took longer than I’d like but I can add a rune to imbue our weapons with fire magic.”

“Think we can set the wurgen on fire with them?” I asked.

“It looks furry enough to be a fire hazard, yeah,” Dawn said. “I doubt it will do us any good against that shield it throws out. Most of the arrows burned to ash on contact but I spotted a couple that lasted long enough to bounce first.”

I frowned. “So much for shield piercing arrows.”

“There’s probably a rune for that too but I don’t know it yet,” Dawn said. “If I had a lightning rune I could add that to our armor for protection but that’s off the table also.”

I patted Hedwig’s side. “It’s nice to know anyway. I’m going to find Ragespire and give him my plan.”

“Good luck,” Dawn said and got back to work with her rune smiths. She was always pretty good with those and if someday we needed to stop adventuring for some reason, Dawn had plenty enough skill in her craft that she could dedicate herself entirely to that.

Ragespire was in the guard barracks when I found him. That helmet of his was still firmly on his head and while I wanted to ask I knew better than to waste the man’s time. “Ryan, you’ve returned. Do you have what you need for a plan?”

“Better, I have a plan.” Rolling out a map of the forest on the table I explained what we were going to do. “So, the wurgen is nesting in this part of the woods. Ideally we could set a million traps at its doorstep and let them do the work for us but for a creature that big there’s no way it will work. So we’ll pull our trapping operation to this area of the woods.” I circled the patch on the map with my finger. “I’m thinking camouflaged pit falls with spikes to wound the beast just to name one of the traps I’m putting out there. The problem is getting the wurgen into that mess.”

"I will lure the beast out," Ragespire said without a shred of hesitation.

The plan had always been to convince the man to act as bait but I wasn't expecting him to jump at the opportunity. It seemed like a terrible thing to just let him jump face first into death without giving him an out but before I could open my mouth to tell him he didn't have to, he met my gaze.

"It has to be me, Ryan. No one else is fast enough. Not even you and your Hedwig," Ragespire said. "Anyone else would simply die."

"They would, wouldn't they?" I agreed. It still felt like I was sentencing him to death but we didn't have a better option if we wanted to keep Bellmare intact. "Right, so, our people will be adding to the worgen's frustrations with a fighting retreat. Our crossbows should allow anyone to quickly fire a magazine's worth of bolts into the worgen and get out before it can find them."

"And should the beast break off I will regain its attention." Ragespire patted the lance slung over his shoulder.

It was good to see he was thinking along the same lines as me. "That's right. You will be leading it right here to face down our main force." I pointed at a clearing in the woods. "I know the forest is rough for speeding cavalry but that won't be a problem here. Our people can rain down bolts on the worgen from the woods and if we're lucky it will be too angry to notice my final trap."

"And what exactly is this trap?" Ragespire asked.

"One very, very deep hole with a very spiky net," I answered. "If Otis happens to have some poison the trap can work even better."

"Getting the worgen to slip into a trap in an open field will be far trickier than in the woods, Ryan," Ragespire countered. "How will we fool the beast?"

"You leave that part up to me," I shot him a grin. "All you have to know is the trap won't be a problem for you."

"You do not have a better plan do you?"

"Not unless you want to wait for Dwayne to come down here from Liberty but that could be a while," I said.

Ragespire shook his head. "Very well then. It seems this is the best course available to us." Ragespire pushed to his feet. "I will gather the men for your trapper team."

"Thanks, Captain."

I set out with my team of guards and villagers to get to work on the traps. Gathering the wood and turning it into sharpened spikes to ruin the wurgen's day was easy enough. The hard part was digging out the pits for it. We spent our first day just digging out the pitfall traps along the forest path. Using little red strips of cloth we marked out a safe passage for Ragespire to ride through. I was also making notes of this on my map for him but I seriously doubted he would have time to reference it while running for his life.

Just like with the bullferos traps we lined the bottom of each pit with wooden spikes. It wouldn't kill the wurgen, I was certain of it, but it would wound it and more than likely drive it into a fury. Like stepping on a lego. The problem child was the much larger pit we dug out at the clearing. This one we dug deep, very deep. Deep enough that the wurgen would—in theory—not be able to claw its way out of, allowing us to plink it to death with bolts, arrows and magical attacks. That pit took most of our remaining daylight so we left finishing it for the next day. Instead we went out into the woods covering up each trap we layed in the forest with leaves, branches, grass and rocks. It wasn't the perfect camouflage but it didn't have to be if Ragespire had the wurgen's full attention.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your trapper skill by +1. You better pray this hairbrained scheme of yours works because there's no chopper for you to run to.**

The next morning we finished the rest of the forest traps, using trees like battering rams that would swing down and smash into the wurgen mid run like what the Ewoks did to those imperial walkers. Those were probably a long shot, given how fast our prey was, but if we could just clip the wurgen with these it would be in for a very bad day.

Finally, we finished the deep pit in the clearing. First, I had to make a strong, thick net to hold the monster. This net was

supplemented by metal spikes I had Randy make. Otis didn't have any poison to help us but the spikes would hopefully be enough to do the trick. The finishing touch was the wooden planks we covered the pit with. It was sturdy enough that I could ride Hedwig over so Ragespire and his mount would be fine. But there wasn't a chance the rickety cluster of planks could hold something as heavy as a wurgen. We covered that up with more grass, leaves and branches before settling in for the night.

"Tomorrow's the big day, Hedwig," I said, leaning back against his side. "We're going to slay us a zone boss."

Hedwig let out an excited grunt and curled around me before we dozed off for the night.

In the morning we were greeted by Ragespire, the guards, and any villager who was willing and able to fight for their town. Our band of brave little newbies was there with us as well with Randy carrying a bundle of lightning rods.

Randy had added the lightning to his list of jobs while back in town and made metal javelins rather than simple spikes. They were surprisingly well balanced. I took out the bundle to deploy as many as I could through the forest while keeping a dozen on me for the fight.

I issued my orders and positioned our forces according to my plan. We had two small teams in the woods to harass the wurgen with me and Dawn riding in on Hedwig to support Ragespire. Everyone else would gather in the woods opposite of the clearing, ready to rain arrows on the wurgen.

Once they were in position, I turned to face Ragespire. "Ready to go?"

Ragespire simply nodded and took off into the woods.

We followed briefly before breaking off so the wurgen would have a clear target to focus on. Keeping our distance was key if we were going to help Ragespire do his job as bait but I didn't want to be so far we couldn't help.

Ragespire rode his horse through the winding field of traps with ease. He knew exactly how to avoid them and he didn't slow down in the slightest. At the wurgen's cave he didn't slow down at all, he dove on inside with his lance pointed forward.

"Did he just charge into the wurgen cave at full speed?" Dawn asked.

"Yup," I agreed.

"Isn't it tight in there for maneuvering a speeding horse?"

"Probably—"

The wurgen shrieked in fury at the intruder within its home. That shriek was cut off abruptly by a detonation and a plume of smoke rushing out of the cave. The scrambling gallopi of Ragespire's horse echoed through the cave before a blinding beam of electricity carved off stone from the mountainside and swept down to the floor.

"Oh crap," Dawn and I said in unison.

Ragespire and his horse rode out of the cave like a bat out of hell. They were untouched but that wouldn't last long if they slowed down. The wurgen tore out of the cave, rending the earth beneath its claws and shrieked again. Ragespire swapped out his lance for one of the crossbows we had made for him and shot the creature right on the nose. It recoiled briefly then charged through the forest.

"Do we start firing now?" Dawn asked.

"Wait for them to pass the first team," I said and urged Hedwig to follow them at a distance.

That was a losing battle. Ragespire and his mount were far faster than Hedwig and Wurgen combined. But the wurgen could plow through the forest with ease where Ragespire had to maneuver around the trees. The wurgen triggered the first of the traps. A tree swung down from the forest canopy and missed the wurgen's backside by a mile. At least the wurgen hadn't noticed.

"That went about as well as I expected," I grumbled.

Dawn readied an arrow. "I'll slow it down next time." She said as we followed through the woods.

Ragespire rode deeper into the forest of traps, weaving right between the small flags we placed for him to follow. The paths we left in between traps were big enough for the Captain to ride through comfortably, even the ones requiring him to slow down through. But it was another story entirely for the wurgen.

The beast smashed through a pair of trees without a care in the world and that was when its foreleg fell right through the first pitfall trap. The monster shrieked in pain as its foot and leg were pierced by our sharpened sticks. With its ongoing forward momentum it flipped forward, tearing itself free in the process. It left a long, bloody arc through the air before it crashed to a stop just underneath another of the swinging log taps. This one sailed above its back harmlessly before the wurgen recovered and gave chase once more.

“Come at me foul beast,” Ragespire bellowed. “Show me what passes for fury amongst your wretched kind.”

The wurgen obliged, tearing through the earth and trees as it took off like a bullet after Ragespire. Electricity poured off its body like the wurgen was trying to kill Ragespire by simply getting close to him. But when the wurgen ran past my lightning rods the electricity arcing off its body was channeled toward them and fizzled out. It wasn't enough to stop all of its electric abilities but it was proof of concept.

The chase went on as the wurgen reached the first ambush team. It had lost some speed thanks to its wounds but we were barely keeping pace. The ambush team opened fire on the wurgen as it tripped over another trap. They rained burning arrows and bolts on the shrieking creature as it unleashed a pulse of electricity. Too little too late. Most of the volley made it through its barrier and its fur caught fire. The wurgen thrashed around the earth, managing to put out the flame but not before it noticed the log swinging down toward it.

“Move, Hedwig,” I urged as we moved in the wurgen's path. It was about to jump on us when Dawn and I unloaded a barrage of Power Shots into its face.

We probably didn't do a lot of damage but we forced the wurgen to stumble about in the same place long enough for the log to hit.



Wham!

The wurgen was sent crashing through the trees and we took off into the woods again while raining bolts and arrows on the creature.

"I can't believe that actually worked," I cheered. "A clean getaway!"

A beam of lightning lanced over our heads, setting the forest ablaze. I pressed down onto Hedwig's back as Dawn did to mine, hoping to keep our heads on our shoulders.

When the beam stopped we heard the thundering steps of the wurgen racing toward us.

"We fucked up," Dawn said. "Faster, Hedwig."

Hedwig grunted in dismay, trying his best to outrun the battered and wounded wurgen but it wasn't going to work. The wurgen was gaining on us and its body lashed out with electricity at its surroundings.

"Call Ragespire," I said.

"How? We don't have chat with NPCs!" Dawn said.

Feeling the hairs standing on the back of my neck I knew the wurgen was getting too close for comfort. I impaled one of the lightning rods into the ground, pulling some charge out of the wurgen's attack. "Ya, that really sucks right now." Then a thought came to me.

*Randy! Is the captain at the clearing?*

*He just arrived but there's no monster with him,* Randy said.

*Because it's chasing us. Hitch a ride with the Captain and lead him right to us.* The trees behind us vaporized as the wurgen unleashed another pulse of electricity, missing Hedwig's rear by inches. *Hurry!*

Randy was silent for a moment as we sped around a boulder. The wurgen clipped it as it took a turn too sharp for its wounded body to cope with. It tumbled across the woods, buying us precious time as we bolted for the clearing. *We're on our way,* Randy said.

On my map I could see Randy's green dot speeding toward us accompanied by the Captain's white dot. Behind us the massive red dot of the marker was rearranging my map in live time as it ripped through the forest. I frowned, wishing we could get back to my field of traps but if we tried we'd be dead long before they could do us any favors.

Dawn fired arrow after arrow at the wurgen. Even with Power Shot she only managed to slow the beast and chip away at its health. "I'm going to run out of arrows before that thing runs out of health."

"Why isn't it catching fire?" I asked.

"Maybe it's a chance thing or it needs a certain number of arrows to hit at once before it lights? I don't know," Dawn said. "Maybe the rune isn't strong—" Dawn froze.

When I glanced back to see what was happening the huge, lightning filled maw of the wurgen was in the air, diving right for us. A golden light enveloped us and Hedwig inched away from the wurgen's snapping jaws at the last second. Before we realized what was going on a rushing, galloping wind sped past us, followed by a detonation.

The wurgen crashed onto its side and shrieked, erupting with electricity once more as it thrashed back to its feet.

Ragespire appeared next to us. "Correct me if I am wrong, Ryan, but I was supposed to be the bait in this scheme of yours."

"My bad," I laughed breathlessly. If my heart beat any harder it was going to burst out of my chest and run away screaming. "Thanks for getting him here, Randy."

Randy gave me a toothy smile. "Any time, Ryan."

"We must make our way to the clearing, quickly," Ragespire ordered. "My mana pool is almost empty from out running this beast and saving you. I only have enough left to make one final pass on the wurgen and we must make it count."

Nodding, I urged Hedwig on ahead. The wurgen was back on our tail but thanks to Ragespire's buff I was able to keep out of reach of

its jaws. When we cleared the forest the wurgen swiped its claws at us, shredding through trees like they were paper.

*Hold your fire,* I sent to our brave little newbies camping out in the woods. They spread word to the guards and NPCs as we pushed forward.

We headed right for the giant pitfall trap in the middle of the clearing just as planned. Ragespire went ahead at full speed and left us in his dust. I couldn't blame him. One mount was strain enough on the wooden boards of our clever ruse. Adding Hedwig to the mix was asking for trouble. Ragespire cleared the trap without issue and we... We slowed down.

The buff faded from Hedwig's body right as we reached the trap.

"Craaap," I said as the wurgen dove after us. It was going to hit us just as we reached the middle of the trap.

Dawn whirled about and fired with her bow but all she did was delay the inevitable by fractions of a second.

*This isn't a bad outcome.* I thought as the world seemed to slow down at our imminent death. Sure Dawn and I would die and we would lose some experience, but the monster would be snared in our trap. Bellmare would be safe. At least I hoped so.

"Open fire," Ragespire bellowed in the distance and a wall of arrows and bolts rushed out of the forest. They caught the wurgen mid air and their combined force knocked the beast back.

This was not ideal in the slightest.

On the one hand, we were safe. The wooden platforms we were rushing over were falling apart behind us, sure, but we had a good chance of making it off before the trap was sprung. On the other hand, Ragespire's attempt to save us left the wurgen hanging halfway into the pit.

"Come on Hedwig, run," I said. From the corner of my eye I spotted Randy sprinting to join the others in the forest.

Hedwig grunted and leaned forward into a sprint as the crumbling boards collapsed closer and closer toward us.

"Jump!" Dawn shouted.

Hedwig didn't need to wait for my explicit order. He dove across the last bit of the pit and came to a sliding halt on his stomach on the other side of the trap. With a breathy huff, he seemed relieved to be on solid ground once again.

That didn't last.

The wurgen pulled itself back to its feet, ripping apart its end of the pit as it did. It unleashed a furious, bone chilling roar as its bloodied fur glowed blue with lightning lashing wildly out of it. It fired another beam of electricity, this time at our ambushing force in the woods. They scrambled away but not before my UI was lit up with the deaths of half our newbies. I didn't want to imagine how many of the locals we'd lost. Some of them had sworn fealty to me and the Broken Bones guild but most followed Captain Ragespire's lead. They wanted me to prove myself before they would commit.

"We need a new plan," Dawn said.

"I don't have a great one," I replied. "Keep that thing busy. Use my crossbow if you're out of arrows." I urged Hedwig toward the giant, electric beast.

"Ryan where are you going?" Ragespire snapped.

"To give you an opening," I said.

When it came to defensive magic, I had nothing. Healing Hands was about as close as I got and that wasn't going to help us here. When it came to raw physical strength, I wasn't a match for the wurgen. None of us were. Even Ragespire, who was ten levels stronger than the monster, could only afford hit and run attacks. But I did have one trick up my sleeve.

I pulled up another of the lightning rods.

"What are you doing with that, Ryan? It won't do anything if you stick the wurgen with it," Dawn said.

Another volley of arrows flew overhead only to be intercepted by the wild arcs of electricity whipping around the wurgen. The boss had to be on its last legs. It was using moves it hadn't in the past and it showed as it charged after us. Its claws were sheathed in lightning,

ripping glowing paths through the forest floor on its path of destruction.

“That’s why I’m grounding this overgrown mutt,” I shouted as I threw one of the lightning rods ahead of us.

The rod lanced into the dirt ahead of the wurgen. Just as I saw with the other abilities in the forest, the lightning rods dragged away the wurgen’s electricity. But such small rods on their own weren’t effective at grounding what was probably a walking power plant’s worth of electricity. I needed more.

“Keep going straight ahead, Hedwig. I’ll keep us safe,” I said as I threw another rod into the ground.

Hedwig gave a disbelieving groan but pressed on ahead.

I managed to get a third lightning rod out before the wurgen dove for us. I immediately casted Healing Hands on Dawn and Hedwig. Dawn had swapped out her bow for my crossbow at this point as we rushed beneath the boss. She shot its tender underbelly full of flaming bolts as the lightning lashing out from the wurgen was funneled to the lightning rods instead of our bodies. The wurgen overshot us and whirled about after us.

“It worked!” Dawn cheered. “We’re still alive.”

I went back to throwing out lightning rods as fast as I could. The wurgen tore apart the ground as it whirled on us and fired a beam of lightning. The beam did not know which way to go. Parts of it were ripped away by the lightning rods dragging it toward them where it would pass harmlessly into the ground but another singed Hedwig’s backside just as I ran out of lightning rods.

The remaining strike force kept firing on the wurgen. With its electricity being thrown every which way by the lightning rods, most of the burning bolts and arrows made it to the creature. On their own they couldn’t do too much but shove the huge beast around. In a large volley the combined force of all those Powershots threw the wurgen to the ground as its fur ignited. It shrieked and thrashed about as it tried to put out the fire but the arrows raining on the wurgen wouldn’t let the flames die.

*This is it. This is our chance.* I turned to see Ragespire already charging toward the wurgen. “I pointed back at the pit. Throw it into the pit.”

If I could have seen the Captain’s face I’m certain it would have been confused to say the least. But Ragespire did as I asked. He shifted his approach to come at the wurgen head on in the hopes his lance’s blast could throw the wurgen into the pit.

The wurgen stopped trying to put out the flames. It howled into the heavens, unleashing an eruption of electricity around it. The blast sundered the earth around it, sending the lightning rods flying across the battlefield.

“Oh no,” Dawn said.

“Damn it,” I said. “Ragespire, the lightning rods are gone. Get out of there!”

Ragespire either didn’t hear me or refused to stop. The wurgen, its white fur ablaze and charred black, turned to meet Ragespire head on. It opened its maw, gathering together its magic power for another blast. Ragespire roared, his lance blazing to life just as he reached the wurgen.

Boom.

The explosion engulfed Ragespire and the wurgen, but only one of them made it out of the black plume. It was the wurgen, sailing back into the pit, taking with it what remained of the sagging camo netting.

**Congratulations hero! You have successfully slain The Wurgen, level 45 region boss. You have received 100000 exp.**

There were so many more notifications after that about level ups and skills but I shoved them all aside. “Captain!” I shouted as I rushed Hedwig into the cloud of smoke.

A breeze picked up, whisking the haze away. There, in a crater, with his broken armor charred black was Captain Ragespire. His breathing was heavy, labored, and his mount was in no better shape beside him.

*Sarah, get over here quick. We have wounded,* I ordered through the party chat.

The Captain looked up at me through his broken helmet and rasped out, "Is it dead?"

I climbed off Hedwig's back and dropped to his side, immediately casting Healing hands on him. "You killed it, Captain. It's dead."

"Good," the man turned away from me and lay on the ground.

My magic was fighting against grievous injuries and bleeding but it was working, little by little. If it took all the mana and mana potions I had to keep Ragespire alive then I would. I was not about to lose anyone else in this hunt, especially not him. He'd saved me too many times for me to allow that.

As I looked to see the wounds sealing up, I caught a glimpse through Ragespire's broken helmet. His face was covered in deep scars from a lifetime spent in battle. At first I thought they were wounds from the last charge against the wurgen but they were old and healed up. It was no wonder the Captain preferred to keep his helmet on. Some people couldn't stomach the things I was seeing beneath his helmet, and I couldn't lie. The wounds I saw on his face were unsettling to say the least, and what I saw of his body beneath his broken armor was no different.

Magic could fix a lot of things but scarring was not one of them it seemed. If a healer reached someone in time it would be as if their wounds were never there to begin with. But if the wounds started healing themselves before a mage could get to them, the scars remained.

"You're going to live to tell me all about these scars, Captain," I said as I poured my mana into the man.

Ragespire cracked a weary smile that faded as his eyes swept over to his horse. With a pained, bubbling breath he asked, "This oath of fealty to you... does it carry over to mounts?"

"I've never tried it on a mount or pet before," I answered. "But for us players if we die our pets and mounts are supposed to come with us so I would think it works that way."

With a weak nod Ragespire said. "Then I hereby swear an oath of fealty to you, Ryan Rosa of the Broken Bones guild." A golden light swirled around Ragespire and his horse. "So now what? I wait to die?"

I shook my head. "I'm not letting you die even if you can respawn." My mana was starting to run low, fighting to keep him alive. "Dawn, get me a mana potion."

She reached into my inventory and pulled out a blue bottle. Dawn fed me the mana and my bar shot back up. Ragespire's health bar was still only crawling up.

Sarah arrived with Randy and Garreth. "Who do I heal first?"

Ragespire pointed a weak finger at his mount. "Flicker."

Sarah didn't hesitate to act. She popped the lid on her waterskin of holding and withdrew the water within. Flowing the waters over Flicker, the horse began to heal before their eyes. While Sarah had been a slave for the Black Wolf guild she had discovered her ability to manipulate water. It began with simple things like moving it around, splitting parts of it, even warming and cooling it. Eventually, after she and her friends were forced to defend themselves from Goblins, Sarah learned to not only fight with her magic but heal others as well.

It was a lot more powerful than my Healing Hands.

Flicker let out a whiny and carefully pushed himself back to his feet. The horse shook its head and paced about slowly, like it was still hurt. But that was a good sign. Magical healing would patch someone up but the pain from wounds often lingered when it came to the more serious damage. I had learned that the hard way.

I grinned down at Ragespire. "Looks like we won't have to find out if Flicker will respawn with you or not."

"Thank the gods," Ragespire said.

Sarah moved on to the Captain and healed him. Between the two of us we were able to get him back in fighting shape, minus the broken armor currently scattering the crater around us. Sarah's



healing waters did more than heal Ragespire, however. they cleaned him off while they were at it. "There. All better."

Ragespire sat up with a grunt and noticed the few shocked faces staring at him from the newbies and the guards alike. Even Sarah couldn't help herself when she saw his face. "Thank you for the healing," he said, suddenly sounding much more self conscious than his normal, confident self. He turned to me and said. "I don't suppose you have a mask or a bag to cover this up with."

"Let me look," I said and dug through my inventory.

Sarah hung her head in shame. "Sorry I didn't mean to stare. I've never seen so many scars on anyone before."

Garreth cleared his throat. "It's quite alright, Captain. We were just shocked since you always wear your helmet. Quite frankly me and the boys were taking bets that you were actually a walking, talking skeleton in the king's service."

Ragespire shot him with a flat, unamused stare.

"W-what sir? You said no one needs the nightmares from seeing your face. I can't think of anything worse than spooky, scary, skeletons."

Randy nodded at his side. "They do send shivers down my spine."

Dawn snorted. "Guys, leave the good Captain alone. He's just barely come out of that fight alive."

I pulled out a burlap sack from my inventory. "Will this do, Captain?"

Ragespire snatched the bag out of my hands, stabbed a few holes in it with his knife then put it on.

"Now you just look like a scarecrow," Randy said, shuddering. "Your face isn't that bad to look at you know."

"I appreciate the effort but drop the subject," Ragespire said in a calm, collected voice. "Covering these scars up is as much for the sake of others as it is my own." He turned to face me. "I don't suppose you could fix my helmet could you, my lord?"

“My lord?” I chuckled. “You don’t have to call me that, Ryan is fine.”

“But I have sworn fealty to you,” Ragespire protested.

Dawn smiled at him. “We’re a little more relaxed here in Broken Bones.”

Ragespire sighed.

“Don’t worry, I think I can fix your helmet,” I said. “It’s the least I can do after you saved all our lives.” I walked up to the ledge of the pit and saw the smoldering carcass of the worgen. “But first, let’s loot this thing.”



## 16

Looting the wurgen we picked up all sorts of rare crafting materials. They synergized with lightning magic or defended against it and I couldn't wait to take it home and make something out of it. If I could get a glaive that amplified Shocker's damage, stun chance, or something else, that would be awesome. But that seemed to be where our luck ended.

The loot gods had not been kind to us in the equipment department. We had a few rare drops we distributed among the newbies based on rolls but that was it. There were no legendary or epic drops, just tons of crafting material. I suppose that wasn't terrible. Crafted gear was better than dropped loot provided you had the skills or knew someone who had them to make something out of quality materials. But after all the trouble we went through it would have been nice to see some quality gear drops.

What we did get was a ton of experience points. The newbies skills in Crossbows, Bows, Power Shot, Dodging, and more all spiked from surviving what amounted to certain death for a bunch of low level players. And the game rewarded them handsomely for it. They all shot up ten levels at least from killing the wurgen. The locals, being around level thirty, only gained a few levels.

Dawn, Hedwig, and I all gained six levels and I had increased several others. As we headed back to Bellmare I checked out all those notifications I ignored earlier.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your Healing Hands skill by +1. I can't believe any of that actually worked.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your trapper skill by +2. I can't believe any of that actually worked.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your leadership skill by +1. Really, what sane person followed you into this mess?**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your command skill by +1. Is this real life? People actually put their lives in your hands?**

I skimmed through the rest of the notifications as the AI kept blathering on about how it couldn't believe what just happened. It was hard to argue though. By all counts we should have all died in that mess if we looked at raw numbers. Luckily New Realm Online is a lot more about skill and the application of said skills. *And a metric ton of luck or two*, I reminded myself thinking back to all the times the wurgen could have killed us so hard the servers might have just perma killed us for being idiots. That probably wouldn't happen but it was probably fair in that circumstance.

Speaking of skills, I leveled up my riding skill by two thanks to the wurgen chasing us and my mounted combat climbed by one along with the Crossbow and Power Shot skills. It wasn't nearly as impressive as Dawn's gains with the bow but she did do most of the shooting.

With an increase of six levels, I had a total of eighteen points to distribute. The first thing I did was catch up wisdom and intelligence to my core stats. Three points went into intelligence and six into wisdom. The next six points I spread across strength, agility, and constitution. *Three points left*, I thought. With these new leadership and command skills it was probably a good idea to invest into charm. In most games those sort of skills were always amplified by that stat, so it would be helpful. Having been spending so much time dealing with NPCs, building up my reputation with them, and trying to establish trade routes while I journeyed, this would be a wise choice in the long run. But as a jack of all trades I couldn't help feeling that I was lagging far behind in the stat game compared to more focused players. *You can always train up your body and mind to make up for it*, I told myself and dropped the last three points into charm. It wasn't a stat I would heavily invest in but it was certainly harder to train than the others.

**Ryan Rosa Level 28 Druman Mystic Ranger**  
**Strength 32**

**Agility 32**

**Constitution 33**

**Intelligence 31**

**Wisdom 31**

**Charm 15**

Hedwig had another eighteen points I needed to take care of. Looking over his stats it seemed his agility had increased by three points in the time we'd been using him as a mount. Hedwig's strength also increased by one point and his constitution by three. *We've been pushing you hard with this wurgen hunt haven't we, boy?* The increases to wisdom and intelligence were the ones I couldn't figure out the source of. So I chalked it up to life experience. I brought agility up by six points and strength by three to match the new level of constitution to even Hedwig's attributes out. But Hedwig's main role was still to be a tank so I spent six points on constitution and the last three points on strength. That would lessen the burden of carrying us around for Hedwig and let him run much longer than before. All of which were important attributes for a battle mount. Not only did Hedwig have to get us into a fight but he had to have enough fuel left in the tank to finish the fight.

