BOOK ONE - Io Online GREYSCONE

DAVE WILLMARTH

The Greystone Chronicles Book One Io Online

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Chapter One

Caverns of The Dark Lord

Alexander stood upon a wide stone ledge, looking out over an underground cavern below. To his right, a roughly hewn ramp sloped down a few dozen feet to the cavern floor. Above him the stone rose up fifty feet or more to a domed ceiling, from which hung hundreds of stalactites. From Alexander's perspective, with the unsteady light from their torches fading into distant darkness, the entire cave looked like a monstrous maw, waiting to grind and swallow him and his party.

This is it. We kill this boss, and there should be some epic loot!

One massive grandfather stalactite hung near the center of the cave. Its tip having grown down over millennia to reach a corresponding stalagmite growing up from the cavern floor, the two of them forming a sort of column. Surrounding the base of the column was a small pond, presumably fed by the same water that formed the cavern's fearsome teeth, one drop at a time. To one side of the pond stood some sort of low stone altar, with a three-foot tall pedestal set in its center. It too looked as if it had grown from the living stone, its surface marbled and glistening with moisture. With the limited light of his torch, he could not make out the object sitting upon the pedestal, but that had to be what they were here for.

Alexander took a deep breath, and held it. He focused on the feeling of his chest expanding fully. Of his muscles moving. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, rolled his shoulders, and flexed his arms. There was certainly a fight coming. He could see no adversaries below, but he knew they were there. One last battle, and they would finally clear this dungeon. He was ready.

Behind him, he could feel Sasha smiling at him. They had adventured together for years now, and she knew well his pre-fight rituals. She understood his need to focus, to establish firm control over each muscle in his body. He drew his sword and executed a few casual practice swings as he turned to face her. She was his oldest friend, and she was beautiful. Dressed in supple tan deerskin armor, and holding a wooden staff that was taller than her five-foot frame, she had auburn hair that reminded him of autumn leaves,

and eyes shaded a nearly crystalline silver he'd only ever seen in arctic wolves.

"Are you ready, oh purveyor of band-aids?" he asked.

Sasha's smile faded to a pretend scowl as she made a gesture with one hand that would be universally recognized in any land. "I got your band-aids right here, muscle head. But maybe I won't heal your rude ass when the boss down there is munching on your face! Your life will literally be in my hands. Didn't your daddy teach you it's not wise to annoy your healer?"

"My apologies, most beautiful and talented druidess. I know it must be stressful, standing way in the back during a fight, wiggling your hands about occasionally, while the rest of us are face to face with our foes."

"Speak for yourself" said Max, the third member of their group. Six feet tall, with the lithe but obviously powerful body of a half-elf. He was dressed all in dark green leather armor with lightweight blackened steel bands fastened in critical areas on his chest, forearms, thighs, and shins. Max was a Ranger, and while he wore a curved elven sword at his hip, and two knives sheathed at the small of his back, he was primarily a bowman. He held up his enchanted elven bow, smooth wooden curves engraved with a leaf and vine pattern, and pointed at Alexander. Then shifted it to indicate Sasha and himself. "Not all of us want get up close and personal with these monsters. Smell their foul breath. And it takes forever to get monster blood out of this armor. Some of us are content to work from a distance, and laugh as you get poked with pointy things and bashed with heavy things."

Alexander smiled at his friend, and was about to respond when he was interrupted by Brick, the team's tank.

"Face to face, ye say? Were ye not paying attention to that last mini-boss. That demon had to be fifteen feet tall at least. Meself, I was able to spend most of the fight hunched behind me shield, bashing it in the knees and insulting its mum to make it angry. Alex pretty much spent the whole fight lookin' him right in the ball sack!"

As the others laughed, Alexander grimaced, remembering the unpleasant battle just an hour earlier, one level up. He and Brick had had to focus on the monster's legs for quite a while, weakening them until it fell to its knees

and they could reach its torso and head to get some critical hits.

"At least you were in front of him" said Alexander. "I don't know what he ate for breakfast, but I can tell you he had a 'gas' weapon; made my eyes water so badly I nearly couldn't see to hit him!".

"Exactly my point, oh stabby stabby one." Max commented dryly. "From where Sasha and I were standing, the air was relatively fresh the whole fight."

As everyone laughed at the exchange, Alexander looked to his friends, one by one. He thought to himself how lucky he was to have found each of them. They were good people, good friends. Over the last couple of years they had learned to work smoothly together as a team. Almost without speaking during a fight, each knew where to position themselves, what was needed from them, and when. When Brick was low on health or got stunned, Alexander would step in and steal aggro on whatever mobs or boss they battled, then would slowly back up, defending himself and kiting the mobs in a small circle while Brick recovered, and Sasha healed. The whole time, Max would alternate shots into any mobs that were threatening to flank Alexander or otherwise penetrate his defense, doing consistent damage, without drawing Then, Brick would shout or shield bash to take back aggro aggro himself. and Alexander would go back to cutting and stabbing the mobs from behind. Each transfer was seamless The only need to speak came when it was necessary to call out adds (roving patrols who walk into range during a fight, or minions called by a boss) or to remind everyone of an AOE, or special attack a boss was about to unleash.

These are the best people I know. Alexander thought to himself. *I'll miss them when I'm gone.*

Of course, there was the occasional unnecessary communication. Just yesterday they had nearly wiped when Brick, a stout Dwarf whose four-foot frame was encased in his heavy Dwarven-crafted plate armor, barely managed to raise his shield in time to block a massive overhead blow from a rock giant. The force of the blow was absorbed between Brick's shield, armor, and his nearly unbreakable Dwarven bones, but it drove him into the soil up to his knees. Upon discovering that he couldn't move, and hearing a short joke drift in from Max (as usual, well distanced in the back), Brick let

out a stream of inventive and colorful curses that caused even the giant to pause and tilt its head, eyes wide in respect. Which had the rest of the group laughing too hard to fight.

This was what Alexander lived for. The adventure, the friendship, the challenge. Not for the first time, he wished that this was his real life.

"You know I love you all, right?" Alex said when the laughter faded. "You're my family."

"Shaddup with yer lovey dovey crap," Brick responded in his typically sensitive manner. "I don't care how pretty you are, I ain't givin you a smooch!"

Max simply grunted and nodded his head in agreement. Sasha looked into Alexander's eyes, and gave him a small half-smile. She alone understood. She knew what his life was in the real world.

"And, as usual..." Alexander began, "I shall demonstrate my love for you by leading you into yet another battle against impossible odds. Where you will likely be maimed, or killed, then eaten. And eventually shat out onto a pile of old bones."

"Awww," sniffed Brick. "Ya know just how to touch me heart!"

Sasha stepped closer to the edge of the rock shelf and looked down for a moment. Then she turned to the group and took over. "Ok morons, everybody loves everybody, we're all likely to die, so let's get on with it". Sasha had a gift for tactics, and though Alexander was their group leader, Sasha most often planned and directed their fights. From her position at the rear, she was able to see more of the fight, and had the time to monitor things like the boss's health level, upcoming special attacks, or incoming adds. So she was the one to call out adjustments.

"Everybody grab some food or drink, buff up. There are no mobs visible down there, but you just know there are things with sharp teeth and pointy sticks hiding behind those rocks. Probably a lot of them. And we don't even know what the boss looks like. Nobody has been in this dungeon before."

"Yeah, baby! First kill means epic loot drops!" Max cheered.

"Focus on living through this fight! Then we'll celebrate and loot," Sasha

admonished, only half serious.

"Right, then. Everybody to the bottom of the ramp. Max, find something to shoot when we get there. Try... PLEASE try... to pull just a few mobs. Not like upstairs when you hit that imp in the very back of the room, and it pulled a dozen others with it all at once!"

Max, hung his head in shame while Brick mumbled something to himself about huntards. "I know. My bad. I was aiming for the closest, but it moved at the last second and the arrow just kept going. Won't happen again."

Sasha nodded her head and continued. "Brick, once Max has their attention, pick a narrow spot near the bottom of the ramp, leaving our retreat path open just in case. Maybe get between two of those stalagmites to block your flanks and limit how many of them can get at you at once." Brick simply nodded his head.

"Alex, do your thing once Brick has control. Stay aware of your position, and keep yourself within my line of sight for heals. And, as always, you and Max focus on healers and casters first. Hopefully the boss won't jump in until the other mobs are dead. But if he comes in early, I'll call it out and we'll adjust. Max and I will position a few steps up the ramp for better sighting."

Our plan established, the group moved down the ramp. Brick chose his spot, and each of them tossed a torch to the ground in a rough circle around it; far enough out to see approaching monsters in time to react, while being careful not to drop them into any puddles that would extinguish them.

Without a word, Max activated his stealth ability and crept forward in search of their first victims. Much more effective in forest settings, Max's stealth still allowed him to blend into the cavern's shadows well enough to avoid detection by your standard mob, at least at a distance. Since he was planning to shoot them, he didn't need to get close.

After just a few moments, the group heard a short screech, followed by two more. Then Max came running back into and through the circle of light, past Brick and Alexander. He winked at them as he passed, taking position next to Sasha on the ramp.

Brick lifted his shield with his left arm. Made of solid steel, and nearly as tall

as the dwarf himself, it weighed more than 50 pounds. But with his Dwarven strength, Brick handled it easily. In his right hand he gripped a war hammer with a frosty mug of ale etched into its head. Brick stepped forward with his left foot, leaving his right well behind, and crouched almost into a sprinter's stance. As the first three minor demons entered into the light and approached Brick's chosen spot, he activated his Shield Rush ability. He shot forward ten feet and his shield met the foes with a resounding clang just as they reached the spot between two stalagmites.

The lead demon took the shield directly to its face, instantly claiming half its health, and knocking it back into the other two. Brick called out, "in your FACE!" as he swung his mighty war hammer down, crushing the already dented head of the first demon and ending its life with a critical hit. As the other two regained their feet, he slammed the bottom edge of his shield into the cavern floor, sending out a shock wave that temporarily stunned the two remaining demons. He set his iron-shod feet, leaned into his shield, and began loudly insulting the mobs. Brick called this "taunting", though it wasn't an actual ability he was using. He had those ready, in case they were needed, but he preferred to develop his litany of "love poems" as he called them. He relied on the stuns and damaging blows from his hammer to hold aggro.

As Brick engaged and insulted the mobs, Alexander used his "Identify" ability to assess them.

Minor Demon Warrior

Level 75

Health 9280/9500

So either Brick's shield bash, or the impact with the other demon, had already cost the remaining two some hp. Well done, Brick!

The demons stood about seven feet tall, with ebony skin that rendered them invisible in the dark. They had dead black eyes with red slitted pupils that glowed slightly in the firelight. Though they had large leathery wings, Alexander knew from previous battles that they were not capable of flight. The wings were as tough as boiled leather and the demons often used them to shield themselves. Both had wicked looking one-handed swords, and razor-

sharp claws on each hand. They sported sharp horns on their heads, and used them as weapons given a chance.

