

DIARY OF AN 8-BIT WARRIOR

QUEST MODE



CUBE KID

ILLUSTRATED BY SABOTEN

AN UNOFFICIAL
MINECRAFT ADVENTURE



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• CUBE KID •

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Illustrations by Saboten


Andrews McMeel
PUBLISHING®

In memory of Lola Salines (1986–2015),
founder of 404 éditions and editor of this series,
who lost her life in the November 2015 attacks on Paris.
Thank you for believing in me.

—Cube Kid

FRIDAY UPDATE III—AFTERNOON

I stood next to Breeze in a small quartz room. A sea lantern illuminated the room with a pale blue glow. Against the center of one wall stood a mysterious object. It was three yards tall, three yards wide, and flat, like a banner. But instead of dyed wool, it was a surface like the calmest pool of water.

Breeze reached out with her right hand and grazed her reflection. She lowered her hand, and we continued staring at ourselves in silence. In awe. It was the first time we'd seen ourselves this way.



On top of that were our outfits.

Our clothes were sewn of spider silk. **Puddles**, the owner of the Clothing Castle, had worked with the humans for days to craft **perfect** re-creations of Earth fashion. Then, to make us look **even more** majestic, our cloaks had been modified to **fall over our shoulders**.

Poster children. Symbols of hope.
Villagetown's biggest stars.
That's what we've become.

Some would say **it's sweet**: a budding **romance** between two young heroes fighting valiantly against all odds. I'd say **that's an exaggeration**. Although Breeze and I are **close**, we haven't had much time for anything besides battle or preparations for the next. I guess the mayor wants to change that, though. He wants the people to have **something to believe in**. I suppose that's why he whisked us away in the middle of the dance.

And when we return, we're to smile,
hold hands, and raise them before a cheering crowd.

"You look so different from when we first met," I said.

"I suppose." Breeze stared vacantly ahead. "I wish we could have danced more."

"Me too."

I adjusted the collar of my shirt. We heard a click, and the door opened. In the reflection, I saw the mayor step in. As he studied us, particularly our outfits, the faintest trace of a smile appeared beneath his mustache.

"I apologize for taking you away like this," he said, gliding in. "I just wanted to make sure that you two are . . . looking your very best for the award ceremony."

"It's fine," Breeze said, still fixed on her reflection.

The mayor slid between us and ran his gnarled fingers along the edge of the object's smooth iron frame.

"So, what do you think? Do you like it?"

Breeze nodded. "It's . . . amazing. What is it called?"

"This is known as a mirror. This one is thousands of years old, crafted during the start of the Second Great War. As I understand, it came from an ancient temple. **The Tabernacle of Gloomfell Cove.** That's near the sea, beyond a vast mountain range to the northwest, far, far from here."

"I suppose it'd be impossible to craft such an object ourselves," I said. "How did it wind up here, anyway?"

"Our records say a trader brought it here. Traders used to be quite common, back when it was **still safe to travel**. I was just a boy then. So many voyagers and vagabonds constantly visited our village. It seems like yesterday. . . ."

I nodded, vaguely recalling reading something about that in school. Only recently had our village learned of **the Eyeless One's** return, yet our scholars believe he's been gathering his strength and amassing his armies for a long time. The coming war is, perhaps, something he's been planning for at least fifty years. Before that, **monster attacks** were far from common. You could have traveled **the Overworld** for weeks without encountering one. And now . . .

After staring off **into nothingness** for a moment, the mayor raised his head and **smiled** again. Was that a tear in the corner of his eye?

"**You two look SO wonderful,**" he finally said. "Yes, you're exactly what our village **needs** right now." Another pause. "I . . . hope you can understand why I'm asking all this of you."

I looked his **reflection** in the eye.

"Of course, sir."

FRIDAY UPDATE IV—AFTERNOON

We walked back in silence. Almost everyone was at the party, so the streets were mostly empty. Still, we could see distant silhouettes on the wall, spaced evenly—every hundred blocks, more or less. Humans standing watch, enchanted bows slung over their shoulders. There was, no doubt, at least one more up in the sky tower—ready to activate the note block alarm system should trouble arise—but I couldn't see into the tower's nest from here.

Upon reaching the village hall, things were mostly the same as when we left: posters and banners, jukeboxes and cakes. And a thousand or so people celebrating Villagetown's success. Even though the Eyeless One was still out there, his minions had been driven back.

For us, that was enough.

At this point, we'll take any victory we can get,
no matter how small.

I heard some laughter to my left: Breeze was already being swept away by a handful of human girls. They couldn't get over her cloak. Stump couldn't get over mine. After he slapped me on the back and flashed a huge grin, his gaze fell to my shoulders. "What's that about?"

"For the **award ceremony**, I guess." I glanced around at the jovial crowd of villagers and humans. "So what's new? Have you heard anything since I left?"

"Yeah. This kid—**Tucker**, I think—said he was playing on the wall the other morning and saw a **rabbit** on the plains. And not just any rabbit. He claims it was a **zombie**."

Stump made a **spooky face**, then busted out laughing. "The imaginations of kids these days!"

"**Hmmm**," I said. "Actually, I'd like to look into it. I'll speak to him later."

"Also, I keep seeing **this weird old man**," Stump said. "Red robes. Red hat. Black sunglasses. Huge white beard. Said his name is **Cocoa**. **Cocoa Witherbean**."

"Cocoa Witherbean, huh?"

I thought for a moment, but the name didn't ring any bells, and neither did the description. That wasn't all that strange, though. New people have been showing up at our gate almost **every week**. **Survivors**. Usually, it's a small group of **clueless** villagers who've fled from some tiny, obscure town after being attacked in the middle of the night. Otherwise, it's a lone human who's been **wandering the Overworld** for months. We take them all in, show them around, and assign them some work to do.

"So this **Cocoa**," I said, "is he one of the new arrivals from this morning?"

"Maybe. Whoever he is, **he's creepy**. I've seen him snooping around outside a **library**, too."

"Interesting. . . ." Once more I thought back but didn't remember seeing anyone who fit Stump's verbal sketch.

"All right, I'll **keep an eye out** for this guy," I said. "Anything else?"

"**Nope**. Not really."

"Well, keep up the **good work**," I said. "And don't let your guard down. Even at a time like this"—I reached up and patted **my diamond sword**, which was now sheathed across my back—"we can't forget who we are."

Stump's smile **faded**. "Yes, **Sir!**"

"**Hey!** You don't need to call me that."

"But they said I'm **supposed** to call you that, now that **you're a captain**."

"**That doesn't matter**. We've been friends since we were just a single block tall. I'm just **Runt**, okay?"

"Sure thing," he said, frowning. "You know, Runt, you . . . you're acting **awfully serious** all of a sudden. What happened? Is anything wrong?"

I lowered my head, unsure what to say. What **could** I say? I couldn't stop thinking about what the mayor had said earlier. **You're a**

warrior, Runt—a sworn defender of our village. And today, you must act the part. . . .

Of course, I didn't need to say anything to Stump. He understood. He understood **better than anyone**. He'd been there when hundreds of mobs breached the wall. So as I stood in silence, he didn't say anything, either—just gave me a **slow** nod. Perhaps he was recalling it as well. Several other villagers ran up, **laughing and joking** and handing us slices of **cake** . . . and the images quickly left our minds. For the moment.

For that matter, I was **so wrapped up** in the celebration that I almost failed to notice the villagers' clothes. Many of them were dressed in **human-style outfits** like me. Breeze was right. We really are becoming more and more like the **humans**. Then again, they're becoming more like us, too. One look at their leader was enough to convince you. There he was, **Kolbert21337**, He Who Hails from Earth, **Lord Commander of the Lost Legion** . . . dressed in a **villager's robe**.

'PLEASE STOP CALLING ME THAT,' he yelled. **'KOLB WILL DO JUST FINE.** I really need to find another one of those enchanted name tags so I can change this silly name. . . . By the way—I have **an important announcement!** My best friend Kaeleb recently discovered how to craft **apple pie!** We'd like to share

some with you guys! In return, we'd love to try some of your famous grass stew! We've heard it's a village delicacy, and we really want to know what it tastes like!"

He went on to explain how there's a holiday on Earth that celebrates a time when two vastly different groups of people shared food with each other. The humans wanted to start something like that here. Unfortunately for them, they had no idea what they were getting into. Grass stew is considered a village delicacy not because it tastes good, but because it's hard to craft. You need shears enchanted with Silk Touch to harvest grass. As for the taste, you're better off eating grass raw.

Poor Kolbert . . . uhh, "Kolb."
He quickly discovered this.



"Well, do you like it? I crafted it myself."

"GREAT!
Glad you
liked it!
How about
some more?"

"Um . . . actually, it's
the strangest thing. I
suddenly feel very full!"

Finally, the mayor announced that it was time for the award ceremony. As we approached, we saw that in his palm he was holding six tiny objects, each no bigger than a single seed. Two resembled hearts, and another two resembled swords. The last pair, however, I didn't recognize. They were gray in color, stone, with flecks of white-blue diamond here and there. They almost looked like some kind of . . . um . . . bird?

"For this year's **graduates**," the mayor called out, "we've crafted various emblems to signify their **achievements**, their chosen professions, and their titles."

He held one of the **birdlike emblems** in his right hand and raised it over his head. The bird's **diamond flecks** caught the setting sun, sparkling brilliantly. "This one specifically," he added, "the **Diamond Blockbird**, is crafted from a single piece of **diamond ore** to demonstrate its **rarity** and value. Thus, each emblem has been crafted to honor those who have **fought so hard to protect our village** in these dark and troubled times. And out of the many brave young graduates here, the two standing beside me have **fought the hardest**. For this reason, we've decided that they may both serve as **captains** and share leadership of **their group**."

At this, a lot of people began **whispering**, but for Breeze and me, this was **no surprise**. The mayor had mentioned this earlier when he first took us to that room. He had said that he wanted our group to **stand out** above the rest. Since we've proven ourselves and all. . . . But I think there's more to it. He also told us that our group would be the **first** to **explore** the Overworld. When it comes to leading and making the right decisions, he probably trusts Breeze more than me. **That's understandable.** Sometimes I let **my emotions** get the best of me. Breeze, on the other hand, **never** loses her cool. So she'll be serving as, like . . . **my babysitter?** No, that's not how a heroic swordsman would say it. She'll be there to ensure I don't make any mistakes. **That's it.**

The mayor turned and gave us a knowing nod. Recalling our instructions, I fell to one knee, as did Breeze. Then he began fastening different emblems on the left shoulder of our cloaks, just above our hearts. They clung securely, like sticky pistons. Then he pulled out another pair: little blue stars. The official emblem of a captain. He replaced my original diamond badge with this.

As he fastened on each pair, one after another, he called out their meaning to the crowd. From what I understand, he had borrowed this from the **Lost Legion**. Every member of that clan is required to dedicate themselves to this thing called **role-playing**. Since they're supposed to be an order of **knights**, they have to carry themselves like knights. And whenever a clan member is promoted, it's through this special ceremony known as **knighting**.

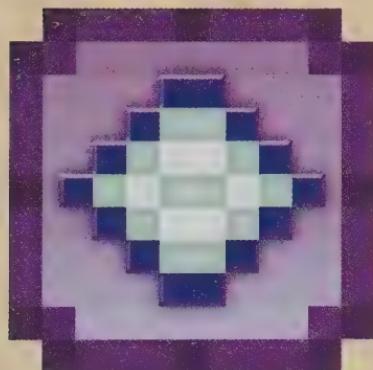


"To our noblest of heroes,
Breeze and Runt . . . you
shall hereby be known as
warriors, as well as . . ."

"Defenders of
Villagetown . . ."



"Captains of
Night Watch . . ."



"and Explorers of
the Overworld."



I wanted to believe his words, but I couldn't help feeling that this whole thing was mostly **just an act** to boost village morale. I don't think of myself as a hero. **Not even close.** In many ways, I'm still **just a kid.** I still get scared at times. And I still have so much to learn.

Yet seeing hundreds of faces **light up**, tears being brushed away, it suddenly seemed that our survival **wasn't unimaginable** but **likely—even certain.** It was as if the **Wizard with No Eyes** was just another **low-level monster**, out there somewhere waiting to be farmed.

Below, whispers grew louder and louder, until they finally erupted into **cheers and screams.** But that seemed **so quiet** compared to the pounding in my chest. The more I watched them, the more **I felt this awful weight.** It grew heavier with each smile directed my way. Only then did I begin to fully realize what this all meant, how high the bar was. **The whole village was counting on me.** When I glanced at Breeze, though, that feeling went away.

No, I thought. They're not counting on me. . . .

They're counting on US.

What am I
worrying about? As
long as she's there,
Villagetown has nothing
to worry about.



"Wow, they're actually dancing! Why don't we join them?"



"Um . . ."

"Err . . . Hello, Stump.
Would you, um . . . well,
would you like to dance?"



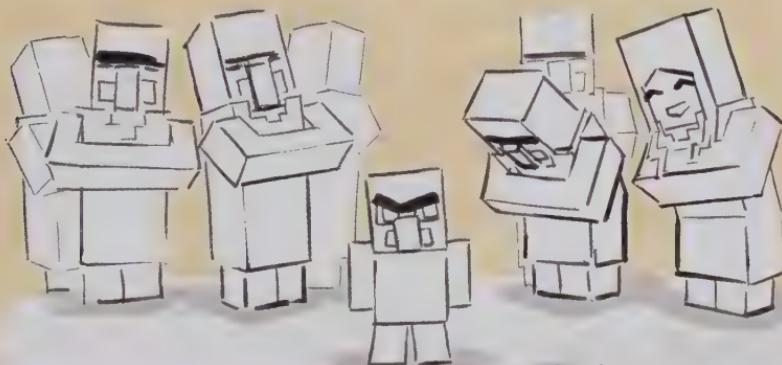
"Sure, but only if you can keep up. I'm about to unleash my newest move. I call it the Creeper Rush."

"We found this book
in Library Seven the
other day. You
need to read it."



"We hope you like
it! It's got all kinds
of useful stuff!"

"Go on—
take it."



"Quit laughing! It
was a zombie!
I saw it, okay?!"



Without a doubt,
today was the best
day of my life.

The party was winding down, so I walked Breeze home. Her dad was already there when we arrived. I had noticed that he had seemed a little off the entire night . . . gloomy . . . but there, seeing him in front of the doorway, his attitude mirrored the storm clouds that were gathering above our heads: somber and unnerving. Something was bothering him.

Breeze didn't seem to notice, or at least she chose not to bring any attention to it. She turned with a smile.

"See you tomorrow, Runt. And make sure you **get some sleep**. We have a big day ahead of us."

Her father made a slight movement, like a jolt? I'm not quite sure.

"**Good night,**" Breeze said, still smiling.

"**Good night.**"

I was **exhausted** when I got home.

"**Good night, Son!**" my mom said.

"**We're very proud of you,**" my dad added.

Yeah, it really was **the best day of my life**. And tomorrow is going to be **even better**. Tomorrow I begin my **first real adventure**, what I've been **dreaming** about for so long. In the morning, we'll start our first exploration outside the walls. We're supposed to head out in our groups, always staying **within sight** of the ramparts. **I can't wait.**

FRIDAY UPDATE V-LATE

And strangely, it seemed like tomorrow couldn't wait for me, either.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Huh? Who's knocking? It must be Mom. I slept in. I'll be late for school.

I actually thought that, in **my deep sleep**, until my eyes flew open and I **sat straight up** in bed.

But there was no way someone could have been knocking at my door—I'd been so tired earlier that **I forgot to shut it**. That was when I saw the **shadowy figure** standing just outside my window. Okay, so I'm not **the brightest** person upon first waking up, but I knew it wasn't my mom.

No, whoever it was, **it was a human**. . . .

And when I looked closer . . . **yes**—

— That human
most definitely
resembled Kolb.



*Come with me,
hero.*

He took me to his house, to a small dark room. A secret library.

There, he told me everything.

How we'd be attacked.



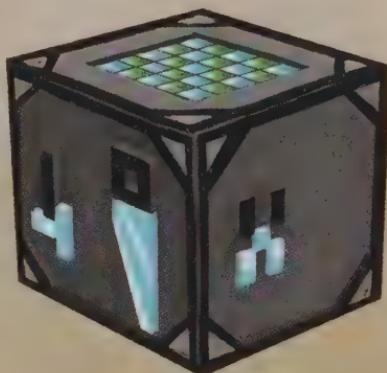
How we couldn't possibly defend ourselves.

How we needed better armor, better weapons, and better items than the ones we had. How a standard crafting table wouldn't be enough.

He showed me a book, an **ancient** book, and a drawing of something thought to exist only in legend. An **aeon forge**—otherwise known as an **advanced crafting table**.

תְּבִיבָה אֲמֵתָה

תְּבִיבָה אֲמֵתָה רַבְבָּה-וְאֶלְקָטָה
תְּבִיבָה אֲמֵתָה רַבְבָּה-וְאֶלְקָטָה
תְּבִיבָה אֲמֵתָה רַבְבָּה-וְאֶלְקָטָה...



The advanced crafting table.

Weeks ago, several members of the Lost Legion went into the wilds in **search** of one. Tonight, they had returned **empty-handed**, **barely hanging on**. . . .

"I know you will succeed where they have failed," Kolb said. "You must go. **Tonight**."

"Alone? What about Breeze?"

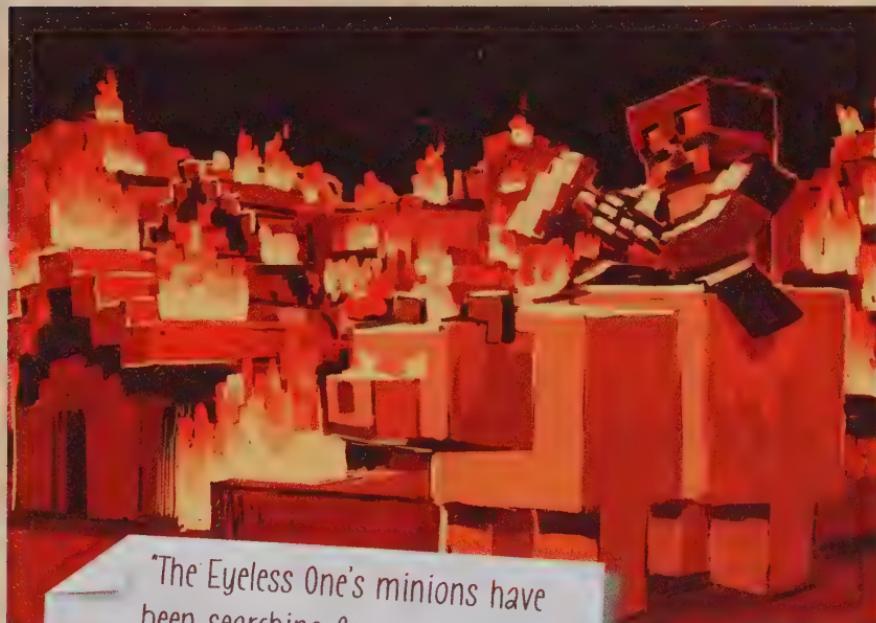
"She'll talk you out of it. You know that. As for the rest . . . they'll only **slow you down.**"

"I assume there's a reason you can't just go yourself?"

"**There is.** Members of the Lost Legion continue to fight among themselves. If I left now, the clan would fall apart. And even if I could leave, I wouldn't make it one night out there."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I'm . . . being hunted."



"The Eyeless One's minions have been searching for me ever since I arrived in this world. I was on the run even before I arrived here."

I changed my appearance, my armor, and even my name. . . ."

"If they discovered who I really am, every last one of them would rush to this area. So I must stay hidden."

"I don't get it. Why are they looking for you?"

"They . . . see me as a threat. I'll just leave it at that."

"You probably can't read ancient script, huh? This loosely translates to 'Destroy him.' What can I say? Monsters hate me. A lot."



So Kolb **really** is a high-level knight? One so **powerful** that the Eyeless One's servants are on his tail? And he's sending me on a quest to save my village? What does one say to that?

"... You'll feed my pet slime while I'm gone?" Kolb's instructions sounded **simple enough**:

"Head north, to the village of Owl's Reach. A librarian named **Feathers** has the table we need."

Then he gave me a map. **A map of Ardenvell**, the main continent.

"It isn't very complete, but it'll have to do. The other guys lost mine."



On the map, it looked so **close**. I was surprised when he said it would take **days** to get there. . . .

Of course, I should have **consulted** with the others before going on **some crazy quest** alone in the middle of the night . . .

but then, you know me.

SATURDAY

It all happened so fast. Before I knew it, I'm on top of a big white horse, doing my best to hold on as the animal chugged full speed ahead.

A million questions are running through my mind right now. Was Kolb telling the truth? Why is he being hunted? Who is he? And this crafting table . . . will I really find one in some village called Owl's Reach?

Most important, did I make the right decision? It feels so reckless going out on my own like this. I'm terrified. The mayor's going to be outraged. . . .

What was I supposed to do? If I had talked to Breeze, she would have stopped me. Anyone would have stopped me. Kolb had been right about that. And if he's right about the upcoming attack, we really will need every advantage we can get.

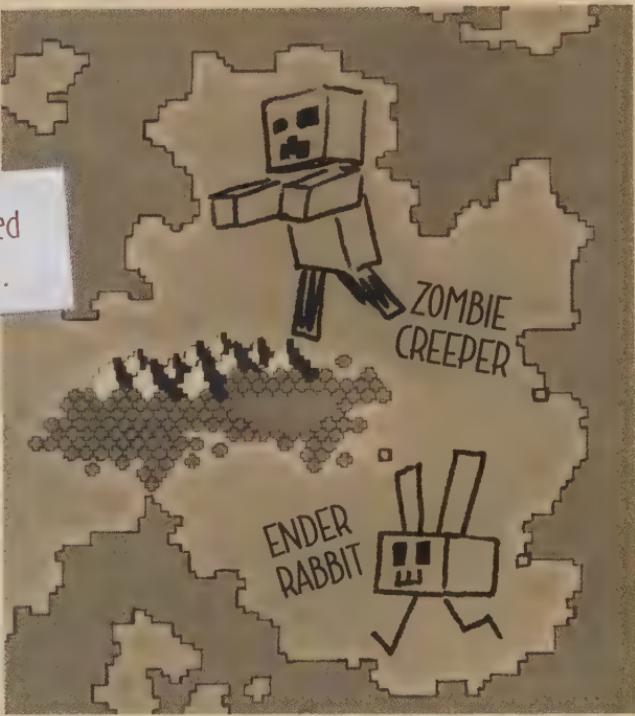
I glance at the map again. Owl's Reach isn't marked, but it's there. Somewhere. Some fifty thousand blocks away. Okay, so my quest is pretty clear: all I have to do is head somewhere, talk to someone, and try not to get eaten by zombies along the way. No problem. But I really wish he'd given me a better map. Even if it's the most complete map Villagetown's libraries had to offer, that's not exactly saying much.

Most of the other maps, well . . .



It's actually
not so bad . . .

compared
to this.



(He gave me one of those maps, too. I'm . . . not sure why. Yeah, I can't fathom how so much villager knowledge has been lost over the generations, when we have such useful information at our disposal. . . .)

As far as supplies go, I'm **set**: Kolb gave me a stack of carrots, a stack of oak, half a stack of coal, a crafting table, a furnace, a bed. Also **332 emeralds** taken from his clan's **ender chest**. Plus, I have a full set of **stone tools** I crafted earlier and, of course, **my sword**. There's just **one problem**. I'm still wearing these clothes. Here's the thing about this outfit: although it makes me seem like a **rich noble**

hailing from some powerful kingdom—a kingdom where golden apples are served in cafeterias and everyone drinks healing potions instead of water—it doesn't provide any armor or stats of any kind. And they're rather useful, armor and stats. I like armor and stats. A lot. I'd wear a big beetroot sack as long as it provided even a bit of armor or maybe increased my movement speed.

I'd somehow craft it into a shirt
and wear that thing with pride.

SATURDAY—UPDATE I

As I make my way north, I sometimes glance to the south, toward home. I decided earlier that if I see any smoke after sunrise, I'd head back to the village as fast as possible. Of course, by the time I'd make it back, it would already be too late. . . .

I can't help but imagine the mayor's face upon hearing that I'm gone. It's kind of ridiculous when you think about it. Just a few hours after I was hailed as one of Villagetown's heroes, I vanished without a trace. So much for the mayor's plan of boosting morale. . . . I can almost hear Emerald cracking some joke about it. Something about how I got so wound up over the whole "Explorer of the Overworld" thing that I zoomed off without any instructions. Okay, I admit it—that's probably something I'd do.

All right. The sun's going down. I'm about to make camp. That is, dig an emergency shelter. I won't write about the process of digging a shelter here. I've already gone over that. Besides, I don't feel like dwelling on the fact that I'll be spending the night in a dirt hole. I still have a shred of dignity.

In a hole . . . next to a horse . . .
a horse whose name I don't even know . . .
a horse who slobbers all over me.

"No!
Those are the carrots;
these are my fingers."



SATURDAY—UPDATE II

I'm having trouble falling asleep.

Two blocks of dirt sit between me and fresh air, yet I still hear all kinds of sounds. Distant howls, **eerie calls**. Sounds not made by any **zombie**, but that's about all I know.

Back pressed against damp earth, in total darkness, I **wait**. . . . I listen to those cries, **thinking about home**. Family. Friends.

That reminds me—**that very heavy book** Max handed to me before he took off with Lola. I place a torch at my feet and turn the first page.



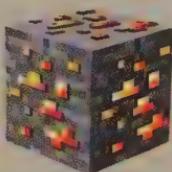
CHAPTER 1

RARE METALS

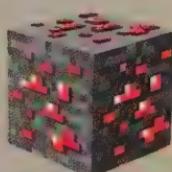
WE SHALL BEGIN THIS TOME WITH AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THOSE RELATIVELY RARE AND UNKNOWN METALS, THOUGHT BY MANY TO EXIST IN LEGEND ONLY. LET IT BE KNOWN THAT SUCH FANTASTIC METALS DO EXIST. SO FANTASTIC ARE THESE METALS, ONLY A PERSON OF GODLIKE POWER COULD DESIRE BETTER.



VOIDCRYSTAL



MYTHRIL



FIRE ELEMENTIUM



EARTH
ESPER



ADAMANT



ORICAL

SUNDAY

I've come across a ruined village. Maybe there was a **fire** here. Only cobblestone foundations remained. After searching around, I didn't find anything. No items. No signs of battle. No rubble, even.

The whole place is just . . .
empty.

I actually drew a picture of the place, along with a caption saying: "Actually, it's not so bad. Just put up some flowerpots, some carpet, maybe a painting. . . . Um, never mind."

Obviously, the joke was that **no amount** of decoration could cheer this place up. But I **threw** the picture away, because it felt wrong to joke about other people's **misfortunes**. This has to be one of the villages those survivors came from. **This was their home.** I still remember their faces when they showed up at our gate.