**Hedwig: Level 28 Oso**

**Strength 41**

**Agility 38**

**Constitution 44**

**Intelligence 16**

**Wisdom 16**

We arrived at Bellmare by the time I finished spreading points around. It was a bittersweet moment as the villagers celebrated the hard earned safety of their homes and mourned the loss of everyone who gave their lives for it. Ragespire shared the news he'd sworn fealty to me. He'd gotten more than a few strange looks for wearing a sack over his head but the villagers were quick to drop the subject when they heard the whole story. The people of Bellmare followed

Ragespire's lead, swearing to me or Broken Bones. With this the people of Bellmare were safe.

I paid for everyone's food and drink at the tavern before I went to work at the smith on fixing up Ragespire's armor. I had to take the whole thing apart to salvage what I could and haggle with Otis for materials but I had enough for my work.

Ragespire sat in the smith with me, watching me work.

"You know it's kind of creepy when you just sit there watching me right?" I asked.

"I am aware, my lord," Ragespire said. "But I prefer this to dealing with the villagers asking about my new headwear."

Lord was a title that would take some serious getting used to. While the villagers and most of the guards were quite happy to keep calling me Ryan or adventurer, Ragespire was adamant about maintaining proper etiquette. "Fair enough, Captain," I said as I prioritized working on his helmet first. I was lucky enough to pull the designs for Ragespire's armor when I salvaged it but my skill was lacking to say the least. "Sorry that my skills at the forge aren't great, next to the artisan who made your original set. It won't be as beautiful or powerful but it will definitely look better than that bag."

Ragespire nodded. "Lady Dawn has already assured me her runes will try to make up the difference. She picked up more than a few designs from the wurgen's corpse to help in that regard."

"Oh ya, I forgot about those," I said. Dawn picked up a rune of amplify shock, shock resistance, and swiftness in her share of the loot. After messing up the helmet's shape a couple of times I finally had a working piece. "So, are you sure you don't want to come back to Liberty with us?"

"Correct," he answered simply. "Placing all of your eggs in one basket is asking for disaster, my lord. While my presence would be of great aid to you in the event of a defense, abandoning the town of Bellmare leaves it and all of its resources for someone else to take."

"Bullferos leather is pretty good for armor," I agreed. "But we don't have a lot of people to defend a lot of territory. Holding on to

Liberty if it is found will be challenging enough for us.”

“Which is exactly why you are building alliances,” Ragespire said.

“I am?” I asked as I finished the helmet. The visor worked and Ragespire’s red plumes, charred as they were, were back in their rightful place.

“You are starting small, admittedly,” Ragespire chuckled. “But that is exactly what you are doing. I heard tales of what you did in Cedar Springs and Blackmoss. You may not have earned any oaths of fealty there but you earned those people’s trust, their willingness to trade. Those are valuable assets in a war.”

“True.” I handed off the helmet to Ragespire and got to work on the rest of his armor. “But it takes more than good logistics to win a war. We need people.” The thought of actually participating in the guild wars in our state wasn’t something I was excited about. On numbers alone we were going to be wiped off the face of the map, even with Liberty’s walls. As soon as we got home we were going to have to train up the newbies we saved to make up for that. Hopefully by that time Dwayne has some good news for us regarding his ballista designs.

“Which is why I urge you to seek like minded allies, my lord.” Ragespire tossed aside the burlap sack and visibly relaxed the second his helmet was firmly placed on his head. “Surely there must be others like you in the world.”

“Gideon is the only one we’ve met but he’s only one man,” I answered. Then an idea popped into my mind. “But we haven’t checked the forums about any of this yet.”

“Forums?” Ragespire asked.

“Sorry, adventurer things, hard to explain,” I said and quickly sent Karen a message to dig around the forums for guilds sharing our mindset.

*Good call, Ryan,* she replied almost immediately. *I’ve been so busy focusing on the grind it never occurred to me to look for friendly guilds out there.*



I smiled at Ragespire. "My people are working on finding those other guilds now. Thanks for the advice."

"I still don't understand what a forum is," Ragespire said.

Taking a breath I put together the best explanation I could. "Think of it like a magical notice board where adventurers can discuss various topics. Someone makes a post, someone else replies to them, and you can always come back to check up on it later without losing track of the conversation... Usually." I remembered far too many times when a forum post blew up and I couldn't even find my own in the sea of replies.

"Sounds like a great means of sharing information. You adventurers really are blessed," Ragespire said.

"So, how is the new helmet?" I asked with a grin.

"Fitting," Ragespire answered simply. "It fits more comfortably but it lacks the flare of the old one."

"Give me a couple of dozen levels in armorsmithing and I'll get you an even better set of armor than your old one," I said, eagerly getting to work.

Ragespire laughed. "I will hold you to that promise, my lord."

**Congratulations hero! You have improved your armor smithing skill by +2. Maybe whoever you made this for will get as lucky as you did with that wurgen fight.**

I groaned at the AI as I finished my work on Ragespire and his mount, Flicker's, armor. Dawn picked up the finishing details with her rune smithing and we spent the rest of the day preparing for our journey back to Liberty.

At first light we were off on our journey north. The locals decided to remain, but thanks to their fealty they would be safe from death. I aimed to secure the roads between Bellmare, Liberty, Blackmoss, and Cedar Springs in the future to make sure the fallen NPC could return to their homes but as it was we had a problem.

Sneaking a wagon full of newbies with low level sneaking skills through enemy territory was a mess. By the time we approached Galford we had encountered at least a dozen scouting and hunting

parties. Most belonged to the Blackhearts, which was odd. We were closer to Braven territory. Dawn and I picked off any stragglers we could to clear the path but something was off.

The closer we came to Mara the less patrols we encountered and still they were mostly Blackhearts.

“Randy, Sarah, can I trust you guys to take charge here?” I asked.

Sarah nodded. “Of course, but where are you going?”

I took Hedwig away from the wagon, leaving two other newbies to pull it along. “This forest should be full of Braven players but it’s practically deserted. Something had to happen in Mara and I need to find out what.”

Randy gave me a thumbs up. “Got it. We can handle wagon duty. We just follow the markers on the map you gave us, right?”

“That’s right,” Dawn said. “Don’t be afraid to leave the path if you see something suspicious. If any of you die out here you’ll respawn back at Bellmare and it’s a long trip back on your own through high level mob territory.”

Randy gulped. “Right. We’ll do our best.”

Hedwig, with his heightened senses, took the lead toward Mara. Dawn held her bow at the ready and I went for my crossbow. If we could avoid any confrontation we would but I’d rather keep my distance in this situation.

There were more patrols from the Braven here. One or two guards at a time, sometimes with a pet wolf or dog. It was nothing serious but we couldn’t start taking pot shots at them. A death deep in the woods was easy enough to excuse away, but one right next to the walls was a sure sign of trouble. I didn’t need the Braven to know we were lurking around them.

The low growl of a wolf was pointed in our direction.

“What is it, boy?” Asked the ranger beside him.

“Hide,” I whispered to Dawn.

Thanks to the afternoon sun we had no shortage of shadows to blend into. I activated Shadows Lover and blended right in. Dawn did the same but Hedwig had no such skill. The huge oso wriggled his way down into a pile of bushes and shrubbery that sort of hid his enormous body. I could only hope the wolf didn't catch his scent.

They approached cautiously and I took the time to scan them down.

**Warwick: Level 30 Wolf**

**Lena: Level 30 Ranger**

They weren't that much higher than us in level. We could take them in an instant but how much time would we have before the Braven were up in arms? It was a chance I didn't want to take.

The wolf approached Dawn's position first and sniffed curiously at the tree. Warwick cocked his head a few times like something was off.

Lena walked around the tree then glanced around. I could see Dawn as plain as day but we were in the same party and using the same skill. I knew what to look for. Someone who didn't have a high enough perception skill would only see a shadow.

"Is something wrong, Warwick?" Lena asked.

Warwick huffed and moved on to the bushes where Hedwig was hidden. With a low growl he pointed at the bush.

I held my breath. *Don't move a muscle*, I sent through party chat, hoping Lena wouldn't notice a thing.

Lena leaned toward the bushes, taking out a spear and prodding cautiously at the bush. Hedwig's health didn't drop a bit and the oso remained as quiet as a mouse.

Warwick continued to growl at Hedwig in the bushes but he was a very well-trained wolf. Without a clear threat or command from his master Warwick held his ground.

Luckily Lena hadn't noticed anything. "It's just a rock, Warwick. A stinky rock." She coughed. "Something big must have passed through here."

Warwick let out a dismayed grunt and moved toward me. I hugged the tree tight with my crossbow at the ready. The wolf circled me, sniffing at the ground. He growled and let out a quiet bark. I inched my crossbow toward the wolf's head when Warwick raised his leg.

He pissed on my boots.

I clenched my teeth and held my breath waiting for the damn dog to finish his business. I wasn't the only one.

"Seriously, Warwick?" Lena groaned. "You make all this noise and drama just to mark your territory again? I swear you're just like my real dogs."

Warwick finished his business and wiped his feet on the forest floor. He returned to Lena with a happy bark.

Lena pouted at the wolf with a narrowed gaze. She broke into a smile and crouched down to cup Warwick's face. "You're lucky you're so damn cute or I wouldn't put up with your antics. Let's get back on patrol before one of the other guard dogs offend your territory."

Warwick barked and hopped back to the patrol.

We waited a few minutes for them to walk off then broke out of stealth.

"Grooooss," I groaned, trying to shake my boots clean.

Dawn laughed quietly. "Does that make you Warwick's bitch now?"

I stared daggers at her.

Hedwig waddled over and offered to correct the issue.

My hands never moved faster in my life. I pushed Hedwig's leg back down. "No. Stop it. Bad Hedwig."

Hedwig let out an amused chuff and waddled over to Dawn for head pats, which she gave happily. "Come on, we have a wall to climb."

We reached Mara shortly after and found the wall to be shockingly low on guards. A couple of players now and then wandered by but it seemed the Braven preferred their patrols to

serve as an early warning system. It was a good thing we didn't shoot Lena and her wolf.

"There's a gap over there," Dawn said. "It looks like left over damage from a battle."

"Ours?" I asked, remembering the Blackhearts used mages to try breaking down our walls and gates.

Dawn shrugged. "We can make our way through there or try climbing."

"I have rope but no grappling hooks," I said. "We should really make some. Lu would love them."

Dawn chuckled. "We should've brought her for this."

I glanced at the gap in the wall. There was a guard nearby but he was fast asleep in his seat. He must have been from a different timezone. "Stay here Hedwig and be ready to come pick us up if anything happens."

Hedwig gave a quiet chuff of acknowledgement.

I waved for Dawn to follow me in. The dash across the clearing was the tensest minute I've had all trip. At any second I was expecting arrows and shouts to rain down on us but the Braven didn't notice us.

We did, however, notice shouting toward the town center.

*Is someone giving a speech?* I asked Dawn.

*Sounds like it.*

I pushed on ahead through the town, creeping into every dark alley I could find. Shadow's Lover was getting a workout through this little mission. The town was devoid of life outside of Braven guild members. Thanks to our help Gideon was able to evacuate the locals before the Braven could sink their claws into them. The town, even as a starting zone for players, was a strategic location for any guild to hold. It was right at the center of all the world's major kingdoms and it had bountiful resources all around it, gorro bacon being my favorite of course. From Mara, any guild with enough manpower could control trade and maybe even access to the other kingdoms.

Unfortunately the town had seen better days. Without the village stone Mara was in a state of disrepair and it seemed the Braven either lacked the resources or the know-how to restore or improve it. That was bad for them but good for us. I fully intended to take Mara back and the battered state of the town gave us an edge in a siege scenario. Through all of our sneaking I made sure to note every single breach in the walls, every bit of lax defenses, and every important building that hadn't collapsed under its own weight.

I froze when we laid eyes on the town center.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of Braven were tightly packed together as a man stood upon a gallows with a dozen dead NPCs hanging behind him.

**Mike: Level 41, Death Knight**

"Well you've certainly moved up in the world, asshole," I muttered under my breath.

"Who is he?" Dawn asked.

"One of the guys who spawn camped me for my sword," I answered.

Straining an ear, I was able to make out Mike's speech through the crowd. "...And so it is with great pleasure that I reveal the names of those responsible for our new town's ruined state. The Broken Bones guild."

The crowd erupted in boos and jeers.

"Yes, those assholes cost us valuable NPC labor and the village stone. And since none of you chuckle fucks have taken to the construction skill we have no choice but to hunt them down and this Gideon if we hope to cement our claim," Mike continued. "And a little birdie told us just where to look."

"No," I whispered as the crowd erupted in cheers.

"How did I find out you might ask? One of their parties strayed a little too far from home and the idiot swinging around two shields couldn't out run our scouts."

"Damn it they got Cam," Dawn hissed.

*Cam where are you?* I asked in a private message.

*Back home why?* Cam replied quickly.

I sighed in relief. *Did you get caught by the Braven?*

Cam didn't respond.

"What a loser!" shouted a voice from the crowd.

"Who the hell uses dual shields?" demanded another.

"Right?" Mike agreed with his audience. "After a bit of—let's call it aggressive questioning—I discovered the Broken Bones have been living it up at a mountain to the north. They've built themselves a little town named Liberty with an exceedingly valuable mine."

The crowd erupted in excited whoops and hollers at the prospect of new lands to claim for the Braven.

*They tortured you for information didn't they?* If this had been over voice there would have been a growl to accompany those words.

*Yeah...* Cam admitted. *I'm sorry. They were going to catch us all so I threw myself at the Braven to save the others.*

Taking a deep breath I replied, *Relax. The guilds were going to find us sooner or later. You did the right thing defending the others. But why didn't anyone tell me this happened?*

*Terry didn't want us to tell you. He said if we told you before you saved Betty you would drop everything to come save us,* Cam said. *I tried to keep quiet, honest. But the things they did to me... I thought it was better for you to save Betty and those players than worry about me. I'm really sorry I messed everything up, Ryan, I really am.*

*Don't worry, Cam. We're going to pay these assholes back,* I said then relayed the information to Dawn.

"They did what?" she whisper-shouted. "I am going to murder every last one of—"

I held a finger to my lips before her rising voice was noticed by the Braven. Scanning through the crowd, the lowest level among them was in the mid twenties. On the high end they had thirties with a rare few approaching forty. Mike was the highest level of them all

along with the rest of his friends from the day they ambushed me. Karen, the uncool one, Todd, and Dave. They were all around level forty-one with far more advanced classes. Karen had become a Dark Priestess, Todd a Black Mage, and Dave was a Shadow Assassin. These four alone were going to be a problem.

“You have one week to prepare for the siege,” Mike shouted over the crowd. “The number of scouts we have lost to the Broken Bones guild suggest they are no strangers to PvP and I will not have the Braven lose to a bunch of cripples. Am I understood?”

The crowd roared.

“Grind, farm, get that loot, get those levels. Only through your dedication can the glorious Braven expand their territory,” Mike continued. “The pro guilds may think they’re hot shit now but we were here first, and we’ll show them who owns New Realm Online.”

That earned another roar from the crowd. I decided it was time to go.

Dawn and I snuck back out of town. With the cheering and now drinking going on behind us the Braven were too busy to notice us skulking through. We rushed back to meet up with Hedwig and get as far away from Mara as we could.

“A bunch of cripples? A bunch of cripples!” Dawn shouted indignantly as soon as she felt safe. “Can you believe that asshole?”

I just laughed at her outrage.

“Why are you laughing? This isn’t funny, Ryan,” Dawn snapped.

I placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled. “I’m laughing because a bunch of cripples are going to kick his ass up and down the mountain chain, Dawn. And that guy just laid out a mountain of salt to rub in his wounds.”

Dawn stared at me, dumbfounded.

“Braven may have numbers and levels on us but we have skills, crafters, and a great defensible position. With a week to prepare we can plan, scheme, and grind harder than them. We can turn the tables on them and beat them so hard we might even be able to



push straight on through to Mara,” I said with a growing fire in my voice.

Dawn laughed at me. “You’re insane.”

“Love you too, Dawn,” I shot back with a cheeky grin.

She shook her head. “Then we better hurry back home. We have a lot of catching up to do and only a week to do it.”

*Dwayne we’re coming home in a hurry,* I sent via private message. *You better have some good news for me.*

Dwayne replied shockingly quickly, *Do you want the good or the bad first?*

*Let's hear the good,* I replied to Dwayne. I needed it after what I just saw in Mara.

*The good news is I have one prototype working, the heavy repeating crossbow,* Dwayne said.

*I thought the ballista was the easier project to work on,* I said.

Dawn and I rushed through the forest to get back to the wagon. Randy and the others had covered a lot of ground while we were out scouting.

*Yeah... Turns out that was a lie. My first couple of prototypes ended up breaking. First it was the arms, another time the rope. The loading mechanism works fine but getting the tension we need just right is proving harder than I thought.*

*You'll get it, Dwayne. I believe in you,* I said.

*Thanks. Anyway, are you ready for the bad news?* Dwayne asked.

*After the day I've had it can't be that bad,* I sent.

*Tasar spotted a Braven raiding party heading our way,* Dwayne said. *There's about twenty of them, all thirties and up. Looks like they mean business.*

I didn't think I could be so wrong in my life. But here we were. Damn. Okay here's the plan. We reached the wagon and I quickly signaled for everyone to follow me.

After explaining the situation to everyone, I continued my conversation with Dwayne. *Get Tasar and the acolytes to set up counter raids against the Braven. Everyone else needs to get behind the walls and ready for a fight.*

*Already done,* Dwayne said. *It was the first thing Terry suggested when he found out.*

I smiled at that. Terry may have withheld important information from me for Betty's sake, but he still had Liberty's best interest in

mind. Good. We're going to come in from the rear with a bunch of newbies. We won't be the greatest fighting force in the world but I've picked up a few new tricks in my little adventure. Oh and get the rest of my party to meet us.

Got it. Uhm. Who's all in your party again? Dwayne asked.

Cam, Lu, and Terry. We never made it an official thing but I liked those guys and the way we worked together. If they can catch up to us without arousing any suspicion, all the better.

Done.

Oh! And one last thing. Keep that prototype of yours under wraps unless we absolutely need it. The Braven don't need to know we have that trick up our sleeves just yet. Something as important as that weapon was an ace up our sleeve we needed to save for the Braven's siege.

This is some Sun Tzu thing isn't it? Dwayne asked.

I never read the book. So sure? I sent. Talk to you later Dwayne.

Stay safe out there, Ryan.

Pulling up my map I saw the blue dots of my fellow Broken Bones guild members scattering across the woods. The green represented myself and anyone in my immediate party. When Tasar's dot approached a thick patch of woods, a mass of red appeared on the map. It was the Braven raiding party. At the speed we were going we were another ten, twenty minutes away but they'd hear the wagon coming long before we were in position.

I pointed at a heavily shadowed patch of the forest. "Stash the wagon there and cover it up," I whispered to the group of newbies pulling. "We're going to hit the Braven from behind, hard and fast. Don't give them the time to react or see you, got it?"

The newbies all nodded.

"Got it." Randy raised his Stabby Whacker over his head.

Ryan, are you there? It's me, Lu, she said over the guild chat as if her name wasn't tagged on every message.

I am. What's going on, Lu?

*Tasar's here with me so I'm just going to say whatever he says, okay?* Lu said then immediately carried on. *The Braven force is here. I see them trampling through the woods as carelessly as stampeding cattle. These appear to be warriors sent to test our defenses but their formation is... unusual.*

*Unusual how?* I asked.

Lu took a moment to respond with Tasar's update. *They have one rider with a hammer. Several rangers and rogues, a few mages and a priest. There is also one oddity among them. A man in dark armor with an absurd sword and shield.*

Grimacing, I thought back to the Braven party Dawn and I saw on our way out of Liberty. *That guy doesn't happen to be called Tarkus does he?*

*Actually, yes. Do you know him?* Lu asked.

Shaking my head I sighed. *We saw him on our way out. He apparently took out an iron golem by throwing it off the side of a tower. That guy's going to be trouble.*

*He certainly sounds like it!*

*Give me and my people a moment to get in position,* I said.

*Gotcha, Ryan,* Lu agreed.

My band of brave little newbies and I rushed to position behind the Braven lines. They were, for the most part, relaxed. The rangers and rogues had their eyes and ears open, the lead man on the horse sat his hammer on his shoulder. They looked like they were out for a pleasant stroll in the woods rather than an invading force. In the middle of the formation one figure towered above the rest. It was Tarkus and his party. They were the highest levels around.

### **Tarkus, Level 36, Black Iron Knight**

Just as the first time I saw him he wore dark plate armor and hefted around a tower shield about as big as he was. It was thick metal, the type I seriously doubted anything short of Dwayne's ballista was going to have a chance of breaking through. Then there was that ridiculously oversized sword he carried around. It was

easily a greatsword and the flat head of the sword suggested it was designed specifically to cleave through targets.

### **Nayla, Level 35, Priestess**

No specific kind of priestess? Just a priestess? That's a little underwhelming, I thought.

She was in white and red robes with an intricate pattern. Rather than a staff, she carried a heavy book on her hanging off a chain from her hip. The book was probably some sort of magic catalyst for her class but if it wasn't, it looked more than heavy enough to cause some serious blunt force trauma.

### **Cylas, Level 35, Giant Hunter**

Somehow I felt this name belonged more to Tarkus than Cylas if their story was to be believed. After all, Tarkus was the one who killed the giant. That didn't seem to matter much as out of all the rangers in the party Cylas was the one with the biggest bow. It was a greatbow and the arrows resembled spears or lances more than arrows.

"Are you sure we can take them?" Sarah asked with a hushed whisper. "Those guys look really tough."

"We can take them," I promised. *Is everyone ready?*

My group spread out across the woods. Sarah, Randy, and Dawn stuck with me and Hedwig. Their confirmations filled up my chat screen.

Lu, time to cause a little chaos.

Smoke ripped across the air, catching mages, rogues and rangers in the face before detonating. Thick clouds of smoke erupted on impact, covering the forest in a white haze. Panicked shouts broke out as the Braven scattered out of the clouds in complete disarray.

"Calm down you idiots," Tarkus roared over the chaos but the Braven didn't listen.

Sarah caught the first one to come our way with a jet of water from her waterskin. Randy finished him off with furious stabs from his spear. Off to our right the newbies picked off weakly armored mages

and priests with concentrated salvos of crossbow fire. It seemed the training and the fight against the worgen had taught them teamwork.

Those who made it through were ambushed by sword and spear-wielding newbies with rare weapons from the worgen. While the skill and level difference was absurd between them, all it took was one slip up for the Braven to fall to the electric touch of those weapons and collapse. On our left our newbies broke as they ran face first into the fighter core of the group.

I watched as our brave little newbies were thrown across the battlefield and cut down. One hit was all it took to send them dangerously deep into the red. At this rate we were going to lose our left flank in seconds and have to go back to Bellmare to retrieve everyone's bodies.

I couldn't sit and watch. I hurled a hunting spear through a fighter's head. "Hedwig!"

My shout caught the attention of the fighters but it was already too late for them. Hedwig darted past me and I hauled myself onto his back, catching another fighter through the chest with my spear before drawing my glaive. I held it out just as Captain Ragespire held his lance. The fighter in our path turned to flee screaming and I ran him through before tossing him aside.

Experience notifications were filling up the corner of my vision but I dismissed them for now. As Hedwig waded into the middle of the fighter formation I jumped off his back and threw myself at another fighter. This one batted me away with his shield and threw me against a wall. Hedwig was too busy mauling another warrior and the poor mage who thought it was a good idea to get between an oso and his meal. Scrambling to my feet I drew my own shield to parry an incoming sword. It was perfectly timed. The fighter was left wide open and I drove my glaive, infused with Shocker, right through his gut. The fighter clutched at my glaive, trying to fight me for control even as his body spasmed. Rather than play his game I released the glaive and drew my dagger, slashing his throat open and ending our fight.

I turned in time to see a roaring berserker flying through the air at me with twin axes. Three arrows slammed into his side at once. Power Shots. Dawn blasted him out of the air and into a tree before pincushioning the man into it. "You should watch your back more, Ryan," she grinned at me.

"Thanks." I pulled out my glaive from the dead fighter and turned to face another group of fighters.

They were stronger and faster than me. Their stats in strength and agility combined with their numbers pushed me back across the woods, leaving me no openings to retaliate. My skills made up the difference in droves but it was only enough to keep me alive.

A spiked ball shot through the forest haze, smashing an axe swinging fighter in the gut. The rest were bound up in thick vines sprouting from the ground.

"We're coming Ryan," Terry shouted.

By the time I turned to see where they were coming from, Cam bulldozed through with his dual shields, flattening the bound fighters. They didn't get a chance to react before he drove his shield edges down on their skulls.

"Glad to have you back, Ryan," Cam said. His voice still soft, timid, but with an edge to it that wasn't there before.

I patted his arm. "Glad to be back, Cam. How's the armor treating you?"

"Great actually," Cam said. "I lost the helmet when that Mike guy killed me though."

"I'll make you a new one," I smiled and turned back to focus on the fight.

Terry used his healing to patch up the newbies and buff everyone's max health and regeneration. Using his vines over and over, he provided us the openings we needed to take on a tougher foe. Cam had fallen into his role as a tank like a fish took to water. He focused on taunting the Braven players to focus their attention on him and defended the newbies. His shields may not have made for

great weapons but breaking his defenses was nigh impossible with the support he was getting.

Lu was off being a ninja. One second a mage was about to cast a massive spell. The next, they found themselves filled with throwing stars. Lu appeared for only the briefest moment to collect her weapons before vanishing back up into the trees. The only hint of her position and movements were the falling leaves before she struck again. I couldn't help feeling she needed the Jaws theme song to follow her around.

A sharp neigh pulled my attention as the Braven's rider came charging at me. He rode on a powerfully built horse. It looked like a clydesdale but it was much faster. The brown and blond horse sped past me, spinning me as I narrowly avoided it and the hammer swinging past my nose.

### **Lord Smashington, Level 31, Shock Cavalry**

Shock cavalry seemed like a fitting class name. With a horse that big and bulky he'd give Hedwig a run for his money when it came to plowing through a crowd. The heavy armor he wore and that hammer weren't screwing around either. I shot Smashington in the chest with my crossbow but it all bounced off.

"Damn boy, you're thick," I commented as I reloaded.

Smashington turned around, readying his hammer. "What can I say? I know what the ladies like."

"That is really bad for trash talk," I raised my crossbow to fire again.

The bolt skated off the side of his helmet.

He pointed at me and said with all the determination in the world. "I'm working on it." He charged me once more.

I dropped my crossbow for my shield and tried to block. The blow threw me across the forest floor and my shield... I had no idea where that went but the strap was still in my hand. I pocketed the strap and drew my glaive but not before I had to roll out of the way of another charge. Dawn peppered Smashington with her arrows. Her much more focused build allowed them to punch through his armor, but it



wasn't enough to slow him down. Smashington came for another pass.

"Ryan get out of the way," Randy shouted. He wound back with his Stabby Smasher and a group of newbies behind him.

I had no idea what he was planning but I wasn't going to argue. I dove out of the way as the stabby spear sailed past my head. It wedged itself deep in the tree next to me and the vine rope hung slack across the floor.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"Pull!" Randy said as Smashington rode by.

The vine rope went taut with all the newbies pulling on it at once and Smashington's horse clipped the line. With a pained neigh the horse crashed to the floor, flinging Smashington head first into a tree.

"Nice one, Randy," Sarah praised.

I couldn't believe that worked, though it snapped the rope off of Randy's weapon. "Thanks, Randy." Was all I could think to say before I ran over to Smashington. His armor was too thick with too little gaps for my glaive to exploit. Smashington's hammer was right there though.

Hefting the heavy weapon up I took careful aim for Smashington's head as he rolled over.

"Aw man, seriously?" Smashington coughed.

"Seriously." I swung the hammer down with all my might.

"Not cool," was all Smashington got to say before I turned his head into a crater.

The sound of fighting around us was dying down and the smoke started to clear. "Was that everyone?" I asked

"Looks like it," Dawn said.

"Nice fight," Tarkus praised, standing at the center of the clearing smoke, surrounded by a golden-white sphere of energy. It was a shield dome Nayla was projecting. "And to do so with a bunch of little newbies. Color me impressed."

"Tarkus, quit playing with your food," Nayla said.

Cylas laughed. "Come on, you gotta admit that was pretty awesome."

Nayla sighed. "Yes, but now they're going to kill us."