Alexander moved around behind the two monsters and raised his two-handed sword above his head. The sword was enchanted with extra strength and sharpness, and with a powerful swing could cut through stone. As he was deciding which demon to strike first, an arrow struck the side of the left demon's head. Max had chosen the demon on Brick's hammer side, as that was where the dwarf was more vulnerable. *Left it is, then.*

Alexander took one step to his left and jumped forward toward the chosen target. As he came down, he put all he had into a downward swing, aimed between the wings at the demon's neck where it joined the shoulder. Completely focused on Brick and his love poetry, the demon did not see the blow coming. The massive sword sliced down through the demon's shoulder and well into its chest cavity.

Critical hit!!

Damage dealt -6,000hp

Minor Demon Warrior has died

Just like that, there was only one. Battle mechanics in Io Online dictated that backstabs, strikes from behind, and stealth attacks had a higher likelihood of achieving critical hits which did up to three times the normal weapon damage. Between Brick's stun damage, and what was probably also a critical hit to the demon's head by Max's arrow, the damage from Alexander's blow took all of the demon's remaining health in one shot.

Seeing its partner's death, the remaining demon turned and set its gaze upon Alexander. As Alexander pulled at his sword to remove it from the fallen monster, Brick swung his war hammer down, striking the wrist on the demon's sword hand. There was an audible crunch, and it's sword dropped to the ground. Having freed his sword, and expecting a slash to the face from the demon's claws, Alexander raised his sword in a high guard position.

In a flash, the demon kicked an iron hard cloven hoof into Alexander's unguarded torso. The impact crushed the breath from Alexander's lungs and sent his body tumbling back out of the circle of torchlight to crash into a huge

stalagmite. His vision flashed red, indicating he had taken damage. A quick look at his health bar showed he was at about 40% health. He tried to rise, but something in his chest was broken, and he was still unable to take a breath. There must have been internal damage, because a "bleeding" icon that looked like a box with a drop of blood in it was flashing in the corner of his vision. He looked down in the dim light and was barely able to see that his chain mail was visibly damaged where the hoof had struck him. *These demons are no joke! That one must have incredible strength*.

Alexander heard Sasha cry out in frustration, and realized she would be unable to see him out here in the dark. He needed to move back to where she could see and heal him. The impact with the stone had caused him to drop his sword. He felt around until he located the hilt, then took up the sword and used it as a crutch to lever himself up. Unable to stand straight, he stumbled toward the torches and his friends.

He could see Brick was still battling the last demon. Protected by his shield, he was hitting the monster as often as possible but not doing much damage. His job as a tank was more to absorb damage than to inflict it. Alexander saw half a dozen arrows stuck into the demon's head and chest. Max had been busy. Its health bar was at about 60%. It had taken up its fallen sword in its undamaged left hand and was attempting to get around Brick's shield.

As soon as he stepped into the light, Alexander felt the cool tingling of a major heal from Sasha. At the same time, he felt the searing pain of his bones and organs resetting and mending themselves. His legs grew weak from the shock and wanted to collapse beneath him, but he would not allow his body to fail. He would not accept weakness that might endanger his friends!

Alexander clenched his jaw, took another deep breath, and held it. His pain level in the game was set at about 50% of real life. He focused on controlling every muscle in his body while ignoring the pain. He was stone. He was steel. There was no weakness, only strength. He would not fail.

As he straightened up and stepped forward for another attack, he felt a second heal from Sasha wash over him, taking him back to 100 percent and ending the pain completely. He raised the sword over one shoulder like a baseball batter at the plate. Stepping behind and to one side of the remaining demon,

he spun to his left in a complete 360-degree turn. With the momentum of his spinning body's weight he swung the sword at the demon's torso. The blade struck, shearing through ribs and organs, severing the demon's spine in a spray of blood and bits of tissue. As the demon fell dead against Brick's shield and slid to the ground, Sasha and Max came running over.

"Are you alright? What happened?" Sasha asked anxiously.

"That thing kicked like a mule" Alexander replied, shaking his head and pointing at the damage to his armor. "Caved in my chest, knocked me back about 20 feet into the stone. Think I broke ribs in front and back. Hurt like hell."

Having reassured herself that he would live, Sasha smiled her brightest smile. Her eyes full of mischief. "See what happens when you get all up and huggy with the monsters? You should at least get rid of that massive phallic sword and pick up a shield like Brick, here."

"Hush. The ladies like my big phallic sword."

Sasha snorted at this, while Brick nodded enthusiastically. "And I like the feeling of hand to hand combat. I don't even really mind the pain from the damage. Most of the time. It makes me feel alive." Alexander added.

Sasha's smile faded some, and she looked into his eyes. He saw the beginning of tears forming in hers, and decided to quickly change the subject.

"Are we going to stand around here, or are we gonna finish this dungeon?"

"To battle!" yelled Brick, always up for a fight. "Kill em all!"

Max stealthed and crept his way back into the darkness to start the next pull. The rest of them quickly looted the dead demons, checked their gear to make sure all was in readiness, then turned to face the dark and wait for Max.

Six more pulls, and the team had killed more than twenty demon warriors, two demon clerics with shadow magic abilities, and a dozen annoying little imps that hung back at the edges of the fight and shot fireballs and lightning at them until Max took them out with arrows. Luckily, none of the friends took any serious hits during these fights, and their gear was still mostly intact. Sasha had observed that none of the mobs they'd fought were healers. *Apparently, demons didn't believe in heals. If you weren't strong*

enough to survive a fight on your own, you didn't deserve to. Good for us, bad for them.

Having eliminated all the "trash mobs" in the cavern, they had expected the boss to come charging out to attack. That didn't happen. Suspicious, Sasha told Max to make one more round of the cavern, checking behind rocks and any places a mob might be hiding. While he was looking, the group took up the torches and moved closer to the center of the cavern. There was more open space close to the altar, which meant better lines of sight for Sasha to heal. There were still columns of stone they could hide behind in case the boss unleashed an AOE attack.

Still waiting for Max, Alexander decided to poke around the altar, maybe see what was on the pedestal. He jammed Max's torch into a crack in one of the stalagmites. The ground here was wet, and he didn't want to drop a torch and have it go out. Following his lead, Sasha and Brick found places to mount their torches as well. Alexander kept the last one in hand and walked over to the altar.

Not being a noob, Alexander knew better than to step up onto the stone structure as that would surely summon the boss. Or activate a trap of some kind. Or both. So he stood at what he considered a safe distance, and inspected the pedestal. It looked to be made of the same stone as everything else in the cavern, grey rock with black and brown marbling. The pedestal rose up in one seamless piece from the rock of the altar. At the top it formed a flat surface, on which sat a stone box. The entire thing looked as if it had been grown, rather than sculpted from the rock. Like everything else in the cave its surface had a sheen of moisture. Thicker than water, it looked almost oily.

Max walked casually out of the darkness, shaking his head. "No more mobs that I can find. There must be a trigger to call the boss," he said, eyeing Alexander and the altar meaningfully. Alexander noticed the others staring his way as well, expectant looks on their faces. Brick was smiling like he just rolled a 20.

"Yer up, Alex! Go grab that box and let the boss chase you around a bit."

"What? Why me? You're the damn tank. Heavy armor, big shieldy thing. Annoying the boss is your ONE job!"

"True. True. But ye see, we have to pick our spot. I pick this spot right over here. I can put me back to this here boulder, so no knockbacks. Nice open space for Mr. Shooty over there and our healer, but still good amounts of rock to hide behind if needed." Brick smiled as he explained.

"Yeah, okay. I agree. It's a good spot. So?" Alex was getting a sinking feeling he was about to be outsmarted.

"Well ye see..." Brick began "this here spot is a fair distance from that altar. With me stubby legs and all this armor, I don't think I could grab the box and make it back here before the boss catches up to me. Then we'd be fightin' out in the open. But yer lanky ass could grab the box and lead the boss right over here to me, no problem!"

Sometimes I just want to punch that dwarf.

Shaking his head, Alexander resigned himself to being boss bait. While the others positioned themselves, he walked back over to the altar. Taking one more deep breath, with his sword in one hand and the torch in the other, he stepped up onto the stone structure.

Spinning around, he looked left and right, searching for any movement. His ears strained for the roar of an angry boss mob, or the stomp of heavy feet. He saw the others were doing the same.

After ten suspenseful seconds, nothing had happened. Alexander looked to the others. Max just shrugged. Sasha smiled her great big smile and made a shoo'ing motioned toward the box. Brick waved his arms to get Alexander's attention, then carefully and clearly mouthed the words, "get the damn box".

Resigned to his fate, Alexander approached the altar. He took a moment to inspect the box, looking at each side, searching for trip wires or pressure plates, or any other obvious traps. He sheathed his sword and used his free hand to gently feel the edges of the box and the pedestal. Finding nothing, he resolved to just grab the box and haul ass.

Alexander took a last look at the group, all of whom seemed more amused than afraid. He set the torch down atop the pedestal, and rubbed his hands together before reaching toward the box. Another deep breath, and he counted down to himself.

Three... two....one!

Alexander grabbed the box, lifted it off the pedestal, and made a running leap off the edge of the altar, all in one motion. Not even looking around, he sprinted toward Brick with every bit of speed he could summon. He felt a tingling heal as he ran. Apparently, Sasha had thrown him a preemptive heal in case he sprung a trap.

At about his third step, he heard a great splashing noise coming from the pond. He didn't turn around, just continued his dash toward Brick. When he reached the tank, he slid to a halt against the boulder behind Brick's back, and set the box down at the base of the stone. Then he jumped up, unsheathed his sword, and backed away as he looked toward the pond. He saw the tank look down at the box on the ground behind him, then over toward the boss. Then back to the box, eyes widening in realization.

Alexander shifted his gaze from Brick to the pond, and smiled as he heard the dwarf say, "Well, shit."

Out of the pond came the boss. It looked to Alexander like a 40-foot snake, with a pair of demon wings and two human looking arms sprouting from its torso just below its head. Its body was four to five feet in diameter from its head all the way down near its tail, which tapered off into a point with what looked to be a stinger at the end. It wore no armor, but the scales looked thick and tough. In its right hand it held a mace with an iron serpent's head at the end. The weapon's head sported two steel fangs that dripped poison.

Alex used his "Identify" skill on the boss

Demon Lord Level 90 Health 30,000/30,000

"Well, shit" is about right, Brick. Alexander thought. This is going to hurt.

Never one to shy away from a fight, Brick immediately began to yell at the boss. "C'mere ya damned demon worm! I got yer precious box right here under me arse. Come take it if ye can! I'll pluck off yer wings'n use 'em for curtains!"

Not needing any encouragement, the snake boss made straight for the tank.

Slithering across the stone floor it moved with surprising speed. Brick raised his shield, placed his back foot against the boulder behind him, and leaned toward the oncoming demon. At the last moment, he activated his Shield Rush ability and shot forward five feet, slamming his shield into the torso of the giant snake. The creature was momentarily stunned. Brick backed up until his back was once again near the large boulder behind him, then set his shield, leaned in, and tightened his grip on his hammer.