If I ever find out **who** did this . . .

SUNDAY—UPDATE I

The horse is gone. I didn't leash it when I went to check out the village because I don't have a leash. Why didn't Kolb give me one? Seriously, that horse was right there, no farther than fifteen or twenty blocks away, just nibbling on grass. I checked a few houses in the village, wrote in here, came back, and . . . great. The weird thing is that I can see for hundreds of blocks in every direction and there's no horse in sight. He must have really booked it. Was I really such a bad master? As if! I fed that thing more than I fed myself!

Great. Now Kolb's going to be angry with me, too. And traveling on foot is going to consume way more energy. I'm not sure if these carrots will last. I might have to go hunting at some point.

Oh wait. I stashed my bow in one of my item chests back home. So glad I did that. . . . See, this is where I've failed—a real warrior would have definitely anticipated a human randomly showing up in the middle of the night and sending said warrior to find an item that may or may not actually exist.

Okay. Let's stay positive. At least I'm not going to have to deal with horse slobber tonight. Horses eat potatoes, apparently. And apparently, my nose resembles one.

SUNDAY—UPDATE II

I wonder what's **everyone's doing back home**. What happened **after I left**? Kolb could be in **a lot of trouble** for sending me out here **on my own**. It's possible that this whole thing could undo the alliance. What if the humans got **kicked out**? What if the mayor **banished him**?

No, it must have played out differently than that. After all, before I left, Kolb said he would **handle everything**. He must have succeeded, because if **Breeze** found out I left, she would've taken a horse and come looking for me. **She would've caught up to me** by now. So everything must be continuing as **normal**. Everyone's getting their feet wet, exploring the Overworld just outside the wall. **Yeah, that's all.**

Breeze must be leading Max, Stump, Lola, and Emerald on **a field trip**. Finding **caves**. **Mapping the terrain**. Spending the night in a carefully constructed shelter that would—at least compared to the emergency shelter I just dug—look like **the royal suite in Snark's Tavern**. They must be thinking they're tough, eating stacks of bread and sharing ghost stories in the ruddy glow of a redstone torch placed on the ground. **Oooh, spooky.**

Note: I added the destroyed village to my map. Should I ever discover its name, I'll update it.



SUNDAY—UPDATE III

Aetherstone. Adamant.
Elementite. Endersteel.
Orical. Redsteel. Mythril.
Voidcrystal . . .



In my new underground abode, I recite these words out loud. They're the names of some of the rarest known materials, or elements, of which there are many. Most only exist naturally in the outer dimensions. That is, the dimensions beyond the End. They're exceedingly hard to mine, even with an obsidian pickax. Others, such as redsteel and endersteel, don't exist naturally in any known dimension and therefore

cannot be mined. They're created by smelting other materials in an object known as a **crucible**—basically an advanced furnace.

I find it confusing that this so-called **elementite** has at least **five different types**: fire, earth, air, water, and shadow. According to the author of this book, a villager named **Theonius** who lived some five hundred years ago, scholars believed there are several more types of elementite. The scholars also argued about what it should be called: **elementite** or **elementium**.

Huh . . . interesting . . . Zzzzz.

Back to reading, even if this book is **slightly boring**. I still can't **sleep**. A zombie has been walking around overhead for the past hour or so. Earlier, I heard this strange sound: **thunk, thunk, thunk**. My imagination went wild. I couldn't picture anything other than some horrible monster, **half tree, half . . .** But no, it was just that zombie, walking into the trunk of an oak tree. **Facepalm**. Some real nice monsters you have there, Herobrine.

What am I even doing out here?

All we have to do is plant trees all around the village and . . .

BINGO! Attack thwarted.

MONDAY

The morning consisted of walking and eating carrots. Mostly. I know. Pretty thrilling. I like to start off my mornings in the Overworld real intense like that.

The highlight of the day was when I came across an arrow lodged in the side of a small stone cliff. Okay, so that alone isn't very interesting, but it wasn't a normal arrow. The tip was made of obsidian, with a creepy ghostlike face. The face had an odd expression, both sad and angry, like someone had just stolen a muffin that he was about to eat. Which would definitely make me sad and angry.

Needless to say, I've never seen an arrow like that before. I can only assume it's poisoned. Or enchanted with some horrible debuff that makes Wither look like slight mining fatigue. Being the curious explorer that I am, I almost wanted to poke myself with it just to see what would happen. But I quickly realized that a zombie, a pigman, or perhaps a creeper would be a much better test subject.



— Or am I just
imagining things
again?

— Do you see it?
The creepy face?
Like, part creeper, part
ghast, and both sad and
angry at the same time?



“Nah, this arrow totally isn’t enchanted with **Noob Melting VII**.
It was obviously crafted out of sheer love and happiness.”

In fact, if it struck a grass block,
it would probably sprout thousands of flowers.

TUESDAY

I spotted a forest in the middle of the plains. In its very center was a grotto-like area with a cliff and a waterfall.

It was a beautiful scene, inviting, with fragrant blossoms and multicolored leaves and mossy stone under streams of brilliant blue water—golden sunlight pouring down. *Come on in*, this place seemed to say. *Just go for a little swim. You don't need to worry. There are no creepers here. Promise. Ignore that slight rustling sound behind you. Ignore the hissing. Focus on the water.*

Maybe that was why I cautiously approached, expecting the worst. But there was nothing. No giant squid surging from the depths. No zombies rising from the ground.

Only tranquility, loveliness, a gentle breeze . . .
and a most unusual-looking girl.



"Are you . . . an NPC?" she asked, stepping back slightly.

...

Here we go again, I thought. As if I haven't already heard enough of that back at the village. Wait, does that mean she's a human? No, she can't be. She looks nothing like one.

"My name is Runt," I said, approaching.

She nearly tripped as she backed up. Then, after another **uneasy** glance in my direction, she **darted** into the forest. Apparently, I'm the **scariest villager** who ever lived.

'Hey! Wait! Come back!'

But she was already gone.

I stood there for a moment, completely stunned. Who was she? What was she? What was up with her sword? It was thin but longer than any sword I'd ever seen.

"Well, she's definitely not a human," I muttered.

"Not with ears like that."

And suddenly I realized that I'd been talking to myself **an awful lot** lately. Asking myself questions out loud. I never **really** thought about it, but you're **truly** alone when it comes to the Overworld. Sure, I'd heard that it was **barren**. Still, you don't quite understand just how empty it is until you **see it with your own eyes**.

After living in a village my entire life,
I find the silence rather unsettling.



ANYBODY
HOME?

TUESDAY—UPDATE I

"The Overworld. The Nether. The End. The Void. The Aether.
The Cleft. The Shadowlands. The Veil. The Maelstrom. The Abyss.
The Channel. The Pinnacle. The Zone. Icerahn . . ."

More self-assigned reading in a temporary underground home. I'm reviewing **dimensions** this time. Before reciting them, I was reading about one in particular: **the Void**. It's this **mysterious** place with **crystalline** plants, pools of water that bestow **magical** effects, and a race of people known as **mycons**. Known for their crafting ability, they are to villagers as **mooshrooms** are to cows.

Maybe I'll visit that place **someday**. There's a path in the Overworld that leads to it; it's **a gigantic chasm** in a forest far to the west. Furthermore, the book says gateways may exist **between the Nether and the Void**. That's pretty useless information for me, since I personally have **NO intention** of setting foot in a place where everything breathes fire.

All right. Back to studying.

THE AETHER

THE FIFTH DIMENSION, THE AETHER, CONSISTS OF VAST ISLES OF AETHERSTONE SUSPENDED IN A BLACK, STAR-FILLED VOID.

MANY DIFFERENT RACES INHABIT THE LARGER ISLES, MOST NOTABLY THE FISHMEN AND THE BIRDMEN, THE NAMES OF WHICH HAVE BEEN LOST THROUGH THE AGES. ALTHOUGH THESE PEOPLE ARE PEACEFUL, IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT THEY ARE PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF DEFENDING THEMSELVES.

AS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN EACH ISLE CAN BE VAST, THE MOST EFFICIENT METHOD OF TRAVELING BETWEEN THEM IS THROUGH THE USE OF A FLYING MOUNT, PARTICULARLY A SPECTRAL RAVEN: A BIRD NATIVE TO THIS DIMENSION, FOUND ON MANY OF THE LARGEST ISLES AND QUITE EASILY TAMED WITH BEETROOTS OR SUGAR. THE FASTEST AMONG THEM CAN RIVAL AN ENDER DRAGON IN SPEED.

Uh, giant ghost chickens that you can ride like horses? Why did I have to be born in the Overworld?! Whyyy?!?



WEDNESDAY

This morning I encountered more people: five humans riding in a V-shaped formation. Both they and their black horses were covered in black armor, and they were riding **fast**. Those mounts had to be at least **twice as quick** as Kolb's.

The one in front spotted me, too. **Was he their leader?** He didn't wave, just **turned back** as they tore across the plains from the east to the west—from my right to my left—fifty or so blocks up ahead. Wherever they were going, they were in a **big hurry**. And they were **serious**. As if the **fate of the world** rested on their shoulders. The way they dressed almost reminded me of **the Legion**. Of Kolb. Were they part of that clan?

→ "Stop! Wait! Seriously,
why does everyone keep
running away from me?! I . . .
just want someone to talk to."



WEDNESDAY—UPDATE I

In other news, I'm running low on carrots. That's the optimistic version. . . . In reality, I have **two carrots** left. Something just dawned on me. **It's been what—five days?** But I haven't seen many animals. I spotted **a chicken** on the first day. A **cow** on the second. But I still had a ton of carrots at that point—and a horse.

This is bad. Are animals really this **rare** in the Overworld? Are they like **diamonds** with legs? Now I can't even find 1 chicken. **Not even 1!** I wrote '**1**' instead of 'one' to conserve my food bar. **It's less tiring.**

UPDATE: Never mind, writing in here doesn't appear to be draining my food bar. Or hunger bar. I don't even know what to call it. . . . All I know is that my stomach starts **growling** when I get down to two chicken thighs.

Actually, what was it that Max once said in class? Only **strenuous activities** affect the food bar. Therefore, once starvation creeps up on me, all I have to do is **stop moving**. My food bar won't decrease at all. I can wait days, if needed, until some pig comes along, then **boom**—a nice cooked pork chop sizzling away on an open furnace, sautéed with mushrooms, seasoned with bits of dandelion and possibly some grass torn from a grass block and sprinkled on top the way Stump decorates his cakes at . . .

Oh!
I can taste it now!

Huh? What's that? No, I'm not starving! How could you even suggest such a thing? A dashing gentleswordsman such as myself would never fall into such a desperate and sad situation! I'm just planning ahead! Believe me!

WEDNESDAY—UPDATE II

Tonight I read about **Ardenvell**. The largest city, also known as the capital, is called **Aetheria City**. It's far to the west. It sounds like paradise. The book speaks of magnificent white towers reaching up to the sky. It's home to some of the greatest blacksmiths in all the land. **The Knights of Aetheria**, too. It's an ancestral order that goes way back, to the time of the **Second Great War**.

Aetheria City



THURSDAY

I saw a chicken. A chicken!

On any other day, this wouldn't have made the news. But today, it was **everything**. I literally could have just left this entry like that—I saw a chicken—and it still would have been **the single most important** entry in the Overworld, the Nether, the End, the Void, the Aether, the Cleft, the Shadowlands . . . okay, I forgot the rest.

But I digress. Back to the chicken. **Without a bow**, I had to chase it down. I ate **my last carrot** to do so—you can't sprint when your food bar is too low. And as the furnace crackled away, with the smell of roast chicken drifting through the air, I heard **a distant cluck**, followed by another. Suddenly, it seemed like chickens were **raining from the sky**. They were fluttering around everywhere, crazily flapping their wings. One even flew into **my face**.

What's their problem? I thought. Is there a wolf or something?
I chased after them all, **catching six** in total. And here's where things get **weird**. (Sigh.)

I ran up to the **last one**. Sword held over my head. More than ready to turn that animal into tomorrow's lunch and hopefully one-third of an arrow. Then I . . . well, I noticed **something odd**: the chicken's feathers, instead of being mostly white, were dark gray, sickly green, even **yellow-brown**. . . .

I'll have you know that I, being the **thoughtful** warrior that I am, was well aware that this chicken could have been an **unknown** species or could have originated from some special biome, perhaps **the savanna to the west**. . . . Maybe chickens in savanna biomes have different-colored feathers than most—I don't know, do I look like a chicken expert? But the thing was, **this chicken**, it, um . . . well, I mean it, it kind of . . . it had no . . . **you see**, it, um . . . okay, okay, I'll just say it up front, sure, yeah, and **if you get scared**, that's totally not my fault. **Deep breath**, here goes:

This chicken,
it . . .
it didn't have eyes!

No, whenever someone refers to the "Eyeless One" . . . this is not who they're talking about.



It was a zombie. A **zombie chicken**. So Tucker was right! As **unbelievable** as it may seem, there really **are** zombie animals. But how could a **zombie chicken** survive in the sun? More important, why didn't **anyone** tell us about this in school? Maybe the teachers thought it was best that we didn't know; maybe they figured some of the students would just start **crying** and someone would ask, sobbing, "D-d-does that mean F-Fluffy can turn into a z-zombie?"

Or maybe the teachers **don't know**. Is it a new phenomenon? **Caused by what, though? Magic?** Some kind of hideous curse placed by **He Who Never Blinks?** Who could do such a thing to such a poor, **defenseless little animal?** It tried attacking me but moved much slower than an ordinary zombie, its little legs moving awkwardly, **robotically**, like a tiny golem. All I had to do was step back every now and then, no real hurry. A little flap of its wings. One step forward—no, it **stopped**. **Okay, there it went**—never mind, it stopped **again**. So sad. No, this couldn't go on.

"**Sorry, chicken.**"

The chicken's undead state appeared to make it tougher, for it took **two swings of my diamond sword** to bring that thing down. The meat it dropped did not appear to be what one might call . . . **edible**. Besides by **a pigman named Urg**, that is. (**What? Don't look at me like that!** He's the hero of this series I came across in the library: Urg the Barbarian. He'll eat anything. In the second book, he survived in the Overworld by eating a zombie's shoes.)

But even Urg wouldn't eat something like this, I thought, staring down at the ground. Mind wandering, I left the rotten food where it had dropped and moved onward, **onward, forever onward . . .** over highlands and valleys, mounds and hillocks, low outcroppings of stone, and gravel, gravel—dark gray patches that were once, of course, **a very long time ago**, incredibly safe and well-traveled roads.

FRIDAY

— A massive wall of cobblestone. I staggered forward, one wobbling foot in front of the other.



Voices.
Distant chatter.

My jaw dropped like an anvil.
I wasn't dreaming. **It wasn't a mirage.**

(Look at those little owl banners. How cool is that? What is that, the sigil of this village? I might not know what they are, exactly, but they're cool and I want some. I'll try crafting a few when I get back.)

Owl's Reach.
I'd found it.



Without a word, the three lookouts waved from above. Iron blocks gave way to gravel streets, wooden houses, and so many people—no two of them the same. Everywhere I looked, villagers were bumbling about, building homes, farming crops, and trading with everyone else. Humans, mostly. Others resembled that girl I saw, with light-gray skin and the longest ears. Some looked even weirder. There was truly every kind of person imaginable.

They ranged from
fairly normal looking,
such as this human
wizard girl . . .



"Just one more
level and I'll have
that spell."



... to those known as "dark dwarves," with light-blue skin.



"Hey!
Watcha staring
at, noob?!"



Even a
humanoid wolf.

I'll never get over
it. Stuck in this
silly game, looking
like this. . . .

"Oh, sorry!
Didn't mean to
bump into you
like that!"

Today, a
(slightly stupid) villager
named Runt learned that Owl's
Reach is, in fact, a town.



From what I gather, Owl's Reach serves as a crossroads for **explorers** like myself. Inns and item shops abound, **catering** to all those who wished to rest and **resupply** before heading out on their next epic adventure. And the level of construction here is simply **staggering**. Roaming those streets, I soon forgot about my quest. I reeled around in awe, **taking everything in**. . . .

I wasn't surprised to hear all kinds of odd names. **ReindeerGirl**. **Mr. Pasta**. **EnderLord80000**. **KraftyKreeper**. As odd and varied as their appearances. But some had **normal**-sounding names. Harold. Alex. Jake. Rebecca. Sarah. Emma.

Anyway—seeing all those people made me recall something Kolb once said. **In that game the humans used to play**, there were these things called **skins**. A skin altered one's appearance. So a player could become pretty much anything. Knights. Wizards. Elves. Dwarves. Ninjas. Faeries. Princesses. **Even animal-people**. So maybe these strange people **used to be players** from that game. After all, they spoke just like the humans back home. Even so, there were times when I **couldn't quite follow** their conversations. They used **unfamiliar** words, like '**mod**' and '**server**'. Of course, there were many more I did understand. Quest. NPC. Dungeon. Loot. Boss. Armor. Stat. My time **hanging around the Legion** had paid off somewhat.

One conversation in particular caught my attention. A dark dwarf was chatting up a girl with large catlike ears.

"Man, we really crushed that boss!" the dwarf exclaimed. "That stone golem didn't stand a chance! Honestly, the dungeons around here are **way too easy!**"

"Yeah, well, the **patrols** are another story," Cat-Ears said. "Those pigmen are **pretty tough**. What are they looking for, anyway? Why are there so many of them in this area? Maybe we should **head back west**. I'm sick of dealing with them every time we hit **the plains**."

(Note: She must have been talking about the monsters looking for Kolb. So he wasn't lying. He said they ambushed his clan mates before they even arrived at the Reach. But they probably aren't looking for a villager like me. Maybe that's why he sent me. . .)

"**Aww, come on!**" the dwarf said. "Just **think of the loot**, huh? Every dungeon we've cleared so far has been **absolutely loaded!**"

I cleared my throat and approached the odd duo.

"Err, excuse me. I'm a bit lost. Do you know where I could—"

The dwarf glared at me. "What do we look like, the **Lost Legion**?! Go ask **one of them** for help!"

"In fact, I just saw one," said Cat-Ears. She pointed down a sun-filled street. "I thought I saw her go into that library **over there**." She drew closer and smiled. "I was a **noob** once, too. Don't worry, eh? You'll get the hang of it. **Here's a little tip**. The Lost Legion has a **lot of codes**, and its members must follow them at all times. One is **protecting noobs from trolls, griefers, and aggressive monsters**.

Another is offering assistance to any player who asks. So whenever you see a Legionnaire, use that to your advantage."

The dwarf laughed. "Ah, what a sight! A high-ranking member of the Boss Wizards, handing out advice like an NPC in a starting zone!"

"It's his lucky day," she said with a shrug. "I'm in a good mood." Then she fixed her gaze toward the sky, toward the dark clouds that warned of a coming storm and the distant lightning that was already flashing above the mountains. "All right," she said, "we are not going out in that. Remember last time?"

"Aye. Let's hit an inn and wait it out." The dwarf patted me on the shoulder. "Good luck, kid."

With that, the pair took off, leaving me even more confused than before. So the Lost Legion had a code of honor, huh? Seems like they forgot all about that when they first showed up at my village. And who were the Boss Wizards, anyway? I decided I'd better hit that library. If someone from the Legion was there, they'd surely help me out. Hmm. But if they really were in the Legion, why weren't they with Kolb?

A torch lit up above my head. Library. I zoomed down the street, in the direction Cat-Ears had pointed, and spotted it immediately: *The Quill & Feather*.

It really is my lucky day, I thought, glancing at the clouds. But I didn't want to push it. I didn't feel like being turned into a witch just

yet. Potion brewing is **so boring**. Hey! Wait a minute, I thought. *Why is it called The Quill & Feather? Aren't quills and feathers pretty much the same thing?*

The storm was **already raging** by the time I reached the door. That wasn't odd—that's just how it is in the Overworld. One second it's all sunshine, not a cloud in the sky, and **the next** it's pouring rain, the lightning so frequent you can only cower indoors. And **not due to thunder**, or the chance of being struck, but knowing those hills are most likely filled with enough **charged creepers** to blast through **an obsidian door**.

I burst through the library's door **like a human in Villagetown**. **Unfortunately**, there was only one person inside, and that person was no member of the Legion. Nor was it **Feathers**. It couldn't have been. From what Kolb told me, **Feathers was not only a librarian** also **but a wizard** who specialized in **ancient lore** and **antiquities**. Thus, I expected Feathers to be like the things he studied: ancient and dusty, with a huge white beard, bushy white eyebrows, billowing blue robes, and a gnarled staff. **You know, a cliché wizard or something.** The person who stood before me, however, was **nothing of the sort**.

FRIDAY—UPDATE I



Until yesterday, I thought pigmen looked weird. Upon seeing **a girl with light green skin**, thoughts of **advanced crafting tables** and saving my village once again vanished from my mind. Only **a single question** remained:

"Are you a . . . zombie?"

She gave me the **strangest** look. "You've never seen a **limoniad** before?" At my **obvious confusion**, she added: **'Ah.** First time away

from home, I take it. Well, you've come to the right place. I have a little something that just might help you." She grabbed a tome off a nearby shelf and thrust it forward violently, as if she were to knock me out with it. "On the house," she said with a smile. "You'd better brush up on your mythology."

Great. As if I needed another book. With a mental sigh, I stared down at the red leather cover. *Races of Aetheria*.

"Oh," she said, "I'm Feathers, by the way."

She then gave me a lecture on how a limoniad is a type of nymph with ties to meadows—a natural being similar to elves, dryads, or faeries. Which explained her skin color, hair, and bracelets of woven flower petals. As for the people with gray skin, they're called moon elves. The humanoid wolves are lupins. I'd already figured out dark dwarves because I heard some people talking about them back there in the street. (*That, and I'm just really, really smart.*)

Okay, enough of this, I thought. *I'm on a quest, not some school trip.*

I glanced at the two strange-looking blocks nearby. Feathers had been fiddling around with them when I'd first entered. They didn't really look like that crafting table Kolb had shown me, but it was a solid start and **way better** than talking about faeries.

"So, what are those things?" I asked.

"Command blocks," she said, turning to them. "Picked them up at an auction on the cheap. In fact, I was the only one to place a

bid. No one wanted them because they seemed worthless, but I think it's only because no one knows how to operate them. They're over **three thousand years old!**"

Fearing another lecture, I decided to get straight to the point: "How about an advanced crafting table? Do you have one of those?"

"Advanced crafting table? Oh. You mean **aeon forge?**" She smiled again. "Looking to do **some real crafting**, huh? You're in luck, then. I have one for sale. Only **twenty-five hundred emeralds**, too."

My mind overheated when she said two things:

- 1.) **Only.**
- 2.) **Twenty-five hundred emeralds.**

I almost wanted to **inform her** of proper trading etiquette: when stating the price of an item, 1.) and 2.) may **never** be used in the same sentence.

"Is there any way you can **lower the price?** Student discount, perhaps?" I did my best to look **pitiful**. "It's for a **class project**. Those teachers, they said I'll never pass **Crafting VIII** until I craft a **powder keg**." I wiped away imaginary tears. Sniffled. "No, without that table, I just can't go on!"

"Sorry," she said. "The price is **not negotiable**. Do you know how in-demand those things are? **No one knows how to craft them.**

Not anymore, at least. It's a **lost art**. Which means there are a limited number of them left in the world. And every time someone carrying one slips and falls into a pool of lava, well, that number gets closer to zero."

So that's how it's gonna be. . . .

Summoning all my **wit**, I crafted the following response in my mind:
"I see."

That was all I had. Seeing all those weird people had **taken a lot out of me**. Nothing would have helped, anyway. She was clearly **proud** of her wares. I had one last idea, though.

Long story short, I **left** and **came back** minutes later with a piece of paper in my hand. I slapped that thing onto the floating carpet that served as a table. *Boom, boom.* (*I didn't make that sound, although looking back, I should have. For dramatic effect.*)

"Nice try. By the way, you spelled 'approve' wrong."



FRIDAY—UPDATE II

I roamed the streets after leaving.
Forlorn. Wallowing in self-pity.
Rubbing my chin as I thought about my situation.

Man, my **trading** skills were useless back there! That girl was clearly a pro. **Twenty-five hundred emeralds**. . . . Do people actually walk around with **that many precious stones** in their pocket? And why did Kolb give me so few? **Was that really all he had?**

My food bar was at two. There was a villager **peddling bread** nearby, so I traded twenty-five oak blocks for five loaves. A **bad trade**, but I didn't care. (*Little did that guy know, the joke was on him: I would have traded the entire stack for one.*)

Then I hit up a nearby shop. It specialized in **arms and armor**, judging by the signs.

I don't know why I went in there.
Guess I just needed information.



The dwarven blacksmith didn't greet me. Actually, he flat-out ignored me. To him, I didn't exist. He clearly had a well-trained eye for low-level emerald-pinchers such as myself. Which was fine. I just wanted to look at the various sets, particularly the leather, dyed red and enchanted with Fire Protection, and the two full sets of diamond. I'd never seen armor of such quality back home.

Nor these kinds of prices: 8,000 emeralds
for the diamond set . . . gulp!

So it's official, I thought. Around here, emeralds apparently grow on trees—err, drop from leaf blocks like apples.

That was when I saw an **endersteel** breastplate. It was straight out of that book Max gave me. **Diamond has nothing** on armor like that. You could probably **tank** an ender dragon in that thing.



I approached this wondrous item,
staring at it,
gazing at it,
studying it . . . it, and its price:
27,000 emeralds.

This sight . . . the sight of this **masterfully crafted** item, just hanging there on that stand like some ordinary armor despite costing a fortune . . . this sight **undid the fabric of my existence**. It destroyed my world. My carefully crafted little universe—so sheltered, so innocent—shattered, just like that. I realized that my home

village, the place I've lived my entire life . . . is, for lack of a better word, a **noobtown**. There was no doubt in my mind: I knew absolutely nothing of this world and **had nothing, was nothing**.

But that's good, right? Isn't that what I've always looked for, always wanted? There I was, a budding adventurer on the open road, surrounded by unknowns, nearly **a hundred thousand blocks** from home, five hundred emeralds to my name, and a newfound desire for more. I **stood up** straighter. Nodded to myself. I had to do this. No moping, no crying. My village was counting on me. Just me. Breeze was no longer here to hold my hand. But where would I begin? My diamond sword was worth only a small fraction of what I'd need.

How could I possibly get enough
to buy that table?

As I stood in the armor shop, pondering this question in dismay, I soon found that things often have a strange way of working out. For the answer to my problems walked right through the door.

FRIDAY—UPDATE III



A young man, with **tattered** leather armor and **rusted** iron sword, timidly approached the counter, where he threw down **an assortment of flowers**. Blue orchids, daisies, morningcrest. Several others I didn't recognize. The blacksmith beamed **like a glowstone block**.