"Do you really have such little faith in me as a tank, Nayla? Because that's really hurtful," Tarkus said. He tapped his fist to his chest. "It hits me right here. In all one of my manly man feelings."

I stepped up to the sphere of light. "Why didn't you three do anything to help your guild?"

"Because they're undisciplined idiots," Nayla said. "They violated my strict policy of don't do anything stupid or I'm going to let you die."

Tarkus gestured at her with his head. "What she said. If they had listened and formed up you wouldn't have been able to pick us off one by one. That won't happen with us."

"Are we really going to wipe the floor with these newbies though?" Cylas asked. "Like I get this Ryan guy he's twenty-eight and the other higher level players but those little ones are only in their low teens."

"Yeah that's not cool, or fun. You can tell your newbies to leave," Tarkus said. "I'm not interested in them."

I opened my mouth to speak then closed it and looked back to Randy and Sarah. "Well you heard him guys. Get out of here. Make sure you're clear before you take the Wagon to liberty."

"Okay, Ryan," Sarah said and ran off. The other newbies exchanged confused glances then ran away.

"So how do you want to do this?" I asked. "All of us against you or party vs party?"

"All of you at once of course," Tarkus said. "But I gotta ask. What exactly did you do to piss off our guild?"

"Us?" Dawn scoffed. "We didn't do anything. They came in to murder and enslave the NPCs there like every other guild does."

Nayla sighed. "Oh no the virtual denizens of a virtual world with poorly written dialogue are suffering. Spare me the sob story."

Cylas leaned over to Nayla. "You should really stop skipping the quest text. The NPCs are actually really cool."

"I'm too busy with school work to bother," Nayla said. "This is my time off to do whatever and I want to hit level cap before Mike and his merry band of ass hats."

"Cylas does have a point," I said. "The NPCs in this world are like living, breathing people. If you took the time to talk to them you'd see it."

"Maybe some other time, kid. I have another... hour or two to burn before I have to study for an exam so if we could move this right along I'd appreciate it." Nayla shot me the most forced smile I had ever seen in my life.

Tarkus chuckled. "So then you're fighting to protect the NPCs and your players. That's a noble little role play guild thing."

"Your guild taking issue with a bunch of medi pod players doesn't really help our relationship," I added.

Tarkus stabbed his sword into the ground and leaned forward. "Hold up. What do you mean we take issue with medi pod players?"

This was an interesting reaction. "Ya. We were just in Mara snooping around our old stomping grounds. Mike said something along the lines of, 'not losing to a bunch of cripples.' Then the crowd went wild."

Cylas blinked. "Wait you're telling me all you guys are medi pod players?"

Dawn nodded. "Broken Bones is almost exclusively medi pod players. But the newbies we freed from the Black Wolf guild have plenty of regular players they enslaved."

"Mother fu—" Tarkus growled. "I knew Mike liked to push people's buttons but what the actual hell, man? That's not cool, not cool at all."

Nayla shook her head. "And that asshole knows your brother's suffering from cerebral palsy too. I bet he talks all kinds of nonsense behind people's backs too."

Lu hung down from a nearby tree like Spiderman, using her kusari-fundo. "So are we not doing the whole fighting you to the death thing?"

Tarkus tore his sword out of the ground and sat it on his shoulder. "Really not in the mood for it anymore." He huffed. "Not because I don't want to fight a bunch of medi pod players. You guys are clearly capable. But I have to check if this is true."

"Go ahead and ask around in Mara," I said. "A ton of people heard it."

"Come on guys, let's go," Tarkus said as he stepped out of the shield.

"You know we're still surrounded by hostiles, right?" Nayla said.

Cylas laughed. "Come on, Nayla. Relax. It's just a game."

I received more than one concerned message and glance from my people. "Let them through."

"Thanks, Ryan," Tarkus said. He stopped as he walked past me. "Oh and if you want to duel or something later I'd love to take you on. You and your people have some interesting moves." He held up his fist to me with his sword in hand.

I tapped my knuckles to his, amazed this didn't devolve into another fight. Tarkus sent me a friend request at the same time and walked off.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your charisma by +1. There's a future for you in hostage negotiations.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your wisdom by +1. Sometimes it's better to keep your spear sheathed, am I right newb?**

**Braven raid party defeated. 25000 exp earned.**

We just stood there, watching Tarkus's party walk away.

"Was that really a smart idea?" Dawn asked.

"Killing them would only slow them down," Tasar said. "Like all adventurers they will only respawn."

“Yeah but we could scare them if we beat them hard enough,” Dawn insisted.

“Somehow I doubt he’s that kind of player,” I said. “Hopefully we can see them again on better terms. That Tarkus guy is alright.”

“Ugh but that Nayla chick needs to unwad her panties,” Dawn groaned.

“Cylas seemed okay,” Cam commented. “All of them see this world as a game but I think he gets it.”

Tasar tapped my shoulder. “What exactly did you all mean by a game?”

A nervous laugh escaped me. “Oh... right. Uhm. You caught that didn’t you?”

Tasar nodded with a raised brow.

“So uh... yeah. I don’t mean to play down the importance of your life or the life of any of the locals here in this world but.” I paused for a breath. “Us adventurers aren’t from this world. We access this one through computers and medi pods as a game called New Realm Online.”

Tasar’s confusion only grew on his calm face. “I do not know what any of these things are.”

“Think of them as magic devices. The computer helps us do a lot of work, research, and access vast quantities of knowledge. It also lets us play games. Sort of like going to a different world and experiencing another life, adventure, or something of the sort,” I tried my best to explain. “Medi pods are like that except rather than accessing this world through a screen we are fully immersed in the world. As far as my mind is concerned this whole world around us is just as real as the world we came from.”

Tasar gave a slow nod. “So these computers are like books but interactive? That is fascinating. But what was this about dire wounds you mentioned? You and the rest of the Broken Bones guild look fine to me.”

Dawn gave Tasar a warm smile. “We aren’t in the real world. We’re all suffering from pretty serious conditions. And our world

doesn't have magic. We only have alchemy and other, more painful techniques for medical treatment.”

“Ya,” I said. “In our world we can’t fix our bodies but we were given medi pods so we could live in this one. But I have to admit, I never expected it to be so wonderful and life-like. I actually have a hard time wanting to go back to the real world.”

Tasar clasped my shoulder. “We would miss you if you did, Ryan. But please, stop referring to this world as a game. We live, we breathe, and die in this world. That may not be the case for those of us who swore fealty to you, but for the others, actions in this world have very real consequences.”

I nodded at Tasar. “Don’t worry, I learned that early and I make sure to share that with everyone I can.” Even calling our reality the real world was probably wrong when conversing with an NPC. To them this was as real as it gets.

“Good. Now what is it you would like us to do about this information?” Tasar asked, gesturing to the other NPCs who came out to help.

“Do whatever you like with it,” I said. “This may be a game world to us but we’re trying to make our lives here. We want to work side by side with the people of this world and help each other out.” I gave him a tight smile. “I know the others might take offense to this revelation but I promise you it changes nothing for us.”

“Very well. We will call it an open secret,” Tasar said. “I will not spread the word nor will I hide it. You and your people have been more than kind to us thus far, Ryan. I expect the others to handle this news with a calm head.”

“I hope so,” I smiled at him. “Let’s loot this place and head home. We have a week to prepare before the Braven show up with a lot more people.”

“Define a lot,” Tasar asked.

Dawn waved a hand through the air. “A few hundred, maybe a thousand-ish.”

Tasar’s eyes shot wide. “By the gods.”



Finally, we returned to Liberty. The town hadn't grown much since Dawn and I left but there were a few new houses here and there, but nothing major.

As we strolled through the town I gave the newbies a quick tour of the place letting them know where they needed to go. "So if you want to be an archer and even an Acolyte of Lilac, Dawn's your girl. Rune smithing too but you already knew that. Fighting and smithing? Go see Voz. Tasar here is great for getting to grips with stealth and wood working. Dwayne is fantastic for weapon smithing, construction, and general engineering and tinkering. And..." I trailed off tapping my chin. "I'm pretty sure I'm missing more people right now."

Dawn smiled. "Don't worry about it. Our brave little newbies can figure it out on their own."

There were nods and rumbles of agreement from the crowd. "Great. I want all of you to take the time to figure out what you want to do now that you're here and part of Broken Bones, then I want you to start grinding hard. We only have a week to prepare for the Braven to attack us so things are going to be a lot rougher than I'd like for all of you."

"That's alright, Ryan," Randy said. "Learning to deal with tough situations is the whole reason I'm here."

Sarah leaned over him. "I thought it was because of your injuries."

Randy laughed. "Well if I had told those jerk faces 'no' I probably wouldn't be hurt so badly in the first place. But since I can't do anything about those guys I'll focus on the jerks I can deal with. Those Braven punks."

Sarah nodded.



“So where’s Dwayne at? I’d like to help him with making weapons,” Randy asked excitedly.

“Probably at the blacksmith shop. That’s where he usually hangs out since it doubles as our tinkering workshop,” I said. “I actually need to see him later but first I need to find Nico. I need to know how the town’s doing and how we should spend our points.” Technically, I could just pull up the interface and see for myself how many points we had available to use but no one knew this town better than Nico. Where my plan would be to build the biggest and strongest walls we could possibly afford, she might know of other options I didn’t.

Randy waved. “Okay, Ryan. See you later!” He ran off in the opposite direction of the blacksmith’s shop.

I laughed. “Should we tell him?”

Dawn grinned. “He’ll figure it out.”

The group split up and I headed for the inn where I found Nico sitting at a table with Voz, having what smelled suspiciously like roasted chicken for lunch.

“Ryan! How was the trip?” Voz beamed.

Sitting down across from them. I replied with a smile. “It was a trip. Lots of adventure, fantastic loot. We even made some new friends and allies. Oh, and trade routes if we can retake Mara but that’s a problem for the future.”

Nico’s gaze narrowed. “That sounds like there is a problem for the present.”

“Yes, well soon enough. We had a little run in with our nearby friends on our way back to the village.”

Voz grunted. “The Braven.”

“Yup and there are hundreds of them,” I answered.

Nico’s jaw tightened. “But I thought Dwayne said there was only a small force coming after us, not a whole guild.”

“We intercepted that party and dealt with them. Luckily their strongest players weren’t interested in fighting. But it was still tough. It was a force about thirty strong with no one lower than level thirty.”

I ran a hand through my hair as I thought back on the recent fight. “The way our ambush went we were able to win that battle with all our newbies and the reinforcements from Liberty. We almost lost half our newbies in that fight and if that happened we would have had to go all the way back to Bellmare to pick them up. But that is nothing compared to what is coming.”

Nico exchanged a concerned glance with Voz. “How long do we have to prepare ourselves?”

“A week,” I said. “Which is why I wanted to talk to you. How are we doing on points for Liberty?”

Nico nodded. “We’re closing up on fifty-thousand points. With our growing population that should be enough to expand our walls to allow new homes to be built within our perimeter and upgrade to sturdier wooden walls.”

“What if we skipped the expansion?” I asked. “Would that be enough to upgrade us to stone walls?”

Nico shook her head sadly. “We would need several thousand more after the first upgrade to make up the difference. A week just isn’t enough time for it.”

Frowning, I asked, “Would the upgraded wooden walls be able to withstand a siege?”

“Depends on what they throw at us,” Voz said. “Without mages the walls should tolerate a great deal of abuse but skilled mages can throw out a great deal of damage very quickly. Fire would also be a problem but as I understand these wooden walls have been treated to be more resistant to flames.”

Leaning back into my seat I reached over to pet Hedwig’s back. “I didn’t get an exact head count on mages but they have more than enough to be a problem. They might even have siege equipment but the Braven don’t seem to be the smart types.”

“Surely they couldn’t bring siege equipment through the forest without us noticing,” Nico said. “There is only one, relatively clear, path from Mara they could use for that and we’ve hidden it well. A journey through the forest with heavy equipment like that would take

longer than a week and by then our patrols would have dealt with them.”

Voz shrugged. “It is probably easier to bring wagons with the materials to construct them on site.”

“We did bring a wagon through the forest without much issue,” I said. “That was with Hedwig and the newbies pulling it too. The Braven have already shown they have mounts available to them so moving at a decent pace won’t be an issue for them.” I leaned forward and propped up my head on my knuckles. “We need to figure out a way to get the rest of the points we need for those stone walls. Do you know of anything that might do the trick?”

Nico frowned. “There are several ways to earn points beyond simple resource production. The people can donate materials to convert to points but most of those resources are tied down in creating equipment for the defense. Trade routes help as well with each successful exchange of goods granting us a greater number of points based on the distance traveled.”

“Until we can make Mara safe that isn’t really an option,” I said. “There are too many Braven patrols in that area even while they muster up their numbers to attack us.”

Nico nodded. “The last two options I am aware of are less than ideal and not particularly helpful to us. Both revolve around defending Liberty against an attack. Obviously if we wait around for the Braven to hit us we won’t have the stone walls we want in time. If we do survive the assault, depending on how strong their force is, we should have more than enough points to strengthen our position.”

“And the second option?” I asked.

Nico sighed. “We would need to fend off a monster surge.”

“Monster surge?”

“A monster surge is when monsters build up in great number and head out to wreak havoc across the lands. Usually they come from one of the larger dungeons but the exact timing varies wildly from one to the next,” Nico explained. “Sometimes it’s every few years, other times it’s every season or so.”

“I’m guessing we can’t just feed an item to Liberty’s village stone to force one of these,” I said.

“Not that I am aware of Ryan, no,” Nico said. “Even if we had such an item there is still the complication of just what kind of monsters we would be facing. The monster surge itself could very well be worse than what the Braven plan to throw at us.”

“Aye,” Voz chimed in. “At least with them Braven bastards we know where they intend to attack from and when. The only places a monster surge couldn’t attack us from are the mines or the skies.”

Nico glanced down at Voz. “You don’t know that. There might be a dungeon hidden right beneath our feet gathering strength.”

“Or a sky dungeon,” I added with a chuckle. “But I imagine getting up to one of those or down from them is pretty tricky.”

Voz stared at me with wide eyes then Nico.

Nico nodded. “There are strange creatures and even stranger places in this world, Voz. Who is to say such a dungeon does not exist?”

Voz stared at the inn’s ceiling. “This is why we dwarves hate the surface. You even have to fear the skies. Not like good old stone. Stone never betrays you.”

“Except for those gas pockets, unearthing long buried demons, cursed ancient ruins,” I listed off on my fingers.

Voz huffed. “But you have to dig those out, Ryan. Sure, sometimes they come digging their way toward us but the stone gives us ample time and warning. Here on the surface?” Voz laughed. “Beasties just walk on over, or drop out of the skies.”

A grin forced its way up to my face. “We might have to expand Liberty to have an underground city district for our Dwarven friends then.”

Nico sighed. “Please don’t encourage them. The dwarves have been pressing for such an expansion for quite some time already. As it is our system points are stretched to their limits defending the surface and the mine’s resources are too important to our defense and growth to spare any mining teams to build such a thing.”

Voz huffed. "You wouldn't have to worry so much about defending this place if you built a mountain fortress. The Braven and any monster surges would be forced to come at us from one direction and one direction only. Whichever one we left open for them."

"Oh the fun we could have with such a place," I mused. We could have a long tunnel covered from floor to ceiling with all manner of traps. If we did our jobs right the enemy would be deterred by that alone or suffer such heavy damage they would be easy to dispatch. Sadly, that wasn't the situation we were in.

"So, Ryan, what is it you would have us do?" Nico finally asked.

"Let's get that upgrade to our wall," I said. "Anything that keeps the Braven out, if only for a little longer, is better than nothing."

Nico nodded. "Should we shift resources from production to point generation?"

My face twisted back and forth in thought. It was not an easy choice at all. On the one hand, the primary resources we needed were bountiful. Iron, wood, we could gather tons of them but we also needed them to arm our defense force as well as repair the walls during the siege. The other resources we could spare were copper and gems from the mine but again those were valuable to craft with. Rune smithing and alchemy in particular used the gems in some of the more advanced recipes and I had learned this applied to crafting weapons and armor as well. Plus I was pretty sure we had someone, somewhere, making enchanted jewelry that would not appreciate us cutting into their supply.

I drew in a deep breath. "Let's not do that. We have a big siege coming and we're going to need everything to prepare. I want stockpiles of iron, wood, and stone gathered up and turned into repair kits for the walls along with weapons and armor. We should also set up traps across the forest."

"But we don't have any trappers, Ryan," Voz said.

I held up a hand and smiled. "We do now. Some of the newbies picked up the skill too when they helped me hunt down the worgen."

"What's a worgen?" Voz asked.

An amused smile pulled at my lips. "A shockingly angry wolf, badger, thing. It was a region or zone boss or something. Level forty five."

Nico and Voz's jaws dropped.

"What? I said we made some friends along the way," I laughed. "If Captain Ragespire hadn't been there I'm pretty sure Bellmare would have been burned to the ground before we even arrived."

"Is there any chance he could come to aid us?" Voz asked.

I opened my mouth to answer then closed it. "That's a good point actually. Bellmare still does need defending but if they can help us push back the Braven it might give us the opening we need to push on Mara."

"And if we secure Mara we can open up trade routes down to Bellmare, Blackmoss, and Cedar Springs," Voz added.

"I'll send a party over to ask for their aid," I said. "Hopefully Cool Karen has found some friendly guilds we could work together with as well."

"Do those even exist, lad?" Voz asked. "It seems every group of adventurers we run into are the worst sort."

"Did you forget about Gideon already?" I chuckled. "Actually I should send him a message as well. Maybe he knows someone that could help us."

"Any help we could get would be appreciated," Nico said. "But let us assume we are on our own and prepare accordingly."

Nodding, I pushed up to my feet. "Then I need to make a plan to turn the forest into a deathtrap. But first, I'm going to find Dwayne."

I headed out to the blacksmith shop but was immediately turned around when one of the newbies there said he'd gone to the warehouse with a friend to check something out. Sure enough I found Dwayne there with a dainty little elven mage with a hat that was way too big for her. Not her head but her whole body. The hat was well and truly massive.

**Eva, Level 24, Pyromancer.**

Eva also had a fondness for the color red in every aspect of her clothing but it went with her class. She was basically wearing a giant warning sign telling everyone around her they were about to get ignited.

“Hey Dwayne, hey Eva,” I said as I walked up to them.

Dwayne smiled. “Hey, Ryan. Nice to see you back in one piece.”

Eva waved with disinterest as she dug around the crates of herbs from Blackmoss. “Healing, healing, that’s for curing poisons,” she mumbled to herself then pulled up a clump of blue moss. “Mana potions.” Eva let the clump of moss drop back into the box.

Dwayne chuckled. “Eva here is my alchemist friend I was talking about. The one trying to figure out gunpowder or something like it.”

“We’ll call it magic-boom-boom dust just as soon as I figure out how to make it,” Eva stated matter-of-factly. “But the trick is finding out how. I thought that the mine would have the answers but so far it hasn’t. The devs probably put in some sort of hardcoded limitations into the game so people couldn’t just figure out how to make guns and bombs.”

I laughed at that. “It would probably ruin the whole fantasy aesthetic New Realm has.”

“Not at all,” Eva insisted as she popped open another crate. “Dwayne here can make some pretty fancy looking weapons. You should see that automatic crossbow thing he made.”

“That was actually what I was hoping to see today,” I laughed. “You said you have it working?”

Dwayne nodded. “I do. The bolts are bigger and heavier than normal crossbow bolts for extra punch but my prototype so far runs reliably. I think we’ve fired a hundred bolts through it without issue thus far.”

I let out a low whistle. “That’s a lot of bolts.”

Dwayne chuckled. “Our lives are going to depend on these things so I thought it might be helpful to stress test them.”

“Good call,” I agreed.

“Unfortunately that ballista of mine is still a problem child. Reworking the parts on my own has been taking me way too long to make any serious progress,” Dwayne admitted.

“No one’s been helping you?” I asked.

“Voz now and then but he has his own experiments to run with metallurgy, plus he goes down to work the mines now and then and trains our fighters.”

“Well I’m here to help now, and Randy is around here somewhere looking to learn from you too,” I said.

Dwayne nodded. “He should be back at the forge. I have him making daggers for practice before I let him touch anything more complicated.”

“I bet he could pick up a thing or two from watching us work.”

Dwayne glanced back at Eva.

She waved him off. “Go on you lurker. I can handle this boring search on my own.” Eva fished out a black clump of moss and leaves that were a bright red and orange. Her lips pursed into a little smile at the sight of them. “If I find anything worth your time I’ll call you for that thing you want to build.”

Eva may as well have spoken Greek. I looked over at Dwayne for an explanation.

“Multi launch arrow system,” he said. “You know like an MLRS but I replaced the rocket part with arrows.”

“Didn’t you say the thing was called a hwacha or something like that?” I asked.

Dwayne chuckled and led the way out. “That is what the Koreans called them, yes. But people kept looking at me weird when I said it so I gave it a much simpler name. This way everyone at least has an idea of what I’m talking about when I mention it.”

Nodding along I asked, “So what if you can’t get the magical rocket dust propulsion thing working? Are you just going to abandon the project?”



Dwayne pulled his arms up. "Yes and no. With the Braven siege coming I can't really afford to waste time on something that won't produce results so I'll shift my focus to more important things like mass production of the heavy repeaters or the ballista if we can get it to work. Not to mention improving the design with Dawn's runes."

"What was wrong with the other runesmiths?" I asked.

"Nothing," Dwayne said. "They were good enough for prototypes and tests but for actual combat I'd prefer to have the highest quality runes on our equipment. There just isn't anyone near Dawn's level in that regard at Liberty."

Hedwig waddled along next to us with a happy grunt at the mention of Dawn. I wondered if he actually understood what we were saying.

"Higher level runes mean more damage," I agreed. "Between the fire rune she picked up from the dungeon and the lightning rune we picked up from the wurgen we should be able to come up with some interesting combinations to throw at our enemies."

"We're going to need every edge we can get against the Braven," Dwayne said as he entered the blacksmith shop. "Randy, come here."

Randy didn't seem to hear as he was too focused on hammering away at another dagger. Through all the noise going on in the crowded shop, it was a challenge just to hear myself think.

Dwayne gave a sharp whistle.

Randy and a few others perked up to look at him.

Dwayne pointed at Randy and shouted through the noise. "You, come with us, and bring your daggers. I want to check your work."

"Right away," he said excitedly as he rushed to finish his latest dagger.

I rolled my eyes, trying not to laugh at him. That rush job was probably not going to come out pretty.

Dwayne went to the back of the blacksmith shop where they had expanded it to give him some tinkering space. There were more newbies there, playing around at making designs and with different

components Dwayne had laying around the place. They greeted us with a wave and went back to work.

There, in the back corner, was a crossbow. But not just any crossbow. The heavy repeater Dwayne had been working on.

He scooped up the weapon with a proud grin. "And this baby right here is my proudest work right now." The weapon was nearly as big as he was and the way he carried it was unlike any other weapon I had seen before.

"How does it work?" I asked.

Dwayne just grinned. "Scoop up the tripod and drum and I'll show you."

I did just that as Randy burst into the room. He had a basket full of daggers and a big grin on his face. "I'm ready to go, Dwayne."

We headed out of the blacksmith shop and out to the archery training range. I set down the tripod and held up the drum full of bolts out to Dwayne.

"Thanks," he said as he slotted the drum under the weapon.

Now that I looked at it closer, the weapon had not one but two bows toward the front to help propel bolts forward. They made an X shape as they crossed and I had to wonder if that was something we should incorporate into all of our future crossbows.

"So before I show you how to fire this thing on auto, let me show you how to fire it in an emergency," Dwayne hefted up the weapon to his hip. It was too big and bulky to be shouldered which didn't give me great hopes for its accuracy when it wasn't mounted on the tripod. Dwayne pulled the trigger and the twin bows propelled a bolt into a target. It hit with such force the target nearly toppled over but it shifted back down. That was when I noticed the target had been tied down to some rather heavy looking rocks.

"That thing has some kick to it huh?" I asked.

Dwayne grinned. "It's like a baby ballista. Now watch. This is how you reload it if you're ever in a situation where you can't mount this thing." Dwayne pulled back on the handle to the side of the heavy

repeater. A new bolt moved into firing position and the bows were cocked back. The weapon was ready to go again. "Easy, right?"

I gave an impressed nod. "That looked even easier to work than my crossbow."

Dwayne shrugged. "Eh, it takes a good bit more force and I definitely don't recommend carrying it around like this. But I figured in an emergency this function would be good to have. Let me show you the real fun."

He gestured for me to bring over the tripod. I did and he mounted the heavy repeater with practiced ease before bringing out a hand crank. He slotted it on to the right side of the weapon.

Randy watched with wide eyed excitement to see the weapon work.

Dwayne gestured for me to take control. "Here, Ryan. You can have the honors."

I took the heavy repeater and swiveled it around on the tripod. It moved with surprising ease and had quite the good angle to fire with. "You put sights on this thing?" I laughed as I noticed them on the crossbow.

"Of course I did. We have to aim somehow," Dwayne said. "Now crank that bad boy up."

Grinning, I flipped up the sight and took aim at the target. With a turn of the crank the first arrow fired. I kept turning and noticed the distinct click and slight resistance as the repeater pulled up another bolt into place. A little bit more force and out went the second bolt. I was worried this would cause a problem but Dwayne said he'd fired plenty of bolts through this prototype so what were a few dozen more? I cranked the heavy repeater as fast as it would let me. It spat out bolt after bolt far faster than I could with my repeating crossbow. While it was certainly no machine gun. It was going to be a massive force multiplier against the Braven.

"This thing is awesome, Dwayne," I praised as I wound out the last bolt from the drum. "Aw man. Fun time's over."

Randy laughed. "Can I have a go next?"

Dwayne nodded. "Sure, just pull those bolts out and load them back in the drum."

Randy rushed out to collect the bolts.

"There's around fifty to a drum. Any more and they get too big and heavy to be practical." Dwayne chuckled to himself. "They're pushing it as it is with their current size."

I nodded. "But it's fantastic that this works as well as it does. I imagine we can make a much more portable version of this for the crazy rangers who want to carry one around."

Dwayne thought that over. "I wouldn't call it practical but it would be a fun weapon to carry around. Maybe I can make it fold up like the bow guns in Monster Hunter."

"That sounds really complicated," Randy said as he ran back with his arms full of bolts. They were about double the size of a normal bolt with heavy heads focused to a fine, sharp point.

"It probably is." Dwayne handed over the drum for Randy to start loading up full of arrows. "We can worry about that after the siege. For now, let's see if our weird weapon creator can make a good knife."

I chuckled. "I'm sure he's fine. With the three of us working on that ballista of yours I bet we can get it working by the end of tomorrow."

Dwayne nodded as he pulled the first dagger from Randy's basket. It was the rush job blade. The edge was not even, the sharpness couldn't even draw blood from Dwayne's finger running over it, and even with his enhanced strength, the dagger didn't stick to the target.

Randy winced at that. "Sorry, I didn't have time to do a good job with that one."

"Then let's look at the next one," Dwayne smiled. "Oh this is much better." The blade's edge gleamed in the light of the late afternoon. He flipped it around a few times in his hand. "Nice and balanced." With a few testing thrusts and swings he flipped the blade

over and whirled it at the target in the distance. This one stuck with ease all the way down to the hilt. "That weapon will kill."

Randy beamed with pride. "Thanks. I spent a lot of time with Ryan working on weapons for the worgen hunt."

"Randy can actually make weapons out of basically anything," I said. "Have you shown him Stabby Smasher?"

Dwayne groaned but laughed. "That is an... *unique* weapon. But it was an effective use of raw, natural materials. I have to give you that much." He raised a brow as he pulled the next knife out of the bunch. "What's this?"

The knife had a chain attached to it with a metal ball attached to the bottom. The ball itself was smooth, between the size of a baseball and a softball.

"That looks like Lu's kusari-fundo," I said.

Randy nodded as he finished loading the drum. "Uh-huh! I got the idea from watching her fight. She has a lot of reach with her weird chain thing and it smashes things up really good but it's not very slashy or stabby. So I figured I'd strap a knife to the end of it."