As the snake recovered and moved in on the tank, Alexander noted that the attack had taken about 200 health points from the boss. Only 29,800 to go!

As the snake began to hammer at Brick's shield, Max opened fire from its left side, aiming for its eyes and what looked like weak spots under the creature's arm. Sasha cast a HOT (heal over time) spell on Brick that would keep him topped off at 100% after any small hits. She was saving her big heals for later.

Alexander moved to the side of the boss, keeping one eye on the tail and its stinger. He aimed an experimental downward slash at the back of the monster, just below where its torso curved up into a vertical position. The blade's magically sharpened edge penetrated the scales and a cut a line into the creature's back but not a very deep one. Dark black blood oozed from the cut, but the monster didn't react to the attack. Alexander quickly checked his combat log.

Downward slash causes 180 damage to Demon Lord

At this rate this is going to be a very long fight.

As he was mentally calculating how many hits it was going to take to bring down this boss, Alexander caught a flash of movement to his right. He instinctively dove forward toward the body of the snake. Turning his head, he saw the snake's stinger pass by, barely missing his back. It struck the floor, making a scratching noise and leaving a splatter of dark venom on the stone. Alexander noted what looked to be a venom sac just behind the stinger, attached to a segmented joint that merged to the snake's body.

As the stinger withdrew back behind the snake monster, Alexander turned toward the torso and placed the point of his sword at about the serpent's midpoint. He triggered one of his combat abilities, Unstoppable Force, and

shoved the point of the sword into the demon's body. The entire four-foot length of the blade sunk into the torso. With every ounce of strength he had, he levered the hilt up and down, doing as much cutting damage as he could before drawing the blade out again. He hadn't scored a crit, but noted that maybe 5% dropped off the boss's health bar.

Demon Lord Level 90 Health 26,900/30,000

So at about a minute into the fight, and the boss was down about 10%. *Not great, but workable*.

He caught movement again and had to dodge the stinger. It missed, and the tail retreated, but remained poised in the air like a scorpion tail. If he had to keep dodging that thing, his DPS was going to stay low, and they might lose this fight. Most bosses had an enrage timer. If they were not killed within a specified amount of time (generally ten minutes or so) they would enrage. The boss would gain great strength, and special abilities like group stuns or massive crit strikes. At that point the fight was usually a wipe, meaning everybody died.

On a hunch, Alexander moved away from the boss and stepped to his left, closer to Brick. He called out to his friends. "I have an idea! When I say go, Max you try and shoot the thing in its eye. Brick, use your strongest taunt. It's going to whip its stinger at you. You'll need to duck down so the stinger hits the rock behind you!"

Both of them nodded their understanding. Alexander moved so that he was standing behind and off to one side of Brick. Close enough that he could reach the box with his sword, but out of line of the expected stinger attack.

"Okay, go!!"

Max fired three arrows in rapid succession, at the same time that Brick roared out his Battle Cry taunt. The stinger shot forward toward the tank just as the arrows struck the demon's face. One of the arrows managed to penetrate the eye, partially blinding and distracting the monster, while the other two bounced away harmlessly.

Brick hunkered down behind his shield, blocking a swing of the mace on his left side before dropping to the ground with the shield on his back. The stinger flew past him and impacted the rock, punching a hole in the stone and filling it with venom.

"Holy shit," muttered Brick as he got back up and raised his shield to deflect another mace attack.

Alexander leapt forward, sword raised over his head. He used his body weight combined with the strength of his torso and arms to power the sword down into the segmented section of the tail above the venom sac. With the stinger embedded in the stone, the power of his leveraged strike cleanly sliced through the end of the tail leaving the stinger and venom sac hanging from the stone.

The tail whipped back as the demon roared in pain. Alexander took a moment to check its health.

Demon Lord Level 90 Health 21,300/30,000

Much better! With the threat of the stinger gone, Alexander returned the side of the monster. When he was sure that Brick had its full attention, he began to cut away at the demon's torso with all his might. He noted that there was a "bleed status" icon above the boss's head. It was steadily bleeding from its tail, losing hp every few seconds. In addition, it was blind on its left side where Alexander was standing. So to hit Alexander, or block his hits, it would need to turn its head far to the left to see him.

Alexander moved in close and swung high over his head, slicing into the forearm of the demon and severing it. The creature's clawed left hand fell to the floor and twitched. That put another continued bleed on the boss.

After a few more cuts into the creature's torso Alexander turned to check up on his team. Sasha was busily healing Brick as he absorbed devastating blows from the monster's mace. One of the fangs from the mace must have either penetrated the tank's shield, or made it around the edge to scratch his arm, because he was pulsing with a sickly green glow that indicated he was poisoned. Even as Alexander was about to shout to Sasha, she cast a

Cleanse followed by a major heal, eliminating the poison and bringing him back to about 90 percent health.

Max had discovered that the demon snake's nose was sensitive and was launching arrow after arrow into it. Three shafts already jutted from the snout, and the creature kept trying to pull them out with its missing left hand. Instead all it managed to do was hit the shafts with its forearm, causing itself more pain and doing more damage in the process.

Alexander was turning to resume his attacks on the demon's back when his legs were flung out from underneath him and the back of his head slammed into the floor. While he'd been watching his friends, the snake's tail had whipped around and hit him from behind. His vision flashed red and narrowed to pinpoint tunnels. An icon flashed in his vision, showing his status as 'stunned' with a timer counting down from ten seconds. Above him he could see the tail moving back in his direction, but was unable to move to avoid it. The bloodied stump came crashing down on his head and torso. The impact caused him to cough up a spray of blood, and his health bar dropped quickly to 10%.

He felt a heal from Sasha as the tail raised up to strike again. His stun wore off, and he rolled to his left in time to avoid the crushing blow that would have killed him. Death was no joke in Io Online. His character would respawn, but at a lower level and without his gear. If he and his friends died here there was no way they could run all the way back through the dungeon to reclaim their gear. The amount of time he had spent leveling, learning abilities, and gathering gear, would be wasted if he died. As Sasha hit him with a second heal he got to his feet and stepped away from the boss. Keeping an eye on the tail, he allowed Brick some time to recapture the boss's attention.

Demon Lord Level 90 Health 15,400/30,000

Sasha called out for Alexander to move back, and for Brick to prepare his mitigation ability. The boss was about to hit 50% health which almost always triggered some special ability.

As Alexander stepped back, he continued to keep an eye on the thrashing

tail. It whipped wildly about, striking the stone in which Sasha had lodged her torch. Her torch was knocked loose, and Alexander made a dive for it, not wanting it to fall and reduce their light. He was too slow, and the torch fell into a small puddle at the base of the rock. Instead of the water extinguishing the torch, the puddle caught fire and actually increased the light.

Just then, another arrow from Max dropped the boss below 50% health. It raised its arms and let out a roar that shook the entire cavern and dislodged a few of the stalactites from the ceiling. As the whole party dodged falling rocks and impact shrapnel, the boss moved back to the pond. It slid into the water and thrashed around angrily.

When the rocks stopped falling, the boss emerged from the pool and went back to attacking the tank immediately. Sasha called out "heads up!" and pointed to the demon's tail. It was no longer bleeding, and the wound had sealed. The same was true for the creature's arm, and the damage done to its back. It no longer had the bleed de-buff, and its health had gone up by 10%.

Fortunately, its eye had not healed since the arrow shaft was still embedded in it. The shafts in the creature's nose were still there as well, and seemed to annoy it as much as ever.

So, the water heals it. And at 50% it's going to jump back in and heal again. We'll run out of stamina and mana before this demon dies.

Alexander jumped back into the fight, one eye on the monster's tail while he tried to cut through the demon's body and sever its spine. Maybe if he could keep it immobilized it wouldn't be able to go back to the pond to heal.

Sasha must have been thinking the same thing. She shouted "Max get around to the its right side. Shoot its right eye out! Maybe blind, it won't be able to find the pond!"

The fight continued for another minute or so. As the boss's health approached 50%, Alexander desperately hacked at its back, trying to cut away enough flesh to reach its spine and disable it. Finally, he leapt upon the creature's back and raised his sword above his head, point down. He plunged the sword deep into the demon's back, causing it to scream in pain and turn its head toward him. Unfortunately, he missed the spine and did not disable

the creature. He did reduce it to below 50% health, however. It let out its tremendous roar, loosening more rock teeth from the ceiling, then it spun around and headed for the pond to heal.

As the creature spun Alexander was thrown from its back. He hit the ground and rolled to a stop. Looking up, he saw a man-sized chunk of pointed rock falling right in his direction. He threw himself toward a boulder, hoping it would provide some protection. As he came to a stop, he felt a burning sensation on his arm. Probably some shrapnel from the falling rock impacting the floor. He looked down at his arm and found that it was on fire! When he landed, he'd placed his hand in the puddle that had been set on fire by the fallen torch! The incredible pain brought tears to his eyes.

He jumped up, waving his burning arm at Sasha, who was distracted dodging falling stone. He needed her to heal him! The flaming water was burning his arm away.

The water is burning!

No longer waiting for a heal, Alexander gritted his teeth and grabbed up the still burning torch. He sprinted toward the pond, yelling, "the water burns!". Within range of the pond, he hurled the torch, aiming for the boss that was thrashing around in the water. The flaming projectile bounced once on the boss's head before dropping into the water. For a split second nothing happened, and Alexander worried that his hunch had been wrong.

Then the entire surface of the pond erupted in flame! There was a tremendous "whoosh" and it seemed all the oxygen had been sucked from the air. The boss reared up from the water, emitting a scream that deafened the whole party. Then came a loud whistling, like a teapot only at a higher pitch. Then the boss simply exploded! Pieces of foul-smelling flesh and scales scattered everywhere, splattering the group. The head of the demon landed nearly intact at the base of the altar. The rest burned away in small pieces, or sank into the brightly burning pond.

In the silence that followed, Alexander felt the soothing tingle of another heal from Sasha. As she approached him, she said, "last one for a minute, I'm totally out of mana". Alexander sat where he was, leaning against the boulder behind him. Sasha sat next to him, breathing heavily. Alexander saw Brick drop his shield and sit down with the stone box from the pedestal

in his lap. Max, being Max, was moving toward the boss's head to check on their epic loot.

A message flashed before Alexander's eyes.

Achievement earned: First Kill!

You are the first to complete the "Caverns of the Dark Lord" Dungeon and slay Demon Lord Sr'vok!

Fame points awarded: 1,000

Experience: 23,000

First Kill Reward: Epic or Legendary level item

From the looks on his friends faces, they were all seeing the same message. Each of them had a golden halo surrounding them, indicating that they have gained at least one level from the experience.

Alexander just closed his eyes, and took another deep breath.

Level up! You have reached level 74!

Your Strength has increased +1. Your Stamina has increased +1.

You have 2 free attribute points available!

You have 5 free skill points available!