Thank you! You don't know how much this means to me! Oh, it looks like I'll be able to craft that set of armor **in time for the king's birthday after all!** **What a joyous day!**

Flowers used in a crafting recipe for armor?

I forgot about this immediately when the blacksmith threw down a pile of emeralds on the counter.

Whaaaaat?! My jaw weighed a ton. That had to be at least one hundred and fifty, or two hundred, no . . .

'Two hundred fifty,' the blacksmith said. 'As promised.'

Without a word, the swordsman scooped the emeralds into his belt pouch, turned around, and headed for the door. He stopped. Right next to me. Turned slowly. Stared at me. Opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it and closed it again. A cube of sweat formed upon his brow, and he exhaled. If I had to describe him in a single word, it would be "lost." That's all I saw in his eyes. Perhaps he had only recently arrived in our world, torn from his own like all the rest. Or perhaps he hadn't yet come to terms with living here.

— 'H-hey,' he finally said.

"Hey," was my reply. "Um . . . I have a question." Fearing the blacksmith might overhear me, I glanced over my shoulder before whispering, "Why **so many** emeralds for a bunch of flowers?"

A raised eyebrow. "You . . . don't know? It was a quest."

"Is that like a job?"

Another strange look. "Quests were one of the things included in the last server update." The more he spoke, the steadier his voice became. "Most NPCs will give you one if you talk to them long enough. Especially in this town."

"So I just ask them about quests?"

"Something like that. Come here. I'll show you."

I trailed behind him as he approached the counter once more.

"This guy's looking for some work," he said to the smith. "Do you have anything he could help you with?"

"Why, yes," the blacksmith said. "I'm looking for some glomoss. You'll find some in a tomb to the southwest of here. **The Tomb of the Forgotten King.** Retrieve this rare crafting ingredient, and I will pay you most handsomely: **seven hundred fifty emeralds.**"

Upon hearing this, **my heart sank** like a zombie in a waterfall. That was less than a third of what I needed. **However . . .**

The swordsman nudged me. "Take it," he whispered. "Seven hundred fifty is pretty good, and dungeons are usually loaded with loot. The items you'd collect could be worth thousands."

Suddenly, the zombie in my chest chugged a Flying Potion and was now dancing upon the clouds.

"I accept," I said. "Just show me that dungeon, and I'll show you some glomoss in no time."

"Glad to hear it," the blacksmith said. "Do you have a map? I can mark it for you." He took my map and added the Tomb's location.



'So I just go there and retrieve your glowmoss? That's it?'

The blacksmith smiled. '**That's it!** An easy task for a fine young warrior like yourself! Of course, before you take off, you'll be needing this.' He slid **a strange item** across the counter. 'Best of luck, young man. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a birthday present to craft. **Armor fit for a king!**'

I stared down at the bizarre object. I'd never seen anything like it before.

'What do I do **with this?**' I asked the human, whose name I still didn't know.



"Seriously? You don't know what a **key** is? Wow. Never thought I'd meet someone who knew **less** than I do. . . ."

And so I received **another lecture**. This time, about dungeons and keys.

"**Dungeons** were another part of the last update," he said. "They can be anything now, from your typical **underground maze** to a **small castle**, or even an **entire town**. And here's the craziest part. They can't be modified. When you're in a dungeon, **you can't mine or place anything**. Oftentimes, you need to use **a key** to open a dungeon's front door, and these keys are usually provided by NPCs. Beyond that, **monsters** sometimes drop them."

"I don't get it," I said. "**Why can't dungeons be mined?**"

"Because **the Builders** made them," he said. "If you could just run around mining everything, it would **undo** all their hard work. Plus, trolls could place **obsidian blocks** over the front doors to prevent noobs

from entering. Or you could just tunnel your way to the final **boss** without first dealing with the minions, puzzles, and traps—what would be **the point?** Dungeons were built for the players to provide challenges, places to explore.”

Whoa. Information overload.

But hey, at least he wasn’t calling me an NPC.

Although I didn’t understand everything he said, I got the general idea. In a dungeon, you have to play by the rules. You have to explore it the way the Builders intended. But who are these so-called Builders? Why would they go out of their way to create challenges for other people? So mysterious.

I must have seemed extremely confused, because the swordsman gave me that funny look again.

“I’m guessing you used to play a lot of single-player,” he said. “Was it your first time playing on the Aetheria server? You were connected, right? When the server crashed?”

“Um, well, I . . . I mean . . .”

“How’d you even survive this long? Have you been hiding in this city the whole time?” When I failed to respond, he followed up with even more questions.

“Do you even remember what happened? The crash? The event?”

I had no idea what he was talking about. It must have had something to do with what the humans back home always argued about. "Interface" this, "MindLink" that. A virtual world that had turned real. He thought I was one of them. A person from Earth.

"I kind of don't really, um . . . Err, I'm what some might call an NPC."

"Oh."

What followed were ten long seconds of silence.

"It's the outfit," he said. "I've never seen an NPC villager wear something like that, so I just assumed . . . Yeah. Feeling a little noob right now. Anyway, I guess it's about time I made friends with an NPC."

He smiled and extended a hand.

"My name's Eto."

"Runt," I said. "Runt Ironfurnace."

We made small talk for a bit after that. Where I came from. Why I'm here. He'd only recently arrived from the capital, where he'd accepted a quest from some townsperson—a series of errands that had eventually sent him here. He told me how a quest can be anything. They're often mundane, like his flower-hunting quest. Other times, a single quest could involve traveling to all four corners of the world.

Eto stared ahead, as if looking at something a million blocks away.

"Like you, I haven't explored all that much. I only recently gathered up enough courage to leave the safety of the capital. But I met this guy a few days ago. Good guy. Great player. He's been exploring

since day one. While most of us were still cowering in fear, he was setting out. The **tales** he had, of the places he's been, things he's seen . . . ships, airships, and an underground city that **puts the capital to shame**. . . . Calls himself a **treasure hunter**."

"When you say ship, you mean **boat**, right?"

"No. I'm talking about real vessels, with sails and cabins and everything. **And this guy has one.** Or so he claimed. He and some villager were eventually going to set sail and explore the ocean. And maybe **the continent to the north.**"

"You mean there's **more than one continent?**"

"That's what he said."

Another. Continent. It felt like I'd been struck by lightning again. Except I hadn't turned into a witch . . . at least then I could have brewed a potion of some kind that would increase my intelligence enough to understand what this guy was saying. **It took seven days**, on foot, to travel a tiny little distance on that map. There could be thousands of villages on Ardenvell—and just as many towns, cities, and castles. And now some human is telling me there's **more than one continent?!**

"It's pretty **strange**, though," he said. "Despite his **accomplishments**, that guy can't even remember **his own name**. He only knows his name starts with an **S.**"

"That is **pretty strange.**"

"Yeah. . . ." He glanced at the door. "Speaking of friends, I have to get going. I'm supposed to meet up with someone."

"All right. I guess I should say thanks. **For everything.**"

He nodded. "And hey. If you decide to **try** that dungeon, I suggest getting someone to **tag along**. **Never go solo. See ya around!**"

And just like that, my new friend **took off**, leaving me with plenty of **unanswered** questions.

I couldn't stop **thinking** about what he had told me. I **envisioned** a ship sailing across **countless ocean biomes**, airships skipping across the clouds, and an underground city filled entirely with **dwarves**.

But none of that was quite **as wonderful** as **the small obsidian key** in my hand.

FRIDAY—UPDATE IV

The storm had mostly cleared by the time I left the shop. I made my way to the **village square**, since plenty of people seemed to enjoy hanging out there. I soon bumped into the cat-eared girl and loud-mouthed dwarf from earlier. They were replenishing their food bars. When I asked if they could help me out, they **spit out bits of cake**.

"Let me get this straight," the dwarf said. "You want us to join you on a dungeon quest."

"That's right."

"And you've . . . never actually been in a dungeon."

"I haven't," I said, "but I'll do my very best! I'm a **quick learner!** I can **carry** stuff, too! Think of me as an extra inventory. And an extra pair of **arms**. Whenever you need a healing potion, I'll be right there! Potion support, **at your service!** I'll uncork those potions so fast, those zombies will think you have **ten life bars!**" I sighed. "Basically, I just . . . **really need emeralds.**"

The dwarf chuckled. "I'm sure you do, but dungeons are **no place** for noobs. I'd feel **guilty** if something happened to ya."

"I'm afraid he's **right**," the girl with the cat ears said. "Dungeons are full of **powerful monsters**. They're much stronger than what you find in the Overworld. And they're nothing compared to **the traps**. . . . If you set one off, **that's it**. Someone will probably find **your items** on

the ground a day or two later, and they'll know exactly where **not** to step."

"Oh. Okay. Well, um, thanks. Yeah, see you. **Good luck.**"

After they left, I stood around for a few minutes, looking for a possible companion. Surely I could find someone. But practically **nobody** was alone, and the few I approached avoided eye contact or **politely declined**.

"Dungeon? **Nope.** I'm waiting for someone."

"**Nah.** I don't do dungeons."

"Maybe **some other time.**"

My face must have revealed **a wide variety** of emotions. Confusion. Frustration. Helplessness. Despair. Doubt. Imagine a pigman who had been zapped by lightning **eight times** in the same week. Imagine how crazy he felt after that eighth time. Imagine his face. That was **pretty much my face.**

It was beginning to feel like everything I'd learned in school was useless. **At least out here.** The Overworld is totally different from what I'd read about, thought about, and dreamed about all this time. **A noob.** I've really become a noob **all over again.** Which wouldn't be so bad, if I didn't have to be a noob by myself. . . . They say misery loves company; well, noobishness loves company, too.

On top of that, my luck was **running out.** I became acutely aware of this when I heard a deep grunt, like a monstrous pig, directly behind me.

I slowly turned around.

FRIDAY—UPDATE V

"You! Villager! Ogre dare!"

(Ogre dare? Um, I think he meant over there.)

Far off, past a hundred or so other people chatting away, a **pigman** was approaching. A pigman in **black leather armor** covered in **crude iron spikes**. I knew it must've been one of the **monsters hunting Kolb**, so I turned away and started **walking**. Until I felt **a hand** upon my shoulder. I whirled around to face **beady black eyes** and a square pink nose. And breath so **hideous** it probably could have broken though **netherrack**.

"Hey!" the pigman said. "I was talking to you!"

"You were? Are you sure? I thought I heard you calling for some villager."

"Is that not what you are?"

I looked down at myself. "Do I look like a villager to you? Do you see a robe?"

"No, but your . . ." He pointed to his nose. "Enough! I am Reh, servant of the great and powerful god-king known as the **Eyeless One**, the **Forever Eternal**, the **One True Wizard**, He Who . . ." He paused, as though he'd forgotten the rest, then grunted angrily. "You are to come with me to **Stormgarden Keep** for questioning!"

God-king? So that's what they call him, huh? Yeah, and what about this guy's name? His name is Reh? That's not a monster name. All things considered, he's lucky I'm such a nice guy. A less composed warrior would have already attacked this ridiculously named pigman as a matter of principle!

"First of all," I said, "that's an amazing title. Really. God-king, One True Wizard . . . just wow. Admittedly, 'Forever Eternal' is a bit redundant, but still, it does have a certain ring to it. Anyway, I'd love to go with you, I would, but . . . it really depends."

"On what?"

"Well . . . during the interrogation, will you be serving milk and cookies?"

He grumbled and drew his obsidian sword. He didn't like milk and cookies! What sacrilege! And here I thought we could be friends!

Suddenly, I heard Kolb's voice in my mind. A speech he once gave to his fellow clan members:

You are members of the Lost Legion! You are OP! The hardest of the hard core! The bravest souls in all the land! Walking tanks destined to crush the armies of He Who Would Never Wear Sunglasses! Without fear! Without mercy!

I drew my sword with the glass-like ring of diamond.

An epic battle ensued. All you could hear were the sounds of our swords clashing against each other over and over, along with pig-like grunts and shouts from the surrounding people, more and more of whom were gathering by the second now, asking one another:

"Am I seeing this right? Are those **two NPCs** fighting?"

I blocked **so many** of my opponent's attacks. I'd been working on my block moves **for weeks**. Now, one nanosecond after that sword came flying at me, I put up my own to the clash of diamond on obsidian. It was **kind of boring**.

I blocked. He blocked. I blocked. He blocked. Okay, **cool**—he didn't block. I only had to **repeat this** thirty or so times to inch his life bar down, half a heart at a time, until it was nothing but a line of **empty hearts**.

That's right.

I, being the **noble and talented gentleswordsman** that I am—possessing far superior wit and consummate skill at arms—**rid the world** of this foul, netherrack-wilting **stench**.

The humanoid pig sank with a low, sad moan. "**UrggQuuu!**"

I returned my sword to its **scabbard** before he hit the ground. (*A total pro move, by the way. I heard a farmer let out a little gasp. At least one person was impressed!*)

Glowing experience orbs flew toward me, and I felt the familiar rush of **XP** gain. An eerie silence lingered. The monster **dissolved** into a cloud of smoke. The onlookers began rambling to one another. Many of them **were armed**. Adventurers, **explorers** . . .

Couldn't they have **helped me out?**!

"What's happening?" someone asked.

"Is this part of a quest event?" asked someone else.

"Maybe it is," said a third. "I say we stick around and find out!"

But they weren't asking the right questions.
Where's the pigman's armor?
And his sword?

His items had evaporated into nothingness, like the pigman himself. **Pretty rude.** Aspiring evil wizards, **take note:** If you're going to send your **minions** after someone, make sure they don't drop **any** items. This way, if your underlings fail, the person you're after won't have anything to show for it. They'll just be wasting time. So **the Eyeless One** really is as terrible as they say . . . more like **Heartless One!** That pigman could have **at least** dropped an emerald or something!

Moments later, **five more pigmen** charged from the crowd and surrounded me, **swords drawn**. All right, I admit it: at this point, I was definitely contemplating going with them. Even if they weren't serving milk and cookies, surrendering would at least mean **living** to enjoy milk and cookies another day.

"Hey, guys." My gaze swept across so many square pink faces. "How are you? About that interrogation. I—"

Suddenly, I heard the **sound of hooves** on gravel. They were approaching **fast**. I struggled to get a better look across the crowd, but I couldn't see past the hats and helmets and ridiculous hairstyles.

At last, I saw her. Breeze rode into view confidently, gracefully, as though she'd been riding **all her life**.

As though she belonged out here.

As though there was
no better place for her to be.

Thought you
might need
some help.

She leapt from her horse and drew two blades, one in each hand. It was then that I noticed the faint, colorful motes swirling in the air around her—the visual effects of multiple potions. But I was far more shocked by her expression: her face showed anger instead of its usual sweetness and innocence.

The pigmen slowly turned toward her, grunting. They had no idea what was in store for them. If they had, they would've thrown down their weapons on the spot and denounced their beloved "god-king."

"Herobrine?!" they would've said. "What are you talking about?! Is that some kind of pickle?!"

Instead, two of them pointed at her and bent over, clutching their stomachs. They were laughing.

That's one of Breeze's strengths. Pebble once said that, after class. They'd been assigned as dueling partners. The duel started with him turning back to his friends and smirking. It ended with him facedown in the mud. You'd never think a wooden sword could be so dangerous until you saw one in her hands.

All right, I take back what I said about that first battle. This one was truly epic. The way we moved together, swords flashing . . . it was something out of a fairy tale. And it felt just like the old days, when we had fought back to back, uncertain whether we would survive. We took them down one by one, until there weren't any monsters left—only gravel and cobblestone. And a sea of people cheering.

"After this," someone said, "maybe those pigmen will finally leave us alone."

"Yeah," said another, "but it's strange to see NPCs handling things. It really must be some kind of quest event. Maybe a secret one. Let's hang around this village for a little longer, huh?"

And in the middle of them all were two villagers named **Breeze** and **Runt**. I still couldn't believe she was here.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

"The mayor told me everything," she said. "They were keeping it a secret."

So Kolb must have told the council, I thought. And the council decided to keep the mission a secret? They probably wanted to avoid widespread chaos. Knowing villagers, they would have definitely panicked.

"I'm really glad to see you," I said.

"Me too." She gave me a hug. "So . . . what happened?"

"Long story on that. In short, I'm on a quest, and we're going to a dungeon."

"A dungeon?"

"I'll tell you on the way. First, we need to buy some supplies. C'mon. Most of the shops are that way."

She grabbed me by the shoulder.

"My horse is over there."

'Oh.' I grimaced.

How embarrassing. I hope she doesn't ask about . . .

'By the way,' she said, 'where's Meadow?'

'Who's Meadow?'

'Um, Kolb's horse? A rare charger with an enchanted saddle?'

'Charger? Is that a type of horse? Well, that horse didn't look so special to me. And was that saddle really enchanted? It had felt really comfortable, like sitting on a block of feathers.'

Another grimace.

. . . Embarrassing.

FRIDAY—UPDATE VI

Atop Breeze's gilded horse, **Shybiss**, we set out to do some trading. I needed **armor** and **potions**, after all, and both of us needed more **food**. At least one shopkeeper was about to have a **good day**.

I went over **everything** I'd experienced and learned so far. My **strange** encounters on the road. **Feathers**. The **absurd** price of an advanced crafting table. **The absurd price of everything**. What that human had told me about quests, dungeons, and keys. As for **Villagetown**, it was just as I'd thought: the mayor had told everyone that I was **in trouble** and that I wouldn't be seen again until I was done filling **five double chests** with potato-based food items. Okay, so I didn't expect **that**, exactly, but I did call that he would lie to avoid a **total panic**.

"What am I supposedly **being punished** for?" I asked.

"The paper."

"The paper? Oh. Yeah." The paper."

I'd forgotten all about that paper. We were supposed to write **twenty pages** on why we'd chosen our **profession**. It was due the very same morning I'd set out. Of course, I, being **the studious warrior-scholar** that I am, finished writing that paper. The night I left, just before falling asleep, I filled each of those twenty pages with **one single, massive word—or letter**. Well, the last two pages were

drawings. One of the monsters' forest **burning**, another of a zombie crying. But still, **twenty pages**.

"Of course, I couldn't help feeling that **something** was wrong," Breeze said. "It was **odd**. Why would they **lock you up in a house** for that? I didn't learn **the truth** until two days ago, when I overheard Kolb speaking to **the mayor and my father**. I stormed up to them and demanded the truth. They **told me everything** and sent me to go find you. Said you **should have been back by now**."

"Yeah? How was I supposed to know **horses just run off** like that?" I sighed. "Okay, what about **the others**? Is anyone else coming?"

"No. I'm the only one who knows. **They're all training**. Exploring. We've already spent **several nights** outside. Some of the humans made **watchtowers**. **Beacons**, they call them. Also . . ."

Breeze told me how she'd **traded** for some new items for her journey. **The outfit** she was wearing now. A **black wool** tunic, black wool skirt, and black leather boots. The wool provided as much armor as leather, but it gave **bonuses to stealth and speed**. The boots had similar stats, as well as a bonus to **jump height**. Such bonuses suited her, since Breeze was the type who cherished **mobility**. That was her style, a style she employed **to full effect**.

"I also traded for this," she said, drawing an **emerald sword** from its scabbard. That was one of the swords she'd **wielded earlier**, but I hadn't noticed the **color**. It looked just like a diamond sword, only **brilliant green**.

"It's a bit **better** than diamond," she said. "Same average damage but with a slightly **faster** attack speed." She glanced back at me and smiled. "After making friends with a few human girls, I found they have **a lot** of interesting items like this."

"How about those **arrows**?" I asked. "Did you trade for those, too?"

"No. Sophia and Talia gave them to me. I almost declined but figured **weakness arrows** could come in handy out here."

"Huh. Where'd they find all that stuff?"

"Dungeons, I guess. Before they arrived at Villagetown."

"That's **good to know**. Hopefully the one we're going to will be filled with items like that. We really need an **equipment upgrade**. Those pigmen were—"

Breeze stirred in the saddle. "What's that?"



I followed her gaze to a building that resembled a temple. It seemed to be constructed entirely of white quartz.

At first, I thought it was a church of some kind. Breeze did, too. A sign above the door read: "Temple of Entity." Another sign read: "Donation Pit Inside." I had no idea what a donation pit was, but I knew it had something to do with charity. As in, giving things away. Offerings for the poor. And guess who was currently the poorest person in Owl's Reach? Surely they could spare a handful of emeralds for this humble peasant.

"Should we check it out?" Breeze asked.

"I think that's an excellent idea," I said, glancing at the sign once more.

In my mind, it no longer read "Donation Pit" but "Free Cool Stuff."

"Yes, excellent idea."

FRIDAY—UPDATE VII



Austere. Majestic.
Breathtaking.

The Temple of Entity was all these things **and more**. The double spruce doors gave way to a **vast** chamber filled with sunlight and opalescent stained glass. I couldn't stop asking myself how such a thing could be built, with **chiseled quartz columns** towering far above to a lofty ceiling. What kind of **scaffolding** had been used? Dirt blocks?

Red carpet stretched between countless ancient pews, and far away, on either wall, were vast murals of legendary battles. One mural depicted an army of knights against monstrous hordes, rays of light descending from the heavens, and fires erupting from below. Farther inside, the windows ended, and redstone torches served as the only light source. Many of these torches surrounded a black altar, a massive slab of obsidian whose surfaces were sculpted with various reliefs.

Breeze stepped in first, her footsteps echoing. Mine were noticeably louder. We stared at every mural, every statue, and every etched relief. The farther we ventured inside, the darker it became, until it was almost gloomy.

We stopped before a statue of a robed man with two pairs of feathery wings. There was no face under the hood of the robe, and he held a weapon that I can only describe as a farming tool, except much larger than any I'd seen.

'The White Shepherd,' Breeze said softly, running her fingers across the statue's arm. 'Entity.'



Entity. . . . He was a character in a **fairy tale**, wasn't he? Yes, my mom used to read me that story when I was little. Back when all we had to worry about was our **harvest**. He was a **godlike** figure, an **Immortal**, who lived during the time of the **Second Great War**. The world was nearly torn apart then, and when things grew worse, Entity crafted **twelve weapons of indescribable power** and chose **twelve heroes** to wield them. With them, the world had a fighting **chance**.

"What **happened** during that final battle?" I asked. "I forget how it went. **Both sides** fell, didn't they?"

"The knights managed to **destroy the Eyeless One**," she said, "although not completely. They **fell** to his minions afterward, vastly outnumbered. They **sacrificed** themselves. Their weapons were then **destroyed**—shattered—yet they survived . . . in some form. **Fragments**. Those knights were to be reborn someday, in order to restore their original weapons and help save the world. **For good**, this time."

"You sure know your **fairy tales**." I glanced around the temple once more and felt **a little chill**. "Looks like they take them pretty **seriously** around here, huh?"

Her expression suddenly grew **dark**. Or had she been that way ever since we'd approached this statue? Perhaps there was **some truth** to the legend. Maybe a bunch of knights really did end up fighting some **evil** wizard with weapons of **divine** origin. And maybe Entity really did exist, so very long ago. Did any of that matter now?

Hey, what is that?

Eyes lighting up, I pointed to a doorway.

"Now there's something I can believe in!"

According to the sign, the door led to **the donation pit**. Call me **disrespectful**, but I practically started **running**. The doorway led to a much smaller chamber, and the donation pit was . . . never mind. **Forget it**. I'm just going to **draw** a picture. Because no words could capture the sheer amazingness of what I was seeing.

FRIDAY—UPDATE VIII



Items. A pool of them, one block deep. The majority of them were gold, but I spotted several pieces of enchanted leather and iron armor. A diamond sword. Saddles. Potions. Even accessories such as belts, rings, bracelets. . . . I leapt in and **rummaged** around like a dragon wallowing in its treasure hoard.

Giddy with delight, I picked up an iron breastplate. **Free!** And an extra diamond sword—**free!** And look at those potions, just waiting to be **chugged!** Why would one go to a shop to trade for items when they could just come **here?**!

Hold on. Hold on. Hold on like a noob holding on to a ladder over a lava pit. This doesn't make any sense. People clearly left all this great stuff here, **but why?**

My smile **faded** bit by bit. Indeed, this piece of armor, shimmering faintly with a soft **violet** light, contained a low-level enchantment. But the enchantment was one I'd never heard of before, and it didn't **sound** like much of an enchantment **at all.**

I turned to Breeze. "**Burden II . . . ?** What is that?"

"It decreases your **attack speed** and **movement speed**," she said. "By 33%, I think."

"Decreases . . . not increases?"

She nodded. "A **negative** enchantment. Otherwise known as **a curse.**"

"But who . . . why . . . how can such a thing be possible?! I've never heard of **negative enchantments!**"

"That's because you **never spent much time** at an enchanting table," she said, wading up to me. "It happens sometimes. For whatever reason, **an enchanting attempt fails**, and . . ."

No, I thought, *this can't be right*. Then it started to dawn on me, and I examined the items in the **gleaming, glittering** mountain.

Everything here was indeed enchanted, from saddles to horse armor to the most beautiful of golden rings. . . . But each of those enchantments had names like "Dullness," "Breaking," or "Vulnerability."

"Dullness **reduces** a weapon's damage," Breeze said. "Breaking multiplies **durability loss**. And Vulnerability **reduces** an armor's protective value."

"What about this one?" I asked, holding up a diamond sword with **Unblocking V**.

"That reduces the effectiveness of blocking," she said. "I think level V is **100% reduction**. So blocking with it wouldn't reduce damage **at all**."

"Whoa!" That definitely doesn't meet my standards of item quality."

I casually tossed that sword over my shoulder and retrieved another sword—iron, with **Lifedrain III**.

"And this?" I asked.

"Lifedrain? Let's see . . . I think that **damages you over time**."

"Frozen Nether!" I dropped that sword as if it were a miniature creeper ready to explode.

"And **don't even touch** that one," Breeze said. She pointed at an iron sword with her foot. It had **Binding II**. "If you equip something that has **Binding**, you **can't remove** it unless you use a specific potion."

"Yeah, I get it now," I said, glancing around **in despair**. "That's why everyone **left this stuff** here. We're standing in a **trash pile**."

"Not exactly," Breeze said. "Many of these items would be of use to someone with nothing at all. An iron sword with Dullness I is still better than a normal wooden sword."

"How do you explain all the stuff with Binding and Lifedrain, then? And that dead bush? Trolls? Griefers?"

"Most likely." Scanning the items once more, she bent down and picked up a necklace. "Nice. I guess not everything here is bad."

A necklace, huh. . . .

Like bracelets, necklaces fall under the class of items known as **accessories**. Many different types of accessories can be worn at the same time. It's sort of like a **second set** of armor. It includes one belt, two rings, two bracelets, and one necklace.



The effect it gave was **small**. **Regeneration I**, when applied to a piece of armor or an accessory, doesn't heal **very much** over time, as

each level of Regeneration is approximately 10% of a person's natural healing rate. Still, it was free—and better than nothing. She must have arrived at the same conclusion, because she equipped the faerie charm—or rather, wore it around her neck.