Dwayne glanced back at me with a curious but impressed expression. "The dagger part looks as good as the other one I tried." He ran his finger along the blade, drawing blood. "Oh, sharp." He shook out his hand with a laugh then tried to throw the dagger. Thanks to the chain, it came woefully short of hitting the mark but it did fly true. Dwayne pulled back the dagger and looked down at the hammer. "Should I try swinging this around?"

I grimaced at the very idea. "Can you promise me you won't cave your face in with that thing?"

Dwayne opened his mouth to speak then closed it. He shook his head laughing. "No. No I can't. Still, I'd show this to Lu, Randy. If anyone is really going to appreciate this weapon it's her."

Randy beamed. "That's what I was planning to do. I hope she likes it. Maybe I can even make it better if she tells me what she's looking for in a weapon."

Chuckling I helped Randy load the drum back in the heavy repeater. "She's pretty big on the ninja stuff so I'm sure you will have plenty of wild and crazy requests from her if you show her this."

"Then we'll become best friends," Randy said then went to fire the repeater. For a newbie who had only recently learned how to operate a crossbow, Randy handled the heavy repeater as easily as breathing. The bolts sailed out of the weapon as fast as he could crank it. But from watching him work the repeater it was clear he didn't know how to aim. His shots were landing way off target and many bolts flew past to crash into the archery range's back wall.

"We're going to have to work on your aim," I said once Randy ran out of bolts to fire.

Randy laughed. "A little bit. Maybe Dawn will help me."

"Oh she will," I said with a hand on his shoulder. "But first we've got a ballista to build."



## 19

Building a ballista was not as easy as making a bigger crossbow. With the ammunition being far larger and heavier, the force required to project them with any sort of reasonable range increased dramatically. The trick was making the parts be strong enough to deliver the force required without breaking them.

We broke a lot of ballistas.

At least a half dozen of the siege weapons were a ruined mess by the time the evening rolled about. We began each new working prototype with a low amount of tension then amped it up little by little to see where the limit was to the materials we were working with. The initial tests were laughable to say the least. We sent ballista bolts belly flopping across the air with all the grace of a beached whale from Liberty's upgraded wall. Slowly, we worked our way up to shoot halfway to the tree line. Those bolts tore up the earth when they hit but that was hardly the range we needed to help fend off a siege.

We needed more.

With our seventh prototype of the night we wound up the ballista one more time. The rope strained and wood groaned from the building tension. I listened intently to the weapon for any signs of cracking or snapping in the hopes of picking up a clue as to its durability.

"Ready to fire?" I asked Dwayne.

He pulled back from the ballista and watched it carefully. "Maybe we should let it sit for a bit and see if it breaks just holding like this."

Randy nodded. "That did happen two prototypes ago."

We backed away just in case and watched the weapon. In the meantime I looked through my messages for any updates. I had sent out a special request to Cool Karen requesting information on any potentially friendly guilds. Another message I sent to Gideon, trying



to catch up with him and his adventures. As for the party heading down to Bellmare, it would be some time before they had anything to report. Hopefully. They were going through enemy territory and there was a very real possibility they could be captured.

*Hey Ryan, Cool Karen responded to him. My people and I have been digging around the forums and we've reached out to a few guilds. Some are smaller than us but a couple are some heavy hitters with big numbers. They're all generally friendly guilds who love to help other players and treat the NPCs either as people, mostly because they are roleplay heavy, or they just treat them as NPCs or assets to take care of rather than things to use and abuse.*

*I guess an asset you care about is better than slaves and cannon fodder. We'll probably have to work on getting them to see NPCs as people but this all sounds good, I replied.*

*Four of them have replied to me so far, Karen continued. First, we have the Solar Hounds. They're pretty big on sun worship for some reason, I guess it's some sort of meme. But they are one of the larger guilds who focus on, 'jolly cooperation'. Their members are friendly enough but the bulk of them are tied down fighting for control of Vorpe. At first they weren't too interested in helping us thanks to their ongoing conflict but when I mentioned our temple had a shrine to their god and it was in potential danger they changed their tune. So we have one, maybe two raid parties coming to help from them. It's mostly their newbies though so don't expect anything much higher than high twenties.*

*Nodding along to the conversation I asked, Did they ask for anything in return?*

*They did ask if we could come help them out in Vorpe after things settled down in Liberty. And trade of course. I played up our crafters so we can earn ourselves a bit of coin out of this as well, Karen said.*

*Good thinking. Who's next?*

*Two small timers. The Titans and Stormbrawlers. Combined their two guilds are about half the size of ours. They've banded together to fight for control of smaller villages across the lands and since their*

*whole thing is fighting for justice the second they heard of our situation they offered to help. The Titans are a lot more serious than the Brawlers I must say. The Brawlers were pretty big on punching things for justice and flashy getups. They're a bit much, honestly.*

*My laugh earned me a stare from Randy and Dwayne. I explained what Karen told me and they laughed as well. They sound like fun. Is there anything special about the Titans I should keep in mind?*

*Don't do anything like lie, cheat, or steal around them. They made it pretty clear they will turn on us if they catch that.*

*I grimaced. Does setting traps count?*

*I asked them about that and several other scenarios, Karen said. Short answer? No. Traps are part of this world and when applied in dungeons or in defense of a town it's all fair game. As far as generally scummy, criminal behavior. Depending on the crime they will arrest the players or flat out kill them.*

*Oh so they think they're Judge Dredd, I said. Well we're a good bunch so we shouldn't have to worry about them.*

*That's the hope, Karen said. Last of the guilds to respond is the biggest one by far but it is not at all organized.*

*Huh? I thought the point of a guild was to get organized with other players, I replied.*

*This one is more of an... association? A club? Anyway they call themselves The Hunters Guild. It's basically an adventurers guild that runs around doing quests across the land and try to help whoever they can, for a price of course. Because of this, getting them to mobilize in any organized way is difficult. They're going to try and back us up with their whole guild but they made no promises as to how many members would show up.*

*I sighed at that. Let me guess, without the offer of payment there's no guarantee of anything huh?*

*Essentially, yes.*

*I stared up at the sky for a moment, thinking of what we could offer. Thankfully the ballista hadn't snapped yet and it looked to be in*

working order thus far. That was when a thought came to me. *Does the hunters guild have a base?*

*No, not technically. They have guild halls across several villages and two of the major cities but they stay away from holding lands, preferring to stay neutral so long as it doesn't affect their business, Karen said. The main reason they're offering to help us is because the guild wars is doing just that. With less NPCs being free to do their things, their monster hunting and general adventuring quests have dried up. Now they can only really find work as mercenaries for the other guilds and they don't want to walk down that path.*

*Then how about we offer them this. They can establish a guild hall here in Liberty, and when they help us clear out Mara, they can have one there as well and we will help them establish themselves in Bellmare, Blackmoss, and Cedar Springs. There is plenty of work to be done in all those towns plus it helps us secure our trade lines, I offered.*

*They might go for that. Should I offer them a discount on any equipment orders they ask of us? Their representative said their guild was hurting in the crafters department, Karen said.*

*With a name like The Hunters Guild that makes sense. Sure. Nothing too crazy, maybe ten percent. We can even get their guild emblem stamped on whatever gear they ask for.*

*Oh that's good. I'll send that over right now.*

*Anything else to update me on, Karen? I asked.*

*Nothing yet. There's no shortage of news on the guild wars but with so many different battles between so many different guilds it's hard to keep track of it all. The pro guilds are especially bad, with the Orc lands falling to one of them. They're building a massive army up there but nobody knows who they're planning to hit first.*

*See if you can find someone who's obsessed with covering the guild wars and make that their job, I said. With the way things are going we're going to need all the intel we can get our hands on.*

*Will do, Ryan. Talk to you later, Karen said.*

*"Good talk?" Dwayne asked.*

I nodded. "Backup is on the way. It's not a lot but it's coming. I'll fill you in on everything later though. Do you think we're ready to shoot?"

Dwayne crossed his arms. "I sure hope so. We've wasted a lot of resources trying to get this thing to work."

"It'll work this time," Randy said. "We reinforced everything with magic and rune smithing. There's no way this one breaks."

I winced at that. "That better not have jinxed us."

Randy grinned and moved to the lever. "Ready to fire, sir!"

Dwayne glanced at me then Randy. "Screw it." He thrust his finger out into the distance. "Fire!"

With a mighty twang and the shake of the tower the ballista hurled the bolt deep, deep into the woods. It tore through tree branches and sent waves of birds scattering into the skies.

Dwayne, Randy and I all glanced at each other. After hours of work for me and Randy, and days of failed attempts by Dwayne, we finally had a working ballista. We threw our hands up in the air with a cheer.

"It actually worked!" Dwayne shouted.

Randy bounced on his feet. "I told you it would!"

I wasn't wasting any time. "Let's go see how far that went." I jumped down from the wall and landed into a roll. There was a minor amount of fall damage but nothing I couldn't quickly fix with Healing Hands.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your jumping skill by +1. It turns out a blatant disrespect for the laws of gravity has its benefits.**

Dwayne followed me down the wall and Randy was not one to be left out. Dropping down to his knee, Dwayne slammed down with a superhero landing that cost him a quarter of his health. Randy face planted, nearly killing himself in the process.

"Oooh," Dwayne and I said as we saw Randy's landing.

I immediately went to work on him with Healing Hands. "You alright Randy?"

Randy held up a thumb then dropped his hand.

Dwayne laughed. "Come on. Randy. We have to see where that bolt got off to." He pulled Randy up to his feet.

Randy wobbled about on his feet like a drunk. His mouth opened to speak but he only stumbled back. Dwayne and I caught Randy before he fell over again.

"Now's not the time to lay down on the job, Randy." I laughed and helped him out to the woods with us. With the waning light of the day it was going to be harder for Dwayne and Randy to see in the woods but they shouldn't need torches just yet. Meanwhile my dark vision made the night as clear as day.

As we roamed around the woods I received a notification from Gideon. *Hey, Ryan. Just got your message. I wanted to let you know I'm doing fine. Me and Beorn are on a big quest for the kingdom. I can't talk about it much because it's supposed to be super secret but I'll get to become a knight when I finish this quest chain.*

*Does that mean I can unironically call you Sir Gideon, Sir Gideon?*

I could practically feel Gideon groaning through the internet. *Yes you ass. Sorry I won't be able to come help you out back at Liberty for the siege though. Beorn keeps saying time is of the essence with this quest.*

*Know anyone who might help?* I had to ask.

*No. I haven't gotten involved with any guilds or found too many adventurers I liked to spend time with outside of you and your Broken Bones, Gideon said. I thought about joining but I figured since I wasn't a medipod user that wasn't going to work.*

I smiled to myself as I sent Gideon a guild invite. *Nobody said that was one of our rules, Gideon. If you want to join, you can join. We actually have a bunch of normal players in our guild after we freed them from the Black Wolf guild, and we're always looking for all*

*sorts of members who just want to enjoy the game and not be terrible to everyone around them.*

*Really? Well I guess I should have asked huh?* Gideon accepted the guild invite. *Just don't think this means you can boss me around and take me away from this quest.*

*Hah, like I would ever dare to keep Sir Gideon from earning his first name.*

*Harr, Gideon replied. Listen Mr. Smartass. Can you do me a favor and keep Liberty safe? Beorn says it might be important for our quest. Just like your help will be in the future if you all don't get yourselves killed after the Braven show up.*

*Is this some sort of super secret undercover deal in service of the crown?* I asked.

*If I told you I'd have to kill you,* Gideon said.

I grinned. *Nice. Alright then secret agent man. I hope your quest goes well. If there's any chance you can come back to Liberty before the week is up I'd appreciate your help.*

*No promises, Ryan,* Gideon said and ended the chat.

I smiled though. This secret quest with Beorn sounded like fun. And if what Ragespire said about some sort of secret involving restoring the kingdom had anything to it, that sounded like an epic quest chain well worth hunting down. The rewards for completing such a quest must be insanely awesome. Sadly that wasn't my adventure to have just yet and it might not be. As it was, I had my hands full.

"Over here," Randy called out. "I found the bolt."

We followed Randy through the woods to where he found the bolt. It had wedged itself on the side of a tree.

Dwayne glanced back toward the wall. "That's about five hundred meters. Plenty of range for what we need."

I grinned. "If we can get eyes on the Braven that far then we can snipe them with that ballista."

Dwayne nodded. "Now all I have to do is stop it from going over that tension level so it doesn't snap. Maybe I can even figure out a way to make it easier to range."

I laughed and shook my head. "You can make the ballista as fancy as you want later. Just get the magazine working on it and get us one for each of the towers so we can send the Braven running."

"We only really need four for the southern towers. We shouldn't really worry about the north," Dwayne said. "With how long it took us to make this prototype that should give us plenty of time to make the ballistas we need and plenty of bolts too."

Randy nodded. "Sounds like a good plan, Dwayne. I can get started right—"

A sharp rustling came crashing through the bushes. Hedwig let out a sharp grunt and waddled forward. A terrified acolyte slammed gut first into Hedwig's snout. She crashed onto her ear, her eyes wide as she looked around, lost and confused until her gaze found me.

"Ryan!"

**Ruby, Acolyte of Liliac, Level 24**

"Ryan, we have to warn the others," she said frantically as she scrambled to her feet.

"What's wrong, Ruby?" I asked as she latched onto my shoulders.

"Monsters. A whole horde of them from the north. There's trolls and giant spiders and so many other creatures," Ruby blathered out with such speed it was difficult to follow her. "They're coming this way. I lost my whole party to those things."

Randy gulped audibly and looked back toward Liberty. "They should be back there now then huh?"

I nodded. "Do any of you have any idea where this monster surge is coming from?"

Ruby shook her head. "No... That's how we got ourselves killed. We tried to find the source."

Dwayne looked my way. "Sounds like we're going to need those extra ballistas after all. Come on Randy. We need to start pumping those things out." He strode back toward Liberty.

Randy nodded. "Right behind you!"

Glancing up at the skies I saw the moon begin its climb across the heavens. "Monster surges come from dungeons, which means there's one north of us that has been left alone for far too long." It was good to have some knowledge about monster surges already but I couldn't help but think we'd jinxed ourselves while discussing ways to upgrade our walls. Having to deal with a monster surge right now wasn't something I wanted to do.

"A dungeon would be cool. But how are we going to find it?" Ruby asked.

"We follow the horde back home," I said and pulled up a group chat in my interface with Dawn, Terry, Lu, and Cam. *Hey guys, we have a situation coming down from the north. There's a monster surge heading for Liberty and we need to see how bad this is going to get.*

*Monster surge?* Terry asked. *That sounds awesome. We can grind them out for levels without even having to go raid the dungeon.*

*But we already have to defend Liberty from the Braven,* Cam reminded him.

*Oh yeah. Well ,that's no good,* Terry said.

*That's exactly why we're going to find the source of this monster surge, see how bad it is, and see if we can turn this dungeon into our new grinding spot,* I said with a growing grin spreading across my face. Perhaps we could kill two birds with one monster surge. Protect the village, get upgrades and power level our players. Right now the Braven had us on both levels and guild size, but if we survived the surge we'd gain a lot of levels and fighting experience. Not to mention it would be a good test of Dwayne's new weapons.

Trolls were big, tough monsters so the experience from fighting off the monster surge alone would be well worth it. A farmable dungeon with such strong monsters was going to be a treasure



Broken Bones desperately needed to hold their ground against the Braven. The mini dungeon with spiders was a great resource and with Karen's discovery about increasing a dungeon's difficulty level we could extend its use but even that had its limits. The spider mini dungeon could take players from level ten to twenty if used regularly and with the increased difficulty it had the potential to help players hit the mid twenties. That was fine for a normal situation but with the Braven sending an army of level thirty players our way we needed to up our game.

*I'm grabbing my things now, Ryan,* Dawn said.

Lu dropped out of the trees next to me. "Me too!"

I practically jumped out of my skin as did Hedwig. Both of us whirled on her with startled gasps.

"Don't drop in on me like that!" I shouted.

Lu laughed. "I wouldn't be a very good ninja if I didn't do that," she said with a toothy grin.

*I'm coming out now,* Cam said.

*Don't leave me behind guys,* Terry said.

All of them accepted their party invites and I watched their dots move in on my position.

When they arrived I drew my spear and grinned. "Let's go monster hunting."

Hedwig led the way north, acting as our early warning system. While my perception and Dawn's had grown to an impressive level, there was just no competing with Hedwig's nose. The oso would sniff out any trolls or beasties lurking around the woods long before our ears could hope to pick out a noise.

We traveled through dense forest, far denser than the forest we had to the south. It was as if no shred of civilization had ever touched this part of the world and for all we knew that was the case. As it was, Liberty was quite a ways off the beaten path and essentially located in the middle of nowhere. This was a level of wilderness I hadn't seen anywhere else, perfect for ambushes and wild creatures to stalk through.

Already Hedwig being at the front was paying off as he spotted packs of wolves, cougars, and other more fantastical creatures trying to hunt us down. We turned the tables on them, hunting them for meat, furs, and hides. These creatures were all around level thirty, some a bit lower or higher but never more than five levels off from that point. That was an important clue as to the zone we were heading into and potentially the dungeon itself. And a level thirty zone was just what we needed to boost the levels of our higher end players.

The question was, how bad was this monster surge really going to be?

I had never seen one of Dawn's acolytes show much in the way of fear. They were all brave in the face of overwhelming odds and smart enough in the use of tactics and stealth to get away if things got out of hand. So what could have struck such fear into Ruby?

The forest had yet to provide any answers. That alone built the tension in the air to an unbearable pressure. Like we were walking into a trap.

I was the first to break under the pressure. “So what were you doing following us around, Lu?”

“Hmm?” She tried to look innocent but the mischievous smile peeking beneath her fabric mask was impossible to hide.

I just stared at her, as did everyone else.

Lu tugged her mask down to grin. “Okay, okay, so I may have made an itsy-bitsy bet with Voz about how many times Dwayne’s ballista contraption would break before he got it working. Just a small one. A single gold coin.”

Terry’s eyes went wide. “That’s a lot of money in this world. Are you winning?”

Lu’s smile dropped. Throwing her head back with a dramatic sigh she gave the squeakiest little, “No. I was betting on another thirteen failures before they got it working.”

“I bet Voz will be happy about that,” Cam chuckled quietly. The towering, quiet man had a hard time squeezing his way around the more cramped sections of forest.

Lu whined. “He’s never going to let me hear the end of it.” She lowered her voice. “‘Oh you silly las, should’ve had more faith in yer mates. That Dwayne fellar, he knows how to do things. Magical things without magical means.’ Or something like that.” It was the worst impersonation of Voz I had ever heard and it earned a laugh from the group.

Things quieted down again and I glanced over at Terry. I had a burning question in my mind I’ve been meaning to ask him but I hadn’t really had the chance to with the speed at which things were moving. In the grand scheme of things, it didn’t seem all that important and right now, while we were in the middle of a scouting trip, seemed like the worst possible time to bring it up. And that’s exactly what I did. “Hey, Terry.”

“Yeah?” Terry asked.

I took a breath. “Why didn’t you tell me about what happened with Cam right away?”

The group fell dead silent. All eyes fell on Terry.

Terry's gaze fell to the forest floor as he came to a stop. There was a long silence before he finally spoke. "Because I couldn't do that to you, Ryan."

My gaze narrowed with confusion.

"Look, we all know how you are but no one here knows you better than I do."

Dawn arched a brow at Terry.

"Okay maybe not better than Dawn but close enough," Terry corrected himself quickly. "Look, we all know you're a good guy. A really good guy. So much so you put everyone else ahead of yourself even if it costs you."

Cam had to nod. "We all saw that when you took the boon from the gods. You turned down personal power for the sake of the NPCs."

"Exactly," Terry said. "This was around half way through your trip. Trust me, I checked the map a dozen times before I made up my mind. If I had told you right then and there what happened you would have torn yourself up about what to do."

Cam leaned over to me. "He was worried you wouldn't be able to decide who to save. Me or Betty and the other slaves the Black Wolf guild took."

My frown only deepened as I looked at Terry.

"Yeah. Basically," Terry admitted. "So I decided to keep things quiet. So no one outside of the party would know. So we could save more people. At least that's what I thought would happen." He sighed and shook his head. "Instead I let Cam get tortured for days expecting the Braven to kill him right away. And now they know exactly where we are." Terry glanced at Cam with a pained expression. Almost like he was pleading for forgiveness. "Now I'm pretty sure I doomed all of us."

Dawn and I exchanged a glance.

"Do you really think so little of me, Terry?" I asked.

Terry recoiled at the question, like he couldn't decide if he should be more confused or upset by it.

“I’m not an indecisive man, and I know I can’t be everywhere at once like some sort of all powerful god to come save the day for everyone.” I took a step toward Terry. “Once I set my mind to something I commit all the way. I don’t stop until the job is done. That’s how I turned a rerolled character with poor stats into this almost awesome jack-of-all-trades build. That’s how we fought our way through a mine infested with goblins and secured Liberty, and that’s how we’re going to fight our way through this monster surge and the Braven.”

Terry gave a withering nod, trying to decide if he was in trouble or not.

I took another step toward him and clasped him on the shoulder. “And that is exactly why I decided to take a boon to help the NPCs over gaining more power for myself. I am only one man. I can’t save everyone by myself. That’s why I need you, the members of Broken Bones, and every single NPC who joins us to band together and get stronger.”

Terry blinked. “Does that mean you’re not mad at me?”

I cocked my head to the side, my lips twisted to one side in thought. “I’m not going to lie to you Terry. I was pissed when I heard about it. But more than anything I’m disappointed you didn’t trust me enough to tell me.”

Terry’s head fell.

“But we can’t do anything about what happened. It’s in the past, it’s done. What matters is we move forward and try to make up for our mistakes,” I said. “Alright?”

Terry nodded. “Sorry, Ryan. I don’t know how I’ll make it up to you but I’ll try.” He turned toward Cam. “Like I’m still trying to make it up to you.”

Cam groaned. “You could stop being so mopey around me for starters. The torture sucked, yeah, and it sucked that I had to give up Liberty to make it stop but if I was the one who decided to stay behind. No one forced me to do that.”

“How exactly did that happen anyway?” Dawn asked as she gestured for the group to get going again. Hedwig had already vanished deep into the woods ahead.

“We walked into an ambush out in the woods,” Cam said. “It wasn’t meant for us it was for another guild. They had riders and everything. The riders had a hard time chasing us because of the trees but the rangers with their wolves were much harder to lose.” Cam gestured at his large body. “Since I was slowing everyone down I decided to hold the Braven off so the others could escape. Even Terry here can out run me on a bad day.”

Lu nodded. “Yeah. I tried to stay behind but he kicked up a big fuss about it.”

Cam smiled. “I’m big and tough, Lu. I can take some abuse. Besides, if they captured all of us things would have been way worse. They had some newbies tied up across from me from the Blackhearts. A bunch of newbies who didn’t know anything except for the one officer with them. They were torturing all of them to break the officer for information. It was horrible.”

I grimaced at the image Cam’s words conjured in my mind. “The Blackhearts may be a bunch of dicks invading every NPC town they can get their hands on but I’ve never heard of a guild being down right evil like this.”

“The Black Wolf guild was pretty bad,” Dawn offered.

I shook my head. “No, this is much worse than what even they were doing and that was bad enough already.”

“So uhm, anyway,” Terry interrupted. “Are we cool, man? Ryan, Cam?”

Cam nodded. “Stop moping around and we are.”

Terry gave a sheepish smile then turned to me.

“Don’t hide important information like this from me ever again, Terry and we’ll be fine,” I said.

Terry gulped. “I won’t man, I promise. One big fuck up is all I need to learn my lesson.”

“Like the failed prison breaks you tried?” Lu asked with a grin.

Terry winced. "I thought between your ninja skills and my druid magic we could break Cam out of there. How was I supposed to know they would go so poorly."

I glanced at Lu for answers.

"We tried to bust Cam out three different times." She started counting them off. "The first was more of a scouting trip. I tried to get inside but a bunch of level thirties showed up so I didn't risk it. The second time I actually broke in through the roof of Mara's jail house. Everything was going fine until I realized Cam weighed more than I could lift and Terry has the stealth capabilities of a wailing moose."

Terry held his hood to the top of his head. "That's why I'm not a shadow druid or whatever the system would call a stealthy mage like that."

Lu nodded. "Well my stealth skills all shot through the roof from that whole mess. The third time I tried the front door since it was the only way in or out of the place. I actually made it to Cam's cell before the guards found me trying to pick the lock. If I hadn't known about the hole in the ceiling they would have had me dead to rights."

"I helped get you out of there too," Terry said.

"I mean. Technically." Lu laughed. "But if I hadn't gotten out of that jailhouse on my own you couldn't have done much of anything to help. There were just too many Braven for you to handle, even if they were low levels."

"Support classes never could hold their own in a fight," Dawn said.

Terry held up a hand. "Hey I've played clerics before where we can heal and stun our way through any duel."

"That sounds incredibly lame," Dawn said.

"Well, at least you guys didn't get caught again," I finally said. "Cam's back with us, and we're going to tear the Braven a new one!"

Cam gave me an uncertain gaze.

"Probably," I added. "But we won't stand a chance if we don't believe in ourselves."

“True,” Cam said simply. “By the way, if we get a chance, can you let me be the one to fight Mike? I owe him for the torture.”

“Sure,” I said. Technically I had my own list of grievances to address with Mike and the rest of his party but they paled in comparison to what Cam had suffered. “But you better level up and work on your agility and stealth. Mike won’t be a pushover.”

Cam gave a determined nod. “I’ll be ready for him.”

Hedwig appeared in the forest ahead of us, as tense as a board, his head pointed into the forest ahead.

I held up a hand for everyone to be quiet and listened to the woods. There was something moving out there. Small, fast, and numerous. The second I realized the sound was coming from all around us it was already too late.

Goblins burst out of the woods swinging spears, clubs, and axes at us.

“Broken Bones!” I shouted, testing our guild name as a war cry. I wanted to look to my friends to see their reaction, but the goblins were already on us. Catching a Goblin mid air through the gut with my glaive, I looked up his information.

### **Goblin Hatchetman, Level 31**

The rabid little creature snapped his jagged teeth at me and tried his best to hack my weapon in two. With a quick flick I flung the little monster into a nearby tree. He slid down it like a cartoon coyote would slide down a cliff face he rammed into. I didn’t allow the goblin to recover. Driving my glaive through the back of its skull I ended the monster and batted aside another with my shield.

This one Hedwig had flung my way. The oso was facing down half a dozen of the spear-wielding creatures but while they were numerous, they weren’t particularly smart. They held their spears half way down the shaft and rushed in to stab at Hedwig rather than try to keep him at a distance. Hedwig chomped his beak down on a goblin’s head, crushing through his chest and shook the creature around violently until the lifeless body sailed through the woods. The other goblins stabbed wildly at his hardened leather armor, cutting



into it until one found a gap to bury his spear in. Hedwig whirled on them, disemboweling one with his terrifying claws and sending the other crashing through the woods.

Terry smashed a goblin away with his staff like a baseball bat. The goblin dropped his axe as it crashed into a tree that quickly brought its roots out of the earth and coiled around the creature. The same happened to the other, neighboring goblins. He tried to crush them to death with these roots but it was a slow, painful process, and the goblins were stronger than their small stature suggested. "A little help here!" Terry called out as he punted another goblin away and threw a heal on Hedwig.

A dual dagger-wielding goblin tried to jump on Terry's back only to catch an arrow through the eye that pinned it to a tree. The sound of heavy, solid thumps filled the woods as Cam bulldozed his way through the tide of goblins. The green monsters were barreled aside with broken noses, bones and ample wounds. Cam hadn't killed any of them, but he'd served them up on a platter for Dawn to mow down with waves of arrows. Cam wasn't one to be left behind however. With the edges of his shields he ground the goblins into the dirt and caved in the skulls of others.

Lu, surprisingly enough, was struggling the hardest of us all. Trying to use her kusari-fundo in a cramped forest was not at all ideal. The weight of the spiked ball hammer she swung around required more space than she had to build up proper momentum and the ninja was adamant about using the weapon. Taking a short grip on the chain she shot the spiked ball forward into a goblin's face then swung the screaming beast into another two of its murderous friends. They weren't dying quickly enough.