Chapter Two

Loot, I Am Your Father

Alexander opened his eyes at the sound of Max celebrating what must have been a drool-worthy loot drop.

"YeeeeHAW!! I love first kill drops! There's something here for each of us. I think you're really gonna like this last one, Mr. Baggins," Max said, favoring Alexander with a smile and a wink.

Baggins? What? Did he get hit on the head in that last fight? "What are you talking about, Max?"

"Hold on," Max replied "First things first. Loot this good should be distributed properly, in order of awesomeness. Which makes ME first!" Max reached down and lifted his prize to show the others. It was an archer's quiver that looked as if it were made of the serpent boss's scales. Dark and supple, it almost seemed to absorb the ambient light.

Elven Quiver of Constant Wood

Item Level: Epic, Scalable Stats: +10 Agility, +10 Focus

When equipped, this magical quiver will produce unlimited wooden Elven Arrows with +5 damage. In addition, once per day it has a 20% chance to produce a magic arrow with special abilities. Class bonus: Even when full, this quiver will be completely silent as the Ranger moves. That's right, unlimited wood, and total silence. What more could a guy ask for?

Brick snorted and pointed at Max "Hahahaha! Constant wood, that's funny!"

Sasha just rolled her eyes. "What did the boss drop for me?" She asked.

Max reached down and lifted a 6-foot long ebony staff, twisted and segmented, as if it were cut from the serpent's spine itself. At the top, held in a three-pronged claw, was an eyeball the size of a golf ball. Complete with a vertical red slit, the eye seemed to look at you no matter where you moved. Max handed it to Sasha, who seemed hesitant to touch it.

Staff of Creepy Consumption

Item Level: Epic, Scalable

Stats: +20 Intelligence, +10 Wisdom, +2 Luck

This staff absorbs magical or elemental damage equal to user's total mana pool, converting it into useable mana. Class bonus: Druids can use nature magic to command the staff to take the form of a serpent guardian that will fight to defend its master for thirty seconds.

"Wow, this is... pretty awesome!" Sasha said with smile and a small excited bounce as she looked over the weapon. The eye on top spun around to face her and winked. "Well, mostly awesome."

Brick couldn't help himself. "Better leave mister creepy with us when you hafta go behind the bushes'n do yer business!"

Sasha's eyes widened, and her face looked stricken. "Maybe I can make some kind of cover or hood for it. Like they do with hawks."

Alexander finished inspecting the staff. "So, you basically got yourself a magic shield, free mana source, and a pet, all in one. That damage absorb could come in handy. What's your mana pool look like now?"

Sasha stood still and stared off into space for a moment, mentally manipulating her UI to look at her character screen. "Hey guys, I gained two levels from that fight! With the staff bonus, I'm up to just over 1800 mana."

"Nice," Brick said, always one to appreciate good mitigation. "Ye should be able to stand up to even a boss level AOE without having to run. And it effectively doubles yer mana pool. Which means more heals for me!"

"Yes, yes. Sexy creepy stick. Very impressive'n shit. Time to see what's next," Max said as he lifted what looked like a large, raggedly shaped, melted chunk of the demon serpent's ebony hide, and handed it to Brick.

"Bah! What is this ugly thing?" Brick asked as he easily hefted the thing in his left hand. "It's too light to be..." he stopped speaking, lower jaw dropping as he read the item description.

Sr'Vok's Last Stand

Item Level: Unique Epic, Scalable Stats: +10 Stamina, +20 Strength

Fused by the fires that ended Sr'Vok's existence, his scales melded and

hardened to form an unbreakable shield. Born in the element of fire, any fire magic impacting the shield will heal its bearer for one half the normal amount of the attack damage. Class Bonus: Scraping a metal weapon across the face of the shield produces a "Serpent's Screech", annoying any foe within a 40-yard radius and causing them to attack the shield bearer.

Alexander, Max, and Sasha all looked to Brick to see his reaction.

"This... fire heals..." Brick sniffed, and turned his back to his friends, quickly wiping tears from his eyes before facing them again. A wide smile broke out under his unruly beard, and he roared "BY DURIN'S MITHRIL BALLS!! With this, Smaug himself would perish under me hammer!"

The friends all chuckled at Brick's rapid reversal and obvious adoration of his new gear.

"Speaking of Smaug... and mithril, this last one's for you Mr. Bilbo," Max handed Alexander a bundle of black cloth.

The bundle feeling heavier than just cloth alone would be, Alexander began to pull the folds apart to see what was wrapped within. But having pulled back all the folds, he discovered nothing within. He held the cloth up to inspect it

Dressed for Dinner

Unique Legendary Item, Scalable, Enchanted, Undroppable
Stats: + 10 Stamina, + 10 Agility, + 20 Strength, + 10 Crit, +5 Luck
This rare dark mithril armor was custom crafted by a Dwarven Master Smith for a human hero of legend. A hero who was, unfortunately, devoured whole and digested alive by the great serpent. After centuries in the belly of the demon lord, the mithril has remained undamaged. It is impervious to any piercing, cutting, or acid damage, and reduces blunt trauma damage by 20%. The armor's enchantment grants a 25% boost to strength and agility for ten seconds. Enchantment is only usable once per day. Bonus Skills: Armor grants wearer Night Vision. Class Bonus: Armor allows wearer to infuse their melee or ranged weapon with "Serpent's Bile" once per hour. Upon striking a target, Serpent's Bile causes 50 points poison damage per

second for ten seconds, stacking up to five times. Infusion lasts two minutes. Wearer is 100% immune to all poisons. This legendary item is forever bound to its wearer, will absorb 5% of wearer's earned XP points for kills, and will grow with the wearer, developing new properties and granting addition skills at higher levels.

The others all stood around Alexander, mouths open, staring at his new armor. Alexander himself took a moment to read the description a second time, slightly suspicious. It wasn't all that unusual for a First Kill on a dungeon boss to drop a legendary item. *But this...*

"Wow, man," Max echoed Alexander's thoughts, "I've never seen an item like that. Never even *heard* of one. If you were to put that up on the auction, it'd be worth..."

"Millions," Brick finished for him. "Unique item, Legendary, with huge stat bonuses that will only get better as ye level? AND its Dwarven crafted! By Durin's hairy nutsack! Ye could buy a house and retire on the cash ye'd get for that!"

"Or you could just equip it, and I'd basically never have to heal your clumsy butt again!" Sasha quipped as she elbowed Alexander in the ribs. "I could focus on stumpy over there. Although with that new shield, I'm not sure either of you will need me much."

"Brick, you could probably sell that shield for a tidy sum, as well," Max added, reaching a hand toward the tank. "I'd be happy to put it in the AH for you. I'll start the bidding at one hundred thousand gold."

Brick moved back a step, sliding his shield onto his back and raising his fists, "Ye touch me shield and I'll break every elfish bone in yer body!" he said with a wicked grin.

Max and Sasha laughed at the dwarf's antics, while Alexander smiled along, looking thoughtful. "Does it seem odd to you guys? The drops, I mean?"

"What do you mean?" asked Sasha

"Well, I get that this is a first kill. But that boss dropped two epics, one unique epic, and a unique legendary. Each piece with perfect stats and bonuses for one of us. And even the mobs on the way down here dropped

better than average loot. We've got a couple rares, and a bunch of high quality common drops and crafting mats to sell. Each of your shares of those sales will pay your bills for three or four months, at least."

"Damn right!" Max agreed. "I knew there was a reason we've followed you around for so long. It sure ain't your sparkling personality. You've got a talent for finding loots!"

"I think Alex sparkles just fine!" Sasha said, looking at Alexander. She suspected she knew what he was thinking, and decided to change the subject. "All the ladies think so. Well, not me. Cuz I know you. But other ladies."

"Dumb ones, maybe," Brick added. "Dumb, near-sighted ones with low standards."

Rising to the challenge, Alexander smiled at his short friend. "You would know all about 'low', wouldn't you, mister four-foot-nothing?"

"Ooooh snap! Low blow, Alex," Max piled on with a smirk at the dwarf.

"Yeah, yeah. Ye can all bend down here'n kiss me sexy dwarvish arse! And speakin of arses, I'm thinkin we should haul ours outta here before these beasties start to respawn!"

"Agreed," said Alexander as the others nodded their heads "let's teleport home. I need to log out anyway, take care of some personal business."

"Personal business, aye," said the dwarf, "had a couple burritos for dinner before I logged in. Got some 'personal business' to take care of, meself! Bwahahaha!"

Smiling, Alexander pulled his teleport stone from within his inventory and activated it. A flash of light, a slight disorientation, and he found himself back in his bedroom in Stormforge, the human capitol city. He took a moment to stow all his loot from the dungeon in a secure storage chest at the foot of the bed, laid down in the bed, then pulled up his UI and thought "log out".

Chapter Three

Like a Box of Chocolates

Alexander opened his eyes and took a moment to orient himself. Even after all this time, the transition from the virtual world back to reality required a brief adjustment. Without needing to look, his right hand reached up and removed the VR set from his head. He blinked a few times, his eyes adjusting to the light, then focused on the clock hanging on the wall across the room. It showed 7:00am. His stomach grumbled slightly, confirming that it was indeed about time for breakfast. With another deep breath, Alexander unfastened the restraining belt across his waist and slowly sat up from his gaming chair. He slid his feet into slippers placed conveniently by the chair and rose on unsteady legs.

"Alfred? How long was I in game this time?" Based on his urgent need to take a leak, it must have been a while.

"Good morning, young Sir. You were playing for just over eleven hours. Did you kill many monsters and rescue the princess?" the voice of his household AI responded in a vaguely British accent.

Shit. Eleven hours! That dungeon took longer than I thought. "No princess, Alfred. Did get some amazing loot, though."

"Very good, sir! It's all about the loot, sir."

Chuckling at his AI's attempted humor, Alexander wobbled, still unsteady, toward his bathroom. After using the toilet, he decided breakfast could wait a few minutes. A nice warm shower would feel good on his sore muscles and wash the stale sweat from his body. Though his real-world body remained relatively motionless while he played the game, his mind still triggered the muscle contractions that corresponded (to a lesser degree) to his avatar's movements in the game. During in-game battles his heart rate increased, adrenaline released, his temperature increased, and his sweat glands activated just as if he were moving and jumping in the real world. The seat belt across his waist kept him from rolling out of the chair.

Freshly showered, Alexander reached over to a shelf just inside his closet and

grabbed a pair of sweat shorts and a t-shirt with "FOR THE HORDE!" emblazoned on the front. Sitting on a stool while dressing himself he made a mental note to shorten his game sessions.

That was too long. I can barely stand, and my whole body is sore. I need to keep it down to eight hours from now on. "Alfred, please call Lainey, tell her I'm going to need a massage this morning," he said as he headed out of his bedroom suite toward the kitchen. Just as he thought he detected the smell of bacon, Alfred informed him, "Lady Elaine is already here, and is awaiting you in the kitchen. She called an hour ago, and I informed her how long you've been in your game, young Sir."

Translation: Lainey knew he'd be hungry and sore.