At this discovery, and perhaps a little jealous of her find, I began sifting through the items again. I desperately needed armor. "Breaking III, Slowness VI . . . oh! Here's one with every single negative enchantment I've seen so far. Hmm. How about this . . . ? Yeah, this one isn't so bad."

I picked up an iron breastplate. Strangely, it had either been renamed or had been generated with the following name: Tarnished Breastplate. It was covered in spots of brown rust, and it only had Burden I, which, according to Breeze, reduced attack speed and movement speed by only 10%.

I stress "only"
because everything else was worse.

In the end, I wound up with a matching set of Burden I armor. Some leggings and a pair of boots, anyway—all covered in rust. Next, I examined all the shields. The best had Unblocking I, a 20% reduction in blocking effectiveness. That wasn't the worst thing in the world. It wasn't even the worst thing about the shield. It had an owl sigil on the front that wasn't exactly intimidating. How was I supposed to scare monsters with a giant owl on my shield?

"Whatever," I muttered to myself, strapping it on.

Finally, a gray cap with a white feather replaced the outlandish red-and-purple thing I'd been wearing. **Moldy Cap**. What a name! But **the look** it gave: the white feather provided a gentle accent to the grays of my armor, a smooth flow of color, **subtle**. And the bits of green mold really brought out the color of **my eyes**. **Just kidding**. What do you think this is, **Celebrity Villager** or something? I only cared about the +1 armor bonus.

Wait. What's this **Resilience I** enchantment?

Breeze noticed it as well. "Nice find. Each level of Resilience reduces damage taken from critical hits by 5%."

"You mean the damage I take?"

"Yes. It's not a negative enchantment."

"Thank you, teacher."

Thoroughly pleased at this news, I inspected myself.

I almost felt like a real warrior.

A low-level one, surely,
but a warrior nonetheless.

TARNISHED BREASTPLATE

+5 ARMOR

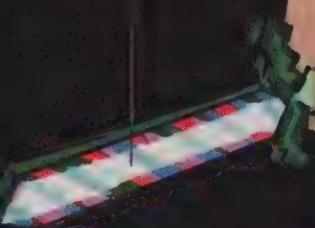
BURDEN I

DIAMOND SWORD

ATTACK
SPEED 1.6

AVERAGE
DAMAGE 7

UNBREAKING I



TARNISHED LEGGINGS

+4 ARMOR

BURDEN I

TARNISHED BOOTS

+2 ARMOR

BURDEN I



MOLTY CAP

+1 ARMOR

RESILIENCE I

VEIL OF THE VICTORIOUS

SUREFOOTED II

SAFEGUARD I

(+1 UNKNOWN
MODIFIER)

OWL'S REACH BUCKLER

+1 ARMOR

UNBLOCKING I

Look out,
monsters! Momma
didn't raise no noob.

Breeze giggled. "You know, if you swapped that shield for a red one, you could almost pass for a Legionnaire."

"Yeah? Too bad I'll never be able to join them."

"Why not?"

"I asked Kolb like five times already. And Kaeleb. And ObsidianDude. Everyone I asked said the Legion has strict requirements. You have to be a human."

"Maybe they'll change that in the future."

"Maybe."

Scanning the items once more, Breeze picked up a belt made of iron cubes. It was the only other accessory that had positive enchantments. The rest had curses or nothing at all, offering no benefit beyond style.

She offered the belt to me. "You want it?"

"No, it's fine. I think I'm set. Besides, you need some armor, too."

With a brief nod, she threw the belt around her waist. "All right," she said. "Guess I'm good to go. Oh, hmm." She picked up a green circlet and threw it on as well. "There. How do I look?"

EMERALD SWORD

ATTACK SPEED 1.5
AVERAGE DAMAGE 7
UNBREAKING I

DIAMOND SWORD

ATTACK SPEED 1.6
AVERAGE DAMAGE 7
UNBREAKING I

ARROWS OF WEAKNESS

DEBUFF 30 SEC
-4 ATTACK DAMAGE

FAERIE CHARM

REGENERATION I

ZEPHYR BOOTS

+2 ARMOR

LEAPING I
STEALTH I
SWIFTNESS II
FEATHER FALLING I

EW CIRCLET

+1 ARMOR
REGENERATION I

NIGHTSONG TUNIC

+3 ARMOR
STEALTH I
SWIFTNESS I
THORNS II

NIGHTSONG SKIRT

+2 ARMOR
STEALTH I
SWIFTNESS I

VEIL OF THE VICTORIOUS

SUREFOOTED II
SAFEGUARD I
1 (UNKNOWN MODIFIER)



OPAL CHAIN BELT
+1 ARMOR
FIRE RESISTANCE I

Okay, those boots are OP. I really need to trade with Kaeleb when I get back.

"Fabulous," I said. "A true dungeoneer."

Of course, looking at the stats of our **many items** might seem **overwhelming**. But to the **experienced**, it was like reading another language, which translated into:

I'd **sacrificed** the ability to move and attack quickly in return for **a strong defense**. With a shield capable of blocking most **frontal attacks**, I could withstand an incredible amount of punishment. In short, I was set up to be a great **frontline combatant**. **A wall**. Even so, a 10% reduction to attack speed **didn't mean** my diamond sword was worthless.

Meanwhile, Breeze had chosen **another strategy: high mobility**. If injured, she could easily **retreat**, switch to her **bow**, and attack from a distance while slowly **healing** from her Regeneration effects. And if we encountered a particularly dangerous threat, her **weakness arrows** would reduce its damage. Combined with my high armor, damage could be **cut by half or more**.

"Looks like most of the potions are just **poisons**," Breeze said. "Trolls have been **hard at work** here. They're not entirely **useless**, though. We could turn them into splash potions. All we need is some **gunpowder**."

"**Good idea**," I said, and helped her collect the bottles. "You know, if **Emerald** were here right now, I know exactly what she'd say. She'd suggest we haul this stuff to the nearest trader and try selling everything for **one emerald each**."

"I highly doubt anyone would pay even one emerald for half these items," Breeze said. "And who knows what might happen if someone

caught us? I'm pretty sure this donation pit isn't meant to be **raided** like this. Besides, that isn't what she'd say."

"Oh? What would she say, then?"

"She'd say it's **time to go shopping**, I mean. And she'd show us this." Breeze held up **a stack of emeralds**.

"What?! Where'd you get that?"

"I asked Emerald for **a loan**. Didn't say what for, of course."

"And she agreed, just like that? How much did she give you?"

"One hundred fifty. And Kolb gave me **another hundred**. I know he had to trade away most of his stuff to do so. Including **his other horse**."

Whaaaaat?! His other horse??!

Oh, this is bad! Really bad! Kolb is going to be so angry. I don't even want to go back home! Okay, there has to be way out of this. Think. Think!

Maybe I can just buy him a new horse? Yeah! And when he asks why "Meadow" looks different, I'll just say that I . . . um . . . enchanted her fur? How genius is that?!

"Come on," Breeze said. She was standing in the doorway by now. "I know I'm going to sound like Emerald when I say this, but . . . shopping is actually **kinda fun**."

FRIDAY—UPDATE IX

Moomoo Alpha's
Survival Shop



A strange energetic music came from a jukebox in the corner of the room. There were so many enchanted items behind the counter that **the wall glowed**.

Moomoo, the dwarven shopkeeper, flashed a wide grin. He gave us a line that seemed straight out of a shopkeeper manual:
"Go on, treat yourself!"

Then another:

"See anything ya like?"

I swear. . . . Was there anything on that wall someone wouldn't mind having? There was a diamond sword with **Unbreaking V**. A **gold** breastplate with so many enchantments it actually **surpassed** diamond in value. A **leash** for monsters. A bed that gave a **strength buff** for an entire day. Even an **enchanted name tag**.

Yet one of the **most ordinary** items caught my eye. A simple **potion of Healing I**. We needed **as many** as we could get. Sadly, with **582 emeralds** between us, and each healing potion costing **twenty-five** . . .

"Twenty-five emeralds," I muttered. "We could get them for **five** back home."

"Maybe we should go somewhere else," Breeze said.

She said this openly, so the shopkeeper would hear. I played along:

"Oh, that's right. That other guy was selling them for **fifteen**, wasn't he?"

"Ten, I think. Or was it nine?" She tilted her head **thoughtfully**, eyes to the side, one finger on her chin.

Yeah, that Moomoo should've been **sweating ghast tears**. But he didn't look **nervous**. Still, I figured that was just an act. Yeah, what do you think about that, bud—two real traders just rolled into your fancy little shop.

Here's the thing, though: **it wasn't an act.**

"I believe **you two are mistaken**," he said with a slight grin, "for every major shop in Owl's Reach follows the **Aetherian Item Index**. This Index is a list compiled in the capital annually and used as **a strict guideline** for determining the base value of an item. Accordingly, you'll find most common items going for the same price **everywhere**. Of course, you are more than welcome to take a look at our town's many other fine establishments. I'm sure you'll find my statement **accurate**."

Breeze and I exchanged glances. The look on my face was probably a cross between "What did he just say?" and "That means we can't haggle him down, right?"

Meanwhile, her face said: "**Don't worry. We've got this.**"

"Then we'll take **fifteen bottles**," she said, winking at me. Those were **one emerald each**.

With a **slight nod**, Moomoo retrieved the bottles from an ender chest and placed them onto the counter. "**Anything else, young lady?**"

"**Nether wart**," she said. "**An equal number.**"

Three emeralds each. I **realized** where she was going with this. Nether wart was required to craft a **base potion**. A base potion was like the foundation for almost every other potion. We were going to brew **our own healing potions** to save money. Even without haggling, Breeze had found a way around the **absurd** prices of that smug little dwarf.

He realized this as well.

"I guess you'll be needing some melons and gold nuggets," he said, "as those are the ingredients for a healing potion. **Unfortunately**, I am out of stock for both. I've been receiving **many** adventurers lately who've been looking to do their own brewing. **It's the strangest thing.**"

"Do you know where we might find some?" Breeze asked.

We were treated to **another smile** from Moomoo. "I'd say your best bet would be asking other adventurers. You'll most likely find some with **a surplus** of ingredients to trade. You might try an inn. There's a big one just down the street. **The Enchanted Dragon**. Can't miss it."

"Thanks a lot," Breeze said. "Oh, we need **gunpowder**, too."

She answered my question before I could ask: "We can use gunpowder to make **splash potions**, remember? Splash healing potions are useful because they heal in an **area of effect**, or AoE."

"You mean a single potion can heal **both of us** with its splash?" I asked.

She nodded. "As long as we're close together. We just throw them at our feet. On top of that, it's **faster** than drinking one. I believe the healing effect would **wound** any nearby undead as well. And all it will take is a pinch of **gunpowder**."

"**Amazing**," I said. "Although, I don't recall ever learning this in school. Did **your dad** teach you this stuff?"

"**Nope. Lola.**"

"I might have known."

Thanks, Lola. Even though you aren't here, it's as if . . .

I went over the numbers with Breeze. If we wanted to craft **fifteen splash healing potions**, we needed **fifteen bottles** at ♦ 1 each, **fifteen pieces of nether wart** at ♦ 3 each and **fifteen handfuls of gunpowder**, also at ♦ 3.

♦ 15 + ♦ 45 + ♦ 45—a total of ♦ 105.

The shopkeeper told us that **a gold nugget** goes for around ♦ 2, a **slice of melon** ♦ 1. We needed eight nuggets and one slice of melon per potion.

In short, we determined that it would cost roughly ♦ 360 for fifteen splash healing potions. **The alternative** would be spending ♦ 375 on fifteen **normal** healing potions, without the AoE effect.

‘Booyah!’ I said to Breeze.

The dwarf looked **a little annoyed**.

‘Yes, you can surely craft your own healing potions,’ he said, ‘and you’ll save some emeralds. But if you buy from me, you’ll save something **far more valuable: time and energy**. Both of you are clearly **tired**. Why would you complicate things? Buy my healing potions, and spend **the rest of your night relaxing**.’ He patted one of his ender chests. ‘I have three stacks right in here.’

‘No thanks,’ I said. ‘We’re good.’

‘We’ll have **at least two hundred left over**,’ Breeze said. ‘Anything else we need?’

"How about that bracelet?" I said. An iron bracelet with Regeneration I. "It's only fifty-five."

Breeze pointed at an item frame containing a stone bracelet. "How about that one? It gives one point of armor."

"Hmm . . . It's a bit cheaper, too. I wonder what's better? Regeneration I or another point of armor?"

"I'm not sure. . . ."

"Anyway, what about yourself? Check that ring with Swiftness I. It's one hundred fifty, but we have plenty to spare, right?"

Breeze looked deep in thought. "It's good. I like that one better, though." She pointed to a wooden ring with Strength I. It cost seventy-five. With that equipped, she'd do slightly more damage. "Oh, wait. Look at that ring. It has both Swiftness and Strength, but it costs one hundred fifty."

"That's fine," I said. "I can get the stone bracelet."

"No, I couldn't do that," she said. "My items are already better than yours."

"Then we'll spend an equal amount," I said. "One hundred each?"

She smiled. "Yeah."

I realized you can't call yourself an adventurer until you've had the full item-shop experience. Count your emeralds. What's the best way to spend them? The best bang for your buck? Well, this item is good, but is it worth buying over that? Or how about this and this?

Well, those are the price of this, which is **better** than this, and you could buy **two of those** for the price of this and this. . . .

'HmMm . . .'

The choice was **difficult**. The eternal search for **the perfect upgrades**. Maybe it's a sword that offers **a slight** increase in damage output, or maybe it's that one last point of armor you so desperately need. Or maybe it's a few potions to give you **an edge** in the next battle. No matter the price, you want **that little bit** extra. . . .

The shopkeeper kept **grinning** at us while Breeze and I debated several more possible buys, arguing and joking and calculating. He kept smiling as he offered to show us **more of his wares**, and the jukebox continually blaring that **strange music**—a style called **8-bit**, I'd later learn.

These kinds of experiences are what any adventurer **cherishes**. The innocent little moments of being a carefree noob.

Right then, I was fine with being one again.
As long as she was by my side.

"Pleasure doing
business with y—"



"We'll take that
wooden ring
as well."

"Pleasure doing b—"



"And that
iron bracelet."



"And don't forget our
brewing ingredients!"



"And try that inn I mentioned," he said. "It has a few rooms with brewing stands."

"Do the rooms have cauldrons, too?" Breeze asked. "Buckets? Furnaces? I'd trade anything for a nice warm bath."

"Of course," he said, taken aback by this question. "The Enchanted Dragon is one of **the best** inns in the entire world. Be sure to try the mutton. It's practically enchanted with **Tastiness VII**."

"Will do," she said.

With a single sweep of her arms, she picked up all three piles of ingredients, then lost her balance and almost fell into me.

"Um, can you help me out? My inventory's kinda full."



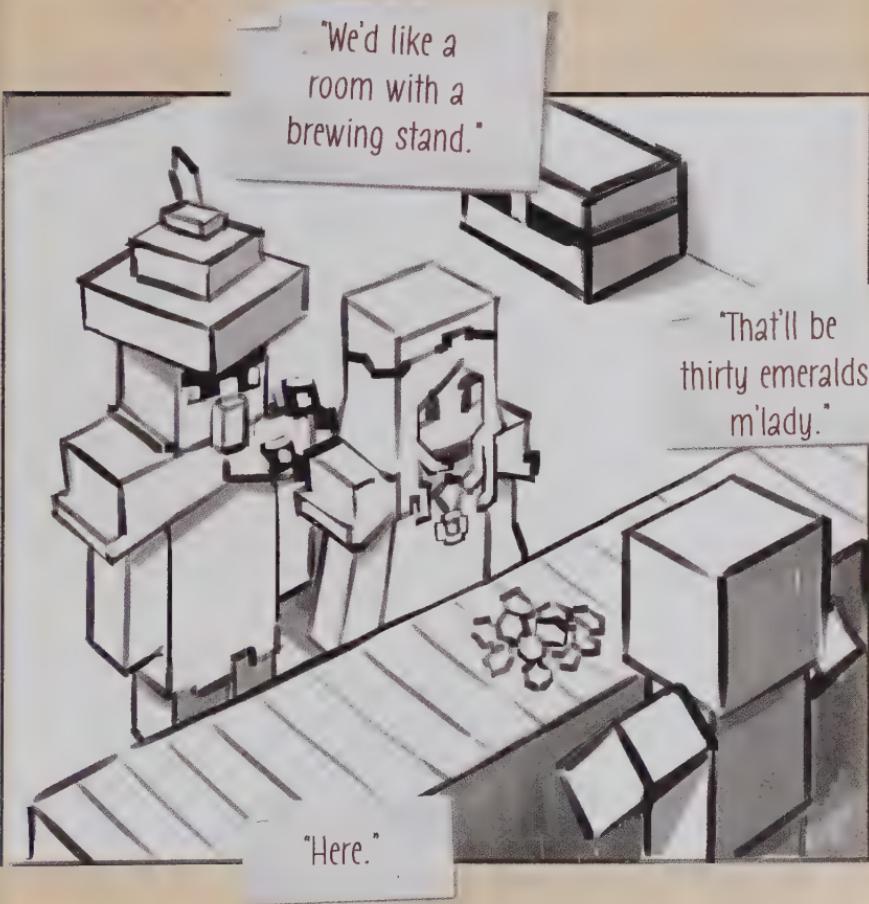
FRIDAY—UPDATE X



Just after **the sun went down**, we stood before a **massive** building made of oak and dark oak, spruce and cobblestone, and hardened white clay. Panes of **glowstone glass** held the silhouettes of many **joyful** patrons, while **cheery medieval melodies** drifted through the air.

The Enchanted Dragon.

That was the name of this den of noobs, and to its doors we sauntered up. Well, more like hobbled, really. It had been a long day. Check the number of updates today if you don't believe me.



Ah, yes. An inn. How could anyone call themselves an adventurer without ever visiting this most famous of traveler hangouts? I'll never forget walking into an inn for the very first time.

Woof: The smoke from the torches **hits you** first, followed by the smell of mutton **sizzling** on a furnace, then the sound of **over two hundred voices**, overpowering now that you're inside. People **everywhere**, heads **thrown back** in laughter, with brightly colored hair and **long ears**, or with helmets and wizard's caps, or with **huge beards** hanging over mouths filled with **square yellow teeth**.

In the very back, there were several **mysterious figures** quietly sipping their enchanted drinks, faces concealed by the shadows of their hoods, and **one shady-looking man**, probably a rogue or treasure hunter, carving something into a table with a dagger. And even farther back, a human, **an elf**, and another **human-like** girl—except with **fox ears** and a bushy red tail—danced next to a group of **singing pigmen**. One of them was playing **some kind of** stringed musical instrument, while to either side a group of knights in iron armor cheered them on, mugs raised, **toasting**. . . .



This was what I experienced in the first few seconds, and all of it hit me like a rapidly approaching wall. Breeze, too. She looked rather overwhelmed. We found a table and sat down to order some warm food. As if our senses weren't flooded enough, our waitress was dressed in the weirdest-looking outfit I'd ever seen.

"What'll it be?" she asked.

"Mutton," Breeze said, "and a baked potato. No. Two baked potatoes. And a loaf of bread."

The waitress squeezed her shoulder. "Wow. Long day, hun?" After noticing our swords, she continued. "Of course. I know treasure hunters when I see them. Any luck so far?"

"Not exactly," I said, and nodded at Breeze. "I'll have what she's having and . . ." I looked past her, at two humans in leather. Between bursts of laughter, they were sipping potions. "What are they having over there?"

"One of the finest potions in all the land," the waitress said with a smile. "The Noob Rager."

"Noob Rager?"

"Best potion you'll ever drink," she said. "Gives a nice burst of energy, too. A young man gave us the recipe. A treasure hunter, much like yourselves, but different. One of those mysterious travelers from a faraway land. . . . Anyway, he called it an energy drink, which is a kind of potion they have in . . . well, wherever he came from."

Ah, she must be talking about . . . of course. I gave the waitress a knowing smile. "I'll take one."

"As will I," Breeze said.



Considering she's like half a block tall, Breeze sure can put away a ton of food. She must have two food bars.

And that potion **really was** amazing. It tasted better than melon juice—and the energy! It was like a potion of Leaping, Swiftness, and Strength all rolled into one. I wanted to order another right after I downed the first.

"I wouldn't advise that," the waitress said. "Drink too many and you'll go **right** to sleep after the effects wear off! Buff overload, they call it."

"I like to live **dangerously**," I said.

"As you wish, m'lord." The waitress whispered to Breeze, "**Just so you know**, he's going to crash in **exactly** one hour."

After our meal, **the empty bottles** reminded me of how we needed to trade for **ingredients**. Following the shopkeeper's suggestion, we went from table to table to see if anyone had a few melons and gold nuggets to trade. **As luck would have it**, a blue-haired elf girl and one of those wolf people (*another odd couple*) had exactly what we needed.



Another person had a handful of blaze powder, which we needed to fuel our brewing stand. At this point, we had a total of fifteen emeralds to our name, so we decided to call it a night.

On the way upstairs, that waitress from earlier approached us. She glanced around before speaking to us in a lowered voice. I could barely hear her over the noise coming from the dining hall.

"If you really are treasure hunters," she said, "could you do me a favor?"

"Define 'favor,'" I said.

"Well, I've always wanted a necklace. A nice one, you know? I was hoping to craft one myself, but I need a frost opal. That's my favorite gemstone. If you two happen to find one, could you bring it to me? I don't have much in the way of emeralds, but I do have these." In her palm were several brilliant white coins. "They're a special type of coin," she said, "crafted ages ago. So long ago, in fact, that their original name has been lost. Some believe they were once the official currency of the ancient people. Now many simply refer to them as quest tokens, because this is what the king usually gives to someone completing one of his many quests."

"So they're like money?" Breeze asked.

"In a way," she said. "Follow me, I'll show you."

She took us downstairs, into the basement, to a spruce door surrounded by many signs.

QUEST TOKENS
ONLY!!!

QUEST STORE
NO NOOBS!!!

RARE ITEMS
EPIC LOOT

DRAW WEAPONS = BAN
MINE BLOCKS = BAN
TOUCH STUFF = BAN

ONLY ONE PERSON
AT A TIME!
NO EXCEPTIONS!!!

DO ANYTHING
BUT LOOK AT
THINGS AND BUY
THINGS = BAN

NO QUEST TOKENS
= NO ENTRY

As we approached, two guards in obsidian armor immediately rushed in front of the door, without saying anything.

"This is called the **Quest Store**," the waitress said. "Several such stores exist throughout Ardenvell. Here, you can find many unique items the king has donated as possible **rewards**."

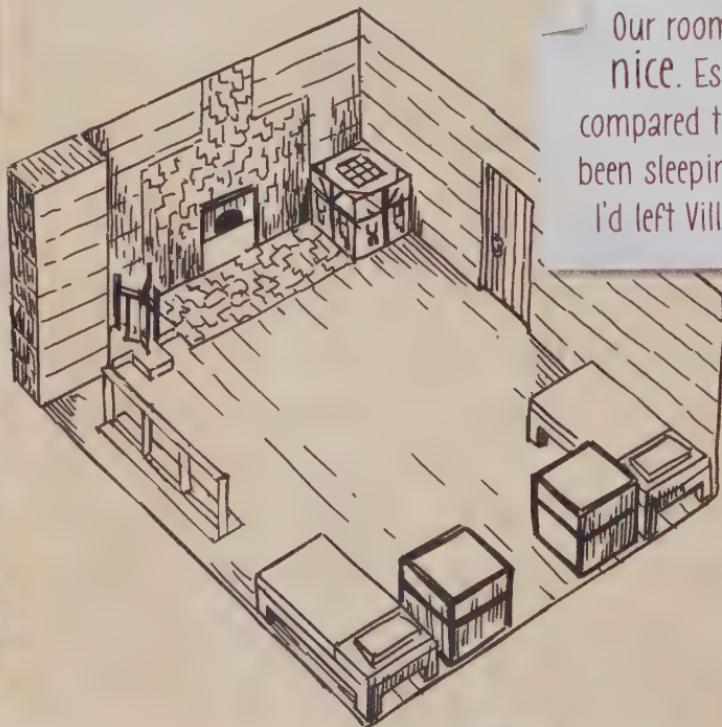
I was overwhelmed with a sense of **wonder**, almost as much as when I first set foot in Owl's Reach. I had to get in there—I just had to! But those guards wouldn't move. I asked them if I could maybe just take a peek inside, but they didn't reply.

The waitress grabbed my shoulder. 'I wouldn't advise that. You could get banned from entering the Quest Store. Permanently. If you want to shop here, you need to show them you have **quest tokens**.'

'So you've offered us a quest,' I said.

'I suppose you could call it that, but that makes it sound so serious, doesn't it? I'm no king, **only** a waitress. . . .'

'We'll see what we can do,' Breeze said. Finding a quest was definitely awesome, but we were both **totally exhausted**. After waving goodbye to the waitress, we went back upstairs and checked out our room.



Our room **WAS** nice. Especially compared to what I'd been sleeping in since I'd left Villagetown.

Before we started **brewing**, we took off to the bathhouse. There, we each found our own personal 3x3 cauldron. The block below the cauldrons contained **lava**, so the water was actually **warm**. Since we're farther north, it's **colder**—especially after sunset. Honestly, I don't know how the zombies around here **survive**. They must wear clothes enchanted with **Cold Protection**.



Yes, a bathroom **all to myself**. There was a public ‘bathing pool,’ but it was full of pigmen and dwarves. So we noped out of there and spent **twenty emeralds** for two **private rooms**. And no, the water wasn’t **that hot**. I’m not some brewing ingredient, **okay?**!

We returned to our room. I asked Breeze a question that had been on my mind ever since that battle with the pigmen.

"Breeze? How did you wield **TWO** swords?"

Silence. That dark expression again. She didn't want to let me in on her little secret.

"Your father must have taught you," I said. "He must have. I saw him do the same thing once. When we were **defending against the wall breach**."

She turned to the furnace, which was crackling away. "It's . . . an ability," she said.

"Ability? What are you talking about?"

"You know how an enderman can **teleport**?" she asked. "How a ghast can **breathe fire** or a spider can **climb walls**? Well, people are capable of **similar feats**. Some are **magical** in nature, like spells, while others, such as duel wield, are **physical**. Their complexity varies as well. Some are easy to learn. **Others, nearly impossible.**"

"Does that mean **you can teach me**?"

"I can **train** you," she said. "The same way my father trained me. It would only take **twenty or so** minutes."

"Twenty minutes?! Seriously?! Why didn't you tell me about this **before**!?"

She **shrugged**. "Just slipped my mind. My father only recently showed me how to do it. And he didn't want me to tell **anyone** about it. He said most of us **aren't ready** yet."

"Well, I'm ready! Super ready! I'll be the best student you've ever seen! Promise!"