"You can stop holding back any moment now, Lu," I called out as I hurled a hunting spear loaded with Shocker through a goblin rogue trying to go in for the kill on her. Another jumped on my back and buried his dagger mere inches from my spin.

"Ryan!" Lu cried but her brief distraction caused her to be knocked over by a pair of goblins.

One of the club swinging monsters went in to bonk her on the head but I tore the backstabbing fiend off my back and threw him head first into the other. The goblins cried out as they crashed through the ground. Lu hopped to her feet dodging an axe and threw a trio of shuriken into that goblin's chest. With her kusari-fundo she coiled the chain around another's throat, kicked it over and pulled until it stopped struggling.

I rushed to her aid as she was quickly getting swarmed by the green monsters. Being the smallest of our group, they saw her as an easy kill. With a Power Throw I shishkebabed a trio of goblins then used a Leaping Power Attack to cleave another in two.

Notifications flashed in the corner of my vision but we were surrounded by too many monsters for me to spare a second.

Another goblin stabbed my gut with his spear. I returned the favor with my own glaive. Dawn's arrows cleared out a group heading right for us while Cam and Terry moved in to protect us.

Hedwig came crashing through the forest with a sickening crunch. His health was down to half and we all looked to see the cause.

A troll swinging a tree trunk for a club had found us, and with it was a group of five hobgoblins acting as its vanguard. They were big, fat, ugly creatures with a mishmash of bones, wood, and hides for armor. The little leather and metal working skills they had looked rugged enough to work as armor but not to handle a lot of abuse. Not that it really mattered at the moment.

We needed to get the hell out of here.

"Terry, heal Hedwig!" I shouted as I healed my own wounds. I just didn't have the reach to help my poor oso.

"On it," Terry thrust an arm out toward Hedwig, engulfing his body in a golden-green light that patched up his wounds before our very eyes.

Hedwig roared back to his feet and shredded through goblins left and right. But it was easy to see Hedwig was doing his best to keep his distance from the troll. The beast was much larger than the one I

had seen Hedwig fighting when I found him. This must have been a full grown troll, or an ancient one. I had no idea how troll life spans or growth cycles actually worked.

Cam smashed aside a wall of goblins with his tower shield then raised it to block one of the rushing hobgoblins. "Guys this is getting a little much," he grunted as he shoved the hobgoblin aside and cracked up across the head with the edge of his shield. Dawn finished the job with a volley of Power Shots.

"We're getting out of here," I shouted over the noise. "Terry, tie them up."

"Where are we running to?" Terry asked as he slammed his staff to the forest floor. A new wave of vines and roots shot out to bind every living creature around us.

The obvious answer was to run back home to Liberty but that path was already blocked off. In the chaos of battle another larger group of hobgoblins and two smaller trolls were closing in on us. Our only way out was to the north east, through a horde of bound goblins. "Cam!" I pointed over the goblins. "We need a door."

Cam rushed into position, slammed his shields together like he was forming the gate of a castle, and charged. He crushed and tossed aside the goblins in his path, only building more momentum the longer he ran. Thanks to their smaller mass, Cam didn't slow down at all when running over them.

We followed Cam through, taking swings, stabs, and shots at any goblin within our reach or who'd managed to break free of Terry's binding roots to come at us.

"How long until your roots wear off, Terry?" Dawn asked.

"Five, maybe ten seconds?" Terry warned.

We ran for our lives to the north east. After six seconds, Terry's spell wore off and the monsters behind us fell over themselves trying to give chase. The trolls and hobgoblins were too slow to keep up with us, even Cam, but the smaller, lighter goblins were another matter entirely. They harassed us all the way through the forest. We cut them down left and right and eventually the forest began to clear.

The path before us lead up a large hill and when we reached the top we stopped dead in our tracks.

A sea of goblins, hobgoblins, and trolls spread out before us, and they were on the move. Part of the tide of bodies sauntered toward the east but far more than I was comfortable with were heading south toward us.

"How the hell is anyone supposed to stand up to this?" Terry asked, his voice quivering.

"With a big, beautiful wall and an unhealthy amount of repeating crossbows?" I offered.

Dawn whirled about and shot out another trio of goblins leaping after us. "We have to get back to Liberty and warn the others."

"Technically we could just message the guild," Cam said calmly. Like he wasn't bothered at all about the almost certain death coming our way. Death in New Realm was only a temporary thing for players like us but it was still far from a pleasant experience. His reaction only made me hate Mike and the Braven more for what horrors they must have inflicted on Cam.

"Already sent," Lu said, swinging her kusari-fundo freely now that they were in the clear. The spiked ball crushing through goblins left and right, racking up the experience for her favorite weapon.

"Good job, Lu," I said and scanned the distance to try and find any hint of the dungeon these creatures were coming from.

My eyes followed the trail of monsters back across a deep valley. In the distance, where the two mountain chains seemed to pinch together, I saw the source of the surge. A black stone fortress with its gates wide open. The monsters were streaming out of that place. I marked the location on my map. "I've got the dungeon's location." I shared it with the rest of the party.

"How do you know that's the place?" Terry asked, swatting away another Goblin then shoving his staff down the throat of another. The vicious creature snapped and snarled at Terry's staff, trying desperately to get at him.

“I’m not seeing any monsters behind the fortress from here,” I said. “Unless you happen to have an ability to let us fly over there this is the best information we can get right now.”

Terry chucked the goblin aside. Hedwig snatched him out of the air and chomped it in two. “Nope, no spells like that just yet, Ryan. Maybe in another ten levels one will pop up but not right now.”

The trees behind us collapsed as the trolls finally caught up to us.

I reached into my bag of holding for another hunting spear to throw and found a disturbing lack of them. “Lu, do you have any smoke bombs.”

“What kind of ninja would I be if I didn’t?” Lu sounded almost insulted.

“A bad one?” Cam said.

“A broke one!” Lu said. “I haven’t had a chance to go to a town to buy any and Eve hasn’t figured them out yet.”

“Damn,” I said, striking down another three goblins.

“But I do have something better.” Lu smashed aside another goblin and hopped back toward the trolls and hobgoblins. “Follow me!”

Dawn, Terry, and I exchanged a nervous glance but Cam was already chasing after her. We followed Lu with growing concern as she waited until the hobgoblins raised their weapons to strike her down.

“Ninja Vanish!” Lu shouted as she swung her arm down. A cloud of white smoke and dazzling sparks erupted all around her.

The hobgoblins all shielded their eyes and roared as they flailed their weapons wildly about. The trolls grunted and stumbled back. The slow, lumbering beasts took slow, tentative steps forward as if afraid they would crush their allies. At least it looked that way until the tree trunk wielding troll was clipped by a hobgoblin's axe on the toe. The troll smashed aside the hobgoblins, cleaving a path through the earth.

We ran through that chaos, and though it shames me to say it, we were all screaming our lungs out. Hobgoblin blades narrowly

missed us, we tripped on goblins, and the troll's wild swings nearly turned us into a red smear across the forest floor. But we made it back into the forest.

My heart hurt and my lungs burned from running longer and further than I ever had in my life but I kept running along with the rest of my party. More notifications popped up in the corner of my vision but I ignored them for now. There were still goblins in the woods around us. Their numbers were thinned out, like the main force had come to face us down on the hill or we caught most of them in Lu's ninja vanish trick.

"What the hell was that?" I asked Lu, breathlessly.

"Ninja Vanish," Lu answered with a laugh. "It's a spell that works like a smoke bomb. But it comes with the extra effect of blinding and deafening enemies."

"Why didn't it blind us?" Dawn asked.

Lu gave a nervous laugh. "I was worried it might but it didn't, so it's all good!"

"You what?" We all shouted at Lu in unison.

"Yeah the spell wasn't exactly clear on friendly fire," Lu admitted. "But everything worked out fine so we're all good!"

She wasn't wrong but damn was it risky to pull a stunt like that. Most area of effect spells didn't care if someone was friend or foe. If a fireball landed anywhere in your general vicinity you were going to fry. Others, like the roots Terry used to tie up enemies, followed the user's intent to decide who they worked on. Still, those were groups of roots, each of which only affected one target. Lu's spell blasted out a wall of smoke five meters around her and we were all caught in it.

The developers of New Realm may lean heavily toward realism but now and then they made some questionable choices. Then again, with a game this big and complicated there were bound to be more than a few questionable design choices and flat out bugs that slipped through the cracks. For my sanity's sake, I decided not to

question the game mechanics too much. Oversight or not, Lu's Ninja Vanish just saved our asses.

Now all we had to do was save Liberty.

Night fell over Bastion mountain by the time we returned to Liberty and our people were already on full alert. Torches lined the walls and everyone who could carry a repeating crossbow or spear took their positions ready to take on the oncoming monster surge.

When the northern gate sealed behind us we all stumbled to a sharp, sudden stop. Dawn and I both collapsed against Hedwig from the marathon sprint we just had across the forest. Cam crashed to the floor and sprawled out with his shield arms wide open. Terry and Lu dropped onto either side of him, using his armored body like a pillow.

While we all gathered our breaths, Dwayne, Randy, and Nico rushed up to us.

“Is everyone okay?” Nico asked.

No one answered, so I held up a finger while I took another couple of deep breaths. “Surge... monsters... coming. Troll, goblins, and hobs.”

“Oh my,” Dwayne quipped.

“Hah!” Was all Terry managed to get out.

I sucked in a deep breath and gathered myself up. “How are the defenses coming along?”

“Poorly,” Nico said. “If there truly is an army of goblins and trolls coming our way we don’t have nearly enough people to fight them off.”

Dwayne waved her off. “Don’t be so negative, Nico. Randy and I got a third heavy repeater up and running. We’re using the newer runes Dawn taught her people to amp up the damage as well. All of them have a power amplification rune, one is doubled up, and the other two have a fire and lightning rune each. So we should be able to stun the larger trolls for the ballista to line up shots and set the forest ablaze to whittle down the suge’s numbers.”



Nico grunted her disapproval. "If we set the forest ablaze we lose access to those resources until they grow back. That's wood and animals in numbers we will not be able to begin to guess at until the blaze stops."

"Resources don't matter if we lose Liberty, Nico," I said. "If we can use the forest as a weapon we will."

Nico frowned but nodded. "Fine. Do not blame me if our production suffers because of this."

"We'll make do," I looked at Dwayne. "Anything else we can throw at the monster surge?"

"Voz and the more melee focused players have formed up into shock trooper units," Dwayne said. "Most of their armor is still leather and the iron stuff isn't great but if they can keep the goblins off our walls we can rain more bolts and arrows on them. Our weaker fighters are up on the walls with spears to keep the monsters from climbing up."

"Goblins are small but they are dedicated little bastards," Dawn said, finally recovering her breath. "They're smarter than they look too."

Cam crawled up to his feet. "They didn't look too smart bouncing off my shields."

"Let's not underestimate them," I said. "Remember they owned the Bastion mines before we came here to save the day."

"I would prefer not to return to those days," Nico added.

"You won't. We won't let it happen. Dawn, how long do you think we have before the surge hits us?" I asked.

"Anywhere from midnight to dawn I'd say." She placed her hands on her hips. "Outside of chasing us through the forest they were moving at a slow pace."

"They're saving energy," Cam suggested. "Just look at how tired we were sprinting all the way back here."

"Makes sense," I agreed. "Dwayne do you still have people working the forge?"

Dwayne nodded. "We're hoping to get another two arbalests out soon and we're making all the bolts we can."

"What about a ballista?" I asked.

Dwayne shook his head. "If we start working on one now we lose people who can make the heavy repeaters and the bolts for them."

"Even if I help?" I asked.

Dwayne stroked his chin. "Maybe. If they don't come for us until morning we can potentially have a second ballista on the northern wall, bolts included. The process will be far slower than with the prototypes we made though."

"Why would it be slower?" Terry asked as he helped Lu to her feet.

"Because I already had the core components laid out for those prototypes. We would be starting from scratch here," Dwayne answered.

"Then what are we doing wasting time? Let's get that Ballista going." I marched to the blacksmith shop. "We're going to need all the heavy weapons we can to deal with those trolls in a hurry."

Dwayne rushed up to my side. "Are there really that many?"

My shoulders tensed remembering the countless monsters heading our way. "Ya, ya there's a whole hell of a lot of them."

Dwayne gave a sharp whistle to Randy as we arrived and we got to work building the ballista. While we worked to build the core components of the weapon, Randy handled the simpler task of making the bolts. Normally, we would have allowed Randy and even encouraged him to work on the larger weapon to level up his skills but time was of the essence, and the ballista's quality may very well mean the difference between life or death.

While we were working away the evening, I decided to check all those notifications I had ignored in the battle.

**You have received 27895 exp.**

**Congratulations hero! You have reached level 29. One more level and you might be half way competent at your job!**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your spear skill by +1. The pokey end does—in fact—go in the enemy.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your spear throwing skill by +1. Sometimes a guy just needs a little long distance relationship, am I right?**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your Double Thrust, Power Thrust, and Leaping Thrust by +1. That's a lot of thrusting! No, I don't have anything better to go with that one.**

**Congratulations hero! you have increased your Leaping Power Slash by +1. Perfect for those hard to reach places.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your agility by +2. By the gods you ran fast from that monster surge. At least needing a new pair of pants paid off this time.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your constitution by +2. Second verse, same as the first. Sprinting for your life has benefits!**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your perception by +1. Maybe next time you won't let the a bunch of cute, adorable, murderous little goblins sneak up on you.**

My jaw almost hit the floor at all the levels I had received from that trip. It was the biggest jump in progression I had seen in a long time. The jumps by two points were especially impressive since they were to my stats rather than skills. Those always took so much longer to level up.

Now I just had to distribute my stat points. With two additional points in agility and constitution I put my three into strength. I was going to need it to cut through a Troll's hide and hopefully out damage their ability to regenerate health.

**Ryan Rosa Level 29 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 35**

**Agility 34**

**Constitution 35**

**Intelligence 31**

**Wisdom 31**

**Charm 15**

When it came to Hedwig's stats I threw everything into constitution. The damage that troll inflicted on Hedwig could have been from a critical hit or a massive level gap but I didn't want to see him ever get that low on health again.

**Hedwig: Level 29 Oso**

**Strength 41**

**Agility 38**

**Constitution 47**

**Intelligence 16**

**Wisdom 16**

With that mountain of notifications cleared out I was free to focus all my time and energy in finishing the ballista. Dwayne was not kidding at all about the time it would take to make all the different pieces required for this huge contraption. The easy part was just cutting all the wood into shape and making it sturdy enough to handle the forces inflicted upon it. The hard part was all the springs, pulleys, and other metal parts Dwayne had made to make this weapon hurl a projectile about the size of a lance five-hundred meters out with enough force to—hopefully—knock a troll flat on its rear end.

The first rays of the sun were coming up when we finished assembling the ballista on one of the northern wall's towers. We were exhausted. Dwayne, Randy and I curled up against the battlements and caught a quick nap when Dawn showed up with stamina potions, coffee—which seemed redundant but I wasn't complaining—and a plate of eggs and gorro bacon.

We dug into the food like it was the best thing we had ever eaten. Something about an upcoming big battle always made food taste better, I wasn't sure what though.

"So you guys are sure this thing is going to work?" Dawn asked.

Randy nodded. "We test fired it and it didn't break so it's fine."

Dwayne gulped down half his mug of coffee. "Yeah. We have five shots to a magazine and plenty of spares. Short of those trolls breaking down the walls we are going to make them wish they'd never even looked in our general direction."

"They'll be too busy dying to get that far," I said confidently. "Are you two sure you can handle this on your own though?"

Dwayne nodded. "A ballista only needs a crew of two. With another two people we could have ammo runners but filling up the tower with spare magazines will have to do."

"Good." I finished up my breakfast. "I'm going to be out in the front with Voz and the others."

Dawn sighed. "And here I was hoping to stay on this nice, safe wall we have."

I gave her a slight grin. "You can, if you like."

Dawn chuckled. "And let you get chewed out by goblins? No, I don't think so, Ryan."

An alarm bell rang in the distance. A cry accompanied it. "Goblins!"

A tide of little green monsters scrambled out of the woods. They were a disorganized mass of monsters. Rather than separate their melee fighters from their archers the goblins threw everything and the kitchen sink at us. Archers fired on our walls even as fighters rushed past them, knocking their aim wide. The fighters ran straight for our walls without any means to breach our walls or climb them. They were idiots.

"Let's go." I hopped down the tower to the wall and whistled for Hedwig to head outside. By the time we reached the gate Hedwig was on his way out and I had an awesome idea. "Jump!"

"What?" Dawn balked.

I hopped off the wall in time for Hedwig to catch me right on the saddle. With a victorious whoop I drew my glaive. "I didn't think that was going to work!"

Hedwig grunted in agreement.

Glancing over my shoulder I saw Dawn head for the stairs. Like a reasonable person.

“Hold!” Voz roared at the front with a shield wall of warriors wielding axes. The tide of goblins broke on their shields and Voz’s group of heavy infantry began to hack away into their numbers.

On the left was another group armed with spears, keeping the goblins at bay for as long as they could with their superior reach. The tide of bodies simply didn’t allow that to last long. For every goblin they killed there seemed to be three more to take their place. With each new wave of goblins the spear’s reach advantage was becoming more and more of a hindrance.

I pulled Hedwig to the left. Voz’s people could handle their own in an up close and personal brawl, but our spearmen were going to break at the rate things were going.

“Run them over,” I ordered.

Hedwig roared as he charged through a mass of goblins. The huge, powerful oso sent the tiny creatures scattering and flying through the air like a cartoon. I swung my glaive through the goblins, using the bonus damage from Hedwig’s speed to carve a swath through the monsters. The goblins hissed and snapped at us. Their blades swung at us, narrowly missing Hedwig or bouncing off his armor thanks to his speed.

The torrent of arrows that came after us was a different story.

“Brace!” The words came from the formation of spearmen as they tightened up and put up their shields. I raised my own but there was no way I could block them all.

Arrows came down on us like a hailstorm, battering against my shield, armor, and sinking into my body. Hedwig’s hardened leather plating offered superior protection as the worst the arrows did to it was get lodged inside. Few were lucky enough to find their way into any of the gaps.

*I need to make better armor,* I thought as I pulled arrows out of my thigh and used Healing Hands to restore my leg. “Bring us back around Hedwig.”

Hedwig roared as he turned back to the battle. The goblins had shot down just as many of their own fighters as they had done damage to our people but that didn't seem to matter with so many of the vicious monsters coming at us in wave after wave.

Bolts rained down from the walls, slowing the goblin's advance while a spread of arrows sailed in between the fighters right into the goblin archer's faces. Dawn had made it onto the field with the rest of our party.

"Don't let those goblins overwhelm our people," Dawn shouted.

Cam rushed to protect the spearmen on the left with Lu for support. While Cam cleared the path for them and pulled all the attention he could toward himself with taunting abilities, Lu came in like a wrecking ball. Literally. She swung her kusari-fundo over her head with such speed and force that when she brought it swinging through swaths of goblins there was just no stopping it.

Voz's group in the distance was covered in blood. Judging by the pile of goblin bodies around them, most of it wasn't theirs. But that didn't stop Terry from running to their aid and laying down the heals. That was the biggest disadvantage to Voz's heavy infantry. They had to come into range of the goblins and trade blows. Their heavier armor shrugged off most of the abuse and their axes allowed them to keep hacking away at the tiny monsters even when they were too close for comfort, but that still allowed blades to slip in between the gaps of armor, or connect with enough force to do some damage.

On the walls, Dawn's acolytes used their archery skills to mow down goblins while the rest of our villagers were using the repeater crossbows to maximum efficiency.

But the sheer number of enemies was still daunting. The goblin archers drew their bows back and fired again. I drove Hedwig into their sloppy lines and lanced through as many as I could with my glaive before breaking off. The forest was absolutely teeming with goblins and the hobgoblins were approaching quickly.

That momentary distraction cost me. A large club caught me across the face and threw me clean off Hedwig's back. Caught in a

daze I coughed up blood. The world around me was spinning and the sounds of battle were muffled by the ringing in my ears. All of that went away when the hobgoblin appeared in my vision.

He raised his club high to finish the job and I scrambled away just as he turned the area my head had been a second ago into a crater. A goblin jumped on my leg and tripped me up. Another went for my shield arm and drove his knife into my shoulder.

I roared as I ripped the monster off my shoulder and flung it back at the hobgoblin's face. It stumbled and barked at me in some brutish tongue. Driving my knee into the ground I crushed the ankle-biting goblin's skull and turned around to face the hobgoblin.

That was when I realized I had gone too far off on my own.

Hedwig was tied down fighting his own group of hobgoblins. The powerful oso tore the arm off of one then beat another down with his rending claws. Dawn and the rest of my party were still with the front lines keeping the goblins from reaching the walls, working in tandem with the heavy infantry units they supported.

Then there was me, an absolute genius, running solo cavalry charges into a mass of monsters. I was alone, separated from Hedwig, and staring down a hobgoblin and his swarm of buddies pouring out of the woods.

*Dwayne*, I said as I raised my shield and glaive.

*Yes, Ryan?*

*Burn it all down.*

Dwayne's reply came in the rapid fire rain of burning bolts tearing through the sky. The heavy bolts impaled goblins to the trees, igniting their bodies and spreading those burning embers across the forest.

The hobgoblin glanced back and laughed. As if that wasn't going to stop anything.

He was right of course. Those fires were the equivalent of someone dropping a lit match on the forest and expecting the whole thing to go up in flames like a Michael Bay film. What we needed was a wildfire.



It came from the castle walls in the shape of a spinning, burning frisbee of death. The magical attack carved through trees before detonating like a miniature volcano when it hit a hobgoblin square in the chest. The monster didn't die right away but the flames would fix that. In the meantime the monster ran about screaming, spreading the fire to any of its allies who had been spared and helping the rest of the forest ignite.

*Eva says hi*, Dwayne said.

I grinned as the morning air became tinged with the orange of a growing wildfire. We were going to have to thank Eva for being a pyromancer later. Now, I had a hobgoblin to slay.

Charging in with a wild swing, that monster was much faster than I had realized. I threw up my shield in time to block its attack.

Wham!

My shield cracked and I went flying across the battlefield into a group of goblins rushing past. I rushed to my feet with a wild sweep, taking them out before the next swing came. I threw myself to the side this time and was about to counter when the hobgoblin whirled about with its club again. I threw my shield up again.

Wham!

I flew back toward the burning forest when I received a particularly distressing notification.

### **Warning: Shield durability at 50%**

Blocking this monster was not going to work. At least not with my shield. Maybe if I had one of Cam's but this thing was much too strong for what I was packing. Then again the hobgoblin seemed much too strong compared to the others. This had to be a special mob of some kind.

### **Hobgoblin Chieftain, Level 38**

"Oh, you're a boss. Well that makes sense." Now that I looked at him this hobgoblin was definitely on the large side of his species when it came to height and muscle. The tusks jutting out from its lower jaw were an impressive pair wrapped in gold and gemmed bands. Its armor was still a mish-mashed mess of bone, metal, and

leatherwork but it actually looked like it would provide a serious level of protection compared to the regular mobs.

I put my shield away and readied my glaive in both hands. *Guys I need a little help here.* The burning forest beside us cracked and the ground trembled. The enormous trolls had arrived on scene. *Now.*

The chieftain swung for my head again. I leaned back out of the way, gritting my teeth as the club's tip missed my nose. Another wild swing followed, throwing up a geyser of dirt from where I had just been standing a second ago. This guy was no joke, but he overcommitted to the last swing and wedged his club in the dirt. I took the opening to thrust my glaive at his throat, imbued with shocker. The chieftain tore his weapon free and moved just enough for my glaive to graze his neck. The monster roared out as electricity shot through its body briefly. It was all the time I needed to jump into a Leaping Power Slash. My glaive bit deep into the chieftain's shoulder but it wasn't enough. I was smashed aside like a fly pushing its luck and sent crashing through the forest floor.

"Ow," I groaned to myself and laid on the healing hands. I was down to a quarter of my health after so many hits and it was going to take at least half of my mana to top myself off.

The ground all around me shook as the trolls marched on the walls. As I rose to my feet I saw the giants armed with tree trunks and their bare hands move to try and batter down the walls. The closest of these trolls raised his tree trunk into the heavens and caught a ballista bolt through the bottom of his jaw for his trouble. The giant let out a low, final groan as it dropped its weapon on top of a pile of goblins and crashed on his back. Another ballista bolt shot through the heart of a second troll, dropping the giant to its knees as it gasped out its final breaths.

However, the goblins weren't out of the fight yet. As stupid as they had been to charge the walls, the little monsters could climb. Using their claws they started clambering up the walls. Our lower level fighters used their spears to knock them off or flat out kill them but things were not looking good for us.

Glancing back at the forest for some sign of hope, I saw that our plan had worked for the most part. The burning woods severely reduced the number of goblins and hobgoblins coming at us but that still left the dozen or so trolls lumbering toward us as a massive threat. Without a well-placed ballista bolt to a vital area those monsters could take an absurd amount of abuse. Even Eva's flaming death frisbee only staggered the monsters and a spell that big had to tear chunks out of her mana.

The hobgoblin chieftain finally caught up to me and snapped me out of my thoughts. Rather than dodging out of the way of its attack I rolled underneath it and thrust my glaive through the hobgoblins gut. The monster roared and I put every shred of my strength into pushing the creature away. It barely budged an inch but I kept pushing and pushing until he suddenly flew back and crashed onto his back.

My glaive tore free from the monster and I threw it up victoriously. "Suck it, goblin." I cheered when I saw Cam rush past me to slam his shield down on the chieftain. "Cam?"

The chieftain caught Cam's shield and shoved him away. He quickly hopped to his feet and roared, smashing his club on the ground as an ominous red glow radiated off his body.

Three arrows blasted the chieftain's face.

"We came as fast as we could," Dawn said.

The chieftain rushed for Dawn but Cam moved in his way. He slammed his shields together like shutting a door on the chieftain's face. The huge creature bounced off the shield and roared his fury. It slammed its club again and again on Cam's shields, like it had gone into some berserker rage and couldn't think of anything more than to go forth and kill.

Lu exploited this with a swing from her kusari-fundo. Where I had expected the ball hammer to crack open the chieftain's skull, it missed. Except it didn't. The way Lu had thrown her weapon made the chain curl around the chieftain's neck and with a sharp tug not

only did the monster croak and drop his weapon to try and fight for a breath but it was dragged away from Cam's shields.

Cam took this opening without hesitation and rushed forward, knocking the chieftain down and slamming both of his shields on its skull. Not one to be left out of the fight, Terry used his roots to bind the monster to the floor while we piled on the damage. It really felt like we were bullying this killer beast.

And then it tore free.

The hobgoblin threw us all aside and went for its club. I hurled my glaive through its chest, striking it with a second helping of shocker. The hobgoblin spasmed and growled in place as I rushed in. In one swift, spinning motion, I tore my glaive free and brought it about with all the force and momentum I could build up, cleaving the chieftain's head clean off his shoulders.

Lifeless, the chieftain crashed to the floor and the screams of terror from nearby goblins and hobgoblins signaled a turning in the battle.

**Monster Surge leader defeated: Monster damage and defenses reduced by 25%. 50% chance of monsters retreating.**

I blinked at this. The developers had thrown in a morale system of some kind for huge battles like this. It really shouldn't surprise me with how life like everything else was but to see it laid out in numbers like this reminded me that no matter how real this world was, it was still a game.

The monsters around us began to retreat. Mostly goblins. The hobgoblins were much more insistent on staying and fighting. The larger hobs especially barked out orders at their fleeing brethren and goblins to fall back in line. This worked sometimes but their debuffed stats made them all much easier to take down.

Trolls were the only monsters that didn't seem affected by the loss of the chieftain leader. At least, not when it came to the retreat chance. Not a single one of the trolls even slowed down their advance. Our ballistas tore into them but with their proximity the shots were less carefully aimed and more panic fire. The bolts

slammed the monsters back and unleashed rivers of blood from the beasts but we weren't equipped to take out such huge monsters.

"How are we going to take those things down?" Terry asked. "This is insane."