Walking slowly but determinedly into the kitchen, Alexander saw Lainey standing over the waffle maker, pouring in batter. He noted two skillets on the stove, one frying eggs, the other bacon. Two plates were set at the small kitchen table, along with a pitcher of orange juice and a pile of fresh toast.

Lainey was dressed casually, much like Alexander himself, in sweats and a tank top. Not quite five feet tall, she was well muscled, and moved with the grace of a dancer. Her long chestnut hair was wrapped up in one of those magical ponytail-slash-bun things that some women seemed to be able to create, with a pencil stuck through the middle to somehow keep it structurally intact.

"Morning, Sir Knight! Alfred says you were rescuing a damsel in distress. After eleven hours straight, I hope she at least put out for ya!" She flashed him a wicked smile.

"Dammit Alfred!" Alexander looked up toward the nearest sensor panel that the AI used to monitor the house. "There was no princess, no damsel!" He winked at Lainey as he scolded his AI.

"No, Sir. Of course there wasn't. My mistake, young Sir Knight."

Alexander rolled his eyes as he sat at the table. He poured himself a glass of juice, his arm feeling weak as he lifted the pitcher. He looked up at Lainey as she set a plate of breakfast in front of him. "This is YOUR fault, you know!" he said.

Lainey just giggled happily to herself as she set down her own plate and took a seat across from him. "You stay in the game for half a day, and I'm to blame?"

"You know that's not what I meant!" Alexander gave her his most accusing look. A year ago he had convinced her to try to the game. When she logged in with him, and saw that his avatar's class was "Knight", she had fluttered her eyes at him and acted all damsel in distress-ish. Upon logging out, she promptly told Alfred all about the Knight in shining armor who protected the virtue of innocent maidens. Since then, both she and Alfred often referred to him as "Sir Knight" and generally gave him endless shit as he recovered from long sessions.

Deciding to change the subject, Alexander asked "Alfred, any messages for me?" before munching on a delicious slice of bacon.

"You have one voice message from Princess Sasha. She called while you were showering. Shall I play it for you, Sir?"

"She is NOT a prin... you know what? Just, yes. Play the message Alfred."

"Of course, Sir Knight."

"Yo! Dork boy!" Sasha's excited voice blasted through the house sound system "Awesome lootz!! You're like our very own leprechaun. Rub your tummy and magical things happen! Wait... that didn't sound right. Shit. Anywayyyy..." she was clearly still on an adrenaline rush from either the boss fight or the luscious bounty of gear, "the guys wanna do another run ASAP. You pick the dungeon. Call me and we'll set up a time. Tell Lainey I said to punish you like you've been a baaaad boy!"

Lainey snorted while drinking her orange juice. The two women in his life. They both teased him, and looked after him, like he was their little brother. Sasha had been his best friend since they were five. For the last decade and a half, they'd seen each other nearly every day, either in person or online.

Lainey had been hired by Alexander's father when he was 15, as his symptoms had started to develop in earnest. She was his personal trainer, housekeeper, nurse, and confidant. Initially, Alexander had been angry with his father for hiring her. He was determined to take care of himself. Five

years later, he couldn't imagine life without her.

"Ok, Sir Stabs-a-lot. You heard the princess. Time to put in some work. Finish your food, take your meds, and meet me in the gym." Lainey smacked the back of his head as she danced past him. "Alfred sweetie, can you hook me up with some mood music in the gym? I'm thinking... Nine Inch Nails!"

"Of course, Lady Elaine. It would be my pleasure." Alexander could hear a smirk on Alfred's imaginary face.

Alexander grabbed the tiny plastic cup that Lainey had filled with his morning meds. He tossed back the pills and washed them down with the last of his orange juice. Seems like there are more pills this week. Wonder what I'm taking now? Wonder if it matters at all..."

At age 11, Alexander had fallen down. He was at the park near their home, chasing Sasha while threatening her with the most dire of fates... cooties! He was on flat, open ground. There was nothing to trip over, no sticks or rocks in his path. It was as if he momentarily forgot how to run. His feet tangled, and his momentum drove his face into the ground. Being eleven, he popped right back up and continued his quest for cootie delivery. He was oblivious to the thoughtful look on his father's face as he watched the boy run.

Three months later, he and his father were sitting on their game room sofa while "testing" his father's latest VRMMORPG video game design. The two of them sat in front of a 55" flat crystal display on which two avatars dashed around a farmer's garden whacking veggie-stealing moles with oversized wooden mallets. This was an in-game tribute to the old mole game that gave Jupiter it's start. Out of the blue, Edward noticed his son's avatar running in a circle. He looked over to see Alexander focused on his controller, eyes wide. His thumb was depressing the "left" button, and it was clear that he couldn't make it release. Alexander looked up at his dad, tears in his eyes. "Daddy, my hand won't move."

Later that week, Alexander played 3D holo-battleship with a pretty young nurse in the waiting area of the best neurologists in the country. His father was down the hall, quietly listening to three somber doctors tell him his son was dying. Their tests, they said, revealed that Alexander was suffering from NDS, Neuromuscular Degenerative Syndrome. Similar to ALS (better

known as Lou Gehrig's disease), but extremely rare. They explained that his son's antibodies were attacking healthy brain tissue, specifically the neural pathways that connected his precentral gyrus to the motor neurons in his spinal column. Edward didn't hear most of their words over the roar of blood rushing through his ears. It was as if they were speaking to him through thick glass. He heard words like "genetic anomaly" and "experimental treatments". But the words that rang clearly, the words that stuck with him, that repeated themselves over and over in his head were "no known cure".

Alexander entered the gym to see Lainey performing her warm-up stretches to the blasting accompaniment of Nine Inch Nails' "Closer". This did not bode well for him. The aggressive music was Lainey's way of telling him she was going to work him hard this morning.

What's she stretching for? I'm the one who's going to be doing all the hard work! He grumped to himself.

That wasn't fair. Lainey was great. She pushed him hard, sure, but never harder than he could handle. At the same time, she rarely let him off easy. Alexander knew that without Lainey, he might not be able to walk and move as well as he could today. Some days, when he was feeling low, or sleepy as he was this morning, or just not in the mood, she had to be tough on him. But he knew it was for his own good, and that she didn't enjoy it any more than he did. He loved her for it, even as he complained or attempted to escape her ministrations.

"Hey, Lainey. I'm kinda sleepy. Long night in the game, big breakfast. How bout we do this later?" he ventured loud enough to be heard over the semi-disturbing lyrics.

"Get your lazy ass on the table, Knight boy! You know the drill. You're mine for the next hour. You can sleep after."

Resigned to his fate, Alexander lifted himself up onto a massage table along one side of the room. Most people enjoyed a good massage. Went to nice spas to get them. Even gave gift certificates for them to friends. Not Alexander. There was nothing soothing or relaxing about what Lainey was about to inflict upon him. This was physical therapy; the manual manipulation, loosening, stretching, and even tearing of muscles that had tightened, shortened, or atrophied from lack of normal stimulation.

Alexander was always in pain. While the deteriorating connections in his brain often failed to transmit his mind's instructions to move those muscles, there was nothing whatsoever wrong with his pain receptors. It was just one of the cruel ironies of his condition. There was normal everyday walking around pain... and then there was Lainey kicking his ass pain. Which was a whole other level of fun.

"Let's go. Off with the shirt. Lay down on the table" Lainey was done stretching and was approaching with a grim look on her face. "If you're gonna be stupid enough to lay in that chair for twelve hours straight, you gotta pay the price."

"I know. I'm sorry Lainey," Alexander said as he complied with her instructions and laid himself out on the table. "We were in a dungeon full of demons, and there was just no safe place to stop and log out. So we just had to keep going until we killed the boss."

"Just had to, huh?" came her skeptical reply. She looked at him with what he had come to know as her "don't bullshit a bullshitter" face. "More like you got all into your killing spree and never even looked at the clock! I know you, Sir Knight. Now. Take a deep breath, and raise your right leg. This is gonna hurt you more than it hurts me!"

After a full hour of pushing, pulling, lifting and stretching of all of his limbs, neck, and torso muscles, Alexander actually felt better. Lainey had worked with him nearly every day for five years now. She had tracked his progress, monitored the ongoing deterioration of his coordination and strength, and constantly revised his therapy to compensate as well as possible. She knew exactly what he'd needed today, and she made sure he got it.

Physically and mentally exhausted, Alexander hit the shower again to wash away the pain-sweat from his "massage". Donning a pair of clean boxers and an "Eat the Rich" t-shirt, he stumbled into bed and was instantly asleep.

He awoke to the sensation of his bed moving slightly. Opening his eyes, he was assaulted by the glare of late afternoon sunlight beaming through his window. "Alfred, shades please..." he mumbled as he tried to cover his head with a pillow.

"No can do kiddo." His father's voice, not Alfred's. Alexander rolled over

and opened one eye, to take in the blurry image of his father sitting on the edge of his bed. "Welcome back to the world of the living! Get yourself together and meet me in the kitchen. Lainey's got dinner almost ready." His father punched him affectionately in the leg before getting up and leaving the room. Alexander was inclined to just put the pillow back over his head and sleep some more, despite the smells drifting in from the kitchen.

Sun's still up. Dad's never home this early.

Curiosity outmatching his desire for sleep, Alexander rose from his bed. Making a short trip to the bathroom, he used the toilet, splashed some cold water on his face, and attempted to wrestle his hair into some semblance of order. Then he pulled on a pair of jeans, slid his feet into his slippers, and headed for the kitchen.

"Smells good, Lainey!" he offered, as he entered the room perked up a bit from the cold water and the grumbling in his stomach. "Whatcha making?"

Before Lainey could answer, his father interjected "I asked her to make something special for tonight. One of your favorites. Gnoll steaks with dragonfire seasoning!" He grinned at his son as Lainey giggled.

"Blech. Gnolls are all stringy and way too gamey for me. Even Lainey can't make them taste good!" Alexander played along, smiling broadly. It was good to have his dad here. They didn't get to spend much time together these days.

"I saw your boss kill this morning. Using that torch was clever! None of our alpha testers thought of that during the run-throughs. That fight usually lasts much longer. The boss often heals himself five or six times before they manage to damage him enough to keep him away from the pool. Or the group runs out of heals and dies. And that trick with the stinger! You're definitely your father's son." His dad smiled at him, shaking his head. He often watched the live feed in his office when Alexander played the game.

"Yeah, about that, pop," Alexander sat at the kitchen table across from his father and looked at him suspiciously. "Those loot drops. They seemed... unnaturally valuable and useful. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

"What do you mean, Alexander?" Richard tried to look innocent. And failed horribly. Causing Lainey to snort. "You know I have Heimdall route your game feed to my monitor wherever I am in the building. I like to watch you play. But I don't do any programming anymore, son. You know that!"

Alexander shook his head "You may not program yourself anymore, but nothing would prevent you from calling down to the dungeon and having one of the guys beef things up a bit."