"There's one thing you should know," she said. "You can only learn a limited number of abilities over time. If I show you how to duel wield, and you come across another ability in the near future, you may not be able to learn that one."

"Why not?"

"Because learning an ability takes experience."

"Got it. Hmm. But . . . how does that work?"

"If you happened to meet another person who knows a different ability, perhaps something better than duel wield, they could train you. According to my father, there are over a thousand different abilities. Some are better than others. Most are common and known by many in the Overworld. The best are rare, highly sought after, and can only be learned from some ancient hermit living on a mountaintop, a nymph a faerie in some secret cove, or a wizard in some remote tower. Like that. My father said there are even items that can teach abilities. Usually enchanted tomes."

"Interesting. . . . Okay, I've thought about it quite a bit, and now I've made up my mind. Teacher, please teach me how to duel wield. Err, train, I mean."

"Are you sure?"

"A hundred percent."

And so, Breeze began training me in the art of duel wielding. As a precaution, we wielded sticks in each hand. Before long, and after much frustration, I began to effectively wield two sticks at the same time.

I brandished my two "weapons" while shouting with excitement.

"Yeahhh!!"

She gave me a little clap. "Oh. You should know that any ability will improve the more you use it. You'll be much better by the time we've cleared that dungeon."

"Maybe I should skip the two swords and just stick with my shield, right?"

"Well, there will be times when you need to do more damage. With duel wield, you'll always have that option."

"I guess you're right. When I need more defense, I can use my shield, and when I don't, I'll swap the shield out for another sword. Sheer versatility. Kinda like Batman."

"Who's Batman?"

"This guy Kaeleb was telling me about. He can do all sorts of cool things to handle any situation, like . . . throw smoke bombs to escape, or use this thing called a grappling hook . . . or deflect arrows with his cloak . . . or fly with his cloak, and . . . and . . . why am I still talking when you don't seem interested in this at all?"

"Um . . ." Breeze gave me a blank look. "I know we've been avoiding it, but we really do need to work on those healing potions."

"Of course," I said. "**Let's do this thing.** I still feel kinda energetic after chugging those potions, so I'm probably going to craft **one million** potions. **At least** one million."

"You mean brew?"

"Yeah. Also, how do we craft those **golden melon things** again?"

Needless to say, I **didn't** brew one million potions. I didn't even brew one. Okay, I **almost** brewed one. I put a base potion on the stand and threw in one of those golden melon things that Breeze had crafted.

But it had been such a long day,
you know?

— Yes, I fell asleep.
No, I'm not proud of it. And yes,
Breeze made a total of fifteen
healing potions. In her nightgown.



So the waitress was right about those energy drinks! Exactly one hour after I drank that second potion, the potion's buffs wore off, and thunk, I dropped like an anvil . . . Anyway, sorry, Breeze!

SATURDAY

It was still dark when we set out. A beautiful sunrise crept behind us as we rode southwest. We had to stop to admire it.

Only then did I notice just how many flowers there were. A countless number, as far as you could see.

"Pink roses," Breeze said, swinging off her horse. "They're quite uncommon this far north. This must be a flower field. It's one of the rarest biome types, I think. It has to mean something. A good omen?" She turned to me. "Do you believe in that kind of thing?"

"Considering where we're going," I said, "I'll believe in anything, so long as it means a better chance of not getting clobbered by ten zombies at once."



We walked through the field **together**, then stopped as the sun came into view. **We said nothing.** I think we stayed like that for a very long time. I didn't know what was on her mind and couldn't have guessed, but she was clearly **thinking about something**.

"Kolb told me **so many things** before I left," she said at last.

"Like what?"

"He said our world used to be something called a '**server**.' A **Minecraft** server named Aetheria. And the players of that game dreamt up **everything** we see now, their countless ideas added, **over time**, through a series of updates, modifications, with every structure built, by their hands, through **some interface**. Then, one day, that world became this world. A world that's **more** than just a video game. . . ."

"You believe that?"

"I prefer not to, **of course**. It's much more **comforting** to believe they were **summoned** to **our** world."

"Breeze, you and I both know **we're more** than game characters. And even if we once were, we aren't any longer. **We exist.** That's all that matters, **right?**"

She said nothing, but I knew from her expression that my words had had **some effect**. I wanted to **believe myself**, too. I felt lighter, uplifted, and once more I gazed at the beautiful expanse before us: **the way the light scattered** across what had to be **millions** of petals . . . a game couldn't have created this. Although I didn't understand

the **technology** of Earth, I knew no machine was capable of producing a world like this. Even if it was **a thousand times more complicated** than our redstone.

Breeze **held out** a bottle filled with water, which **sparkled** in the sunlight. The bottle's unique design indicated that it was **a splash potion**. A splash **water bottle**.

"**Here,**" she said. "I had some leftover gunpowder, so I made several of these."

"**What are they for?**"

"When thrown, they'll create a **burst of water**. This can put out **fires** or harm creatures with a **vulnerability** to water or affinity to fire. Another thing I learned from Lola."

"I wasn't even going to ask," I said. "**I just assumed.**"

And I thought: *Thanks again, you creative little redstone engineer.*

SATURDAY—UPDATE I

We stood at the edge of a **wide cliff** overlooking the plains below. You could see **forever**: perhaps a thousand blocks away, the emerald greens of the plains met the clay browns of **savanna**. That's called **a boundary**, where two biomes merge in a perfectly straight line. Far beyond that, the brown grass turned green again, although a different shade than the plains. Almost **cyan**. That biome was **mountainous**, with the grass turning to foothills rising gradually in steps, leading to **vast gray peaks** capped with snow. All this under a cloudless, **sapphire sky**—a blue so deep I felt lost within it whenever I looked straight up.

But this scene had a flaw. Someone had left a dark spot on this painting of sheer perfection. . . . There it was, far away, nestled in the middle of a million grass blocks. **The Tomb of the Forgotten King.**

If that place had once been built by the hands of some human, through some advanced **computer interface**, on some world known as Earth, **you couldn't tell**. Even from here it seemed **ominous**, a dreary slab at odds with the **vibrant** greens surrounding it, all black obsidian and storm-gray bedrock, red torches burning low.

"**We're finally here,**" Breeze said.

I nodded **absently** and stared ahead, feeling a sudden chill run down my back. We were running into **the unknown**. We had no idea what kind of **traps** that tomb contained, how many monsters there

were inside, or **how far down** it went. Truth be told, I didn't even know what a **puzzle** was. I was **terrified** at the thought of fighting another boss.

But Breeze didn't share my sudden lack of confidence. She turned toward me **with a smile. Nodded.**

'Let's go!'



SATURDAY—UPDATE II

I learned some things **about dungeons** today. Before, I'd always thought they were **single rooms** with a handful of monsters and **one or two treasure chests**. After all, that's what our teachers said. And every book I'd ever read on the subject had said the same exact thing. So **imagine my surprise** upon actually standing before one.

Go ahead—**imagine it.**



A simple underground room, **they said**. No larger than a 7x7 chamber, **they said**.

Yeah, well, they were wrong. Just a tad. Like the ocean has a tad of water. . . . (Seriously—I know I'm supposed to be a brave warrior and all, but can I *hurrg* now?)

I'll be honest:
I was terrified.

The little skull next to the doors was a nice touch. It had glowing red eyes. I turned to Breeze.

"Judging by the looks of this place, this must be **the home of a giant wither skeleton**. . . . Neat." A pause. "How about we just forget about it? We'll just tell the blacksmith we couldn't find his glowmoss. . . ."

"And maybe he'll send us on **another quest**," Breeze said. "A **pumpkin pie-eating contest**, perhaps?"

I smiled. "What's **this?** Breeze joking around?"

She smiled, too, although it quickly faded. All business.

"You said this place is protected somehow?" she asked.

"That's what that one guy told me. Think of it as a biome-wide **enchantment** that prevents the mining of blocks and the placement of activators. Actually, the placement of everything."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to see this **for myself**." Within moments, Breeze crafted a **wooden button**. When she tried placing it against the

bedrock to the left of the door, it fell to the ground, as if it had been dropped. It failed to cling to the wall the way buttons always do. This was, of course—

“**Impossible,**” Breeze said. With a look of utter disbelief, she tried placing the button against the dirt with the same result. “What in the Overworld . . . ?”

I was wielding my stone pickax at this point and swung at those doors with everything I had. One swing, two. On the tenth, my pick flashed red . . . and shattered, crumbling into little gray cubes before my very eyes. (There was also a sad little sizzling sound: ‘p’tweeeeeuu . . .’)

What’s interesting here is that my pickax had almost full durability. It had gone from approximately 95% to zero in an instant. I glanced at the single brown cube in my hand (which had once been part of the handle). “The Nether?!”

When Breeze tried digging with her iron shovel, she accomplished the very same thing. That is to say, she accomplished nothing. After her shovel flashed red and crumbled, she stared down at the iron cubes at her feet, thoroughly unimpressed. “Hurmmpf!” It was the first time I’d ever heard her make that sound, a sound villagers often make when annoyed. Indeed, what we were currently experiencing . . . it was simply unbelievable. No matter what, a button always stuck to whatever surface you placed it against, and a shovel always mined

dirt in a very short time, but here . . . well, let's just say we didn't go chopping at some grass with our swords to see what might happen. **We knew what would happen.**

"So how far does this extend?" Breeze asked. "The enchantment, I mean. Is it really biome-wide?"

"I think so," I said. "Any biome that contains a dungeon can't be modified at all. Otherwise, **trolls** and **griefers** could put up **obsidian walls**, **TNT traps**, **monster spawners**, **lava moats** . . . apparently the Builders didn't want anyone **messing** with their creations."

"Got it."

A huge problem, then—the **enderman** in the room, or more appropriately, the iron golem in the room—immediately confronted us. If we really **couldn't place or mine anything** within this biome, that meant:

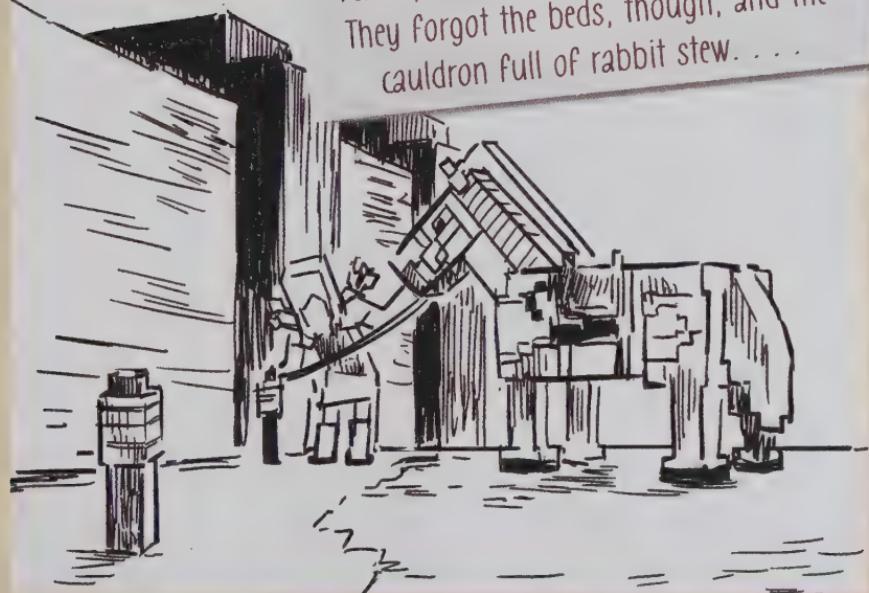
- 1.) Without beds, **sleeping would be difficult**.
- 2.) Old tricks involving the terrain—such as emergency shelters, dirt pillars—were **not an option**.
- 3.) The **most pressing** issue was something I hadn't yet thought of (*but Breeze had, obviously*): She tried placing some **fence**. As expected, the single fence post, instead of securing itself to the ground, **fell over**.

"So what are we going to do about Shybiss?" she asked.

Ah, yes. Without any fence, she couldn't **tie up** her horse. If we left Shybiss out here, she could pull a **Meadow** on us and **take off**. I was

so close to **hurrging**. So close. Eto had mentioned this in the armor shop, but I never really thought about what kind of problems it would cause. I almost suggested we **bring Shybiss into the dungeon** with us, but I knew how Breeze would have responded to that. Luckily, she's **way smarter** than I am. She decided to walk around the dungeon and check things out. Guess what was back there? Is your answer **'some fence posts'?** Well, **you're correct!** Congrats, you've won **one million emeralds** and a stuffed Urg the Barbarian doll!

Whoever those Builders were,
they were very considerate of us
adventurers. They left behind some
fence posts for people to tie horses to.
They forgot the beds, though, and the
cauldron full of rabbit stew. . . .



"Well, that's one problem solved," she said. "But whose horses are **those**?"

"Other adventurers, I guess? Who knows, maybe we'll run into them and we can group up." I showed Breeze the obsidian key. "Ready?"

Regarding Breeze's response, I could write something **mundane** here, like:

She nodded. "I'm ready," she said.

But even though I'm barely an adult, I'm trying to be a **better** writer. She **nodded**?! How **boring** is that? Let's cross that one out!

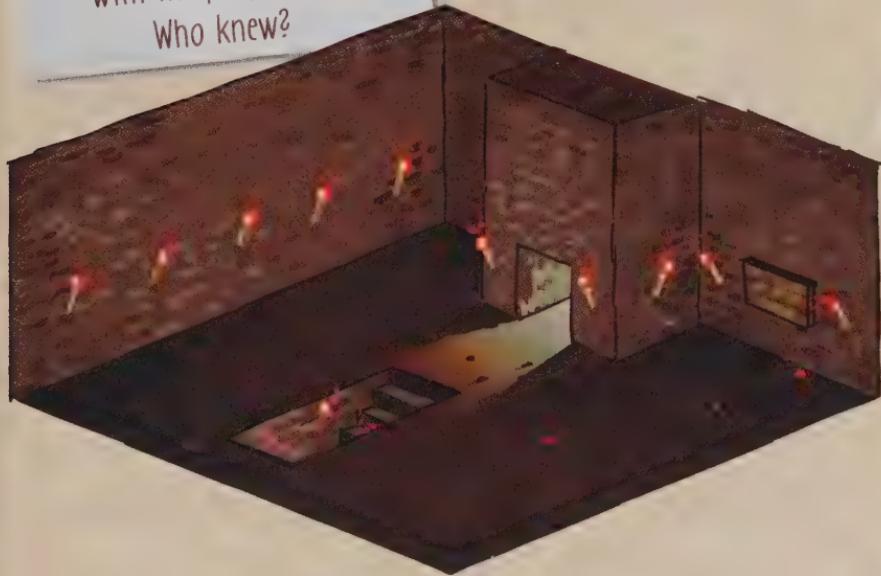
~~*She nodded. "I'm ready," she said.*~~

Boom! Away with you, **boring** description of Breeze! And now for something **a little more interesting**, such as . . .

I didn't have to ask if she was ready. Her expression **said** that she was ready to go in there and **drop zombies** until her résumé no longer read "**warrior**" but "**zombie farmer**," until so many **dropped** items littered the ground that the items actually **spilled out** like water,

until that place was no longer known as the Tomb of the Forgotten King but Item Mountain. Not only that, but until so many experience orbs were swirling through the sky above that explorers five biomes away actually got lost because they mistook those orbs for the sun. (Assuming they don't have a compass . . .)

To open a locked door,
one only needs to touch it
with the proper key.
Who knew?



The doors led to a single room lined with redstone torches. An obsidian staircase led downward, and there was a large sign near the doors.

THE TOMB OF THE FORGOTTEN KING

HEAD BUILDER: IONE

APPROVED BY: ENTITY303



We turned back to the staircase and began our descent into the depths of the dungeon.

What's that? You're scared?

So imagine how I felt!

SATURDAY—UPDATE III

The hall below was **three blocks wide** and mostly the same as the surface room: **obsidian under bedrock**. The walls had these . . . **alcoves**, I guess. They held what looked like flowerpots, but they weren't flowerpots at all. They contained a **gray gunpowder-like material**.

"Are those **ashes**?" Breeze asked.

"Looks like it. As if this place isn't **creepy enough**."

We had no idea what to expect, so I **went in front**, my shield raised, sword readied. Breeze trailed behind several blocks with her enchanted bow **ready to fire**.

That was when I heard a scraping sound coming from the hallway to the right. Moments later, a **zombie** shambled around the corner. **There's no point** in describing this battle in any detail. You know how it played out. **Two arrows** and a **diamond sword** later, the zombie went down. Smoke. Experience orbs. A stone sword, five or so swings from breaking. Leather armor in worse condition. But **here's the thing**. It also dropped **six emeralds**.

I glanced at Breeze. She glanced at me. Silence. The squeak of a bat.

"So . . ." she said, "every time we kill something in here, it drops emeralds?"

I looked down at the pile of items.

"I'm not sure. Eto said the monsters didn't drop too many. But maybe six **isn't too many** to him."

We heard more scraping around the corner. **Another zombie**, with a sword, shield, and full suit of armor, **all crafted of gold**. We took that one down like the last, **without too much effort**. And like the last, this one dropped every item it carried, the golden breastplate being **enchanted with Protection II . . .** along with **five emeralds**. We exchanged glances again, looked at the pile. More sounds came from around the corner. Three zombies, maybe, maybe four, five, six possibly, **no, at least seven**. Well, no, that's way too much noise. Definitely **eight or nine**. We glanced at each other again. It was our first time in a dungeon. What we knew about such places came from outdated books written **hundreds of years ago**, books written by villager librarians who had never even set foot in the Overworld. Even so, after seeing the **gemstones scattered across the floor . . .**

we knew exactly what to do.

Trash!

The!!

Dungeon!!!



SATURDAY—UPDATE IV

After that **small battle**, the only direction left to go was forward. The problem was, there was another **iron door** standing in our way. The key didn't work on this one. We had to find a way to open it.

We couldn't find anything, though. We **searched everywhere**, but we couldn't see any buttons, levers, or pressure plates. Before long, I was pressing on **random blocks**, thinking there could be a secret button somewhere. Breeze tried pulling on all the torches, hoping one of them was **a lever in disguise**, to no avail.

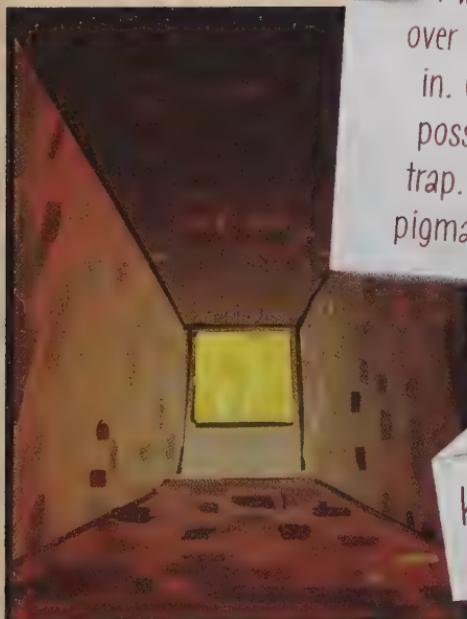
Nothing budged, and I was about to **hurrg**. I didn't, though. I managed to **stay calm**. My mind was like a diamond, **clear and sharp, unbreakable** and . . . anyway, I noticed something **different** about the alcove to the right of the door.

**It had a small 1x1 shaft
leading down to the floor below.**

Two possibilities:
either this is how dungeon
monsters deal with garbage, or
I had found a secret passage.



I whipped out a torch, leaned
over the edge, and stuck my head
in. Only then did I consider the
possibility that this could be a
trap. But it wasn't. Nor was it a
pigman's trash bin. Thank Notch.



"You've gotta be
kidding me. Breeze,
come look at this!"

At the bottom of the shaft was a golden pressure plate: a line of redstone was connected to this activator, and it most likely linked to the door. All we had to do was drop an item on it and the door would open.

So Breeze tossed in a beat-up leather helmet. Nothing happened.

"That's weird," she said. "I thought you could activate pressure plates with items."

"I thought so, too. Huh . . ."

I kept staring at the golden tile, thinking back to what little we'd learned in school regarding them. "Wait, aren't golden pressure plates special somehow?"

Breeze shrugged. "I don't know anything about redstone, remember? If only Lola were here. . . ."

At the mention of Lola, I suddenly recalled a time when she had been talking about pressure plates with Max.

"I remember her saying something about iron pressure plates," I said. "Something about how they're heavier? Or heavy?"

"Okay, iron is heavy, but so is gold."

"Right, I don't know what she meant by that. Wait." I was starting to remember something. . . . Wait . . . Wait . . .

•Weight!

The weight of the items on top of it directly affects the signal strength of these types of plates! A single item would only send out redstone power for maybe a block. I explained this to Breeze, then tossed

in a pair of leather leggings. Still nothing. An iron breastplate with Protection I and Breaking III. A wooden sword, a stone sword, a pair of leather boots. An egg. A tulip. A stack of seeds (*we were short on ideas*).

The door stayed closed.

"Well, the redstone line could extend for quite a ways under the floor," I said. "Maybe we just need to throw more stuff in?"

So we did, throwing pretty much everything we'd looted from those zombies earlier. And an egg. And a tulip. And a stack of seeds (*yes, I know . . .*).

That was when I heard a click to my left. The door had finally opened.

"So I guess this is what Eto meant by puzzles."

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

SATURDAY—UPDATE V

We took down another group of zombies, along with some skeletons. We fought perfectly. We timed our swings so nothing could get close. And when the last skeleton fired at Breeze, I dashed in front of her with my shield raised. . . . Beyond emeralds and the usual trash-tier items, one dropped an obsidian sword. I'd never seen an obsidian sword and was shocked to learn that its damage is actually one less than diamond. And with half the durability. Still, it's way better than anything else we've found so far.

Whenever the situation calls for it, I'll swap my shield out and begin dual wielding. According to Breeze, the Defender enchantment increases the wielder's armor by its power level. Kind of like a mini-shield. So I'll still have better-than-normal defense wielding it in my off hand. As for the pink handguard, or whatever it's called, I'm not sure what that's about. Breeze thinks it could be a type of material known as "coral," but that's just a guess. (*Can more advanced swords be made with three or more different materials?*)

SATURDAY—UPDATE VI

We encountered **another puzzle**. Another pressure plate. It was situated at the end of a horizontal shaft, or tunnel, so there was **no way** we could drop any items onto it.

Do you know how we managed to activate it? **Think about it for a second.** I'll count to five, and by the time I'm done counting, you need to come up with the answer.

Ready? One. Two. Three. Four. Five. **And?**

Is your answer "Runt drank a potion of Shrinking II to become one block tall so he could walk down the tunnel?"

Wrong! First of all, what kind of noob do you take me for?! There is no such thing as a Shrinking potion! (*Item scholars, you're free to correct me if I'm wrong.*)

In truth, the answer was **far simpler**.

Are you ready? Let's test your **knowledge**. You can still think some more, if you'd like. If you didn't come up with an answer and are still thinking, stop reading immediately. Unless you give up, I mean. **And no cheating, eh!** Don't go reading further and then pretend you came up with the answer!

Okay. Anyway. The answer is: **arrows**.

On a golden pressure plate, a single arrow has enough weight to send a redstone signal out one block. Since a repeater was placed

next to the plate, boom, the door was opened. Of course, Breeze is the one who handled this. She said she should be the one, so we wouldn't waste resources, whatever that means. . . .

Wait. Was she suggesting that I'm a bad shot?! She was, wasn't she?! That's it! Now I have a bow, too, you know! One of those skeletons dropped one. Okay, so it might be two or three shots away from breaking, but that's enough for me to hit that pressure plate myself and show her who's boss. She'll see. Hold on, I'll update in a second. I'll take my time with this, hold my breath, aim carefully and . . .

SATURDAY—UPDATE VII



Okay, clearly that bow had problems. I say 'had' because the bowstring snapped on the eighth shot. My aim is normally dead-on.

SATURDAY—UPDATE VIII

The next room was . . . um . . . **interesting**. It was a long hall with a spruce door on the end. Oh. And the **obsidian** floor was covered with more of those golden pressure plates.

Hmm . . .
I'm no dungeon expert,
but something isn't
right here. . . .



It's the **color scheme!** Those gold tiles simply do not go with this dungeon's **gloomy aesthetic!** I might even go so far as to say it **clashes**, if I dared to use such a strong word! Just kidding. **I know it's a trap**, okay?

"I know what this is," I said to Breeze. "It's one of those arrow rooms. You **step in the wrong spot**, and **arrows fly everywhere**." I announced this **proudly**. "Yeah, that's what this is. Urg the Barbarian had to get around one of these things in the last book. It looked similar to this."

"Well, **if this is an arrow trap**," she said, "shouldn't there be **some of those face things** in the wall?"

"Face things? You mean **dispensers**?"

"Yeah, I think so?"

I'm pretty sure that's what she was talking about. A dispenser is a block that can hold other items, and it **releases them** upon activation. Anyway, she was right. If this room was some kind of arrow trap, it would have had dispensers **in the walls**. But the walls here were **just bedrock**. Could it be?! Was it possible that the Builders used some **ancient, mystical** technique to create dispensers that looked like bedrock?! No. Not really. It was just **normal bedrock**.

Standing in the doorway, Breeze moved up to the **very edge**.

"I think **it's the ceiling**," she said. "It's **much lower** than the other rooms and it's made of **cobblestone**. Until now, we've never seen any cobblestone. . . ."

I retrieved a handful of seeds from my inventory. ‘Let’s find out, shall we?’

I tossed the seeds onto the pressure plate directly in front of the doorway, like I was feeding chickens or something. Nothing happened. The pressure plate sank down, sure, and the seeds clearly activated it, yes, **but that’s it.**

‘Try farther out,’ she said.

So I gathered the seeds and tossed them **two blocks** from the door. Again, this pressure plate **sank in . . .** and **the entire ceiling** flew down with a **deafening** crash—the sound of **over fifty sticky pistons** firing all at once.

Breeze said something, but I couldn’t hear her over the noise. She dashed in just as the ceiling went up, **grabbed the seeds** and dashed back. I don’t know how she moved so fast. It reminded me of the time we first met. (*Was it another ability?*)

The ceiling crashed down **a fraction of a second** after she returned, then went up again and stopped.

We didn’t say anything for a moment, just **stared** ahead in silence, our ears ringing. At least, **mine were**. I’d read about trapped rooms, of course, but never in my **wildest** dreams had I imagined **one like this**. I pictured it now: the ceiling of sticky pistons covered in a grid of redstone, the complex trails leading to the floor. Or subfloor. What is that called? You know. A floor under a floor.



It must have
looked something
like this. . .

The ceiling?

The floor?

"So this is what the Builders are capable of. . . . Just **what kind of lunatics** are we dealing with here . . . ?"

I didn't **dare** imagine how much damage **a ceiling** would inflict.

In short, we had to figure out **the correct path**. One wrong step, and we'd become **villager pizza**.