One of the trolls slammed his tree trunk down on a wall, killing a dozen of our defenders who didn't get away in time and grievously damaging the wall. Eva firebombed the monster with her spells and the focused fire of heavy repeaters was enough to kill it.

"Beat them until they're dead?" Cam offered.

I nodded. "Aim for their ankles. If we can take out their achilles I bet they drop just like any of us."

"I really need a bigger bow," Dawn sighed. "I've got your back, Ryan." She fired off an arrow into a troll's eye. The beast roared and a ballista bolt caught it in the side of the head.

I whistled for Hedwig. He came running, covered in blood and wounds, but the oso didn't seem bothered in the slightest. If anything he seemed excited by the big fight and dragged his disgusting tongue across my face.

"Groooss," I laughed and rubbed his big, fuzzy, armored head. "We have more work to do, boy. Are you ready?"

Hedwig looked over at Terry.

"What? Oh! Healing, right." Terry laid down a heal on Hedwig, restoring his health to full.

With a happy grunt, Hedwig shuffled over to let me climb on.

We took off speeding for the nearest troll. Using power slash, Hedwig's cavalry charge, and a well aimed cut, my glaive acted like a scalpel at cleaving open the troll's achilles. A very, very small scalpel. It took us two, sometimes three passes before we succeeded in doing anything more than getting on a troll's bad side. But when it worked, the monster's tumbled and dropped to their knees if not outright fell. This made them much easier targets to focus on with ranged attacks and spells.

Voz and his people still preferred to keep their distance from the downed trolls. They may not be able to run but those arms were

powerful enough to swiftly end anyone unfortunate enough to come within their grasp.

Cam, Terry, Dawn and Lu worked together to bring down the trolls one at a time. While Hedwig and I stopped them from moving, Cam grabbed their attention and kept it on lock down. Terry helped by slowing their movements further with the reckless application of more roots. Dawn poured on the damage with arrows and Lu had figured out that you can strangle a troll just like any other creature that needs air. Her kusari-fundo worked wonders for that.

It took us the rest of the early afternoon to finish mopping up the monster surge, but once it was over we received a notification showered in fireworks, gold, and confetti.

**Congratulations heroes! You have successfully defended the town of Liberty from a monster surge. Rewards: 165,000exp. 100,000 system points. Monster surge protection for one week. Monster surges cannot attack Liberty for the duration. Your choice of town upgrade.**

**-Keep: A keep to place anywhere within the territory of Liberty. Keeps are small, fortified structure housing the leadership of a town. As a final defensive line these fortifications can store supplies, people, and weather all but the mightiest attacks.**

**-Engineers Guild: A structure dedicated to engineering. Ropes, pulleys, cranes, catapults, and siege towers. Oh my! Engineers guilds are a hub for highly skilled and knowledgeable craftsmen to create things more complicated than a sharp, metal stick.**

**-Scroll of Founding: Ever wanted your own kingdom? An empire? It all starts with this scroll. The scroll of founding allows its user to double the land claimed by a city, establishing it as the capitol of their kingdom, and greatly expands the town management options to that of a kingdom. Or empire. Call it whatever makes you happy noob.**

**Congratulations hero! You have reached level 32. Looks like you might catch someone's eye now, newbie.**

My jaw dropped. The levels were awesome but these rewards were amazing. *Guys we need a town meeting.*

We piled into the inn for a discussion. Me, Dawn, our party, Nico, Voz, Dwayne, Eva and Randy were there too. Sarah saw the commotion and piled in with a few others who were more than a little bit nosey as to what was going on.

“Did you see those rewards?” I asked everyone.

“The experience was pretty insane, yeah,” Dwayne said.

Nico nodded. “And those points are more than enough to upgrade our walls another tier and expand our holdings.”

Dawn shot me a glance. “Let me guess. You have some fancy reward all of us mere peasants couldn’t even dream of glancing upon,” she said in her most overly dramatic voice.

“Ya,” I agreed without a hint of sarcasm. At least at the fancy reward bit. “I was given the option of getting a Keep, an Engineers Guild, and a Scroll of Founding.”

The crowd exchanged glances, some more excited than confused but there was still a great deal of confusion.

“So the Keep is pretty straight forward,” I began. “It’s a defensive structure, the last line of defense between our people and whatever it is that’s trying to kill us.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Voz said. “Not the type of thing we would want to happen but a great precaution.”

“If the Braven force us back to our keep we’re basically done for anyway so this seems like a ‘nice to have’ reward at best,” Dawn said.

I nodded. “Ya, it doesn’t look great. The next two rewards are way better. Like the Engineers Guild, it is set up entirely for making things like siege equipment and other complicated machinery. It comes with some more NPCs too to help us along and going deeper into the details says there are all sorts of magical applications that



can be used in conjunction with the engineering you've been doing, Dwayne."

"I'm sold," Dwayne grinned.

"Those weapons Dwayne made saved Liberty from the monster surge, aye," Voz agreed. "If we could make bigger and better ones we would be far more secure in our position here. Even against the Braven."

"It definitely looks like the best option," I agreed. "But we wouldn't get the full benefit right away. Sure we will have the facilities but those NPCs will have to come here from somewhere and with the guilds fighting over every village and city I'm not sure where that somewhere would be."

Dawn sighed. "So that works just like the guards then. Still, it's better than the Keep."

"What's the last thing?" Sarah asked. "That scroll."

"The Scroll of Founding," I said. "It's apparently a scroll that lets me found a kingdom I can call whatever I want. It expands our holdings greatly and the town management options to a kingdom level."

Jaws fell all around me as I carried on.

"It doesn't really let me see what those options are but I imagine they're pretty amazing. And while this looks like the best long term play, I'm not sure how this helps us right now."

"Do it," Voz said. "Pick that one."

"What? Why?" I asked. "The Engineers Guild we could use right now."

"Voz is right," Nico said. "So far our village has been growing at a nice, steady pace. With the new arrivals you have brought our town is already at the threshold where it can become a city, which is why things are so cramped here. Add to this the alliances you have made on your adventure south and your intentions to retake Mara and it seems only natural your goals would be to create a kingdom of your very own."

I tilted my head to the side with an awkward smile. "A kingdom for us sounds pretty awesome but my primary goal right now is to keep us all safe."

"And what better way is there to safeguard those you care for than establishing a kingdom?" Nico pressed. "You can place outposts across the lands, fortify cities, raise armies, and have a much easier time laying claim to resources than we did when we claimed the Bastion mines."

Nodding along to her every word I considered what she was saying. It all made sense and in the long term it would provide the greatest benefit, but it didn't help us now and there were potential pitfalls that weren't being discussed.

"OK. Let's say we go with this and we start our own kingdom. Won't that make us a threat to all the current, existing kingdoms?" I asked. "As it is we're just a bit north of the middle of everything. Something this big probably won't go unnoticed the second we use it."

"This could be asking for a lot of trouble," Dawn agreed.

Cam crossed his arms over his broad chest. "Trouble has already found us."

Lu nodded. "If the Braven know where we are then the whole world knows we're here. A guild that size can't hold any secrets."

Terry grimaced. "That could be good right? I mean. Maybe they'll fight each other to get to us instead of just attacking us like the Braven are planning."

"Maybe," I said thoughtfully.

"Of the guilds I cannot speak," Nico said. "But of the kingdoms I have enough of an understanding to know a new kingdom springing up out of nowhere will be a curiosity. Under normal circumstances they would want to find out what we are like, if we can be used, allied with, or if we are simply enemies. But these are not normal times."

Voz sipped from his mug of ale. "Aye, these are most certainly not normal times. With the rise of the guilds the kingdoms are all too busy dealing with them and other internal matters to worry about a

new kingdom appearing. Now I know that our numbers aren't big enough to hold vast expanses of land but we can always grow. Ryan has that sort of personality that draws people to him after all."

"He does, doesn't he?" Dawn smiled.

I rolled my eyes. "So either way we go with this scroll our cover is blown and we have bigger problems than the other kingdoms. Fine. We'll vote on it. Raise your hand if you want the Keep."

Not one hand went up.

"Engineers Guild?"

Dwayne and Randy threw their hands up. Voz and a few others did as well.

"And lastly, the Scroll of Founding?"

The remaining hands went up at this. It seemed they wanted a kingdom.

"The scroll it is," I said and accepted the reward.

"You better not name us the Broken Bones kingdom," Dawn said. "It's cute for a guild but it makes us sound like a pirate empire or something."

I laughed. "Ya, we're a little too land locked for the whole pirate thing. We'll think up a name between now and the time we send the Braven packing. Until then, Nico, upgrade our walls with those points."

She nodded. "And expand their coverage?"

Hedwig grunted and nudged me with his beak like that was a bad idea.

"Hedwig doesn't like that and I agree," I said. "For the moment we need to hold what we have. If we make our walls cover more ground than they already do we won't have enough people to man it all. That lets the Braven sneak up on us instead of forcing them to break through our walls."

Nico looked away briefly. There was a rumbling outside and some shouts. "Done. Our walls are upgraded. We can expand our holdings later, after this crisis has passed."

Dwayne sighed. "I guess this means we're going to have to build our own Engineers Guild. Oh well. More construction levels for us, right Randy?"

Randy nodded. "Yeah!"

"Speaking of passing crises," Nico said. "There is still the matter of that dungeon, Ryan. Did you find it on your scouting trip?"

"We have a pretty good idea about where it is," I said. "If not for the monster surge we would have gone inside to clear it out."

"Then it looks like we need to clear out that problem before we can focus our efforts on the Braven," Nico said. "We may have earned a week of protection from monster surges but so long as that dungeon isn't cleared we will have another, potentially stronger surge headed for us in that time."

**You have been offered a quest! Find and clear the dungeon to the north. 100,000exp. Do you accept yes/no?**

While there was no promised reward of skills, gold, or loot, the experience alone was worth a level or two. I accepted it without much more thought. Liberty's safety alone was enough and a dungeon at this level was bound to have plenty of loot to pick up.

"We'll be back by tomorrow morning at the latest," I grinned. "Come on, guys."

On our way out I glanced over my stat points. There were nine to distribute for me and Hedwig. So I kept things simple and put three points into my strength, agility, and constitution. As useful as my spells were I really didn't know enough offensive ones to justify going heavier into intelligence and wisdom but that was probably a good thing. As it was my stats were spread out a bit much, even for a jack-of-all-trades like me.

**Ryan Rosa Level 32 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 40**

**Agility 37**

**Constitution 38**

**Intelligence 31**

**Wisdom 31**

**Charm 15**

I had to do a double take when I saw the updated strength number. I must have leveled up strength fighting off the monster surge. Unfortunately I cleared my notifications out already so whatever jab the AI had for me was gone forever. At least until the next time I leveled something up.

With Hedwig I followed the same point spread of three for each of his core stats.

**Hedwig: Level 32 Oso**

**Strength 45**

**Agility 41**

**Constitution 50**

**Intelligence 16**

**Wisdom 16**

Our journey north to the dungeon went far smoother the second time around. With the monster surge that headed our way broken, all we found were goblin stragglers and the occasional hobgoblin among their number. They were quick, easy kills, thanks to our new levels.

It was late in the afternoon when we reached the black stone fortress I had seen off in the distance. Just as ominous as it had looked in the distance its walls were covered in spikes and the hanging skeletons of humans, elves, and dwarves. The gates were wide open and seemingly without guards. Regardless we moved in with Cam and his shields up front. I rode on Hedwig at the back, ready to swing around our group at a moment's notice. But the fortress was deserted. Smoke drifted up from a few fires that were put out not long ago but it seemed all of the monsters had already left on the surge.

"This feels like we were supposed to fight our way inside," Dawn said.

“A really big fight,” Lu agreed. “Unless the gates are supposed to always be open.”

Across from the gate we came in through was a second gate, this one was sealed and led the way further north. According to my map there was nothing but plains, forest, and eventually the ocean in that direction, but I knew there could be other towns, dungeons, or any other number of awesome things there. I would have to come back another day to check those out.

“Where’s the dungeon?” I asked and glanced around.

The central structures were made up of hide, bone, and wood. Spooky, ominous, and definitely we are baddies in the aesthetic sense but not quite dungeon material. I looked to one of the mountains where it looked like a castle had been built. A dark, ominous structure that crawled up the western mountain side.

Terry caught me looking. “Sure looks like a dungeon to me.”

We headed over and tried the doors. They didn’t even budge. I put all my strength behind it, Hedwig tried, and Cam joined in as well. The doors refused to move.

“This feels a lot less like a door and a lot more like a wall,” Cam said. “Locked doors shake and budge at least a little.”

Dawn sighed. “Is this awesome evil castle just a set piece? Because that’s absurdly lame.”

Lu tried picking the lock. Her pick went in but the keyhole glowed an ominous purple. When she pulled the pick out, it was gone all the way down to the handle. “Uhm. I think this door’s a little out of our league.”

A gargoyle statue above the door stirred. Its glowing violet eyes stared down at us. “The path forward is barred to those who have not proven themselves worthy.” It pointed across to the opposite mountain. “Prove your worth within the Iron Sanctum, then perhaps you may enter Nightwhisper Castle.”

**Nightwhisper Castle.**

**Requirements:**

**-Minimum Level of 45.**

**-Full Raid of 40 members.**

**-Iron Sanctum Seal.**

I blinked up at the castle. “Nope, not going in there any time soon.”

“But how are we supposed to stop a monster surge if we can’t clear the dungeon?” Terry asked.

Pointing my thumb back at the Nightwhisper Castle I said, “This can’t be the dungeon the surge came from. All the monsters we were fighting were in their thirties. This place is forty-five minimum. Plus, the game was released not too long ago. Why would they have raid dungeons unleash monster surges so early? They probably don’t expect anyone to have raids high enough level to take this on just yet.”

“Some people can hit that level in a day,” Dawn said.

“I haven’t heard about any of them,” Lu said. “Wouldn’t the game make a big deal about that as a world first?”

“Right, so this is a problem for the future. Let’s go to the Iron Sanctum.” I lead the way over. A dungeon and a raid dungeon... Man, we might’ve hit the jackpot here!

On the opposite mountain, the entrance to the Iron Sanctum was a large, metal disk flanked on either side by a sloping stone work. Sort of like a mini pyramid built into the side of a mountain. The second we approached the door it rolled out of its way for us and allowed us inside.

“This is totally going to lock us in, isn’t it?” Dawn asked with a grin.

“Yup,” Lu agreed.

We crossed the threshold and the door sealed behind us.

“Then we better make this quick, huh?” I grinned and hopped off Hedwig.

While the Iron Sanctum was a spacious dungeon, compared to the mini dungeon infested with spiders, I didn’t want a repeat from the monster surge where I split the party by charging on ahead. Nor

did I want to charge right into a trap. This was unknown territory and we needed to go nice and slow.

The walls in this place were all carved from dark stone, just as the floor was. Broken wood was scattered about here and there from smashed open crates or weapon racks. Weapons were littered about along with old plate armor too rusted and worn from age to be of any use to anyone. It looked like this was where soldiers rushed out to get their gear before heading out to defend the fortress.

We wandered further inside through long, winding halls, collapsed sections of the structure, and found ourselves in a training yard. The ripped up dummies scattered around us told a tale of an encounter with beasts rather than soldiers. It wasn't until we reached the center of the room when the doors slammed shut behind us.

A terrifying cry of a goblin horde and their hobgoblin masters filled the air. The monsters poured in from every direction.

"Oh good I was wondering when the fighting would start," I said.

Cam swung his shield to the right and slapped away a volley of arrows. "Archers in the stands."

"I have them," Dawn said.

Lu was already gone from our group, sneaking off to do ninja things probably.

Terry backed up into the middle of our formation. "There aren't a lot of trees for me to root things with guys. My magic is almost entirely support based."

"Then back us up, Terry," I called out as I swatted the first goblin out of the air. "Keep the heals coming." While Terry's root magic was handy, it was his healing abilities that made the most difference in a dungeon like this.

Dawn yelled another 'Woo' in her best Rick Flair style and Cam roared across the arena to taunt the goblins. The tide of goblins turned to focus their attacks on Cam. While he blocked and bashed his way through them, some still got around his shields. Terry was on point, casting heals whenever Cam took any serious damage. Hedwig clawed and chewed up the tiny monsters left and right.



In the distance I spotted the hobgoblin leader. One with an axe and sword. He shouted a war cry and the goblin's movements became faster, their attacks dealing more damage.

### **Hobgoblin Slayer, Level 32, Miniboss.**

"There's the leader," I called out. "We need to take him out now."

"Easier said than done," Cam said, batting aside groups of the tiny terrors and punting another across the arena.

"Where's Lu in all of this?" Dawn asked as she took out another five goblins in rapid succession.

That was when Lu dropped from above right on top of the Hobgoblin slayer. With all the force of a comet her kusari-fundo smashed into his head and sent it off somewhere deep between his shoulders. The momentum from her attack was so strong it didn't come without consequences. She slammed into the floor hard, her health dropping to nearly half.

*Guys, I think I twisted my ankle,* she sent over party chat. We couldn't see what was going on as the hobgoblins moved to surround her.

"Hedwig let's go!"

Hedwig roared and charged forward. With a swift stomp he sent a wave of rushing earth across the arena floor, sending the monsters flying into the air. Lu was caught in the attack as well. Hedwig rushed to her, snatching her out of the air by the back of her collar.

By the time Hedwig whirled around to bring Lu back to the party, I pounced on the back of a hobgoblin, using Shocker to stun him as I drove him back down to the ground, finishing him off. After that, it was basically a cleanup job, killing off the remaining goblins and hobgoblins.

When the fight was finally almost over, Terry started healing everyone as we continue our killing spree, although now at a much less frantic pace. "What did we learn?" Terry asked as he topped Cam's health up.

"Uh, dropping from the roof might be a bad idea?" Lu said.

Cam snorted.

“No, we learned that we don’t run off without telling our party where we’re going,” Terry said.

“You could’ve gotten killed there, Lu,” I said as I worked to thin the goblin swarm around us.

“I would have just respawned at the start,” Lu huffed.

“With one less level,” Cam added.

“Maybe. I’m almost at level thirty now so I’d still be at twenty-nine.” Lu insisted.

I threw a Goblin aside with a swift swing of the haft of my glaive then knocked aside the weapon of another. Cam finished it off with a shield slam. “We can’t afford to lose levels, Lu,” I said. “We have the Braven out there and it might be every other asshole guild soon. We need to get stronger.”

Lu finally stood under her own strength. “Okay, I’ll try to be more careful,” she said with a pout as the last goblins fell dead.

I shook my head. “It’s not just about being careful, it’s about teamwork.”

Lu bit her lip and nodded.

As Cam killed the last of the Hobgoblins, a brilliant golden light shone from the middle of the room and a heavy iron chest appeared.

“This is new,” Terry said.

“Must be part of how the big dungeons work,” I said as we moved to open the chest.

**Iron Sanctum, Tower Shield, +500 defense, +100 damage. Releases a shock wave of force around the caster when slammed down.**

“Awesome. Is there another one in there?” Cam asked.

“No but maybe if we duct tape your two old shields together they might be half as good,” Terry said.

“I don’t think so,” Cam said.

**Boots of the Shadow Dancer, +50 movement speed, +50 defense. Shadow Teleport. Every five minutes the user can**

**teleport from one shadow to another. Cooldown reduces with Shadow Teleport skill.**

Lu made grabby hands at that so we tossed it her way.

The rest of the loot was gold, metals and gems for crafting, and healing potions. Now, when I say there was a lot of iron in that chest, I mean there was a ton of the stuff. Like we could outfit every single person in Voz's heavy infantry unit with a suit of full-plate. It wouldn't be great full-plate, but we definitely had the materials for it.

"Man, I cannot wait to take this home." I said, stuffing the iron into my bag of holding.

"You would be all excited about a bunch of crafting materials, nerd," Dawn teased. "Oh, hey, gems." She not so subtly stole those for her rune smithing.

"How many more floors do you think are in this dungeon?" Terry asked.

"It's a big mountain. Maybe two or three?" Cam guessed.

I nodded. "Sounds like a reasonable number. Let's see how this place goes."

We marched through the next few rooms taking on small encounters against goblins, hobgoblins, and the occasional wolf they had under their command. The experience was rolling in and it looked like we might pick up another level or two before we hit the next floor. But on and on the dungeon went. We had no idea how far we were into the mountain by the time we came to a towering set of double doors. Double doors surrounded by piles of dead goblins, hobgoblins, and it looked like human skeletons.

"This looks vaguely ominous," I said.

"Boss room?" Lu asked.

Cam threw the doors open, revealing a comically oversized forge room. The crucibles were industrial sized; the molten metal flowing around the central platform could give a volcano a run for its money. On the sides of the obvious arena were molds for weapons and armor and... people?

“This is definitely a boss room,” Cam confirmed as he strode in ahead of the party.

“But what’s the gimmick here? Blacksmith’s gone bad?” Dawn asked.

The doors sealed behind us and a figure appeared from the shadows at the end of the hall. It was a man clad in shadows with twin orbs of flames for eyes glowing behind a helmet. A health bar appeared across the underside of my interface.

### **Forgemaster, Level 38, Boss.**

This boss looked nothing like the goblins we had faced thus far. In fact, it may very well be what had left those dead monsters outside the doors. This creature was clad in dark metal but its body appeared to be made of shadow. Raising a hand toward the forgeworks around us, molten metal began to pour into the molds. One of these molds finished far faster than all the others.

A great maul flew from the mold into the Forgemaster’s shadowy hands. The monster advanced toward us. Each step carrying with it a weight a body made of shadows should not have. Yet it made perfect sense for a monster who stood half again as tall as Cam.

“How do we kill that?” Terry asked. “There’s no soft, fleshy body under that armor. Just shadows.”

“I’d recommend a flashlight but we’re surrounded by light and that’s not doing it,” Lu said.

Dawn fired an arrow at the monster’s head. It bounced off the helmet. “How about we start shooting it until something hurts?”

I hopped on Hedwig’s back and charged forward. “Sounds like a good plan.” It probably wasn’t... But I didn’t have any better ones so I just went with it.

The slow, lumbering Forgemaster shifted its gaze toward me as we rushed toward it. I pointed my glaive at its chest. The creature didn’t move to dodge. Instead it raised its hammer in the air. Flames engulfed the head as it telegraphed the coming blow.

I pulled Hedwig to the side to steer clear from the attack and kicked off my oso companion to throw myself at the Forgemaster.

The flaming hammer tore through the air beneath me. I crashed into the shadow monster's chest and slammed my spear into its chestplate. Shocker erupted from my glaive and coursed through the boss's body. It wasn't bothered in the slightest.

"Oh crap," I said as I fell to the floor. The boss tried to kick me but it was too slow. I swung left and lashed out with my glaive.

For hitting a solid piece of metal with a sharp weapon, we had so far done a good bit of damage. Five percent of its total health was already missing between my attacks and Dawn's.

"We can beat this thing."

"But it doesn't bleed," Lu called out as she rushed in with her swinging kusari-fundo. She went for a head blow but the forgemaster caught her weapon with its hammer and tore her off the ground.

"Hold on, Lu!" Terry tried to use its roots but without any plants to draw from his skill was too weak to create powerful roots on its own. The ones that sprung up were frail things that ignited under the forge's heat. "Nevermind."

Cam rushed forward, using a taunt on the boss. It worked to get the monster's attention but its fluid movements didn't slow down at all to change targets. Instead it swung Lu like a flail at him.

"Lu, let go," I shouted.

Lu released her weapon and flew at Cam. He dropped his shields to catch her in his arms. The forge master's hammer swung for them. Cam dropped to the floor as the burning hammer swung past.

"That was close," Cam said as he released Lu and rushed for his shields.

"Anyone have a spare weapon?" Lu called out.

Dodging the monster's hammer swings I said, "You have a bunch of daggers hidden in that outfit of yours. Throw them."

"I'm not sure they're going to cut it." Still, Lu drew them and started throwing, chipping away at the boss's health.

Cam charged in and slammed the boss with his shields, briefly staggering him and allowing me to get a couple of power thrusts in.

The boss's health dropped a quarter and the monster slammed his hammer down on the floor. A blast of flames shot out, sending us scattering across the arena and our health bars plummeting.

Hedwig held his ground against the blast and got in a series of vicious swipes at the boss while he was recovering from the area of effect attack.

The Forgemaster rose to his feet, ignoring Hedwig like it was stuck in an attack. It raised its hand slowly into the air and the sound of metal rattled all around us. Blades shot out from all the different molds and hung in the air above us.

"This isn't good," I said.

The Forgemaster drew his arm back.

"Get under my shields," Cam called out, throwing both of his enormous shields up.

We barely had time to get under them but there was no room for Hedwig. He was simply too big. Terry and I slammed the heals down on the big oso as the Forgemaster swung his arm down.

Blades rained from the sky, covering the area in swords of all shapes and sizes. The relentless assault battered Cam's shields, a few blades actually managing to punch through the spider carapace shield I had made for him. Hedwig cried out and roared as blades lanced into him but we healed him through the damage. By the time the forgemaster's assault stopped, our mana was drained and Hedwig was still missing a quarter of his health. Had that attack kept going, we might have lost Hedwig, and I would have had to find out if slain pets respawn or if they were gone forever. After all, Hedwig couldn't swear fealty to me or the guild.

"Terry, I know this isn't really your kind of weapon, but you should pick a sword," I said as I stepped out from under Cam's shield.

Terry gulped and picked the nearest sword to him. A greatsword. "I guess I could give it a swing."

"My kusari-fundo!" Lu called out, her weapon strewn on the floor.

"Go get it," I called out and started hacking away at the Forgemaster. Hedwig's attacks earlier had reduced its armor enough

for my glaive to do some serious damage. When Hedwig rejoined the fray the damage started piling on.

Stomping the ground the Forgemaster made jets of molten metal shoot up out of the arena floor. We were forced to scatter but Dawn rained arrows on the boss. Lu regained her weapon and as the jets of metal came down she rushed in with a vicious blow to the Forgemaster's chest. The metal dented under the force and Cam was quick to follow up with a barrage of blows from his shields.

The boss's health dropped down half. The shadows around the Forgemaster flared out like a flame. Its speed and strength all amplified as it stomped after Lu then swatted aside Cam.

Cam dug his heels in and slowed himself to a stop before he was thrown off the arena's edge. Lu slapped aside the boss's stomping foot before it came down on her but not fast enough to avoid tripping over herself.

Terry rushed the Forgemaster with the sword he'd picked up. The boss took notice and brought his hammer down on Terry. Rather than dodge, Terry threw his sword up to block. The force of the blow slammed Terry to the floor. His health plummeting to near zero.

"Terry!" I shouted as Hedwig roared out a taunt.

The Forgemaster's attention was locked squarely on us. Hedwig threw his full weight on the boss, gnashing and clawing at the monster.

Lu dragged Terry out of the way of danger while Cam shielded them from the flaming hammer swinging past them as he tried to crush me and Hedwig.

"Get a healing potion in him," I called out before I took a hammer blow myself. My ribs broke under the force and I went skidding to the arena's edge. The heat of molten metal burned my face but I could barely breathe. Clawing my way from the edge, I slumped onto my back and watched the fight from the corner of my eye.

Terry was back on his feet, limping away from the main battle but alive. Dawn was running from a flurry of hammer blows lagging

inches behind her. Cam, Lu and Hedwig worked together to drop the boss's health and then it hit the last quarter.

With a wide sweep of its hammer the boss cleared the fighters away from itself and gathered a mass of shadows into its hand. At the same time every suit of armor it had forged was pulled toward the arena floor. There were a dozen of them and when they were all gathered together the Forgemaster's arm shook. It crushed the gathered mass of shadows in its grasp and let them fill the gathered armors, bringing them to life. The armors all rushed to grab the nearest blades and moved on to attack us.

Wheezing, I fished out a health potion and chugged it down. I could feel my bones moving back into place and the pain started to subside but it wasn't fast enough. A trio of living armors was coming my way. Hedwig roared out a taunt but they were just out of reach. I chugged down a second potion and staggered up. With my glaive in both hands I crossed blades with the first armor. It twisted my weapon aside but I retaliated with the haft of my glaive, slamming it in the chest. The second and third armors came at me. I couldn't dodge out of the way of their blades, so I threw myself at the closest one. Its arms came down on my shoulders and I stabbed the third through the chest with my glaive. The living armor threw me off and I went to drink a third potion only to have it cut from my hands.