His father adopted a grave countenance. "I would never do that. That is strictly against our corporate non-interference policy. Any programmer or developer caught altering the loot drops on behalf of a player would have to be removed from the building and dismissed!"

"But still you look guilty!" Alexander pressed, causing Lainey to actually giggle.

"You really do" she added helpfully, which earned her a dirty look from Richard.

"And the loot drops were clearly over the top. So if you didn't have one of the guys do it, and you didn't do it yourself..." Alexander's eyes widened and his mouth opened in an astonished "O" shape. "Odin!! You talked to Odin, didn't you! You instructed him to upgrade my loot drops! Which means you didn't technically code anything yourself. Because you didn't have to!"

Knowing he was caught but still resisting, Richard said "One does not 'instruct' the All Father to do anything. One suggests. One bargains. He has a mind of his own." As if he'd suddenly remembered something important, Richard added "Oh, and Odin has something he'd like to show you. I'd like you and Sasha to come to the office around 3pm tomorrow. I'll have a driver pick up both of you. Lainey, it might be good if you could come as well?"

Chapter Four

Never Let the Dwarf Decorate

Logging back into the game the next morning, Alexander found himself back in his room in Stormforge. His group had formed a guild called Greystone a year or so ago and bought themselves a small home within the city. It had a bedroom for each of them, plus a few extras for guests, as well as a kitchen, meeting room, a large training room, and a great room with a giant fireplace and a stone mantle. The great room was decorated with half a dozen large padded chairs, as well as two long leather sofas on either side of a low stone table that sat near the hearth.

Entering the great room from the hallway that led from the living quarters, Alexander found Max sprawled out on one of the sofas, cleaning his fingernails with his dagger and smiling to himself. The dwarf, meanwhile, was sitting in one of the chairs, arms crossed in front of him, glaring at Sasha as she stomped a foot and pointed at him accusingly.

"I can't believe you brought that nasty thing into our home! Setting aside that it's ugly as hell, it SMELLS!"

"This be a guild hall, lass. And that be a badge of honor!" The dwarf's face had begun to turn red.

Alexander poked Max in the back of the head and whispered, "what's going on?"

In answer, Max simply grunted and pointed his knife up and over his shoulder. Following the Ranger's direction, Alexander looked over his own shoulder, toward the fireplace. His eyes grew wide for a startled moment before he burst out laughing. Mounted front and center above the massive hearth was the severed head of the Demon Lord snake they'd killed the day before. In the light of day, it really was quite ugly, especially since Brick had apparently made no effort to clean or prepare it; having simply somehow jammed it onto a spike mounted in the stone. It still had an arrow protruding from its left eye, and the jagged edge where its head had been blown from its torso was still dripping black ooze onto the mantle below.

Sasha is right... it smells!

"Hey, buddy," Alexander half chuckled as he called out to the Dwarf. "While I really do appreciate the sentiment, and I generally hate to say that Sasha's right, ever..." he ignored the hostile look from a very agitated druidess, "that thing really does reek! How bout you take that bad boy to a taxidermist and have the goop cleaned out. Maybe get the eye replaced, and have it properly mounted? Then we'll put him back up there with a plaque commemorating your great victory."

"We most certainly will NOT!" Sasha stomped a foot again. "It's bad enough I share this place with you three slobs. I will not have that ugly thing sneering at me every time I walk in the room!"

"Please, lass," the dwarf pleaded. "It be a first kill! This'll tell all what enters that Greystone are a force to be reckoned with!"

"I agree," Max backed up his friend with a wink that Sasha couldn't see. "I believe it's even an ancient Dwarven tradition, right Brick? There's supposed to be a dedication ceremony, followed by consuming mass quantities of ale and dwarven spirits!"

"Exactly right! Wouldn't want to deny me heritage, now would ya lass?" Brick picked up without missing a beat. Sasha looked from one to the other, a slightly doubtful expression on her face.

"I've changed my mind," Alexander added his two cents, a smile on his face. "Don't get the eye fixed. I kinda like it with the arrow sticking out. Gives it character!"

Realizing she'd been outvoted, Sasha made rude gestures at each of them, then stomped her way toward the kitchen, growling, "don't think for a minute I believe that 'tradition' bullshit. You just want an excuse to hang that ugly thing and have a party. Idiots!"

Alexander fist bumped Max and Brick as he followed his friend into the kitchen. He opened their magically cooled fridge and grabbed two bottles of juice. Handing one to Sasha, he used his best negotiating voice. "Tell you what. The very next fluffy pink unicorn boss we kill, you can have the whole thing stuffed and put it right there in the corner. And Brick will have to sit on it for a photo shoot!"

Doing her best to remain angry, Sasha looked stonily at him for a moment before the sheer ridiculousness of that visual, combined with an alarmed "wait, what?!" from the dwarf made her snort-laugh. She walked back into the great room and plopped down on her usual spot at the end of one of the sofas, mumbling "idiots".

Crisis averted, Alexander moved to sit next to Sasha, leaning in to gingerly place his head on her shoulder, prepared to be violently rebuffed. When no bruising occurred, he looked across the room to Brick. "Speaking of trophies, don't you have something else to show us? Hmmm?"

"Oh, aye. The box!" The dwarf exclaimed as he reached into his inventory bag and pulled out the stone box that had sat upon the pedestal in the boss cave. "I figured since ya so sweetly ran it straight over and planted it right under me arse, ye just wanted me to have it!" he grinned at Alexander.

Alexander smile back. "Hey, the boss wanted the box, you wanted the boss to come to you... marriage made in heaven, right there." Everybody laughed at that.

Then Max, always one to focus on the loot, made a hurrying motion with one hand. "C'mon shortness, open it up!"

Brick stood with box in hand and moved over to sit on the sofa with Max. Setting the box on the table between them, he turned it to face Sasha. "You can open it missy. As me apology for smellin' up the place."

Sasha quickly leaned forward, taking away Alexander's headrest and leaving him to fall to the side as she reached for the box, smiling at the tank. Just as she touched it, though, she hesitated. Her smile faded to a look of suspicion. "You think it's trapped, don't you!?"

The dwarf instantly raised his hands up in a placating gesture and did his best to look innocent. "O' course not! I'd nay even considered it! Here, pass it back and I'll open it meself if yer worried." Sasha did exactly that, sliding the box back across the stone table, then leaning back away. She smirked at the dwarf when, after considering the box for a moment, he pulled on his plate gauntlets and donned his helm. He reached for the box, hesitated, then flipped his visor down before grabbing the lid and lifting it.

After a few seconds with no explosion or gas cloud, all four of them audibly released the breath they'd been holding. As the dwarf reached inside to remove the contents, Max confessed, "I was sorta hoping for an explosion. Or snakes. Or something. Kind of disappointing, really."

Brick looked thoughtful as he withdrew his hand from the box. "Um. Did any of ye notice any doors or chests in tha' cave after the boss lost 'is head?" he asked as he laid four golden keys onto the table next to the box.

"Shit." Alexander reached out and took one of the keys to examine. "No, but I wasn't really looking. I was exhausted and just wanted to log."

Sasha just shook her head, indicating she'd seen nothing. She too picked up a key. After a quick look, she grabbed Alexander's key and put them together to see if they matched. They did.

"There were no doors," Max stated, sounding sure of himself. He took another of the keys off the table. "I took a circuit of the room before I ported back. Figured the way the boss was splattered everywhere, I might find something cool. Didn't see any chests, either."

"Well, methinks we missed something." Said the dwarf, reaching for the last key. The moment he lifted it from the table, a message appeared on each of the friends' UIs.

Keys to The Kingdom!

Item Level: Semi-Unique (1 of 4)

Stats: None

Binds on pickup. Cannot be dropped, stolen, or traded.

These keys are bound to each other as well as to their keymasters.

Sasha's face scrunched up thoughtfully. "Huh. Well that creates more questions than answers. What do you think they open?"

"Well, the description says keys to a kingdom," replied Max. "Maybe they earn us a rep increase? Like, we take them to the king and he makes us into Knights and grants us lands or something?"

"Or maybe they're the start of a raid!" Brick interjected. "These could be keys to the palace that let us sneak in at night, kill the king and take over!"

"I don't think it's a raid..." Alexander mused. "There are only four keys. Why have four unless each of us has to use one to get into... wherever? Which means only four of us can go. Too few for a raid. I think maybe Max's idea makes more sense. You guys want to head up to the palace and see if the king's interested in these?"

"Aye, good thinkin, lad," the dwarf said as walked over to the hearth, removed the demon lord's head and stuffed it into his bag. "I'll just bring our friend here, in case the king needs proof of death!"

"YES!" Sasha pumped a fist in the air. "Let the king have that smelly old thing!" Brick just looked hurt. Max shrugged and headed for the door.

The group left their small guild house, turning north and headed for the palace. Stormforge was a moderately sized city, as far as the game world went. It was a port city situated on the shore of a protected bay. A dozen stone piers stretched from the harborside out into the bay, each long enough to dock five large merchant vessels. Between the bay and the Sea of Storms, a barrier of granite cliffs extended in a slow arc across the bay, leaving only about a two hundred-yard gap for ships to navigate into and out of the harbor. The granite ridge continued its arc northward up the shoreline in both directions, forming a complete circle roughly two miles wide. The land rose up at a gradual slope from the harbor toward the northern rim, where the palace itself was built right into the ridge. This gave the palace a commanding view of the city and the harbor, as well as the surrounding farmlands and forests.

The Greystone guild house was located in a quiet section of town roughly midway up the slope. The neighborhood consisted mainly of small one and two-story residences, with several small shops scattered here and there. The nearest intersection they passed as they walked up the hill sported an alchemist's shop on one corner, with a bakery next door. On the opposite corner was Gregor's General Goods store, where adventurers could purchase an array of needed supplies, weapons, armor, potions, as well as sell any loot items they gathered. Across the street and filling the entire block was the Bloated Ogre Inn, with a large and often rowdy tavern on the ground floor, as well as a more sedate restaurant with a separate entrance. The three-story building had about forty guest rooms on the 2nd and 3rd floors and a stable in the back. Above the tavern doorway hung a carved wooden sign depicting a

comical overweight ogre with a mug of ale in one hand, and an oversize turkey leg in the other. The friends often relaxed at the Ogre after a hard day of adventuring. The ale wasn't bad, and the food was excellent. The innkeeper's wife was a master chef, who would often cook up the wolf, boar, rabbit, or raptor meat brought in by adventurers; turning them into delicious meals that gave buffs to stamina, health, or intelligence. After a full meal there, Alexander and his friends often felt as bloated as the ogre on the sign. Though they hadn't actually eaten anything in the real world, the neuro-link in their VR gear was able to simulate satisfaction. This presented a small danger to players who played for long periods, as their real bodies needed nourishment. There was a safety setting that limited players to no more than twelve hours of continuous play time. It required at least an hour off-line before a player could log in again.