Since **the entire ceiling** came down, throwing items in front of us like a reverse trail of bread crumbs wasn't an option.

The answer was right **in Breeze's hands**. A fishing pole. The lure was **heavy enough** to trigger the plates. We could use it to **safely test** which areas were safe and which areas . . . um . . . weren't safe. This was a **time-consuming** process (and deafening). If any nearby monsters weren't **already aware** of our presence, well, they surely were now.

Thirty minutes later, we mapped the safe route. I'm going to include a **drawing of the safe path** here, in case anyone ever visits this dungeon in the future.

By the way, even though we figured out which pressure plates were safe to step on, that didn't make walking through that room **any less terrifying**. After today, setting foot into any building with a low ceiling is going to give me a **serious** panic attack.

STICKY TRAP MAZE



The humans said there's this thing called a wiki that's like a huge book of information on various subjects. If we ever make a wiki about dungeons, this drawing needs to be added.

SATURDAY—UPDATE IX

Another trap. This one was pretty obvious, yet there was no way to tell what kind of trap it could have been. It was a long corridor, three blocks wide. The floor, made from soul sand, was completely covered in pressure plates. Cobwebs filled the remaining space.

We were going to have a hard time advancing with all that.

Not cool!

Yes, soul sand can slow you down, even underneath a pressure plate. Ask me how I know. Go on.

Cobwebs obscured whatever sat beyond. I turned to Breeze, who was still holding her fishing pole.

"Probably dispensers on the other end," I said.

"Arrows, you think? Can arrows fly through cobwebs?"

"I guess we'll find out. Pole it!"

Breeze sent out her lure, which hit a stone plate. It didn't activate.

"Right." I sighed. "These plates aren't weighted."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not really sure, but . . . I think that kind of pressure plate only works when a living creature steps on it. Guess we'll have to test this the hard way, huh?"

I held my shield in front of me. Breeze followed directly behind me. Sure enough, after I stepped onto the first row of pressure plates, **arrows went flying everywhere**, accompanied by blue-gray swirls. **'They're enchanted? Please tell me those aren't Wither arrows.'**

"Slowness," Breeze said.

'Wonderful.'

While we slowly advanced, and I do mean slowly, **another volley** was unleashed. An arrow struck my shield with a **clang** and bounced off. I was quite happy to have a shield equipped—next to the soul sand and spider webs, the enchanted arrows would have slowed us to a complete stop. We would **never** have gotten out of there.

Approximately nine million arrows later, we reached the end. **All I could taste** at that point were cobwebs. That's not even the worst part. We couldn't loot the dispensers: they were, like everything else, protected. And we couldn't **collect** the arrows themselves. They **crumbled into nothingness** seconds after striking something. (*And yes, I tried grabbing one super fast, but the arrow crumbled as soon as I touched it.*) **No free arrows** for us. Those Builders, man . . . they really thought of everything, didn't they?

As soon as we were in the clear, Breeze headed for the door, then **stopped**.

'That's odd,' she said.

'What?'

'The door's open.'

'Hurmm. Maybe it's the same people who left those horses?

C'mon, they might be close.'

SATURDAY—UPDATE X

We stood before a vast chamber with, thankfully, an extremely high ceiling. The style of construction was noticeably different here. Although still gloomy, all obsidian and bedrock, it was beautiful in a way. I'm no expert, but I had the impression that it was the work of a different Builder.



They'd somehow engraved portraits into the obsidian. I didn't recognize any of them.



Well, no-one
recognized one.

Entity.

Can you believe that this guy was **the nicest wizard who ever lived? Me neither.** With a look like this, you'd never expect him to offer you some cookies and tea. I'd be waiting to be **polymorphed** into a baby rabbit and/or teleported to the **Void**.

"What's the point of this area?" I said. "**Where's the challenge** in walking around giant, empty halls?"

"Looks like someone has already taken care of it." She pointed down a hall. **Countless items** were scattered across the floor. Sword. Axes. Pieces of armor. More common were the **remains of monsters**—bones, spider eyes. . . .

So someone else had **cleared** this area. They must have been in a hurry, because they **didn't bother taking anything**. One of our nicer finds was **a gold ring**. It had a fancy name: **Ancient Band**. That ring was totally mine, because dude, just **look** at that armor bonus.



There was also **a bracelet made of redstone**. **Critical Strike** means it increases damage dealt through critical hits by **one per power level**—that is to say, **one heart**. Needless to say, **Breeze** took that one.



REDSTONE
BRACELET
ACCESSORY
CRITICAL
STRIKE I

The rest of the stuff was inferior to what we had on. Gold axes, iron swords. Some with low-level enchantments. We took everything anyway. We could trade this stuff for a few hundred emeralds back in Owl's Reach. A question popped into my head.

"Yknow, if someone already cleared this area," I said, "how come the zombies from earlier were untouched?"

"I think they'd only recently spawned," Breeze said. "That's one of the things Kolb mentioned, before I came looking for you. Monsters spawn continually in dungeons."

"Through monster spawners?"

"Yes. Well, something like that. Except they're invisible."

"Then the other people must be close, if the monsters here haven't respawned yet."

"Probably."

She said this **absently**, as she was now staring at a nearby wall where there was a section of iron blocks instead of bedrock. Above this was a massive stone sign. I'd **never seen** a sign like that before.



I could draw another picture of this sign, closer up so the words could easily be read, but I'm currently pressed for time. I'll just write the words down here:

The Vault of Emerillion

An ancient treasure sealed forever.

Until to our world the light returns.

Emerillion Grayson CharBot Aeonia

Martin Declan335 Robert303 XiangFang

Rainbow_Creeper Creepyguy101

'Ancient treasure,' I said. 'What's that about? And who are all those people?'

'Builders,' Breeze said, approaching the vault. 'This dungeon isn't really a tomb but one of the many mazes created, thousands of years ago, to store things that pose a threat to our world.' She paused. 'I think.'

She had that dark expression again, troubled. She definitely knew something, and that wall had made her think about it again.

She had to know something, because she had never really talked about this kind of stuff before. Breeze, a history buff?! That'd be a shocker. The two go together like me with bows. Like Emerald with mud. Like Stump with anything that isn't a cookie or a cake.

"And how do you know all that?" I asked coolly.
"My father made me read so many books." Breeze forced a smile.

"Let's continue, shall we?"

Oh, nice excuse there, I thought. She's definitely hiding something.

Now is the time to confront her.

Another thought hit me. (*Yep. I totally forgot about confronting her.*)

"Wait. Here's a question for you, Ms. I-Not-Only-Know-
How-to-Destroy-Monsters-in-the-Most-Efficient-Way-
Possible-but-Am-Also-Secretly-a-Farmer-and-a-Librarian.
If this dungeon contains **dangerous** stuff, things sealed away from
the rest of the world in order to protect it . . . well, what things are
we talking about, exactly? Like, **giant boss monsters**, or maybe
redstone war machines, or cursed **legendary-tier** weapons—or
possibly a giant boss monster wielding a legendary weapon, or
possibly duel wielding two such weapons or riding an aforementioned
war machine . . . ?"

My **silly** question failed to elicit any emotional response, only
an answer:

"I believe this dungeon holds one of **the Eyeless One's**
creations," she said, "which fought in the final battle of **the**
Second Great War. It can never be completely destroyed, only
subdued for a time. And yes, I suppose that's what the humans
might call **a boss monster**."

"And what about this vault? How do we open it? And what does it contain?"

"I . . . well, um, I'm not really sure. I have a guess as to what might be in there, but it would take a long time to explain, and . . . anyway, I don't know how it can be opened."

"Humm . . ."

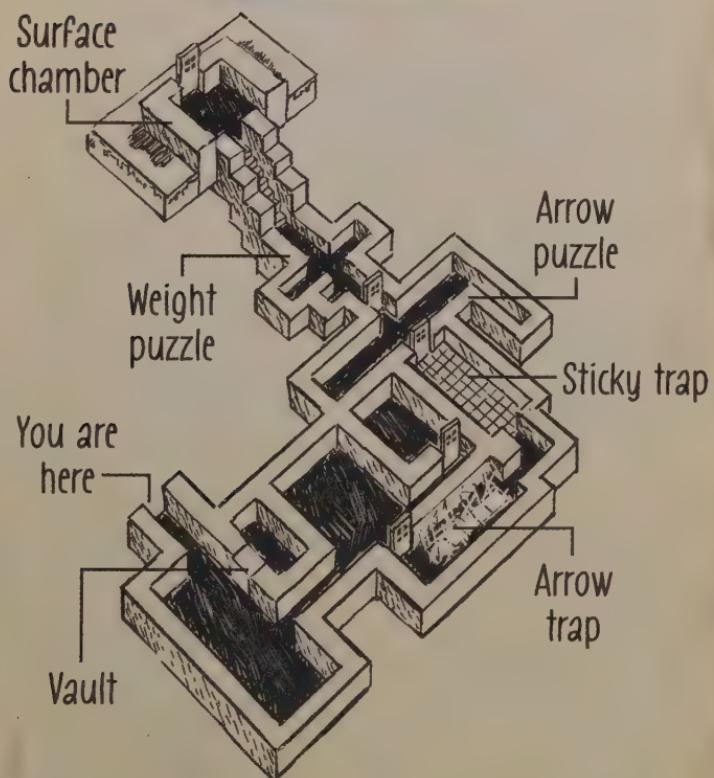
Why is she being like this? She really is hiding something from me! Why?! What does she know? Can I trust her? Man . . . what am I thinking? Of course I can trust her. Anyway, it's not a good time. The village is counting on us. Every second matters. Twenty-five hundred emeralds. Let's go!

I studied the vault again, looking around for some kind of activator. Sadly, the only thing being activated around here was my curiosity.

Interestingly, there was a horizontal shaft in the wall, six blocks above the stone sign. If you look at the previous drawing, you'll see it. It was obviously the key to this puzzle: bright flickering blue light emanated from within. (What could that be?!)

Of course, if this dungeon worked like the rest of the Overworld, it would have been easy to get up there. Just place a dirt pillar and you're done. But again, in a place like this, you have to play by its rules. So maybe that tunnel contained a button and we needed a Flying potion. Who knows . . .

Note:
not drawn to
exact scale



"Whatever," I said. "It doesn't matter, anyway. We're here to save Villagetown, right? So let's find more zombies, take down as many as we can, collect all the emeralds, find that moss, receive the blacksmith's quest reward, and trade for an advanced crafting table. Sound good?"

At this,
Breeze gave me the biggest hug.

Why? I'll never know. I asked her, but she just shrugged. Then she mentioned how hugging me was like hugging an iron golem because of my armor. And with that, we continued onward down the silent, empty halls.

SATURDAY—UPDATE XI

The next hall had **nothing** but wooden doors. Each door led to a small room five blocks wide, five blocks deep, and three blocks high. Most of these rooms held **little of interest:** bookshelves, mostly, and every last book was in **some weird language** neither of us had ever seen. However, in one room we found **not only** bookshelves but also **one of those wolf people** browsing them.



Faolan
the Wizard

Note the potion on his belt, for quick access. The humans—or players—call that a “hotbar.” Whatever that means.

He claimed to be not only a **wizard** but also a **scholar** of ancient history and connoisseur of fine potions. More important—far more important—he offered to **teach us a new ability**, magical in nature: **Analyze Monster**. With this, we could see not only **the names of creatures** but also:

- 1.) A green bar representing **their life force**.
- 2.) Any and **all status effects**, buffs, and debuffs currently affecting them.
- 3.) A visual indication of exactly **how much damage they receive** equal to the number of hearts lost.

Interesting, yeah? I consulted with Breeze, who thought it would be **a good idea** for both of us to learn this. **So we did.** It took all of **five minutes**.

Faolan mumbled the words of **some magic spell** and summoned **a transparent blue cube** with eyes. An ice slime. I knew it was an ice slime because that was the name floating over it.

ICE SLIME



"A golden icon is a **buff**," the wizard said. "A light-blue icon, a **debuff**. As you can see, this slime possesses **one of each**. That is because of the ice slime's cold affinity. It will take **increased damage** from any fire-based attack and less damage from cold. Indeed, **with this knowledge** at your disposal, you can easily exploit **the weaknesses** of monsters."

"Why are there **infinity symbols** underneath the icons?" Breeze asked.
"That's the **duration**," Faolan said. "Normally you would see numbers there, **counting down** by the second. But status effects provided by an affinity are **permanent**."

As I listened, I noticed that the text floating over the ice slime **had disappeared**. "Huh? What happened? Why did it vanish?"

"This ability only works when you're actively looking at a monster. For your convenience. Otherwise, larger battles would become quite . . . busy."

"Oh." I stared at the slime again. Sure enough, the overlay reappeared. "Cool."

I turned to Breeze. "It's almost like magic, huh?! Just wait until we're back home! I'll start teaching everyone how to do this stuff! And we can trade abilities with the Legionnaires!"

"Yeah." She was staring at the slime, seemingly lost in thought. She suddenly turned to the wizard. "What happens if we train this ability up more? What benefits will it provide?"

"Additional information," the wizard said, "such as a monster's armor, stats, abilities, worn items, and, finally, at the highest level of skill, their inventory."

"Wow!" That could really come in handy, Breeze said. "Thanks a lot."

"Glad I could be of help." He paused. It seemed like he wanted to ask something but was too shy to do so. "Err, what village do you two hail from, anyway?"

"Villagetown," I said. "You know it?"

"I've heard of it. It has a wall, right? Smart move." He looked a little sad. "I wish mine had had the same. . . ."

He told us he came not from a village but a city.

Diamondhome. The largest port city in the world. It was attacked two months ago—completely destroyed. Many people made it to the ships, though, and set sail. Where they headed, he didn't know. He had stayed behind, freezing zombies with blasts of ice until his magic was depleted. Forced to flee from his hometown, he returned a day later . . . to ruins.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Breeze said. "The same happened to my home village. Shadowbrook."

The wizard nodded gravely. "So I've heard. And not everyone managed to escape, correct? Some were even captured. . . . I'm so sorry. I can't imagine. . . ."

The two lowered their heads.

"Maybe you could come stay at Villagetown," Breeze finally said.

(I was going to suggest that, actually, but didn't want to interrupt their moment of silence. Gentleswordsman, remember?)

At her suggestion, the wizard's cheeks turned a little red. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "Are you sure they wouldn't mind taking in someone like me? My magic isn't even all that strong yet. I'm still just a neophyte, really. . . ."

"Hey, I'm sure the people of Villagetown would be more than happy to have an actual wizard around," I said. "Isn't that right, Breeze?"

"Definitely."

Faolan nodded. "Hmm. Very well. I shall go there soon."

"Well, you're more than welcome to come along with us," Breeze said.

"That's right," I said. "We're heading back as soon as we finish up with this quest we're on."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I must decline. I still have much research to do. The libraries here hold a vast wealth of knowledge lost through the ages. But I shall make my way there as soon as I'm finished."

"Great. Hope to see you around. Oh, sorry. I'm Breeze, and this is—" "Runt."

So yeah, long story short, we picked up a new ability and recruited Villagetown's first wizard. Neophyte or not, he'll be a welcome addition. (*In other news, I learned that "neophyte" is basically the polite version of "noob."*)

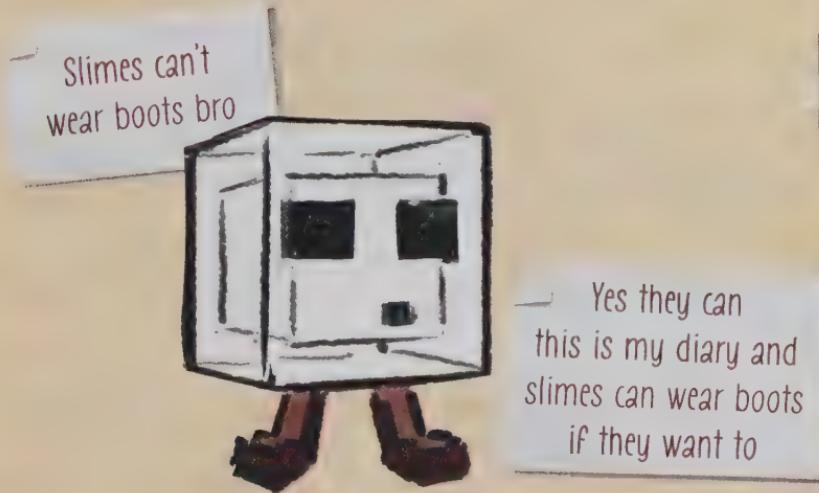
Oh! Breeze wants me to include one more thing. Players talk about **buffs** and **debuffs** to describe the effects of spells. Buffs are temporary magical effects with a certain duration. For example, a golden apple provides two buffs upon being eaten: **Absorption I** for two minutes and **Regeneration II** for five seconds. A debuff is the opposite. It's a negative effect that you want to avoid at all costs, like those slowness arrows from earlier. Pretty simple, right?

And that concludes our lesson for the day. Please make sure to leave an enchanted apple on my desk before you leave. **Class dismissed!**

SATURDAY—UPDATE XII

The twelfth update for today. And what an update it is! You're not going to believe what happened. In fact, I'm so pumped up after what just happened, I'm shaking, bouncing around, like a slime wearing boots enchanted with Leaping II.

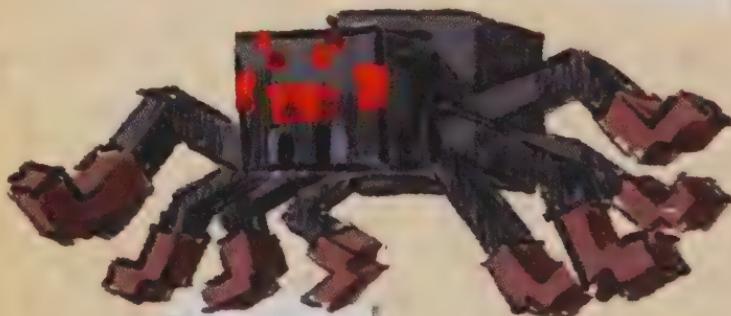
Well, no, that doesn't make a lot of sense, really, because boots would look ridiculous on a slime—especially a baby one. Here's the real problem:



Note: The above should have had punctuation like commas and exclamation points. That isn't a mistake, however—oh no. I purposefully left them out to achieve a kind of rushed feeling, like a little villager kid writing about his first time eating a slice of enchanted cake: DUDE WOW THAT CAKE = AMAZING EPIC LEGENDARY TIER 10/10 WOULD EAT AGAIN #1 FOOD ITEM IN THE OVERWORLD!!!

Okay, so slimes can't wear boots. **Very well.** So what about a spider, **then?** But spiders have **eight legs** . . . so it would need to enchant like **four different pairs** just to get the effect of one enchantment—and honestly, spiders might climb cacti and do a lot of other silly things, but not even the **noobiest** spider would enchant multiple pairs of boots like that!

Yeah well at least
spiders can wear
boots, okay???



They can,
okay???

Okay???

OKAY NEVER MIND
PLEASE FORGIVE ME I'M SORRY!!!

SATURDAY—UPDATE XIII

Sorry. I got a little carried away there.

Okay, so anyway, here's what happened just now. We were wandering the halls again and heard a shout, followed by an eerie howl and another shout.

"Sounds like they're not too far away," Breeze said, meaning whoever had left those horses tied up outside earlier. "C'mon!" She began sprinting down the hall.

"Hey! Wait up! This armor reduces my movement speed, remember?!"

Bedrock walls blurred past, along with torches and pillars and the occasional item, the remains of some monster. The shouting and howling grew louder. And, upon turning one last corner, we stopped completely in our tracks. The hall merged with another massive room, and in the center were two people locked in combat with three wolves. One person was wielding a large emerald sword and wearing a near-complete suit of leather armor. He was missing the helmet, and we could see a wave of spiked yellow hair. The other person was in a suit of obsidian and wielded a bright red ax in each hand.

As for the wolves, well, I'd never really seen wolves like that before.

Now was a good time to test Analyze Monster. I almost felt like a wizard.

FELHOUND



25.91



25.91



I'd read about **felhounds** before. They're nothing more than a **scarier version** of wolves. Strangely, I thought I'd read that they didn't exist in the Overworld. At any rate, each felhound was affected by two different buffs. The gray shield was **Stoneskin**, which provides an armor bonus of five per power level. The little II in

the bottom right-hand corner meant its power level was two. The golden rabbit's foot was **Haste I**, which increased movement speed and attack speed **by 25%**. After Breeze fired a weakness arrow at the wolf I was focusing on, a third icon appeared. **A broken sword**. That was the Weakness I debuff, which reduces attack damage by four.



The young man with yellow (*almost orange*) hair glanced over his shoulder. **'Nice! We could really use some help right about now!'**

Without a word, I charged in between the two strangers. All three felhounds **immediately focused** on me. I'm not sure if it was **the giant owl** on my shield or what, but they just wouldn't stop **attacking** me. The giant owl often thwarted their efforts with a **clang**. How **humiliating** for them, right?

Meanwhile, Breeze **unleashed more arrows**, and the other two swung their weapons **frantically**, like they were mining the Overworld's **last diamond vein**. I'll skip all the details, but basically

felhounds fell one by one in a flurry of arrows and ax swings. (Along with some really graceful sword work from yours truly, I might add. Oh, and that guy with yellow hair.)

After the battle, the obsidian-clad warrior bent down, collecting the emeralds the wolves had dropped. His swordsman friend turned toward Breeze:

"Thanks," he said. "That would've taken a lot longer without you two."

"It took long enough as it is," I said. "So, um, are dungeon monsters normally this tough?"

He shook his head. "Not really. At least not around here. Actually, I'm not sure what those felhounds were doing here. You usually won't find them in low-level dungeons like this. And those buffs! Why did they have Stoneskin and Haste? So weird . . ."

Breeze moved up to join us, slinging her bow across her shoulder. "They could have been summoned."

The swordsman shrugged. "It's possible. Not sure why someone would do that, though. . . . I mean, griefing used to be a thing back when this was just a game, but now . . ."

At this point, I noticed that the other person, the one in obsidian armor, **was standing still**. Many emeralds were still scattered before him. He hadn't picked them up and wasn't attempting to. In fact, he wasn't moving at all. It was as if he'd been **frozen**.

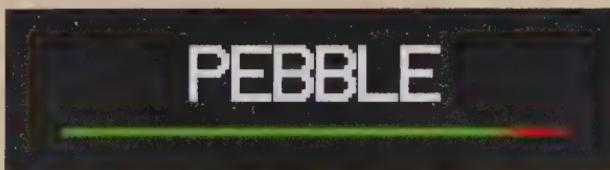
Well, that's odd, I thought. What's his problem? He's been like that ever since Breeze and I started talking. . . .

As I stared at this person's back, the usual information appeared above him. **The name.** **The life bar.** It seemed Analyze Monster worked on people as well. It took a second for my mind to process this person's name. My mind just couldn't accept what I was seeing.

No. No, no.
N-n-nnnnnnooooooh!

But the name was there, **real**, and it was spelled correctly.

And it was a weird enough name to possibly be **unique** in all of the Overworld. And it was the name of someone I'd known, someone I'd hated, someone I'd **never expected** to see again. . . .



SATURDAY—UPDATE XIV

Pebble. Pebble!
It was really Pebble!

When he turned around, I couldn't believe my eyes. Not only was he alive but also he was in a dungeon with some human and equipped with some pretty amazing stuff. (Are those redsteel axes I see?!)



"Wow!" he said. "What are you two doing here?"

I approached him, desperately searching for words.

"I, uh . . . well, we, um . . ."

The human, whose name was simply S, flashed a wry grin.

"I take it you three know one another."

"We do," Breeze said, eyeing Pebble coldly. "Unfortunately."

I glared at him as well. "Looks like the Overworld has been treating you well. Let me guess. You're no longer the Pebble you used to be. You're a changed villager now."

"As a matter of fact, I am."

S was still grinning when he turned to our former bully. "Don't tell me he's the one you . . ."

"He is," Pebble said.

"So you told him?" I asked, still glaring.

"Of course I told him," Pebble said. "I tried blowing up the wall, tried blowing YOU up, and I don't even know why. I could apologize a million times. It still wouldn't make me feel any better about it. I . . ."

"Yeah?! Well, maybe you should have—"

Breeze shouted over me. "You have a lot of explaining to do! You nearly—"

I shouted over her, and we both began shouting even louder and at the same time.

"People don't just randomly go crazy like—"

"Enough!!!"

That shout came from S, and it sounded louder than a TNT blast. **We fell silent** and continued to **glare** at Pebble while S continued.

"**Listen.** He told me the full story, every little detail, and I personally believe he was under the effect of **Confusion III.** It's a **strong debuff** that clouds your judgment. It can even make you believe friends are enemies. The third-level variant can last for **entire days.** Instead of being angry, you should take it up with **the Eyeless One.**"

"Last I heard," Breeze said, "he's been **rather busy** for the past several months."

"**That's right;**" I said. "You're telling us **the Eyeless One** cast a **Confusion spell** from **a million blocks** away?"

S shook his head. "**It's not like that.** As far as I know, there is no spell that can inflict **Confusion III**—only **a potion.** It's typically used for crafting a **really powerful arrow.**"

When S said this, I recalled **the battles** that took place in our village. Pebble was always pretty reckless; that was **his style.** He wasn't afraid to take damage, and as a result, he often **chugged healing potions** in the middle of combat. Had someone really **swapped** one of his healing potions for a potion of **Confusion III?**

As if reading my mind, S suggested **this theory** as well. But I **didn't believe it.** Didn't want to. **I wanted to be angry** at Pebble.

I know that's immature. If he really had been brainwashed, it meant Pebble wasn't such a bad guy after all. As much as I didn't like it, this possibility had to be considered. . . .

"Why would someone do that?" I asked.

"More important," Breeze said, "who did it?"

"I think these are questions we should deal with later," Pebble said glumly.

S nodded. "He's right. The monsters around here are going to respawn any minute now. Let's move, people."

Pebble was now but a single block away.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "Really. I'll do anything to make it up. A million emeralds. Anything. Can we just leave all that behind?"

Psh!
As if!

*So he tries blowing me up with TNT
then thinks all it takes to make it right is a few apologies?!*

I wanted to shout at him some more, tell him everything I'd been bottling up inside like a potion of Rage XI, then leave with Breeze right then and there. But I had to be better than that, didn't I? I was bitter about what had happened, but my feelings weren't the most important thing in the world. If working with Pebble increased the

odds of Villagetown's survival by even the slightest bit, how could I refuse?

The past is the past. What was it that Kolb once said? Face the problems you've not yet had? I extended a hand.

"Thank you," Pebble said, while giving me the strongest handshake of all time. "You won't regret this. And . . . do you mind telling me what you guys are doing here?"

"Um, basically . . ."

I told him everything regarding our mission, summarized: how Kolb wanted me to retrieve **an aeon forge**, how I needed **twenty-five hundred emeralds**, and how some random blacksmith had sent me on a quest for a handful of so-called **glowmoss**.