"That was a cheap shot," I told the living armors when a battlecry pulled our attention.

It was Terry. With his greatsword he cleaved the first living armor with all the grace of a train flying off the side of a cliff. "I've got your back man."

The remaining armors moved to attack but I caught one through the side with my glaive, buying Terry enough time to defend himself. With a quick double thrust I managed to get the last remaining armor to back off and Terry nearly cut my head off as he brought the sword around to finish the last of the living armors.

"Good job Terry," I praised as I rubbed my neck at how close that came.



Terry quickly cast a heal on me with his remaining mana. “Any time, man, but let’s avoid having me do any front line fighting alright?”

I finished off my healing with another healing potion. “Ya. Ya I think that’s a good call, Terry.” I tossed him a mana potion from my pack and drank down another one myself.

My attention turned back to the battle as Cam, Lu and Hedwig all finished off their living armors. Dawn was doing her best to fight on the move with her bow but the armors were too quick and aggressive for her while having to deal with the Forgemaster’s attention. She was the next one to take a blow. My heart sank as her health dropped but she was too far away for me to reach her. Too far for me to heal. I glanced at Terry who merely grimaced and ran for her.

Hedwig tackled one of the living armors before it could finish off Dawn. Cam and Lu tied down the other two. All that was left was the boss with its final five percent of health. One more good hit. That was all it would take to end the boss and finish this fight.

I took my glaive and ran for the Forgemaster. The monster brought its hammer back for another swing. Its shadowy form was engulfed in flames for the next attack. I threw my glaive with Power Throw and Shocker for maximum damage through the Forgemaster’s skull. The monster lurched to the side, dropping its hammer to the ground. The shadows within its armor sputtered and hissed away. With the creaking groans of metal, the Forgemaster crashed across the arena floor, falling dead to the molten river of metal below.

**Congratulations hero! You have defeated the Forgemaster! You have gained, 100,000exp, Iron Sanctum Seal.**

**You have completed a quest! Find and clear the dungeon to the north. 100,000exp.**

**Congratulations hero! You have reached level 34. The grind is starting to settle in, hero. How long can you go?**

While I was glad to see another two levels, I had to admit the AI had a point. For that much experience I could have easily gained ten

levels when I was a clueless little newbie. Now it seemed a hundred thousand experience points would only net me one level, if even that. I was pretty sure all the monsters we killed on the way to the boss pushed me over the top to thirty-four. Every level would take far longer to climb now and I may have to rely on picking up more quests on top of grinding dungeons to progress at a decent pace.

Just as in the first room a shower of golden light erupted from the center of the room. This time an enormous and somehow ornate iron chest appeared. But the loot could wait. I ran over to Dawn and the others.

“Dawn, are you alright?” I asked.

Dawn nodded in a daze. “I’m fine, Ryan... Now you take all five of you and stop spinning before I throw up.”

I laughed and planted a kiss on her forehead. Respawning may minimize the consequences of death but I couldn’t help the dread I felt seeing Dawn hurt like that. Using Healing Hands on her I was able to bring her back up on her feet. “Come on, Dawn. I can’t open this loot without you.”



Dawn did the honors. She strode to the chest, still a bit wobbly from her brush with death, and threw it open.

**Shadow Steel 100x: A strange, dark metal imbued with magical properties. Stronger than regular steel, this enchanted metal almost feels liquid to the touch.**

“Well that’s not cryptic at all,” I said. “What do you think it means by liquid?”

“That sounds like a blacksmith question.” Terry pointed at me.

Lu nodded. “If you can’t figure it out maybe Randy and Dwayne can.”

We agreed and moved on down the list. There were more precious gems, regular ores, and a lot of weapons none of us were really trained in. Longswords, greatswords, but there was one epic axe Voz was sure to appreciate.

**Forgemaster’s Gift, +200 damage. Applies an additional 25% fire damage as splash damage within 2 meters. Can ignite targets. Does not affect allies. When infused with mana the wielder of this weapon may throw a burning shadow duplicate of this weapon.**

Dawn whistled. “Now why can’t the game be nice to us for a change and get us some gear we can actually use.”

I held up a piece of the shadowy steel granted to us by clearing the dungeon. “I wouldn’t be so quick to say that Dawn. Crafted weapons are better than drops, and I still haven’t had a chance to play with the wurgen materials.”

Dawn crossed her arms. “You’re going to make a lightning glaive aren’t you?”

My lips pursed as I held up a finger. “That’s actually a really good idea. Let’s go.”

Terry and Dawn laughed at me but followed.

Cam spoke up. "Hey, Ryan, have you picked your class advancement yet?"

"Honestly I forgot about it between the scroll and preventing another monster surge," I admitted. "I'll take care of that as soon as we're back home. We may have cleared the dungeon but I wouldn't put it past the place to spawn new enemies if we stick around too long."

"Good call," Dawn agreed.

Hedwig let out a grunt and gave a big nod of his owl-bear head.

While we headed out of the dungeon I distributed my six new attribute points. Three went into agility and the rest into constitution.

**Ryan Rosa Level 34 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 40**

**Agility 40**

**Constitution 41**

**Intelligence 31**

**Wisdom 31**

**Charm 15**

My next levels were definitely going to have to go into Wisdom and Intelligence though I had yet to pick up any new skills. If I could craft something that used mana, however, it would need an increased mana pool to draw from. Like Cam's new Shield Slam, Lu's shadowy boots, and Voz's soon-to be axe. All of those items consumed mana to activate their skills. Since those existed, there was no reason we couldn't craft something similar.

I moved on to Hedwig's stats and dumped everything into constitution again. Hedwig was, after all, primarily a tank. With his increased strength and agility, coupled with the weight he could throw around, he was sure to demolish most Braven he came into contact with. But the coming battle for Liberty was sure to be a long one. We were going to need all the staying power we could muster.

**Hedwig: Level 34 Oso**

**Strength 45**

**Agility 41**

**Constitution 56**

**Intelligence 16**

**Wisdom 16**

Surprisingly, we didn't see many monsters on the way home, I wondered if it was luck or a function of having defeated the monster surge.

As we arrived at Liberty we were greeted by Voz and Nico.

"Is it done? Are we safe from monster surges?" Nico asked.

I scratched at my chin with a raised brow. "I thought you would get a notification whenever we finished a quest."

"I did but I still prefer to hear it from you," Nico replied.

"Ya, the dungeon is cleared. At least one of them is," I began. "There's a much higher level raid dungeon across from it. We have the key to enter but without a full forty people at level forty-five we won't be allowed in."

Nico's eyes went wide at the mention of a raid dungeon.

Dawn leaned over to Voz. "Is that a bad thing?"

"It is a problem for the future, las," Voz said. "The creatures a monster surge from such a place can produce are... Let's just say it takes kingdoms banding together to fight them back."

Cam sighed. "And we have one in walking distance of Liberty." Cam reached into his bag and pulled out the black and silvery axe from his inventory. An orange glow drifted along the silvery parts of the weapon, especially around the blade's edge. "We found this for you, Voz."

"For me? But I am no adventurer," Voz said as he took the weapon. "My gods this is a big axe." In Voz's hands it was absolutely a two handed axe but the weapon never specified as such. Then again the greatsword Tarkus swung around was easily a two-hander but he used it with a tower shield. The game must be flexible enough to allow players to fight how they want. If they couldn't handle it, they would suffer the consequences by dying.

“None of us can use it and you’re the highest skilled axe fighter in all of Liberty. So why not?” Dawn said.

Lu nodded. “We have other weapons to spread around with the same story. That one was by far the fanciest though.”

Voz hugged the axe to his chest. “I will treasure it always, my friends.”

“Any time, Voz,” I said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some forging to do.”

Dawn and Cam grabbed me by the shoulder. “Class advancement now, tinkering later,” Dawn ordered.

“Fine, fine,” I admitted defeat and moved to a nice bench to sit at. Shutting my eyes I pulled up the class advancement notification.

**You have reached Level 30. You are eligible for a class change. Would you like to visit Alecia?**

Yes.

Alecia stood in a black void with only clouds drifting by. Compared to the last place I had seen her at, this was far tamer, and it was honestly a bit concerning. Were the events of the world so terrible they put her in a sour mood? Was I just humanizing an AI far too much for my own good?

She gave me a warm smile. “Ryan. It is nice to see you again. And level thirty already. My, my, you have been making a great deal of progress. This is even faster than I had predicted.”

“What can I say? I try to impress.” I returned the smile. “So how are things since I last visited? I notice we aren’t in any scenic locations and I am a little bit worried something might be wrong.”

Alecia’s smile faded. “Dark days lay ahead of us Ryan and there is precious little light in this world.” Her gaze locked on me. “And I fear the brightest of these lights is about to be snuffed out.”

“You mean Liberty?” I asked.

Alecia shook her head. “You, Ryan. I mean you.”

“What? I’m just some guy I’m not that important.”

Alecia chuckled. "Just some guy who travels the world doing the best he can for the people he meets. While there are many like you, very few have established any kind of following. And this is why the likes of the Braven and the Blackhearts thrive. They band together to destroy and pillage everything they touch while the likes of the Broken Bones are happy to let the world be."

"That's not true. We have four guilds coming to aid us against the Braven, people heading down south to see if our allies in Bellmare can spare any aid, and I haven't really made any concrete plans just yet but we are definitely retaking Mara," I explained.

Alecia's warm smile returned. "That is exactly why you were offered the Scroll of Founding, Ryan. So you can band together with others like yourself and form a bulwark against the dark forces spreading through this land."

I held up a hand. "Are you telling me that scroll wasn't supposed to be a reward?"

"Not at all, Ryan. But it is an incredibly rare reward to be offered," Alecia explained. "One the gods may very well have decided to offer you for your growing list of good deeds."

"You're being coy aren't you?" I asked.

Alecia shook her head. "I am merely proposing you have earned this reward rather than it simply being a happy coincidence."

"Right," I didn't believe her in the slightest. "Looks like I'm going to have to add more shrines to the temple after all the fighting's done."

"You could build them you know," Alecia said. "You have the skills for them."

"I could have all the skills in the world but if I don't know what I'm building I'm probably going to make fast enemies of the gods by accident," I countered.

Alecia laughed. "True. The gods can be fickle when it comes to their shrines. After the fighting is done, study the gods so you may create proper shrines to each of them. You may find they are far more talkative than the gods of your world."



“Sure seems that way,” I said, remembering my brief encounter with Sol. “So, any suggestions for my new class?”

Alecia smiled. “Nothing you aren’t used to seeing by now, Ryan. But had you used that scroll before you came here, we could have found more regal classes for you.”

“There’s always next time,” I grinned and moved on to my class selection.

**You have reached Level 30! You may now advance your class, or choose another. You have opened three classes.**

**1) Shadow Spear Master: A warrior class specializing in the use of pole arms, shields, magical attacks and stealth. You gain bonuses to all polearm weapons, formation fighting, leadership, and defense. Shadow spear masters are a terror on the battlefield. Whether alone or in groups, these masters of the spear strike the first and often final blow in a battle.**

**2) Artificer: A crafter class that has mastered multiple crafting classes and learned to infuse their work with mana. Gain 10 crafting skills and 20 levels to distribute among your crafting and gathering skills. Receive a greater bonus to all crafting experience and bonuses to intelligence. An artificer’s power comes from their creativity, ingenuity, and willingness to toy with new and dangerous concepts.**

**3) Arcane Shadow Ranger: This unique class holds a diversity of talents. A warrior at home in the shadows, with blade and spell, they are capable of mastering any battlefield. There is no limit to what an Arcane Shadow Ranger can accomplish with enough dedication and time. Gain bonus skill progression in weapons, gathering, crafting, and magic.**

I had to admit the other two classes sounded awesome, especially the spear master. Considering how often I used stealth and spears over magic, this really seemed the natural choice for me to follow. But gaining that strength and prowess in battle meant sacrificing my crafting skills and I was not about to do that. Artificer proposed the opposite problem. I could gain amazing crafting skills

but I would lose all of my combat bonuses. Maybe if my time in New Realm had been more peaceful I would have considered taking this path.

No, my choice was clearly made before I even came here. Arcane Shadow Ranger. That class line continued to give me the best of both worlds. It may not grant me bonus levels in anything but the bonuses to experience more than made up for the decreased skill gain as we went up in levels.

“You have made your choice then?” Alecia asked.

I nodded. “Next time I come back here we can figure out some more regal classes for me.”

A light, musical laugh escaped her. “That assumes you survive the coming battle with your spirit unbroken, Ryan. Farewell.”

The world faded to black briefly before I found myself back in Liberty.

Dawn and the others were gathered around me. “Let me guess,” she said, “You went with the same class again didn’t you?”

I held up my hands with a grin. “If it ain’t broke...”

Dawn laughed. “Come on, Ryan let’s get to work. We have what? Five days now before the Braven are here?”

I stood up, wondering if Alecia was trying to warn me about other guilds working with the Braven. “Ya. That sounds about right. ”

“What we need now is a montage,” Terry said.

I rolled my eyes and went to work at the blacksmith’s shop. Starting with studying the materials we gathered from the wurgen. Using it’s hide and fur, I could create a rather tough set of leather armor. While not as tough as plate, the blue leather was difficult to cut with even the sharpest blades. More importantly, it provided a heavy resistance to lightning damage while the white fur amplified any electric magic used by the wearer.

*If I make a set of armor out of this, and a weapon to go with it, Shocker is going to be ridiculous,* I thought.

Randy came running into the room. "Ryan, look at this!" He held out a knife in his hand with a black grip and a silvery blade.

My brow furrowed. "Randy did you start messing with that shadow steel already?"

"Maybe," Randy said in his squeakiest voice.

"We agreed we'd look into this stuff together. In the morning. It was a pain to get our hands on," I sighed. "We have no idea how to gather that ore outside of clearing the dungeon and hoping it gives it to us, you know."

Randy smiled nervously. "I couldn't wait that long. And this stuff is awesome."

"Go on then, show me what you did," I said.

Rather than show me how stabby, slashy, or unbreakable the weapon might be, Randy took a firm grip of the weapon and poured mana into it. Shadowy wisps swirled about the blade as it grew in length to match a long sword.

"What?"

"Neat huh?" Randy said.

I blinked and touched the sword to make sure it was really real. The cold steel was, in fact, there. While the metal had an odd, flowing sensation beneath my fingers it acted like any other steel blade beneath my hand. I took the sword from Randy's hands and ran my finger along the edge. It cut with ease and drew blood.

"How does this work?" I asked.

"Magic! Probably," Randy said. "A lot of it actually. I tried a few experiments."

My eyes narrowed on Randy. "How many is a few?"

"Twenty-five-ish pieces worth?" Randy practically squeaked out.

I took a long, long breath. "We're locking you out of any new and rare materials in the future, you know that right?"

Randy just smiled sheepishly.

"Go on then, tell me what you did," I said, playing with the sword by pouring mana into it, shrinking it down to a dagger then back over

and over.

“Right, so, for my first experiment I made a dagger, nothing crazy, just trying to see how the material worked and it worked like steel. So no special techniques required there.” Randy held up a finger. “With one little difference. The material was actively training my mana while I worked on it. So either this stuff is really evil or really magical.”

“We did kill an armor made of living shadows to get this stuff so let’s go with both,” I said.

Randy nodded. “Sounds like it. Anyway, I noticed that when I finished the dagger the mana stopped draining from me, but I got curious, so I gave it some more mana myself. The dagger grew! Very poorly but it did. It was like the metal was just exploding out of the blade in every direction but since it was so small it didn’t do much.”

“That sounds terrifying and amazing,” I said. “We could probably make a weapon out of that.”

“Maybe but I didn’t want to test it since, you know, only a hundred pieces,” Randy said. “So anyway I kept playing around with it, making some different weapons.”

My brow raised, wondering just how much metal he actually used.

He threw up his hands. “Recycling everything I could!” Randy insisted. “And I discovered the trick to it. You start by making the weapon at the biggest size you want it to go. So in this case a long sword, pouring mana into it the whole time, willing the weapon to retain its shape. Once you have that weapon finished completely, you return it to the forge and pour mana into it once more to sort of... loosen the stuff. You can rework it to whatever shape you need and then bam! You have a two in one weapon. Maybe three. I haven’t tried that yet.”

“And this works with the grip as well?” I asked, pointing out the dark leather grip on the dagger.

“Actually yes. The shadowy metal with its totally not evil magicalness seems to take over everything attached to the weapon.

So that leather grip grows and shrinks with the weapon to the designated shape,” Randy explained. “So in theory we could make you a glaive from this stuff and have it shrink down to a sword or dagger. Whatever you needed.”

“And armor from this stuff could be amazing too,” I thought. “With just a little bit of mana you can pop a shield out of your arm. Maybe even summon and unsummon a helmet.”

Randy laughed. “The helmet might not work, Ryan. I haven’t tried it but I imagine it would be part of your chest plate and then you wouldn’t be able to turn your head.”

“You’re probably right,” I conceded.

“So, want to make something out of this?” Randy asked.

“I was going to wait for Dwayne but if I don’t you’re going to use all this stuff up aren’t you?” I asked.

“No,” Randy said innocently. “Maybe.”

“Oh, we are definitely putting a lock on the rare materials.”

We spent the rest of the night working with the shadow steel, seeing what we could do with it. Randy, being clearly more experienced with the material than I was, started working on a new weapon for Lu. He called it a kusari-gama, which was like her kusari-fundo except at the end of the chain there was a sickle attached to it. The shadow steel allowed Randy to work a couple of tricks into the weapon. For starters the length of the chain could be expanded or retracted with the use of mana so Lu could avoid making more noise with the chain of her weapon and still manage to fight in close quarters without too much excess chain to deal with. Then there was the ball hammer at the end. A little bit of mana and that weighted ball grew in size with spikes jutting out of it. It was awesome.

My weapon was nowhere near as elaborate but still awesome. At least to me it was. I reforged my glaive but this time using the shadow steel and materials from the worgen. With these I was able to add the lightning amplification effect to the weapon I wanted and now I had the ability to change the weapon between three sizes. Glaive, sword, or dagger. It took a great deal of help from Randy but

the kid actually knew what he was talking about. Though I was still locking the rare materials away before he burned through all of them without telling anyone.

**Lightning Shadow Glaive, + 150 damage, +50 lightning damage. 10% chance to apply shock to target. Thunderstruck: Call down a lightning strike on target following a vertical slash. Bladeshift: Weapon can change shape to a longsword or dagger. Reduces maximum damage by 20% per shift down.**

The damage penalty wasn't great but it was roughly in line with other weapons I had seen. Sort of. The glaive form, its original form, was stronger than any other polearm I had seen or used but the sword and dagger forms were weaker than their epic counterparts. I wasn't super happy about that but rather than having to flail around for another weapon I could just summon up a sword or dagger on the fly and completely eliminate an opponent's advantage at any range. Except for long range. I hadn't experimented with making a bow but that was just what I planned to do for Dawn next.

I went out to ask her about what sort of back up weapon she wanted. She decided on dual daggers but didn't want any of the wurgen materials used on it.

"I'm more of a pyro," she said. "Besides your lightning spells would benefit the most from those materials. I still don't have any strong magic outside of my archery skills."

I couldn't argue with that logic so we set about the task of figuring out if a shadow steel weapon could actually be split in the first place. Again, Randy came in for the save on figuring out this trick. While reforging the bow, which was impressively springy even for steel, Randy split it in two pieces to create the dual daggers. The results were comical when we tried reforming the weapon into a bow while the daggers were separated. It looked like we were swinging around dual sabers but the metal seemed to bleed shadows in this state. That probably wasn't a good sign so we reverted it to daggers before trying again. The transformation worked, but only when the daggers were sitting pommel to pommel. Otherwise the bow was warped in

less than ideal ways. For safety's sake we added some notches to the daggers pommels so they would slot right into one another.

The bow did have an odd special ability called Shadow Arrows. From what I gathered she could shoot arrows made of shadow. A target would feel the impact and even be pinned to surfaces without any damage being done to them. That didn't seem particularly useful but there was probably a time and a place for it.

After confirming everything was to her liking we finished off the day and the last of the shadow steel upgrading my armor. I tried asking the rest of my party if they wanted anything but Cam was happy with his shield, Lu was too busy playing with her new kusarigama to pay any attention, and Terry made it pretty clear I hadn't spent a single second crafting any rods or staves so I couldn't make him anything better than what he already had.

The finished armor set was a beautiful piece of shadowy black metal with silvery highlights running through the metal. The leather that was exposed was the blue of the wurgen. Most of it was on the sleeves peeking out beneath the pauldrons, the fauld, and the fur cloak attached to it all. It was a beautiful piece of armor, and far better than I thought possible.

**Lightning Shadow Plate. +550 defense, movement speed +20, cost of all lightning spells reduced by 50%, effects of all lightning spells boosted by 25%.**

It may not have had any special abilities like my weapon or Lu's boots but the bonuses alone were well worth it. I really needed to start picking up more spells. This was too good of a bonus to waste. That said, I did have some notifications I had ignored throughout the day's work.

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your clothier and armorsmithing by +1. That doesn't look half bad, newbie. Nice job.**

**Congratulations hero! You have increased your blacksmithing by +1. Oh look, you can actually make something more dangerous than a rusty spork.**

I rolled my eyes at the notifications and closed up shop for the day. The next few days went by in a blur. In the mornings we ran our newbies through the mini dungeon as many times as they could handle, grinding out levels and loot for all of them. Randy brought in the first day of grinding for the newbies by getting himself killed in the first room. How did he do this you might ask? He stuck his head in a strange hole in the cave and got eaten by an overgrown worm. We had to wait a half hour for him before we could get to work on the dungeon. At least the rest of the runs went smoother than that. Whatever gear we couldn't make for the newbies, the dungeon had a good chance of providing and if we could provide that gear the dungeon often gave the newbies upgrades. It was also a good way to pad the guild treasury and earn some exotic materials to work with. During the day we worked the mines and chopped down the woods to the south for lumber to use in maintaining Liberty and building up Dwayne's ballistas.

Speaking of Dwayne's ballistas, we were able to make good progress on those, adding an additional three to the southern wall with a fourth one well on its way. The heavy repeaters were coming along too now that every one of the crafters involved had more experience with the process.

Sadly, Eva had yet to make any of the explosive powder she was hoping to craft from the herbs she found. She was definitely on the trail however. The fire herbs she found and the black moss did have incendiary and explosive properties. The trick was getting the blend right. Until then, the most she could do with them was make some pretty fireworks. Which didn't really have the kick we needed for Dwayne's fancy weapons and much less so for any explosives we could potentially develop from such a discovery.

We were grinding out our newbies levels to the twenties and working on our defensive strategies when, on the fifth day of preparations, the other guilds began to pour in.

First to arrive were the solar hounds with not one but two raid parties worth of players, most of which were around level thirty. For the most part they were fighters in full plate with white tabards with



an orange and gold sun on them. After the initial greeting they went to make sure our temple did have a shrine to Sol. They cheered and drank copious amounts of orange juice they brought with them and swore upon their lives to do everything in their power to defend Liberty, all in the name of jolly cooperation. They were definitely an odd bunch, maybe a little too obsessed with memes, but they were good people. Unlike the average players they were pretty quick to warm up to the idea of NPCs being more like living breathing people than a random collection of code and art assets to be exploited or ignored if they couldn't provide quests or services.

Next, trickled in The Hunters Guild. They were as disorganized as they had suggested in the messages they exchanged with us. First a couple of members from their leadership showed up, then came a party and a half. Then nothing until the day before the siege was supposed to happen when several raid groups showed up and more stragglers kept showing up at random. The excuse for this mess was fairly universal. There were quests to do along the way and they were distracted by new quests during their journey. At least we had their support and so long as our people gave them quests to help with the preparations they didn't complain much about the calm before the storm.

Lastly came The Titans and Stormbrawlers. Where The Titans were a mix of a stereotypical, lawful paladins and Judge Dredd, the Stormbrawlers were more of a mix of Power Rangers in fantasy get ups and hulking barbarians types that looked like pro wrestlers. The Titans preferred to match a shield with a weapon, and quickly fell in love with our repeating crossbows though they still had mages, healers and rangers in their party. The Stormbrawlers earned their name by literally punching things to death. In the warm up run I took them through the Iron Sanctum. They beat down every goblin, hobgoblin, and the one appearance of the Forgemaster we ran across. All of it with their bare hands.

While we appreciated all of the help, The Titans added a bit too much friction to the mix for my liking. *Just another day and this siege is over. They can go be someone else's problem*, I told myself when

I caught them harassing a bunch of Solar Hounds and Stormbrawlers gambling outside of the tavern. *At least they expanded Terry's spell library.*

Our final day of preparation was spent running drills, checking, and rechecking that all of our traps were in place and in working order, and taking out any Braven scouts and saboteurs.

The days had gone by in a blur. Now all we had to do was survive.



The day of the siege arrived with an unnerving calm. There were no sightings of scouts, war machines, or parties of any kind. Silence filled the air as a light mist drifted across the cloudy day.

Then the messages started pouring in all at once.

*The Braven are moving in on us.*

*Blackhearts are with them.*

*Oh man there's way too many of them.*

That was the general gist of the situation according to our scouts.

*Don't make any hasty moves, people,* I sent over the guild chat. *If you can't make a clean getaway don't go in for a kill.* We had no shortage of seasoned rogues lurking in the shadows, led by Tasar, but there were also ample numbers of newbies who wanted their shot at ambushing the enemy. For many of the lower level players, they could afford to be more aggressive as they were at levels where, if they died, they could easily recoup their losses by killing one or two higher level players. It was an excellent risk-reward proposition.

Pulling up my map I could see the tide of red dots moving in on us from the south. There were thousands of them. While the Braven were the smaller of the two guilds with roughly a thousand members, they were the highest level by far with their weakest members being just shy of thirty. The Blackhearts were a different story with their levels ranging wildly from ten to the high twenties. Quantity, it seemed, was the quality they were going for.

"What's the plan here, Ryan?" Dawn asked as we helped set up another heavy repeater on the wall, Terry and Cam helped bring a small mountain of ammunition to feed the weapon.

"It's just like we talked about, Dawn. The traps soften them up, our ambushers hit them from behind, and we cut them down when they get to us." I pointed up at one of the ballistas. "One bolt from

those should do plenty to even the odds even if they decide to spread out.”

Dawn nodded. “I know that, Ryan, but what are we going to do? Our party I mean. We’re the strongest people on Liberty. We can’t just hide behind the walls.”

I glanced over at Hedwig who carried over drums of bolts on his back to help speed the process along. “Bear cavalry.”

“Ryan we only have one oso and that’s Hedwig,” Dawn said.

Terry nodded. “Not much of a cavalry charge if you only have one mount.”

“That’s why we won’t go far from the wall for this,” I said. “So you guys better be ready to come back us up.”

Cam flashed us a thumbs up. “Always.”

“Speaking of backup, any word from this Ragespire guy?” Terry asked.

“They’re coming but I don’t think they’re making it in time,” I said. “They picked up Jean and several other NPCs who swore fealty but their numbers don’t matter if they miss the fight.”

Distant screams tore our attention to the forest. The crack of wood erupted from another location with the faint rumble of a crashing log. On my map red dots began to disappear and scramble. Tasar and our ambushers rushed in for quick kills then vanished out of sight again. It was a slow bleed, probably a negligible one to our enemies’ numbers, but every hostile player that died in the woods was one less problem for us to deal with. They would respawn back at Mara or one of the Blackheart-owned towns or villages. If they were at all smart it would be Mara.

Our people manned the walls with bows and crossbows. The heavy repeaters were locked, loaded, and aimed deep into the woods just as the ballistas were. We were ready for war.

When the Braven and Blackhearts emerged from the forest. A few looked haggard from the gauntlet of traps they had to run but the invading army was no less impressive. They made the numbers the monster surge threw at us look like amateur hour. That was

something made all the more obvious by the newbies they had carrying around siege ladders and the hurried sounds of hammering deeper in the woods.