Pulling Brick back on track after he began to drift toward the tavern, the group turned to the east for about a block and reached the main thoroughfare than ran from the harbor straight up to the palace. Turning left and once again heading uphill, they walked for about ten minutes, passing a multitude of specialty shops, market stalls, temples, and offices. Taking Brick's hand, Sasha pulled him along as he tried to wander toward every shop or stall that smelled of food. Passing one particular vendor that was waving succulent meat skewers at passersby, both Max and Alexander had to help restrain the drooling dwarf.

Finally reaching the outer wall of the palace compound, they approached the open gate. Two palace guards in well-used but polished plate armor stood on each side of the entry. A sergeant stood in the middle of the gateway questioning each person who sought entry. A short line of citizens and players had formed, waiting to gain permission to enter. The group joined the back of the line and waited patiently to speak with the sergeant. The line moved quickly, and after just a few minutes they reached the front.

"Sergeant Rockman, a pleasure as always." Alexander bowed his head slightly as he approached.

"Ah, young Alex and friends. Here to see the captain about another quest?" the sergeant smiled and shook Alexander's hand.

"Not exactly, sir. We're here to seek an audience with the king regarding a

demon lord we encountered in some caverns to the west."

"I've told you before, son, don't call me 'sir'! I'm no fancy noble or officer; I work for a living. You just call me Sarge. Or Rock. As for the other, a demon lord? We ain't had demons in this kingdom since I was a child. You must be mistaken."

"No mistake, I'm afraid, Sarge. We came across some caverns maybe ten miles to the west, just past the old ruins by the waterfall. We decided to explore, and found a dungeon full of demons!"

"Well, lad. As you know, the king does not often grant private audiences," the sergeant said, still looking skeptical. "But right now, he's in the main hall, hearing grievances from the local merchant's guild. And I happen to know he'd appreciate an interruption!" The sergeant smiled and winked at Sasha. "Come with me, I'll escort you to the hall, and ask if the king will see you."

After calling over a corporal to take his place at the gate, the sergeant led the group across the outer courtyard, which contained the guard barracks, stables, and smithy, and through the inner bailey gate. To their left, Alexander could see the palace gardens, perfectly manicured lawns, stone pathways, and a pond with a fountain.

They followed the sergeant up a wide stairway to the main doors of the keep. These were massive fifteen-foot tall doors of steel-bound iron oak nearly a foot thick. "Sturdy enough to keep out a mountain troll!" Brick observed approvingly as they passed by.

Once inside, they were led to small waiting area just outside the main hall. The sergeant motioned for them to stay, while he quickly ducked through the doors. Alexander could see him approach the king and whisper in his ear. The king smiled and nodded his head once. As the sergeant walked back toward the doors, the king held up a hand to interrupt the merchant who was speaking.

"I'm sorry, Master Bindletree, I must interrupt. An urgent issue has just come to my attention. Some adventurers are here with alarming news," the king said. This caused Bindletree, the well-known and much disliked head of the banker's association to stand with mouth agape for a moment before

sitting down.

Alexander and the others were led toward the king, who was sitting on the edge of his throne, leaning forward with interest. The group stopped ten feet from the lowest stair to the dais and each took a knee, bowing to the king.

"Please rise, young Alexander and friends. And welcome! I'm always glad to see friends of the court and brave adventurers such as yourselves! Now, what is all this about demons in my kingdom!?"

At the word "demons", all the merchants and nobles gathered in the room began to mutter and whisper amongst themselves. The main hall was a massive room, easily sixty yards long and half as wide, with 30-foot cathedral ceilings, and polished marble floors. The acoustics of the room were specifically designed so that where the throne was located, the king could easily hear the magnified whispers of the courtiers.

"Silence, please! One mention of the word 'demon' and some of you cowards already speak of leaving the city? Have you no common sense? Let's hear with this young man has to tell us!" King shifted his gaze back to Alexander. "Please, begin."

Alexander bowed his head in respect, and began his tale. "Your majesty, my friends and I were in the western forest near the old ruins yesterday. We were gathering dire wolf pelts, intending to bring them here to collect the bounty placed upon them by your majesty." Alexander motioned to Max, who withdrew a stack of nearly fifty dire wolf pelts. This caused some additional mutterings among the merchants, and the head of the Tanner's Guild actually took an involuntary step forward. With a nod from the king, Max laid the pelts on the lowest step of the dais. Alexander continued, "Sasha spotted some caverns nearby. We decided to explore them, thinking there might be a wolf den. Once inside, we found no dire wolves. However, Sasha did find some unusual herbs to use in her potions, and one that was unknown to her. We moved further into the caves, collecting herbs as we went. After a few turns, we discovered a dungeon entrance."

At this, Sir Redmond, the captain of the Guard stepped forward. "Majesty, I know of these caverns. The entrance lies northwest of the ruins beyond Dire Falls. My wife is a druid and alchemist much like this lovely young lady," the captain smiled at Sasha, who blushed slightly. "In years past I escorted

my wife to these same caverns so that she could gather a rare herb called feather-root, that grows only in those caves and is used in strong healing potions and disease cures." At this, Sasha smiled and removed a bundle of feather-root from her herb pouch to show the king. "Yes, that is it." Confirmed the captain. "But in all the times we visited those caves, there was no dungeon!"

The king nodded to Sir Redmond, then shifted his gaze to Alexander. "What say you?"

"I am not sure what to say, Majesty. I believe we're talking about the same caverns. The location is right, and the we did find the herbs, but there is most definitely a dungeon there. We entered through the gate, and found the caverns filled with demons. We fought our way down through four levels, eventually reaching a large cavern with a stone temple. We battled a Demon Lord named Sr'Vok and defeated him." Alexander motioned to Brick, who removed the demon's head and held it aloft as high as his four-foot frame would allow. There were audible gasps from the courtiers, a few of the more delicate noble ladies and one foppishly dressed nobleman even fainted at the sight.

"I would add, Majesty, that we were notified upon the demon's death that we were the first to complete that dungeon, and we were awarded some powerful gear. So maybe the demons just recently inhabited the caverns?"

The king and his Captain both looked with consternation upon the demon's head, then exchanged a look between themselves. The captain approached the group, looking closely at the head, then examining the group of friends, saying, "show me the gear you received". Alexander pointed to his chest, Sasha's staff, Brick's shield, and Max's quiver. "All unique, epic items, Majesty. And this chest piece is Legendary!" The captain walked back up the steps of the dais, leaning down to whisper to the king, who gave a single nod. The captain called over a lieutenant and gave him quick orders. "Take ten men, go straight to these caverns to investigate. The path should be clear, as these adventurers seem to have gone out of their way to eliminate every dire wolf in the forest! Return immediately and report!"

The room was silent, awaiting a reaction from the king. He looked thoughtful for several moments, then pointed a finger at Brick. "Please, put

that away, sir dwarf. Its dripping on my nice clean floor." Brick snorted and placed the head back in his inventory bag. "As for the rest, though my men will confirm, it seems there is little doubt that demons have once again invaded my realm. Captain, let it be known that we are recruiting for our army. I want an additional five thousand soldiers trained and ready to fight in three months' time!"

The captain bowed his head to the king and motioned to one of the scribes stationed to the side of the room. "Have notices prepared immediately! I'll send messengers to spread the word."

"Master Bindletree, Master Smith, please approach," the king beckoned the two merchants. "Master Bindletree, within the hour you will receive a note from the Treasury to provide funds for the purchase of armor, weapons, and supplies for the army. Those funds are to be available no later than tomorrow morning. Agreed?" The banker quickly bobbed his head in agreement. "Master Smith, as head of the blacksmiths and armorers' association in the city, you and your people will provide the necessary weapons and armor, as well as arrange for the other needed supplies. You will do so at three quarters the normal market price. I know this leaves you with a smaller profit margin. But supplying 5,000 additional kits will still earn each of you a significant sum, and it will lessen the burden on the treasury. I need them all within two months' time, with the first 600 delivered next week. Agreed?"

Master Smith's eyes widened significantly, and he took a moment to consider the task, calculating the time and materials required to complete the order. "Majesty. We will of course do whatever it takes to support the realm in this time of crisis. Your price of three quarters of the market rate is fair. I'm not one to try and profit from war. And we can certainly arrange the required clothing, tents, food, blankets and other supplies in that time. But the weapons and armor, Majesty, those may be an issue. I estimate we have maybe two hundred full kits of standard weapons and armor in stock in the various shops in town. And these are not of the standard for normal army supply, as they are meant mainly for beginning adventurers. But they would work well enough as training gear. Myself and the other smiths can forge maybe 300 full sets per week. As many as 350 if we bring in more apprentices. To meet your demands, we would need to purchase nearly half from other cities or kingdoms. We can maybe reduce that number if some

portion of these new lads would be archers who could wear leather armor?"

The king shook his head, looking toward his Treasurer, who was suddenly sweating profusely. "From the look on Treasurer Knox's face, Master Smith, I believe purchasing so many weapons and armor sets from others at full price, and paying to transport them here, would overtax our resources. And borrowing the necessary funds from Master Bindletree and his ilk, even at the reduced rate of interest I'm sure they would provide," at this point the banker began to look very much like a cornered rat, "would still put undue stress on our economy, requiring us to raise taxes. Which I will not do." Both the Treasurer and the banker breathed a sigh of relief. "Master Smith, work as fast as you can. We will have to make do with what we can forge here at home. Let us hope the demons give us time to prepare."

Seeing the concern on the faces of the king and his people, Alexander stepped forward, and again took a knee. "Your Majesty, if I may?"

"Rise, Alexander. You and your Greystone clan have done much to aid the realm, and you are always welcome to speak your mind within my court."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Alexander stood and addressed the king in a voice loud enough for all to hear. "I have listened to your discussion here, and I may have solutions to several of your problems. First, as to your immediate need for the weapons and armor to outfit your first 600 recruits. I think we can supplement the supply that Master Smith can procure or forge by week's end." Alex motioned to Brick and Max, who motioned for a table to be brought over, and began pulling loot out of their bags. "As I mentioned, we fought and killed hundreds of demons as we worked our way down through the dungeon yesterday. Many of them dropped weapons or armor as they died. We have with us approximately..."

Alexander looked to Max, who replied, "About 180 swords, 150 spears with obsidian heads, 85 obsidian daggers, 180 chainmail shirts, 200 ebony bracers ... and 40 helms that have holes in the sides for demon horns to poke out." At this last part, the king and Master Smith both laughed out loud.

Alexander continued, "Many of these items will need repairs, as they have may have been slightly damaged when we killed their previous owners," this got a laugh from nearly everyone, "but they should function well enough as training gear in the short term, Majesty." Master Smith, who had approached the table to inspect the various items, spoke up, "Aye, Majesty, these will work well enough. Simple repairs for the most part. Though those helms with holes would be better melted down and forged anew."

As the king nodded at Master Smith, Brick cleared his throat and looked a bit embarrassed. "Er, yer Majesty, sir? I might... well what I mean is... I have... a few horns. Demon horns, I mean. I cut them off as we looted the bodies, thinking they'd make clever drinking cups or something. Your smiths could attach 'em to the helmets n fill those holes. Save ye some time on reforging. Make fer right scary lookin soldiers, it would!"