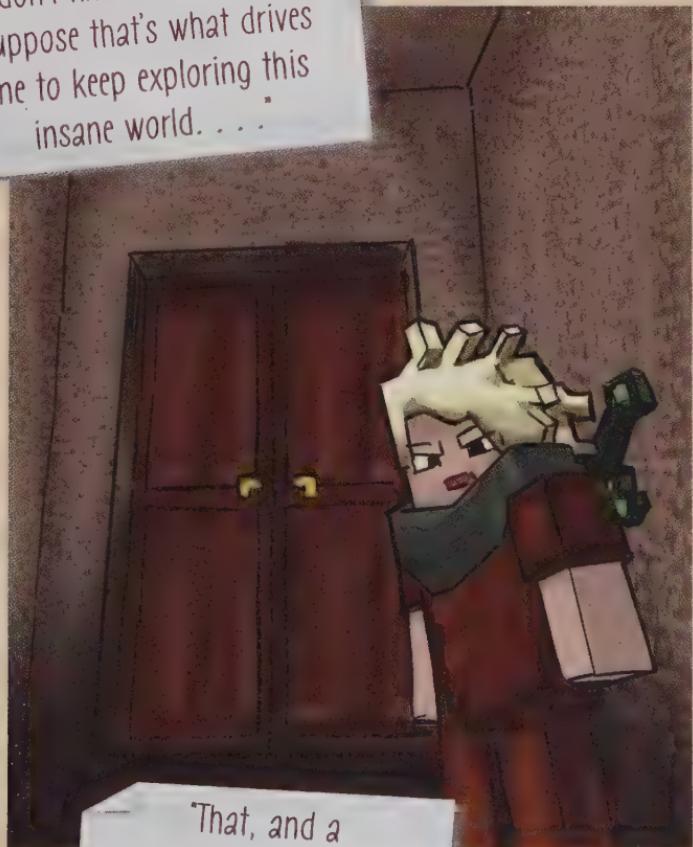
"Glowmoss? The boss drops that," S said. "You won't find it anywhere else. C'mon. He's just past those doors."

As S took the lead, Pebble spoke to me **in a low tone**: "Don't worry; this guy really knows what he's doing. I think he might know **everything**. He's already taught me so much. . . ."

And suddenly, after exchanging **uneasy glances** with Breeze, I found myself walking down another corridor with (*I can't believe I'm writing this*) **Pebble the Exile** to my left. Ahead of us, the human named S walked in a casual way, as **confident** as he was **mysterious**.

He stopped before
a pair of massive doors
and turned around.

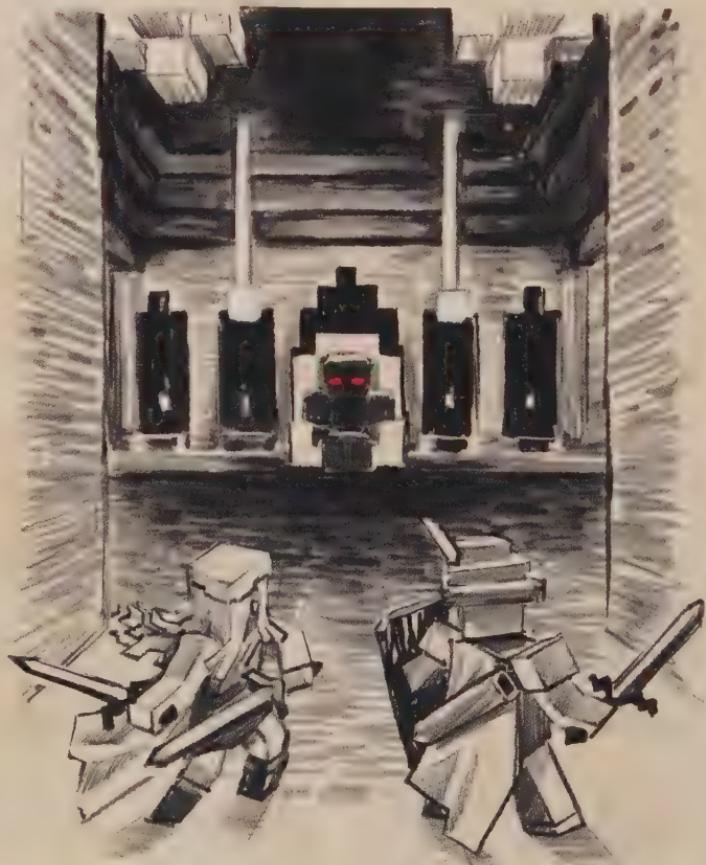
"He's wrong; you know.
I don't know everything. I
suppose that's what drives
me to keep exploring this
insane world. . . ."



"That, and a
promise. . . . Where are
you, Emerillion . . . ?"

SATURDAY—UPDATE XV

If you look at the previous drawing, you'll notice that the doors behind S were **five blocks tall**. That was **no embellishment**. I go for **accuracy**, remember. No, those doors actually were five blocks tall, and they led to an **enormous** chamber. With **an enormous giant zombie**. He was sitting on a golden throne on the other side of the room.



"That's the boss," S said. "Obviously."

"Why is he just sitting there like that?" Breeze asked.

"That's normal," Pebble said. "Most of the bosses wait for you to engage. At least the lower-level ones."

"How many bosses have you fought already?" I asked, somewhat surprised and more than a little curious.

"Three. No, wait." He turned to S. "Does that Skull Lord count?"

"Nah. Their scripting is pretty complex, but I'd classify them as minibosses. Quest monsters, really."

Scripting? Quest monster? Hurgg . . .

I was totally lost. And it sounded like Pebble had been on quite the adventure.

Yeah, I was jealous.

S stepped forward. "Looks like he's also got Stoneskin II and Haste I. Hmmmm. You know, there's an item that gives those two buffs. And with a duration of thirty minutes, no less. What's it called again? Diamond wafer? Yeah. First the felhounds, and now this . . . very strange."

It was extremely strange. If what S said was true, someone was trying to hinder us. Pebble said it best:

"I don't like this, guys. Just have a funny feeling. . . . Maybe we should leave."

"We **really** need that crystal," S said, and glanced at Breeze and myself. "We're on a quest to **light a beacon** in the mountains to the southwest. We need the enchanted **voidcrystal** this guy drops."

"Ohh," I said, pretending to understand.

Breeze drew her bow. "So **what's the plan**, then?"

S smiled again. "**Simple.** We just wait here until his buffs wear off."

What a great idea, I thought, and peered at the boss from afar to see how long we had to wait.



A chill hit me as I did, a horrible realization.

23:53—I hadn't really made the connection until seeing this number.

"If the duration was originally thirty minutes," I said, "then the person behind all this was in this room just six minutes ago, right?"

S shrugged. "I guess so. But there's no one else here."

The four of us scanned the room. Especially Pebble. He looked positively spooked. But then, he'd looked like that ever since I first saw him today. He was like a completely different person. Before he was all bravado, all the time. Now he gave off a kind of doubt. What had made him this way? His time in the Overworld must have been quite different from mine.

"Guess we'll just have to wait and find out what this is all about," he said.

And so, after slowly approaching the center of the room—still twenty blocks from the giant zombie—we waited. For the looooongest several minutes, we waited. Silent. Glancing around. Idle chatter. I rearranged my inventory. Well, that potion would go better there. . . .

Until finally . . .

precisely five minutes and thirty-seven seconds later . . .

an exact time calculated by observing the duration of the boss monster's buffs . . . Breeze gave **a slight gasp**. She was looking up and far away, near one corner of the ceiling. I followed her gaze to a most unbelievable sight. **A potion.**

Mysteriously, it was floating fifteen or so blocks above the obsidian floor, **slowly sailing** toward the boss—turning slightly, bobbing up and down—as though dancing in the air. . . .

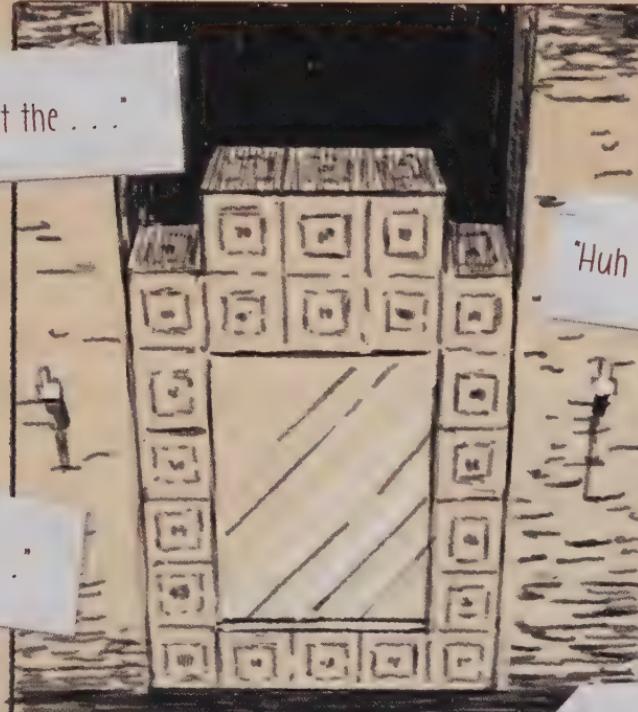
It was **SO enchanted** that it had a faint glow, like violet torchlight. **Its destination** was, of course, the zombie's right hand. The potion looked so tiny in that **block-sized fist**, and **the zombie didn't chug**, oh no. It was more like **a little sip**. To the gasps of three villagers and a human, **a third icon** appeared next to the first two. **A golden heart**. That was **Regeneration V**, an extremely strong healing buff. Its duration: **three minutes**.

'This is **too weird**,' S said.

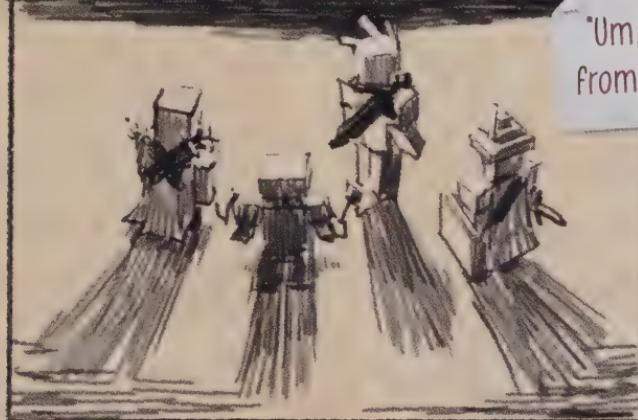
Again, Pebble said it best: '**S? Let's get outta here.**'

Suddenly, I heard a faint **crackling** sound from behind me. I glanced over my shoulder. The hallway leading out was now **sealed with a wall of ice**, ice that shimmered almost like it was enchanted.

"What the . . ."



"Um, is that
from a spell?"



Shrill laughter resounded from overhead. Familiar laughter. A laugh I hadn't heard in quite some time. We slowly turned around.

Now, perched on top of the throne, was an old man in a deep red robe. Red hat. Black sunglasses. Bushy white beard. It was the same person I'd bumped into earlier in Owl's Reach who had matched Stump's description of a suspicious character named **Cocoa Witherbean**.

But now, upon hearing that laugh, I knew that this person was none other than . . .



It was the same villager who had **betrayed** us so long ago. Even with his name hovering over his head, **it was hard to accept**. This was a person known for being totally clueless—**incapable of basic combat**, let alone **magic**. But the person now standing before us could apparently **fly**, **turn invisible**, and **conjure walls of ice**. . . .

"You seem so surprised," he called out. His shrill voice was unnaturally loud. "So was I, upon seeing **you three** show up here **together**." He hopped up and down like a giddy child. "Oh, isn't it **wonderful?!** Here you are, **Villagetown's very best**, and I'm going to **erase all of you** in one go!"

"I take it **you know this guy**," S muttered to Pebble.

"Yeah."

"Might've been good to let me know **you were** being hunted by a crazy old wizard."

"He wasn't a wizard then. **Just some fool**."

"**Fool?!**" That was Urf. "If anyone's a fool," he shouted, "it's her! She—"

Breeze fired an arrow with unequaled speed. I'd never seen an arrow fly so fast or with such **perfect** aim. A critical hit. An arrow sticking out of Urf's **forehead**. At least, that's what would have happened, had he not instantly **blinked away—zip!**—like an **enderman**. The arrow struck obsidian instead.

Now Urf was roughly ten blocks away from his original location, hovering in the air. "Care to try that ag—"

Breeze didn't hesitate. Her second arrow flew as true as the first. But Urft was faster still. Again he blinked away. Urft appeared on top of the giant zombie's head.

"Are you done? I can do this all day, m'lady."

I've seen Breeze get angry before, but nothing matched her expression right then as she lowered her bow. It was pointless to continue. She knew that. She was only wasting arrows.

"Why are you doing this?" Pebble shouted. "We never did anything to you!"

"Wrong!" Ghostly flames erupted around Urft. "You humiliated me! You laughed behind my back! And then you replaced me! Me . . . replaced by a human!"

The flames crackled and grew brighter. "Of course, I was going to use my magic on you while you were dealing with Nethy here, but I've come up with a much better idea. It's the best way to end this little story." He smiled. "It's true, I didn't know anything before. However, my master taught me well. . . ."

"Let me show you
what I've learned!"



Shrouded in flame, Urf closed his eyes and began mumbling, like Faolan had when **summoning** the ice slime. Then he vanished in a flash of brilliant orange light. **No**, not quite. He sank downward, into the zombie, in a fraction of a second.

Still seated upon the massive throne, the zombie **jerked violently**, then closed his eyes and fell completely still. Thankfully, **S the All-Knowing** explained what had just happened: "I think he just cast Soulshift. It lets you **control a monster** by occupying its body. It isn't **supposed** to work on bosses, though. . . ."

I sighed.

So Urf was now **in control of a boss monster**, one that could **easily** beat an iron golem at arm wrestling. You know, it's just **not** my lucky day.

The huge zombie **opened his eyes**. Then he **slowly** rose, glanced down at himself and laughed: **hurhh, hurhh, hurhh**. . . . And when he spoke—even though his voice was **deep** and sounded nothing like Urf's voice—there was no doubt in my mind that it really was the old man.

"You might be wondering **how** I'm capable of this," he said. "My powers were increased by **the master** . . . the **kind** master. So kind is he, in fact, that he asked me to **spare your lives** if you would only **kneel before me**. But no, I won't give you that chance. I may have failed to get rid of you **before**, but **I won't fail now**. . . ."

As he spoke, I recalled how Stump had seen Urf in Villagetown. He'd been there the whole time, **spying** on us. Doing who knows what. Disguised as **Cocoa Witherbean**.

If S was **right** about that potion, Urf was probably the one behind it. It's a simple task, **renaming a potion**. All you really need is an anvil. I could picture it so clearly now. Urf changed the potion's name, turned **invisible**, crept into Pebble's house while he was sleeping, and slipped the potion into Pebble's inventory. And Pebble, pushed so hard during training, had been too tired to notice the potion's different color. . . .

Thinking about this, I **flew into a rage**. I shouldn't have charged in, **I know**. I should have **waited** for S to give us some command. To be honest, I barely even remember this moment. It was just a blur. I **shouted** something, and before I knew it, I was standing **before the giant zombie** possessed by a **completely** deranged old man.

SATURDAY—UPDATE XVI

I swung my diamond sword at ~~Nethersoul~~ **Boss Urf**. The blade left a crescent in its wake, and hearts appeared, indicating the damage dealt—one. A single point. That is to say, practically nothing.



Since Stoneskin II increased Urf's armor by ten, on top of whatever protection the boss monster had naturally, attacking him was like trying to mine obsidian with a beetroot.

And he had Regeneration V . . . so what little life I'd taken was immediately restored. There was, of course, one more problem. Laughing at my pitiful display, he struck me with one of his furnace-sized fists. Despite the Surefooted enchantment on my cloak, I flew back ten blocks and landed on my back near the others. I lost three hearts. I'd forgotten to raise my shield. I was shocked, okay? It isn't every day you see a former noob directly controlling a giant.

Boss Urf once again laughed creepily.

"I suppose we shall see who's the nooblord now." And he began lumbering forward.

"He can't cast spells right now," S said. "When Soulshifting, you only have access to the monster's abilities, and Nethersoul has none. Only high melee damage." As Breeze helped me up, S turned to me. "We need someone to mitigate that damage."

I looked at him suspiciously. "Mitigate . . ."

"We need you to tank," Pebble said. "We didn't bring shields. Didn't think we'd need any."

"Oh."

I glanced at the approaching boss. Again: furnace-sized fists. Then I shrugged.

"Yeah. Sure. No problem."

Breeze handed me two potions: Stoneskin I and Regeneration II. The latter had an extended duration. Eight minutes. She **gave** me a **hug** and said, "Come back with your life bar intact, **okay?**"

Then she ~~kis~~

No, I can't write about that in here! I'm a warrior, got it?! I have no time for mushy stuff! Okay, fine! She kissed me on the cheek! That's not so weird, though, right? I mean, I heard about this one village where kissing another person on the cheek is totally normal, like a handshake! So it must have been like that in her old village!

Yeah! That **must** be it!

Well, for some reason, I felt more courageous. Could it be that she's secretly a wizard whose kisses give some kind of buff? Whatever it was, it worked. I charged back in. Pebble and S were right there behind me.

"We'll be on either side of you," S said. "If he goes for one of us, make sure to move over and intercept his attack."

With Boss Urft now towering before us, I raised my shield. Intercept. Mitigate. S made tanking sound so fancy, you know? But there's absolutely nothing fancy about being pummeled by a zombie who most likely wrestles ender dragons in his spare time. Oh well. At least with my shield I was only knocked back half a block.

SATURDAY—UPDATE XVII

As my shield **absorbed** blow after blow, the amount of damage Pebble, S, and Breeze put out was **simply incredible**. Pebble's axes were **redsteel**. Although their individual attack speed was slow, an ax has **higher damage** than a sword. Duel wielding them almost seemed **unfair**. Breeze cycled between normal arrows and the Weakness variety, using Weakness only when **the debuff** was about to **wear off**. On top of that, she threw a **splash healing potion** at my feet the few times I took damage.

S used a sword ability called **Overblade**. It was **the coolest** thing I'd ever seen. With a loud battle cry, he jumped into the air—**sword raised over his head**—and slammed down into Urf with **such force** that Urf bent over backward in pain.

He looked so ridiculous.
Urf, I mean.

NETHERSOUL

I've got to learn
how to do that—
you just can't be
cool without it.



Twenty-five damage—or twelve and a half hearts—with a single strike! It was shocking. To give you an idea, my maximum health is twenty-two, or eleven hearts. Even so, Urf's life

bar only shrank slightly—maybe 10%. I wasn't sure if that was the monster's life or Urf's, or a combination of the two. Either way, he was **nearly indestructible**.

And even though S took away a **significant chunk** of Urf's life, without his Overblade ability, Urf's **regeneration** equaled our damage output. With every one of our attacks, his health bar went down ever so slightly, only to **bounce right back up again**. At some point, Urf actually stopped attacking and **laughed**.

"You call that **damage**? You won't even get me to half! This is **so much fun**. I—"

The zombie/wizard/noob **cried out in pain** and bent backward again as S landed another **Overblade**—then he did it **again** before he even landed.

Having lost roughly **30% of his health**, the sound Urf made could only be described as **pitiful**. Naturally, I expected S to follow up with a **fourth** Overblade, because why wouldn't he?! But he went back to standard-issue sword swings, the kind we practiced in class. I looked at him **in despair**.

"What are you doing?! Keep using that jump move!"

"I can't," he said. "It's on cooldown."

Cooldown?

"Time limitation," Pebble said. "He can only use it **three times per day**."

S grinned. "I would be overpowered if I could just spam it over and over like that, right?"

...

It gets worse. My shield broke upon blocking Urfs next attack. With my left hand, I drew my obsidian sword and joined Pebble and S in swinging away frantically.

"Keep at it," S said. "Once that Regeneration buff wears off, he'll stop out-healing us, and it's over for him! We're almost there! Fifty-five seconds!"

Urf offered no response.

Hhmm. What's this? He's not playing around anymore? Seems like he's a little worried.

Now forced to block Urfs attacks with my swords, I wasn't knocked back very far but still took considerable damage. Breeze threw splash healing potions to keep our health up. Our life bars were all somewhere around 50%. Sometimes, I just couldn't move fast enough. We were never going to make it until his Regeneration ran out.

53, 52, 51 . . .

Each second felt SO long. Then, all of a sudden, the arrows stopped. Breeze was out. Drawing her swords, she joined us in the heat of combat, a blur of emerald and diamond. Then I remembered

something—the arrow with the **obsidian point** and the **creepy face**. I had **no idea** what it did. Normally you can see an item's **stats**, but that arrow's properties had been **masked somehow**. Still, by the looks of it, that arrow did **something bad**. And hitting Urf with something bad seemed to be our only shot, seeing as **he was going berserk**.

Blocking another fist with my swords, I turned to Breeze and handed her the projectile.

'I'm not sure what this does, **but . . .**'

The look on her face indicated that this arrow did a lot. (*Her face then indicated that I was an elite noob for not telling her about it earlier.*)

'Hurgggggaaaaaaa!!'

Pebble flew past us. He'd glanced over—to see what I was talking about—allowing Urf to catch him off guard.

'Uwwwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!'

And there went S.

SATURDAY— UPDATE XVIII

There was no long and detailed discussion about what the arrow did. Breeze took it and fired. Striking Urf square in the chest, the arrow didn't do all that much damage (*only three*), but the *debuff* it inflicted . . . it was **such a joyous sight.**



The skull with the gray heart was **Wither**—a damage-over-time, or DoT, debuff—**Wither V**, in fact. In this case, Wither V was strong enough to counteract Urf's regeneration, and in thirty-five seconds, when his Regeneration wore off . . .

"Where'd you get that?!" Urf howled. "I can't . . . I won't . . ." Like an enormous baby throwing a tantrum, he swung wildly and randomly at all of us. "I'll take all of you with me!"

"Stay together!" Breeze shouted over the roars. "The splash doesn't reach very far!"

We drew closer to one another, and she threw a potion at the ground. The splash hit everyone, healing us somewhat. Then we immediately split up again so he couldn't strike all of us at once.

"You ruined everything!" Urfs shrieked.

He began focusing on Pebble, who couldn't do anything but hold up his axes in defense.

"You were supposed to deal with him! You were supposed to join us! You drank that potion! I saw you!"

Urfs left arm swung through the air like a tree trunk, and a fist slammed into Pebble.

"Why—"

The right arm this time.

"Didn't—"

The left again.

"It—"

Finally, both fists came crashing down, and sparks flew from Pebble's axes as Urfs sputtered in rage.

"Work?!"

At the end of this furious assault, above Pebble was a mostly red life bar with just a sliver of green. . . .

'Get back!' I shouted. When he didn't, I pushed him aside and stared up into the wizard's glowing red eyes.

'So it was you! You made him crazy!'

'I did! And I'll do much worse! Your little village will come to an end! If—'

From somewhere not too close, I heard a scream. Breeze. She was now behind Urf, tearing into him, her swords, like her hair, a flash of brilliant green and blue. Urf whirled around in a total frenzy. She never even blocked, trying to match his damage output. But there was no way she could. Even without his regeneration, he was still at 35% with an ample boost to his armor and attack speed. Looking back, we should have kept our distance and let the Wither debuff wear him down further. But everything's so clear in hindsight.

Breeze! No!

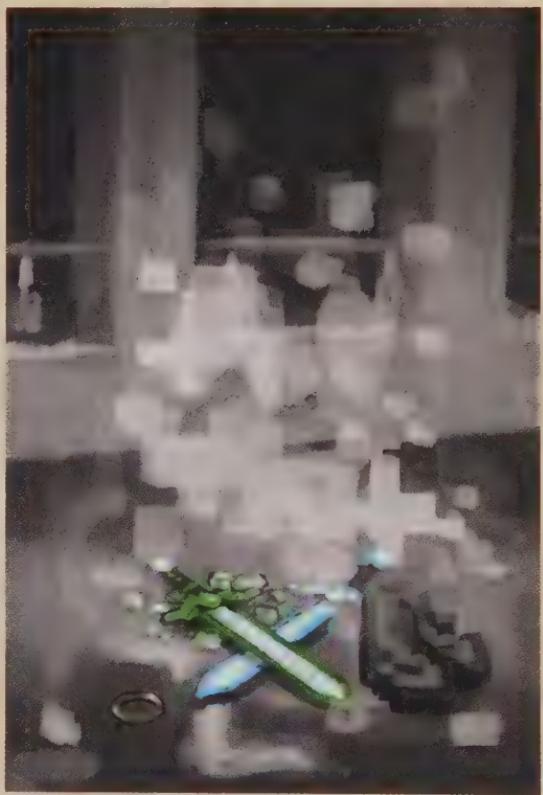
I sprinted around Urf, toward her, each second an eternity, and each millisecond accompanied by a beat of my heart, the swing of a weapon, the right-to-left movement of green bars, a shout, or the ring of sharpened emerald through hard, withered flesh.

I was only five blocks away, and saw that her health was less than Pebble's. A thin green line. Three blocks. She looked up. So slow. Time had stopped. She was looking up. What's she looking at? Move.

Get to her. And it seemed like forever until I saw **the shadow**, like that of a cobblestone pillar, quickly moving toward her.

A fist
slammed down.

SATURDAY—UPDATE XIX



When the smoke finally cleared, all that remained were scattered items on the ground, including two swords and a pair of black leather boots. All thought left me. All feeling. I took a single step forward, silent. All four of us stared at the pile on the ground without saying a word. Even Ur. His expression was almost one of regret, if a zombie could display such an emotion. But soon, a deep laugh was welling

up inside him, which he let escape—at first slowly but then stronger and **Stronger**. All I can remember here was **three** loud battle cries, swords flashing before me, another sword to my right, axes to my left, and Urf staggering back **again and again**. Only later did I realize that I was wielding **her** swords. I must have picked them up. . . . Breeze had taken him to **25%**, and we took him to **7%**, but it wasn't enough. He fought back just as crazily, and **we struggled even more** without Breeze and her potions. In the end, he cornered us. Backs pressed against the wall, each of us was one hit away from **going out just like—**

Why didn't she dodge . . . ?

I failed her. Didn't make it to her in time.

No, she can't be gone! It's some kind of trick! It has to be!

"This is **so crazy**," S muttered. "What's happening? Why is an **NPC** doing this?!"

"Runt," Pebble said, "I . . . I'm sorry for being such a jerk to you before. I don't know what was wrong with me."

"Will you guys **stop that?!**" S hissed. "**Focus!** We need a plan!"

"We can **charge in**," Pebble whispered. "**Flank him.** He'll probably take us out, but . . . **we should do it for Breeze.**"

"**For Breeze!**" I said.