*They've brought siege weapons with them,* reported one of our scouts in the woods. *Tasar says they didn't get many through the traps but there are still a ton of them.*

*Mark them out for us,* I sent over guild chat. *Ballistas, I want them taken out as soon as the fighting starts.*

Acknowledgements filled my chat as the Braven and Blackhearts stopped at the edge of the clearing around Liberty. A party of five strode to the midpoint between Liberty's walls and Braven's forces.

**Mike, Level 42, Death Knight**

**Todd, Level 41, Black Mage**

**Karen, Level 41, Dark Priestess**

**Dave, Level 40, Shadow Assassin.**

There they were, the assholes who got me started on this wild journey in New Realm Online. The very ones who spawn camped me outside a dungeon to try and steal my unique sword. They've moved up in the world from simply harassing newbies to leaders in Braven. From the numbers I saw in front of me today, they may very well be the ones in charge of the whole guild.

"Hey you, yeah you up there," Mike called out. "I see you shaking in your boots. Now, if you could keep from pissing yourself for five seconds I need you to call whatever worthless sac you call a leader so we can discuss the terms of your surrender." Mike shrugged. "Or don't and we'll just kill you now. Option B is a lot more fun for us."

"Charming," Dawn groaned.

I nodded and patted Hedwig's side. "Let's go have a chat with them."

Terry looked at me like I'd just slapped him with a fish. "Are you serious? They're going to kill you out there."

"That's why you're coming with me, all of you are," I said. "So come on, back me up."

Cam nodded and headed down. Lu hopped off after him.

Terry groaned. "I liked your plans better when they didn't involve getting us all killed."

"Have a little faith, Terry," I grinned. Not that he needed, that was all on me. If Terry didn't put his new spells to use at the right time, we were royally screwed.

We headed out of Liberty's walls through its shiny, new, metal gates. I rode on top of Hedwig's enormous bulk with Cam and Lu flanking me on either side. Behind me were Dawn and Terry ready to support us.

Mike whistled. The man's armor was covered in spikes and skulls to give him that edgy death knight look that fit his class so well. "An oso mount? I didn't think anyone would actually be stupid enough to train one of those. Impressive." He held up a finger. "Both in the idiocy of the plan and that it actually worked." He chuckled.

I raised my brow at him and hopped off Hedwig. "You wanted to talk then let's talk. What are your terms, Braven?"

"Oh nothing too demeaning, I assure you." Mike pulled a scroll from his pouch. "I just need you to sign this little contract here that says your guild is now a vassal of the Braven. That means you do whatever we say, when we say it, no bitching and/or moaning necessary," he stated bluntly. "But we'll be nice. We know that mine of yours is rather valuable and someone has to maintain the fortifications. So we'll be generous and let you keep fifteen percent of the profits from the mine, hmm?"

"Fifteen percent?" I laughed.

"Oh I know, I know. I am being far too generous," Mike said. "But you do have a nice place here. Those stone walls couldn't have been cheap for a player to put up and those defenses of yours are just *nasty*." Mike grinned. "On top of that we'll require the bulk of your little guild to come with us on raids and sieges. We have a lot of ground to cover if we're going to play with the big boys in the pro guilds after all. New Realm Online was ours before they showed up

and it will belong to us long after they are gone.” He glanced over his shoulder at his party. “Am I right?”

Todd, the black mage nodded. His overgrown hat flopping with the motion. True to his classes name his outfit was all black leather and belts. So many damn belts. There were a few pouches on these belts and the occasional potion but otherwise it looked like he was wearing belts for the sake of wearing them.

In a set of black, purple and red flowing robes was Karen the dark priestess. “Quit playing with our food, Mike. Let’s just kill these newbies and be done with it.”

Dave, the shadow assassin who looked much more like a ninja than Lu did narrowed his gaze on me. “This one looks familiar.”

Mike swung his gaze back around to me. “Now that you mention it he kinda does, doesn’t he. Do we know you, noob?”

*I think we have all the siege weapons marked, the scout reported through chat. Lily was her name. There’s about fifty of them. Twenty catapults, a trio of battering rams, and a ton of siege towers they’re still putting together.*

*No trebuchets?* Dwayne asked.

*Nope. Not a one. I think they’re too big to shoot from the woods or we didn’t let them scout out a good position for them,* lily said.

*Get those ballistas ready to fire. Take the catapults out first,* I said then returned my attention to Mike and his crew with a broad grin. “Oh I remember you four alright. The four assholes who spawn-camped me to steal my sword. Man that feels like a life time ago.”

“Steal a sword?” Mike glanced back. The others shrugged in confusion.

“A gaia elf, an unique race with an unique sword that leveled up with the wielder?” I asked with that amused grin never leaving my face. “Ring any bells?”

“Oh I remember that little shit,” Mike said. “The one that vanished all of a sudden and didn’t even drop the sword.” His eyes widened with realization. “You rerolled to get out of that mess didn’t you?” He asked with growing anger in his voice.



*Ryan, not cool getting on this guy's bad side, Terry said. I thought we were here to try and calm things down.*

Ignoring Terry I replied to Mike, "And I am so much better for it. Really, I should thank you for being a dick." I smiled "I might not have learned how to really play this game if not for that. Now before we get down to business, I am really curious." I pointed at the Blackhearts. "How did you get the Blackhearts working with you? Last I saw you stole Mara from them."

Todd let out an amused huff. "It was a simple matter of telling them who denied them Mara in the first place. You. Had you and the rest of your merry band of cripples not been there to stop them, we might have actually struggled to take the town. Now they're here for revenge."

"Perfect." I grinned. "Now let me tell you how this is going to go. You have two options. Option A: You pack your things up and go home. Option B: We give you an embarrassing lesson on just how little your level actually matters. So what'll it be?"

*Nice, Cam said.*

*Dibs on the wannabe ninja, Lu said.*

Dawn barely contained a snort. *Lu this is no time to be fighting yourself.*

*Hey!*

*Get ready guys, they're going to beat our asses in front of everyone, Terry warned.*

*Ballistas get ready to open up, I sent.*

Mike sneered down at me then looked back at his party. He whirled on me with his longsword but I had expected as much. I thrust my fist out to meet his blade only to summon a shield from my bracer and parry his blow.

*Open fire!* I ordered through guild chat. I followed through my parry with a quick thrust of my dagger imbued with shocker into Mike's stomach. He was so shocked—pun intended—by the tables turning on him so swiftly he didn't even move out of the way. I kicked him free of my knife as his party scattered.

Bolts filled the air, joined by furious cries of battle from both sides. The Braven and Broken Hearts arrows were all heading our way. Karen immediately casted a heal on Mike, Dave vanished in a puff of smoke, and Todd swept his arm out in front of him, unleashing a volley of fire balls on us.

Terry slammed his staff on the floor. A shield of golden light erupted around us just in time to catch the wave of explosions and arrows. Terry's shield shattered around us and I charged forward with my glaive.

Dave appeared behind me, an arm wrapped around my throat and a dagger ready to plunge into my back. Dawn's arrows forced him to release me and gave Lu the space she needed to wrap her kusari-gama's chain around Dave's throat and slam him down to the ground.

My glaive clashed with Mike's sword. We went back and forth, steel singing against steel. Todd's hands crackled with electricity then spat out wild arcs of lightning at me. My armor blunted the damage drastically and even nullified the shock debuff, allowing me to keep the pressure on Mike.

Cam closed the gap with Todd, running him over with his shields. The higher level mage was no match for Cam's raw strength. Karen began chanting a hex. The dark, violet swirls forming around her hands shooting out to debuff me and Cam.

### **Speed Reduced by 25%**

Warned my interface.

Suddenly I felt like I was moving through thick mud. Mike's attack slipped past my glaive. My shield barely moved in time to block the blow and I was swiftly thrown to the floor.

It was like falling in slow motion thanks to that debuff. While we'd been having our own little skirmish, the Braven and Blackheart forces rushed our walls. Voz and our allies rushed through the gates to meet them in the field of battle.

Heavy repeaters unloaded heavy bolts at a rapid and steady rate of fire. For the Blackhearts, an encounter with one of those bolts was

often fatal. For the Braven they shrugged off the damage and crossed blades.

Voz with his epic axe, cleaved through one of the Braven fighters, igniting his body as it split in two. The splash damage effect came out in a burst of heat erupting from the point of impact, igniting a few of the nearby warriors.

I slammed onto the ground and watched as Mike moved his sword to drive it through my chest. Cam rushed to my aid as fast as his slowed body would allow him to go. Dawn shot Karen through the eye before she could let loose another spell.

Cam was too slow.

I kicked off the dirt, forcing Mike's sword to miss my heart but it still punched through my stomach. Pain spread through my body like fire as my health plunged nearly to half. Blood loss sapping away more health points with every passing second. I tried to pull the sword out of my gut but Mike was just stronger than me. He raised his blade again, this time wreathed in a ghostly glow.

"It's just like old times, isn't it, newbie?" Mike smirked.

A golden light washed over me and Cam.

"Get up, Ryan!" Terry shouted.

The debuff cleared from me but it was too late. That sword was plunging after my heart again and my wound was making it difficult to move.

A sharp whistle tore our attention to the side. It was Tarkus.

Mike shot a furious glare at him before his eyes widened at the sight of Cylas's greatbow. It was drawn with one of those ridiculous lances he called arrows ready to fire.

The arrow fired, taking Mike off his feet and sending him flying across the battlefield.

"Surprise mother fucker," Tarkus said. He rushed over to my side, stabbed his enormous sword into the ground and helped me up to my feet. "Sup, Ryan?"

I casted Healing Hands on my gaping, bleeding stomach, wincing as the wound slowly sealed itself. "Taking out the trash," I said with all the bluster my wounded voice could carry. "What are you doing here?"

"We left Braven," Nayla answered directly.

Cylas nodded. "We tried to deal with Mike and his BS with the higher ups but short version? They said no."

"So we were hoping you were looking for new members," Tarkus said. I could practically hear the grin behind his helmet.

Nayla gave a grudging nod. "If your Broken Bones can turn a bunch of newbies into a strong fighting force like this, it looks like the best way for us to grow strong in a hurry."

I looked around at the chaotic battle around us.

The Solar Hounds shouted something about jolly cooperation and descended upon the Braven with sword and magic. There was a lot of lightning flying out of their group and lightning enchantments on their weapons. Which was odd given they were followers of Sol. I expected a lot more fire.

The Titans fought in extremely well organized units, working together more like a well-oiled machine than a group of random players banding together to fight. They put up their shields and clashed against the onslaught of Braven and Blackhearts. Their front lines stabbed and hacked at the enemy while the rear lines stabbed them with spears. Other times their formations shifted to engulf the enemy and cut them down swiftly with the aid of their mages and rangers keeping other parties at bay.

Stormbrawlers just turned every fight they got involved in into a pro wrestling match. I swear I saw at least one guy get body slammed and there were several tag team beatings dished out by the mostly unarmed guild.

The Hunters Guild was still a disorganized mess. Some of them supported our heavy infantry and Voz's group. Others were off on their own picking any fight they could on the field while many more were manning the walls. While I wished they had their act together, I

appreciated that their numbers allowed them to spread out across the battlefield, and we definitely needed them on the walls.

Siege ladders had rushed across the battlefield to our walls. Invaders quickly climbed up the ladders to get on top of our walls but our defenders stabbed at them with spears or wrestled the ladders off.

Boulders sailed across the skies as the catapults finally came into play. Their heavy boulders crashing across the battle, crushing friend and foe alike with their missed shots. Many more slammed against our walls, tearing chunks out of them. Our ballistas tried to take them out as quickly as they came into view and that was before the siege towers rolled into view. They were made of wood, metal, and leather and we had no idea how they were moving. Maybe they were magically powered or there was something pushing them from inside, I just couldn't tell.

Around me Mike's party had retreated to join him. Even Dave who I was pretty sure Lu had a guaranteed kill on was gone.

While they licked their wounds I tossed Tarkus and his party an invite to Broken Bones.

"Thanks, Ryan," Tarkus said. "Now, if you don't mind, we're going to demolish us some siege engines."

Cylas drove the point home by sending one of his great arrows punching clean through the side of a siege tower, taking a dozen of Braven's troops out the other side.

"Try not to let Mike and his goons kill you," Tarkus waved as he walked off.

"You're not coming to help us?" I asked.

"Nah, this was your fight. I only interrupted because Mike is a total dick. So do me a favor and don't make me come over there and save your ass again, alright?"

I laughed and climbed on Hedwig.

"That guy is a special kind of special isn't he?" Dawn asked.

"Ya, sure seems that way." I helped her up onto Hedwig.

Cam rolled out his shoulders. "So, how are we doing this?"

Mike's blade was sheathed in ghostly wisps once more as he raised it into the air. He was chanting something.

"Dawn, Lu, Karen is priority one. We don't need her healing anyone or debuffing us," I said. "Take Todd out next."

"Got it," Dawn said.

"Cam, I know you wanted to beat on Mike but someone has to tie down Todd and Dave in the meantime. We can't have that dark mage throwing spells around or a rogue getting us in the back."

"Right," Cam agreed.

"Terry."

"Yeah?"

"I want you to go heavy on the support. Every buff and heal you can lay on us, any crowd control abilities you have, I want you to throw it all out, got it?" I said.

Terry nodded. "Burn through all my mana, got it!"

Pointing my glaive forward I shouted. "Charge!"

Hedwig surged forward with terrifying speed for an oso of his size. We left the rest of our party behind but that was part of the plan. Dawn drew her bow and rained arrows on Karen, breaking her focus on whatever hex she was about to cast and forcing her to focus on dodging. Todd had seemingly learned not to use lightning magic on me and was instead hurling jagged spikes of ice at us. I drove Hedwig from one side to another, dodging what I could and blocking the rest with my shield. Dave simply sat there, watching us approach.

I readied my glaive to run Mike through when he carved an arc across the ground in front of him. Ghostly energies erupted from the scar in the earth and skeletal soldiers wearing ramshackle armor crawled out of the ground.

Dawn gasped. "He can summon undead?"

"Focus on your target," I said as Hedwig bulldozed through the gathering mass of skeletons. Mike's spell apparently still had him

rooted in place, letting me drive my glaive through his chest.

Mike crashed onto his back and I swung my weapon free from him. We gained some distance from them before we turned around. Dawn hopped off Hedwig to keep laying down her barrage of arrows. Mike clutched at his wounded chest and forced himself to stand. Karen turned to heal him only to catch an arrow in her arm. Todd threw his arm up drenched in fire. Pillars of flame erupted from the ground beneath Hedwig's feet as we charged back for them.

Dave vanished in another puff of smoke and reappeared in front of me. He threw me off Hedwig's back to the ground.

"Keep going Hedwig, maul them," I shouted before Hedwig decided to rush to my aid.

We came to a rolling stop with Dave on top of me. His hand governed in clawed gloves tried to bite through my shoulder armor while his other held a raised dagger aimed right at my exposed throat. I shrank my glaive down to a dagger just as Dave stabbed at me. I swung my head out of the way, latching on tight to Dave's collar and plunged my knife into his side again and again. Each time I poured mana into the weapon to cast Shocker and Power Thrust. Thanks to the effects of my armor and weapon, Dave's body erupted with electricity with each stab. The shadow assassin howled in pain, unable to do anything but die at my hand.

**Congratulations hero! You have defeated Dave, Level 40, Shadow Assassin. You have received 65,000exp. There's only enough room in this world for one wannabe ninja and it ain't either of you!**

**Congratulations hero! You have reached level 35. Keep it up, newbie. You're kicking ass and taking names!**

The experience points must have been pouring in from all the kills my raid group was involved with. That was great news. Every level I could gain was another bit of the gap in our power levels closed. I tossed aside Dave's body and shot to my feet, putting one point into strength, agility, and constitution.

**Ryan Rosa Level 35 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 41**

**Agility 41**

**Constitution 42**

**Intelligence 31**

**Wisdom 31**

**Charm 15**

Hedwig and Cam met by slamming Todd in between both of their bulky bodies. Cam, acting as the immovable anvil, Hedwig acting as the razor sharp hammer. The black mage effectively exploded in a shower of gore between them.

**Congratulations hero! Hedwig has defeated Todd, Level 41, Black Mage. You have received 70,000exp. No more magical nonsense from that big hat wearing nerd.**

Hedwig and Cam shifted to engage with Mike but they found themselves in the middle of an undead horde of skeletons with more crawling out of the wound in the earth Mike had carved out. Cam's shields were amazing at bashing the skeleton's apart while Hedwig's heavy, clawed paws shredded through armor and bone alike. But it was a numbers game and Mike was cheating. He carved out another arc in the earth and more skeletons started climbing out to surround them.

*How many times can he cast that?* I asked on the off chance anyone in my guild knew.

*Beats me,* Terry answered. *Keep fighting guys, I've got your back!*

That wasn't particularly helpful but if I knew one thing about magic it was that killing the caster was the answer to most magical conundrums. So rather than helping Cam and Hedwig fight their way through the skeletons, I chased after Mike. But I didn't leave Hedwig and Cam hanging. I pumped all three of Hedwig's new attribute points into strength to help him cut a path through the undead.

**Hedwig: Level 35 Oso**

**Strength 48**



**Agility 41**

**Constitution 56**

**Intelligence 16**

**Wisdom 16**

Mike was bathed in a golden light before I could reach him. His health climbed back to full. Karen managed to get a heal off on him. I used a Leaping Slash infused with Shocker to close the gap. Mike blocked my attack and shoved me away.

“Two out of four? Not bad for a cripple,” Mike chuckled. “But you know you can’t possibly win this.” He gestured with his head toward the walls.

The gate was being battered by rams. Segments of the wall were coming down under the barrage of boulders. Ballistas were forced to switch from targeting the catapults to the siege towers rushing for the walls but already three crashed against them. Their huge ramps dropped down and out poured the Braven and Blackhearts.

Mike flourished his sword. “Struggle all you want, newbie. This town, that mine, and all of your little friends will be ours.” He swung out a quick combo of diagonal strikes.

I blocked and dodged through them, trying to get in a quick blow to his side. Mike stepped back with an evil grin on his face.

“And you could have had it easy. Instead I’m going to make sure to grind your face into the mud every day.” He smashed my glaive aside and grabbed me by the throat. “Let’s see if you’re willing to reroll this time. Or maybe you’ll just uninstall the game.” He brought his sword back and stabbed me through the heart.

My eyes shot wide at the surge of pain flowing through my body. My health plummeted down to ten percent and was dropping fast. The glaive at my side was heavy, too heavy to lift, but I fixed that by shifting the weapon once more to a dagger.

With a weak grasp, I took on Mike’s wrist and stared him dead in the eyes. “The only one dying here is you.” I growled through blood spilling out of my mouth. I drove my dagger into Mike’s elbow and twisted the dagger.

A surge of electricity shot through Mikes arm as the dagger punched clean through. Mike screamed and tried to drop me but he didn't quite realize how badly he'd messed up yet. With a little bit of mana I shifted my dagger to a sword within his wounded elbow and threw my full weight into the weapon. It twisted in his elbow, not quite able to cut clean through his armor but instead twisting his shoulder right out of its socket as we both crashed to the floor.

Mike planted his boot on my face and kicked me away. He scrambled to his feet and tore the sword out of his arm. "You little shit. I'm going to enjoy killing you over, and over, and over again." He pointed my own sword at me. "Starting with this fancy sword of yours."

I was down to my last few hit points so I did what any sane, reasonable person in my position would do. I shot Mike a one finger salute.

Mike snarled and charged.

**Congratulations hero! Your party has defeated Karen, Level 41, Dark Priestess. You have received 70,000exp. We ain't got time for none of that cult nonsense here.**

**Congratulations hero! You have reached level 36! Now quit slacking on the job and fight!**

By now I had gone through the same motions so many times it took less than a second to assign my attribute points across strength, agility, and constitution.

**Ryan Rosa Level 36 Druman Mystic Ranger**

**Strength 42**

**Agility 42**

**Constitution 43**

**Intelligence 31**

**Wisdom 31**

**Charm 15**

I mentally smashed the button to confirm my choices. My health and mana both shot back up to full and just as Mike was about to

split me down the middle I shot my hands out. I caught the sword between my hands. Shadow steel bit deep into my palms but I could ignore that pain.

Mike tried to tear the sword free from my grasp but all he did was jerk me to my feet. "What the hell? You're supposed to be dead."

"Not... yet." With a bloody grin I shifted the sword to point the pommel at Mike's face and shifted the weapon back to a glaive. The grip extended into a pole and slammed him right in the forehead. Mike let go of the grip. He was wide open for an attack. I whirled my glaive around with Power Slash then followed up with every single Double Thrust I could unleash on him. My every strike was amplified by Shocker.

I burned through my mana fast, roaring out my fury. Mike tried to defend himself with only one working arm but it didn't matter. His suit of armor was all metal, acting like a conductor for even my weakest glancing blows. Through sheer force of will, Mike pushed through the electricity threatening to take control away from his body but every strike chipped away at that will. The damage only piled on as his movements became slower, sloppier, jerkier. My glaive battered at his tough plate until it punched clean through his chest and out the back.

"Game over, Mike," I twisted the glaive. "You lost, to a bunch of newbies."

Mike tried to speak but all that came out of his mouth were gurgling whimpers. I tore my glaive out of his body and let him drop to the ground.

**Congratulations hero! You have defeated Mike, Level 42, Death Knight. You have received 75,000exp. Oooh that's going to cost him at least two levels. Nice.**

I turned and watched as the skeletons Mike had been summoning collapsed into heaps of bones. The scars he cut through the earth sealing themselves back up. Throwing my glaive into the air I let out a fearsome cry of victory. Lu and the others joined in, rushing to join my position.

Cam, of course, had to be the voice of reason in our celebration. “You know we’re still fighting a war here, right?”

Grinning at Cam, I nodded. “Sorry. I let the victory go to my head.”

“After getting impaled a couple of times I can imagine how that could happen,” Dawn teased.

I grinned and distributed Hedwig’s attribute points into strength. He could definitely use more speed but right now we needed damage above everything else.

**Hedwig: Level 36 Oso**

**Strength 51**

**Agility 41**

**Constitution 56**

**Intelligence 16**

**Wisdom 16**

“Let’s end this fight,” I said as another siege tower collapsed from a ballista punching through its base.

Tarkus and his party rushed in to capitalize on the easy kills. His oversized sword cutting swaths through the panicked and fleeing Braven and Blackhearts like a scythe through wheat, Nayla casting heals and buffs everywhere they went while Cylas pinned unfortunate souls to trees.

Deep in the forest we heard panicked cries of more hostile players and the galloping of hooves.

“Uhm. What’s all that noise?” Dawn asked.

“The cavalry has arrived?” I suggested.

Cam turned around and braced his shields. “That better be ours.”

A stampede of horses and their riders came pouring out of the forest, heralded by an eruption of fire. At the head of the formation was Captain Ragespire in his red plumed helmet, cutting a bloody swath through the Blackhearts and Braven. Behind him were a bunch of guards riding on horseback with spears and swords. A man of action, Ragespire didn’t stop to greet us. His guards were well

trained and disciplined, staying in a tight wedge formation as they swept from one group of enemies to the next, demolishing their ranks and scattering others.

“I have no idea where they got all those horses but this is awesome.” I beamed. “Come on then, we can’t let them hog all of the glory.”

The battle raged on late into the evening with our walls breached and parts of the town burned down and destroyed in the fighting. While the Braven and Blackhearts took the bulk of the losses, that story changed with our breached walls. As the hours went on though, the Braven lost their catapults and their siege towers were all used up. While our dead respawned right back in Liberty, the Braven and Blackhearts had to respawn all the way back at Mara, if their spawns were even set there.

The Braven and Blackhearts tried to reorganize over and over again but by the time night had fallen, they were broken. Their players had lost the will to fight and went to do other things in New Realm or simply logged off for the night. Eventually, there weren’t enough enemy guild players left to mount much more than harassment attacks and even they stopped after a time.

We had won.

After the battle there was a ton of looting to do. Weapons, armor, jewelry, and potions. There was so much of the stuff we honestly had no idea what to do with all of it besides pile it in the warehouse. Some of the Braven and Blackhearts players actually sent us private messages asking or even begging for their items back but we ignored them. They knew what they signed up for when they decided to attack us, and whatever profits we could gain from their looted equipment paled in comparison to the damage they had caused.

We gathered for a victory celebration at the demolished tavern with the little ale we managed to recover.

I raised my mug into the air with a grin on my face. "Here's to our allies and all the members of Broken Bones! To our victory and many more to come." The crowd cheered and we drank. "Seriously, we couldn't have done it without you all."

"We are always glad to engage in jolly cooperation with our friends," Richard, the leader of the Solar Hounds said.

Reyes, of the Stormbrawlers, nodded after chugging down his drink. "For sure, homie. Anytime you need us to lay the smack down on some punk ass muchachos you give us a call."

"The Hunters Guild is always at your service, Ryan," Lyra said with a light nod of her head. "So long as the payment is fair."

Kester Lightbringer, of The Titans, took a light sip of his mug. His helmet only lifted ever so slightly to allow the drink. "It was a good and righteous battle and though we find some of your people and allies..." He glanced around the gathered crowd with an unnecessarily long glance toward the Stormbrawlers. "Questionable. I must admit we all worked well together. Guilds like the Braven and Blackhearts are the scum of the earth and it is our honored privilege and duty to help eradicate their kind. When you embark on a crusade to destroy them, do not forget us, Ryan."

With a smile I nodded at them all. The Titans and their leader were a little too intense for my liking but they were really sticking to that holy paladin shtick to a hardcore level.

“My lord,” Ragespire said as he knelt by my side. “You have my deepest apologies for being late to the battle. Had we been here at the beginning of the battle the fine city of Liberty would not be in such a sorry state.”

“You know you don’t have to kneel to me, right?” I asked with a nervous laugh.

“You are my lord and I will not show you even the slightest hint of disrespect, Ryan,” Ragespire insisted. “I know you mean well and your ways are different from ours, but this is our way.”

I sighed and let him do what he wanted. “As for the damage.” Looking around at the damage it was a pretty grim picture. The blacksmith shop had collapsed, the mine entrance was barely hanging on for dear life, the warehouse had a moon roof that was definitely not in the original design, and to top it all off we had at least five breaches of varying size in our walls. “All in all, we came out better than I expected from that fight,” I admitted and held my hand out to Captain Ragespire. “Now rise, Captain. We are here to celebrate our victory and if I have to order you to drink I will.”

Ragespire rose to his feet. He gave a light chuckle. “No need, My lord. I appreciate the kindness.”

Nodding I gestured at the horses in the distance. “Speaking of, where did you get all of those horses?”

“After you departed I took it upon myself to train the guards as cavalry, My Lord,” Ragespire said. “With a young, growing power such as your town of Liberty and the Broken Bones guild, it was only natural that you would earn enemies sooner rather than later. Admittedly your call for aid came much sooner than even I expected.” He gestured a hand back at the horses. “As you can see we only recruited thirty riders. None with proper equipment for the task but I did what I could to make up for it with training.”

I raised my mug to Ragespire. "And a fine job you did. If I could promote you I would but I don't have a kingdom."

Dawn poked her head over my shoulder. "You don't have a kingdom, *yet*."

Lu popped up over my other shoulder. "Yeah, you can fix that really quick, you know."

Cam towered over all three of us. "There's no better time to use that scroll of founding than after a victory like this."

Ragespire gasped. "You mean to establish your own kingdom?"

"Or Empire," I admitted. "Whichever sounds coolest with the name I choose. That's not going to be an issue, is it Captain? I know you were still holding out hope that maybe your king had a successor hidden away somewhere."

Ragespire stood straighter and pressed a fist to his chest. "I swore an oath of fealty to you, my lord. Whatever you decide to do I will follow. Considering the state of our world, this may very well be the best path forward for our world."

"See? Listen to the Captain, Ryan, bust open that scroll," Dawn urged me. "You can be a king or emperor or whatever." She slipped around my side and waved her hands at me. "And I can be your queen, oooh." She burst out laughing. "Seriously though this would help everyone here progress much faster, and it would help us hold our own against all those nasty guilds out there."

"Well, if you put it like that. Having you be my queen does sound pretty awesome," I teased.

Cam groaned.

Terry laughed. "I'm with the big guy on this one."

Grinning, I pulled the scroll from my inventory and pulled it open. "Now what should we name our kingdom?"



## Author Notes

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