I still **refused** to believe she was gone. There had to be **some other explanation**. She couldn't . . .

"It's a pity, what happened to her," Urf called out.
He was some distance from us, where he'd been waiting. The
Wither had worn off by now.
"But you should feel **relieved** to know that you will be joining her
very soon." A **hideous** smile appeared across his equally hideous face.



"It is the end . . . for you!"

Startled by the voice, the three of us looked around. **It was her voice.** I saw a slight figure appear behind him. **It was her.** As if she could have been **beaten** by a noob like Urf!



Barefoot and wielding a greatsword, she was already in the air before he began to turn around. She used **Quietus**—an ability that only works a monster on **who isn't facing you**. The damage it deals is proportional to how injured the monster is. With a zombified Urf already in the red zone, this ultimate ability **finished him in one go**.



The red flashes of his life bar gave way to nothing but an empty border. He staggered forward, looking at Breeze, who'd landed a safe distance from him. Then, trembling with rage, he bent his head upward and howled.

'Immmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm—
p-p-possssssible!!!

His scream ended abruptly; his body pulsed bright red, then flashed, a slow strobe that illuminated the entire room. With each strobe was a crackling sound like static. At last, the monster Urf had possessed crumbled into countless bright red cubes, which quickly disintegrated, until all that remained was a pile of items—including a small gray item chest.

From nowhere and everywhere came a woman's voice, as cold and emotionless as an iron golem's:

The dungeon Tomb of the Forgotten King has been cleared. All traps and monster spawners have been deactivated. Additionally, any remaining hostile monsters have been purged. Please note, this dungeon will reset in exactly one week. . . .

She said some other stuff, but I can't remember the rest.

"That's the announcer," S said. "It's part of a mod. Never mind. It'd take too long to . . ."

I can't recall what else he said, either, because I wasn't paying attention anymore. Not to him, anyway, and not even to the treasure pile. The real treasure was right in front of me.



Putting away her **massive sword**, Breeze ran up and gave me **the biggest hug**. Then Pebble gave me a **hug**, followed by S giving Pebble a **hug**. Breeze and Pebble **almost** hugged but there was **awkwardness** there because of the whole **he-used-to-be-a-bad-guy** thing. Finally, we **broke out laughing** and had a group **hug**. I just used the word "**hug**" a lot, but what do you expect—we were just **happy to still be alive**, okay?!

"Will you **please** use a healing potion?" I said to Breeze, glancing at her life bar again. "With your health **that low**, I'm afraid to even breathe!"

SATURDAY—UPDATE XX

So you want to know **how** Breeze survived. You also want to know **why** she was **barefoot** and wielding **a greatsword**. Well, dear diary, **don't you worry**. I asked for you. Right after she used up the rest of the splash healing potions on everyone. (We practically bathed in the stuff.)

She explained how she'd **sidestepped** Urf's attack at the very last moment and used an ability called **Smoke Bomb**. It creates **a large smoke cloud** around you, and you **turn invisible** for a short time. To make the illusion of her demise more convincing, she **threw down** her swords and the emeralds she'd collected, then unequipped her boots and **accessories**.

"**Honestly**, I'm surprised I didn't realize that," S said. "That was way too much smoke, and there should have been some **experience orbs**." He gave her an **approving** nod. "**Nice move**, I have to say. A rather unconventional use of **Smoke Bomb** but **effective** nonetheless."

"Yet **another ability**," I said. "So you have been holding out on me! **Why all the secrecy, huh?!**"

"**You'll learn more**," she said. "As soon as we get back."

"And what about **that sword?**" I asked. "Where'd you get that?"

"My father **gave it to me** just before I left. Said I should always carry a backup."

Again, the tone of her voice indicated she was **hiding something**. I narrowed my eyes. Something was definitely **going on** here. Some kind of **secret**. I was almost certain. What was it?!

Luckily for her, Pebble—after glancing around **superstitiously** again—totally changed the subject.

'Hey. Guys. What happened to Urf?'

"Good question," S said. "If the monster you've Soulshifted into is **defeated**, you'll **reappear** nearby. But it seems like he really is gone. Those are **his items**. **Besides that chest**, I mean."

"We'd better not **take any chances**," Pebble said. He still had that fearful look. "Let's grab the loot and **bounce**."

Everyone turned to **the pile**. Normally, the boss would have **only dropped that chest**. The items lying around it had **belonged** to Urf. There were books on **ancient history**. Books on **magic**, **monsters**, and **dungeons**. That's what S said, anyway. Like those books we'd seen earlier, they were all written in **unknown languages**. (*By the way, knowing a language is an ability. There are many: Common Tongue, Ancient Tongue, Enderscript, etc.*)

We sifted through countless **stacks of blank paper**, low-level potions, and monster parts used in brewing like **spider eyes** and **bat wings**.

Of course, his worn items were also there. While his hat, sunglasses, and shoes had no **enchantments**, his robe—excuse me, **his gown**—had **two**.



NETHERFORGED GOWN

CLOTHING

CONTROLLER I
FLAMEWEAVER I

"I should have known," S said. "All **Nethermancers**, upon first starting out, are given such a gown. Those enchantments **boost fire** and **summoning magic**, which a Nethermancer **specializes in**."

So Urf was a type of wizard known as a **Nethermancer**. Wielding **magical fire**. Inflicting hideous plagues. Summoning **undead minions** and controlling them like **slaves**.

Urf had decided to enter **Nethersoul's body**, and that was a **major error** on his part. Had he simply **held back** and summoned an army of skeletons, we **definitely** would have lost. His anger had gotten the best of him.

Anyway, there's **no way** I'd wear that gown. Especially considering the fact that Urf used to **sleep in it**.

"Maybe he was the one behind those **zombified animals**," Pebble said.
"You've seen them, too?"

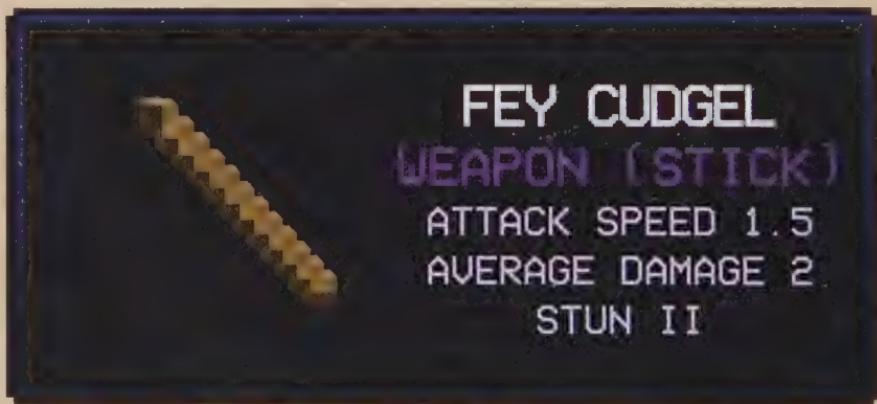
"**Everywhere**. Especially in the forest to the south. Still give me **nightmares**."

"Only Nether Rot could be capable of doing such a thing," S said. "It's a spell—that is, an ability of a magical nature—that inflicts a **horrible debuff** similar to **Wither**. Except when your health hits zero, you don't die. You turn into a **zombie**. Of course, being a **disease**, the debuff will also spread to any nearby life-forms. Works on animals, too."

"It must have been him, then." I sighed. "Guess that's **one mystery solved**."

Back to the items.

Urf had also been carrying a **most curious weapon**.

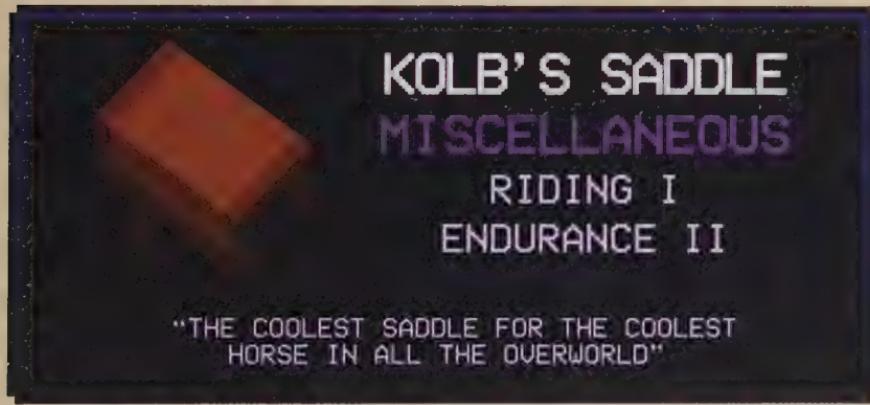


A stick.

An enchanted stick.

I wish I were **joking** here, but alas, I'm as serious as Urf was when he wrote that one handbook. It's not totally **worthless**, though.

I guess. According to Breeze, **Stun II** has a 20% chance of inflicting **paralysis**. According to S, the duration of said paralysis is . . . **one second**. For some strange reason, Breeze seemed **very interested** in this weapon. **Why?** Honestly, I can't see how the **small chance** of stunning a monster for one second makes up for such **pathetic damage**. Not only that, but the item reminds me of Urf's tales of bonking a zombie on the head **with a stick**. Plus, I believe the word **fey** has something to do with **faeries**. That means I will **most definitely** pass. Regarding Urf's former inventory, it seemed there was only one item left, which happened to be none other than . . .



KOLB'S SADDLE
MISCELLANEOUS
RIDING I
ENDURANCE II

"THE COOLEST SADDLE FOR THE COOLEST HORSE IN ALL THE OVERWORLD"

When I saw this, my mind became a slimeball.

No.

Nono.

Nononono.

Nuh-ooohh.

NONOPINEAPPLE . . . ?!

*Why is this here?! Why?! What does it mean?! What does it
meannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn?!*

*Think. Think. Logic. Logic. Don't panic. Stop breathing like that!
Explanation! Need! Explanation! Why is everyone looking at me?! Look
innocent! Act casual! Oh, I don't know how to whistle! Not my fault! Not!
My! Fault!!!!!!*

"That's strange," Pebble said. "Kolb's still in Villagetown, right?"
"He is," Breeze said. Then she gave me **the sternest look**,
probably the way Stump's parents look whenever he burns the cupcakes.

*So what this means is . . . thinking logically here . . . Urf stole Meadow. . . .
He took Kolb's horse and . . . Well, maybe Kolb had two enchanted saddles?
That's possible, right???*

"I'm not sure why Urf was carrying that," I said at last.
"So you guys know Kolb?" S asked. "Small world. We've been friends . . .
since the server launch." He picked up the saddle. "Maybe I should return
this to him. I'd like to ask him what—"

"No, that's fine!" I said, snatching the saddle out of his hands.
"I'll be meeting up with him soon anyway."

Lucky, this whole thing was quickly forgotten when S opened the small gray chest. It was time for the real loot. **The boss loot.** According to S, most of the items found in a boss chest are randomly generated. After opening it, he added, "Let us pray to the gods of RNG."

I'd heard a few **Legionnaires** say this exact phrase several times before. **RNG** has something to do with **random events**—I think it stands for Random Number Generator. So praying to the gods of RNG means hoping you **get lucky?** Is that right? Well, let's just say **his** prayers failed. **Take the following item**, for instance:



A **golden cow**. The size of a child's toy. Seriously. I couldn't make this stuff up. Apparently, when placed in a room, this little cow gives off **an aura** called **Prosperity**. At level III, it gives anyone crafting nearby a **3%** chance of crafting **double** the amount of whatever they're trying to craft.

I suppose I can see the uses there, but still, it's **weird**. If the gods above really are the ones who determined this loot, well, they must be laughing right now. I'm not, however. **Next**.



BED
OF ROSES
FURNITURE
GOODNIGHT I

It's official: **the gods really are laughing**.

So it goes like this—there are **several different types** of bed enchantments, and they're all appropriately named: **Goodnight**, **Sleepwell**, **Sweetdreams**, and so on. The Goodnight enchantment gives you two extra temporary health, per level, upon waking up the next day. You'll see it in the form of **golden hearts** added to your life bar. This **buff** will last the whole day, only vanishing when you take the appropriate amount of **damage**. Not bad, I guess, but you won't see me sleeping in it. **I do have dignity**, you know. **Next!**



ENDERPOUCH ACCESSORY POCKET III

Oooooh, now **this** I like. What is it, you ask? Only a miniature ender chest that you wear on your belt. The **Pocket** enchantment is like a small **extradimensional space**. Any item with this enchantment functions as a container. Not only is the size of your inventory effectively **increased** but also you can retrieve items from the container in record time. **Pocket III** means three additional squares, meaning I could put **three different potions** in it. So Batman.

I don't yet have a **belt**, but I totally grabbed this. As soon as Breeze explained what it did . . .



DRAGONSKULL HELM ARMOR RESILIENCE VI

Hmm. Classic **tank gear** that greatly reduces damage from critical hits. What's not to like?

First of all, it's kinda cool, but I dunno. It's a dragon skull. Something **Urg the Barbarian** would wear. Or a Nethermancer. Just **not my style**.

But more than that, I'm not so sure about my future as **a tank**. I've tried it out, and I like **protecting** my friends, but dude—**taking damage gets old. Really old.** In fact, if you happen to be an aspiring adventurer, I advise doing anything to not be the tank. Like, **make up a story** about how a zombie in iron armor attacked your village when you were a little kid and **you've had nightmares** about it ever since. Then wipe away **imaginary tears** and say something about how you can't even **look** at a shield without wanting to cry.

Next!



"And **there it is**," S said, holding the crystal before us.

Breeze traced her fingers across its surface. "I've heard of a temple with the same name. Does this crystal belong there?"

S nodded. "It does. It's required to **light the beacon** located on the temple's roof."

"What happens when you do?" I asked.

"At night, its light will be seen from anywhere on the main continent, and even the outlying isles, like **the brightest blue star**."

"It's an ancient **warning system**," Breeze said. "Those living in remote areas will know to **prepare for war**. Every village should have at least **one librarian** who knows what the blue light means."

"You sure know your **lore**," S said, giving her a quizzical glance.

"I do. And I know that completing your quest will be **far from easy**. Surely the Eyeless One has already sent a considerable number of his **minions** to that temple."

S clutched his chest. "Wow. I think I'm **in love**." When Breeze gave him a **cold look** (*me too*), he raised his hands defensively.

"Joking, joking. Wait a sec. Are you two **an item?**!"

Breeze **blinked**. "Item?"

I have **no idea** what he meant by that, either. How can a person also be an **item**, let alone two people?

"Never mind," he said. "Anyway, **yeah**. You're probably right. I'm sure monsters are **guarding** that temple now. The last thing **Herobrine**

wants is someone lighting that beacon. Good thing I've got my dark apprentice here. He won't let me down."

He slapped Pebble across the back.

"How about we hit Owl's Reach again? I saw a few guys hanging around there who owe me a favor. I'm sure they wouldn't mind coming along. After seeing what that UrF guy was capable of . . ."

"He was such a noob before," Pebble said. "I don't get how he became SO powerful."

S grinned. "That's power leveling for you. Old Eyeless probably just kept summoning a bunch of monsters and weakening them for him. It's a cheap tactic and one the Boss Wizards used to employ a lot back in the day, even though it's against server rules. Or WAS, I should say. The rules don't exactly matter now. . . ."

"The Boss Wizards," I said. "I think I met some of them. Who are they?"

"A clan. One of the foulest. The complete opposite of the Lost Legion, really. They had no interest in proper player etiquette before the crash and infinitely less interest now."

"But the ones I talked to didn't seem so bad to me."

S shrugged. "They might act okay in the cities, where it's safe. But when you're at the end of the line, in places like this and in situations like the one we just faced, well, they'd leave you without a second thought. Don't trust 'em."

"We ended up grouping with some of them a few days ago," Pebble said gravely. "Didn't . . . go so well."

S made an annoyed sound and scratched the side of his face but said nothing.

"Anyway," Pebble looked at me like he'd been holding in the most important question of all time. "So, uh . . . how's Villagetown doing?"

'Surviving. Barely.'

"Kolb seems to think an advanced crafting table will help turn the tides," Breeze added.

"It'll definitely help," S said. "With that, you'll be able to craft obsidian weapons and armor. About the same as iron, really, but once you make an obsidian farm, you'll have an infinite supply."

Obsidian farm?

Sure, I slept a little in farming class,
but I don't have a clue what they're talking about.

"Listen, all we really came here for was the crystal," S said. "You guys take the rest. Sell whatever you don't want. Or sell it all. The boss dropped some pretty lame stuff this time around."

"Appreciate it," Breeze said.

"What about the glowmoss?" I asked.

"Oh. Sorry. It's in one of those chests," S said. "Minor quest items load in those."

Yes, you may have been wondering about the **eight ender chests** in the back of this room. I **checked five** of those chests; **all** were empty. However, after I slammed down the fifth lid, Breeze was right there beside me, sticking out her tongue. And also dangling a **soggy green item** in front of my face.



Legendary moss, huh?

How moss can be used to **craft armor**, I don't know, and I **don't really care**. When I looked at this item, which seemed to be little more than phosphorescent slime, I saw not moss but a **pile of emeralds—750**, to be exact. Shortly after I **stuffed** that thing into my inventory, there was a **faint crackling** from behind us. The blocks of magical ice Urf had created were **vanishing**.

(I'm guessing Nethermancers don't use ice spells too often. How can ice exist in the Nether?!)

S returned his **emerald greatsword** to the scabbard on his back. **A bit jumpy.**

"All right," he said. "Since we're both headed to Owl's Reach, I guess we might as well **head there together**, yeah?"

"Yeah, if **Shybiss** can keep up," I said. "That's her horse. Not sure what happened to . . . **mine**." Quick! Change the subject! I turned to Pebble. "So um, after you've lit that beacon, are you gonna **come back**? Considering how what happened before wasn't your fault, I'm sure the mayor would **pardon you**."

"I'm not sure," he said. "I already **promised** S that I'd go traveling with him. He's been working on **a ship**. You should see it. We still need to **find several items** to get it up and running, though. One of the items was in this cave. You wouldn't believe—"

"Like he said," S **interrupted** with a smile, "it still needs **a lot** of work. But maybe **someday**."

*(There was something strange about the way he cut Pebble off like that.
Why all these secrets?!)*

The former **bully** looked at me and shrugged. "I'm sure I'll visit at some point, Runt. Until then, tell everyone that I'm . . . sorry." He looked around again. "Can we leave now?"

With that, we left the dungeon. Just as that mysterious voice had claimed, the halls were now **devoid** of monsters, and the golden pressure plates only clicked lightly when we stepped on them. Of course, I stared at that vault again as we walked past, wondering what it could possibly **contain**. . . .

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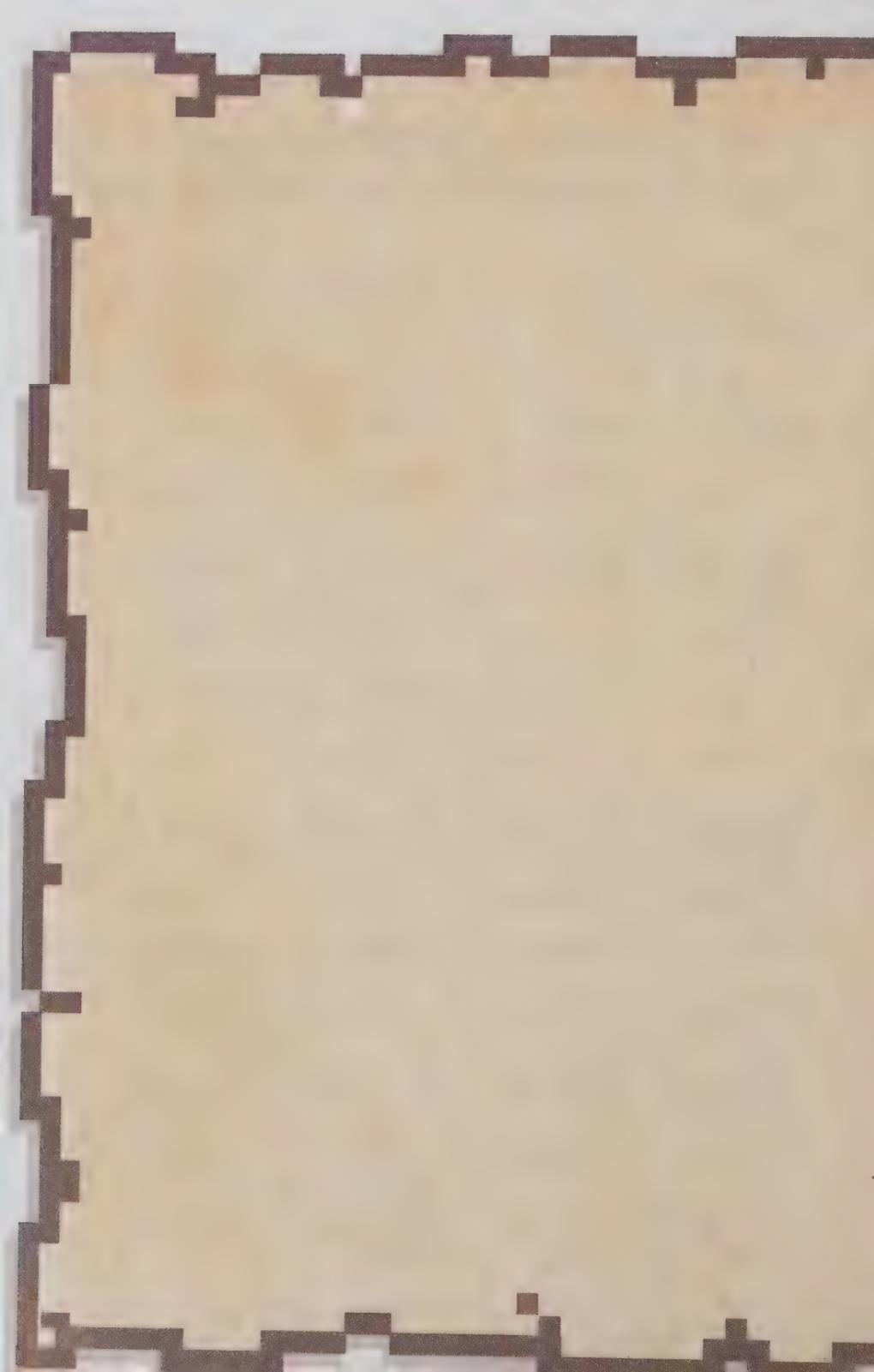
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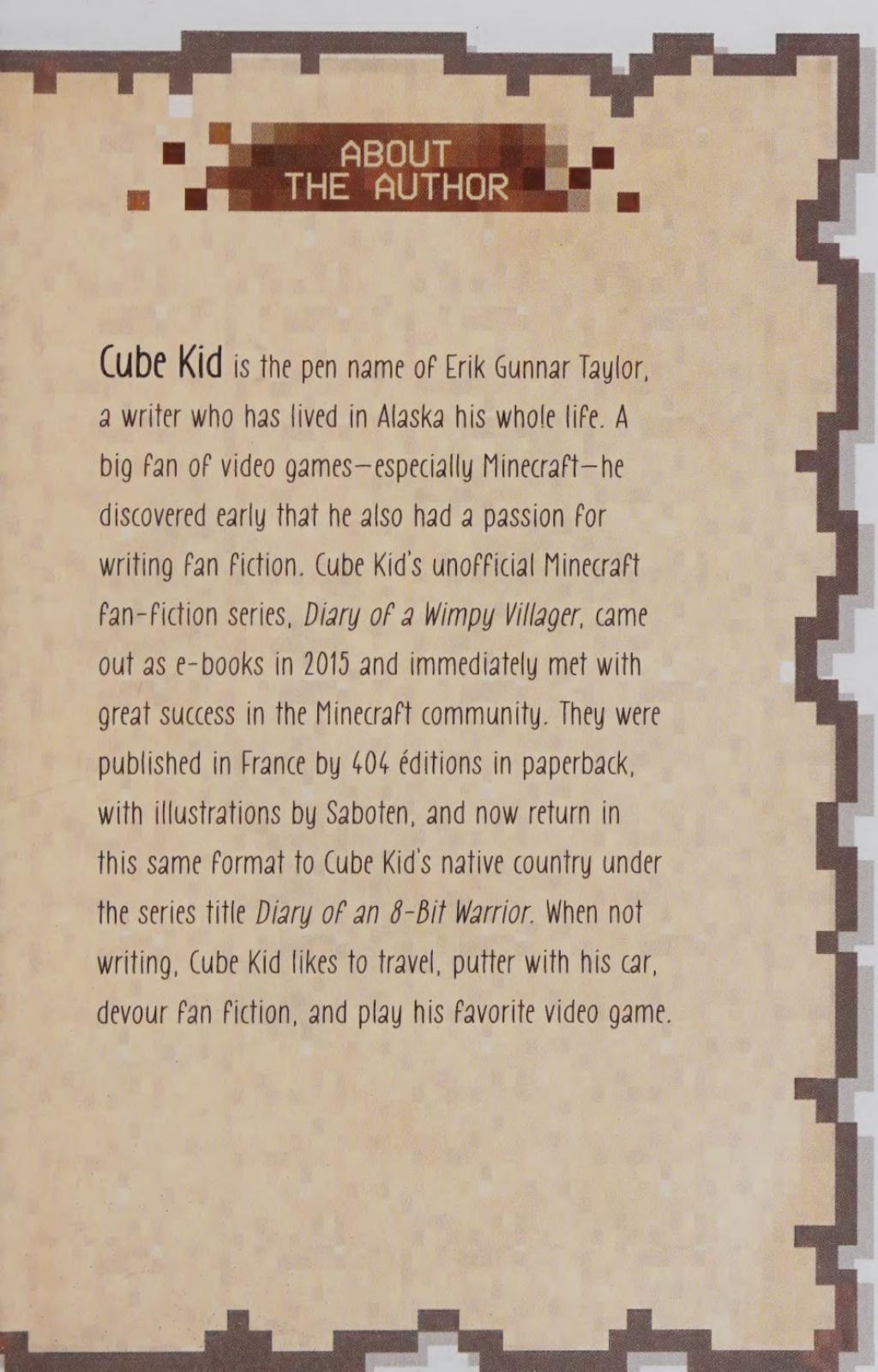


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cube Kid is the pen name of Erik Gunnar Taylor, a writer who has lived in Alaska his whole life. A big fan of video games—especially Minecraft—he discovered early that he also had a passion for writing fan fiction. Cube Kid's unofficial Minecraft fan-fiction series, *Diary of a Wimpy Villager*, came out as e-books in 2015 and immediately met with great success in the Minecraft community. They were published in France by 404 éditions in paperback, with illustrations by Saboten, and now return in this same format to Cube Kid's native country under the series title *Diary of an 8-Bit Warrior*. When not writing, Cube Kid likes to travel, putter with his car, devour fan fiction, and play his favorite video game.



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