The king tried to hide a smile as he looked to Master Smith with eyebrows raised. "Aye, Majesty, that would be possible. How many of these horns do you have, master Dwarf?"

Looking embarrassed again, Brick opened his bag, then mumbled a number.

"What was that?" the king asked, still smiling. "I couldn't quite hear you. Speak up!"

Brick took a deep breath, upended his bag, and dumped out a large pile of horns. "Just over 400 horns, yer Majesty. Though I'd like to keep just a few for meself, if ya don't mind?"

Sasha giggled and covered her mouth, eyes wide. Max just fell to the ground laughing. The king and Master Smith laughed long and loud. Finally, wiping a tear from his eye, the king was able to speak. "My thanks master Dwarf. It has been quite a while since I laughed so hard. And to do so after receiving such dire news is truly welcomed. I'm sure we can work something out. As we heard earlier, there are only 40 helms with holes, so we'd only need 80 horns to correct those. Though I do like the idea of horned helms! Our soldiers going to fight demons with the horns of their brothers mounted on our heads! Wearing demon armor and swinging demon swords! Maybe we can create a special front line unit of shock troops with horned helms? What do you say, Captain? Master Smith?"

Smiling at his King, the captain replied "Of course, your majesty. A single company of 150 men would do nicely. We'll give them special training and extra pay."

Nodding his head, Master Smith agreed. "Easily done, Majesty!"

"That settles it then!" roared the king. "One hundred fifty helms with two horns apiece, plus some extra for replacements. We'll take 400 of your horns, master Brick, at shall we say one gold per horn?" Brick bowed low to the king, gladly accepting. That left him a dozen or so horns as souvenirs.

"That's very generous, Majesty. Though I think you nearly just made Master Knox cry!" Alexander said with a smile of his own. "However, I have more solutions that should quickly make Master Knox much happier. First, in the interest of assisting the realm, the Greystone clan will sell all these weapons and armor to the Royal Armory for one half of what we'd normally receive from the vendors in the city! You see? He's smiling already!" Alexander nodded toward the Treasurer, who was smiling at the king. "In addition, Majesty, I would respectfully suggest that you consider recruiting a lesser number of soldiers. Beyond the cost of recruiting and outfitting 5,000 men, there is an ongoing cost of wages, food, medical care, and so forth. I don't believe you'll need that many men, sire."

"I cannot defend these walls with the less than ten thousand guards I have now, Alexander. If the demons were to assault the city, with the men we have we wouldn't last the hour."

"I agree completely, your Majesty," Alexander replied, "and I don't think even 5,000 more men would help you in that situation. But consider this. My three companions and I entered that dungeon yesterday, and in about ten hours we killed more than 400 of those demons. Not one survived. We are simple adventurers, not legendary warriors. We used strategy, fought them three and four at a time in enclosed spaces. And with their demon lord dead, it may be some time before they dare to inhabit those caverns again. Now, right now within your city there are thousands of adventurers like us, who would love to be given a quest to seek out and destroy demons wherever they may appear within your realm. They would gain experience, which we value greatly, and some quality gear. In addition, the quest could require that they return with the armor, weapons, and yes, even horns of the vanquished demons to be sold to the crown, or to local vendors, as you see fit." Alexander winked at Brick as he finished.

"Thus reducing the expense for additional troops, both in the short and long

term. And more importantly, saving the lives of many of our young men who would otherwise be lost in battle with these demons!" The king shouted happily. "Alexander, I believe Master Knox may be considering offering you the hand of his eldest daughter!" The king laughed, and the treasurer looked thoughtful. "That is, if this lovely young druidess has not already claimed you?" Alexander, Brick, and Max all laughed, and Sasha blushed furiously.

"Save your daughter, Master Knox," she said. "I've known Alexander my whole life, and I love him like a brother. But no woman deserves to be tied to him for life!"

Smiling again, the king looked to the four friends. "Approach Greystone Clan, and kneel." Each of them climbed the stairs of the dais and knelt before the king. "For your many services to the realm, and for your true friendship, I name each of you Friends of the Realm! I grant each of you a boon. What would you have of me?"

Without even thinking it over, Max spoke first. "Horses, Majesty. We have not yet been able to afford to pay the stable master for riding lessons or to purchase mounts of our own. We are forced to walk wherever we set out to. So I would ask for training from the stable master, and four mounts to aid us in our adventuring. Oh, and maybe a special made ladder to help my dwarf friend here mount his horse."

Brick spoke next, having no doubt what he wanted, but taking a moment to work out a plan. And to give Max a look promising future retribution for the ladder comment. "Ale, Majesty! The ale hear in the city is fine, but, and I mean no offense, it ain't Dwarven ale! I would ask that ye name me as official trade emissary to me people in the Broken Mountain, and empower me to enter into a trade agreement. Things like them dire wolf pelts, which make soft lining for plate armor, would be highly valued under the mountain. We could trade them for barrels of dwarven ale and spirits, which yer Majesty could then sell to the local taverns. I know me fellow adventurers would pay well for them, and everyone would make a profit. I'll take a few barrels per shipment as me share!"

Sasha was the next to speak. "Your majesty, when we found these herbs, which I now know to be feather-root, I was not able to identify them. As it turns out, they are rare and valuable. And so, I wonder how many other

valuable herbs I have passed by because I did not know their worth. Also, even now that I know the value of feather-root, I don't have the knowledge to make them into useful healing potions. So I would ask my boon of the captain's wife. She is a well-known alchemist, and I would ask that she teach me some of what she knows of herbs and alchemy."

While his friends were speaking, Alexander had been thinking. "Majesty, I am not sure how to adequately describe what I would ask. Let me begin by saying this. My father is... an important man where I am from. From birth I have been trained as a noble son would be. In the arts of negotiation, the principles of war, the rules of law and nuances of politics. Mathematics, engineering, literature, even some limited medical training. I was encouraged to solve puzzles and play games of strategy. My father planned for me to one day take up his position. Or to build and run my own corporate empire. A position that you would consider somewhere between a prince and a guild master. However, circumstance led me to choose the life of an adventurer. And while that is where my heart still lies today, my youth and vigor will not last forever. So, I suppose what I am asking is that your Majesty grant me your friendship. Use me as a counselor when you have need of my mind, so that I may offer ideas such as I have today. Send me and mine to engage your most dangerous enemies. Allow us to grow and get stronger, in order to better serve you and the realm."

The king sat back in his throne, looking at each of the group in turn with a serious expression. Then he looked out over the various merchants and courtiers gathered in the room, who had been listening and quietly commenting on the proceedings.

"Did you all hear that? Were you listening? THAT is how you ask your king for a boon. Too many of you, finding yourselves in the same position, mindlessly blurted out, "I want 1,000 gold!" or, "make me a baron!" Pitiful. These young adventurers have shown proper etiquette, forethought, and grace. You could all learn from them!"

Looking back to the group, the king smiled. "Rise, all of you. That marble is hard on the knees after a very short time!" The four of them all rose to stand before the king, taking three steps backward down the stairs so as not to look down upon him, and keeping their heads bowed. "In fact," said the king, noting their continued deference, "let it be known henceforth that these four,

Founders of clan Greystone and Friends of the Realm, need not kneel before me again! A simple bow will suffice, and only in the most formal of settings." The four of them bowed in acceptance.

"Now, as to your requests. Master Dwarf, we shall start with you. As a youth I visited the Broken Mountain as an emissary for my father. I will admit to developing a fondness for dwarven spirits myself! Your idea is a good one, though I may keep more barrels for the palace cellars than I sell to the local taverns. But first things first. You have placed in front of me fifty dire wolf hides. I believe the bounty on these is five gold per pelt, is it not? Master Knox, you will present Master Brick with 250 gold for his bounties. Master Brick. Though it will annoy many of the merchants in this room today, I hereby appoint you my official trade emissary to the Broken Mountain Dwarves. Take these 50 pelts, along with any others Master Knox has recently purchased from other adventurers. Trade them to your people for the best ale and spirits you can lay your hands on. Take 5% percent of that, and all future shipments, as your payment."

Brick, tears in eyes, bowed so low that his beard swept the marble stairs. "Thank ye, Majesty. I'll not disappoint ye!"

"Master Ranger. Max, is it? You and your friends shall have your training. Stop and see the stable master at your convenience, and he will assist each of you in becoming expert riders. Once your skills are worthy of them, you may each select the mount of your choice from my stables. I have some stallions of the finest bloodlines available. But I suggest you consider alternate mounts. I myself prefer one of the great cats. They have the speed and endurance of horses, but can handle rougher terrain. They can be set loose to hunt for their own food, and can even be trained to fight alongside you. And for you Master Brick, if you are so inclined, we even have a few purebred battle boars! Once you have made your selections, we will have them delivered to your guild house stables, along with appropriate saddles and tack."

Max also bowed deeply to the king. "Thank you, Majesty. For both the training and the excellent mounts. I'm afraid our guild house is but a small structure, and we do not have stables of our own. But we could board them at the nearby Bloated Ogre stables, if you wouldn't mind delivering them there?"

"Ha! The Ogre! I have a few fond memories of that place myself," The king replied. "But no. No... that just won't do. I cannot have my purebred mounts housed in such a place. We shall have to think of something else." The king motioned for the captain, and the two men had a short whispered conversation.

"Who's next? Ah. The lovely Lady Sasha. My Captain informs me that Lady Redmond would be pleased to take you on as an apprentice. She has a fiery disposition much like your own, and I admit I'm curious to see how you two will get along! In addition, Lady Redmond is our palace Healer. She tends the household staff, palace guard, and any visitors with ailments in addition to watching over myself and my family. Once you have completed your training, we will offer you a salaried position as her assistant, with a flexible work schedule to allow for your adventuring."

Sasha favored the king with her biggest smile, and a delicate curtsy. "Thank you, Majesty!"

"And now for Alexander. Our young prince guildmaster! You have indeed impressed me, young sir. Not just with your prowess in combat, with the killing of dire wolves and slaying of demons, but also with your quick thinking and clever ideas, and most importantly, your sincere desire and willingness to protect and enhance the lives of my people. I am quite sure your father is proud to call you son. However..." the king paused, looking over the assembled courtiers. "I have too many counselors already! And few are truly trustworthy. They whisper in my ear with ideas that promote themselves, their own wealth, or secure their positions more than benefit the kingdom or the people."

Alexander bowed to the king, "I understand, Majesty. I presumed too much in asking. Please forgive me."

"Nonsense! It is my honor to call you friend, and to name you Knight-Advisor to the Throne. I said I don't need counselors who buzz about and annoy me, but I could use a good man who comes when called. And when not needed, goes away and does something useful like killing demons! Take this ring. It has a seal of office that will identify you as one of mine. In addition, it will allow me to communicate with you instantly if I should need you while you are out questing. Further, you will be provided with a supply

of teleportation scrolls that will allow you and your group to return to the palace immediately when called."

Still surprised from the sudden turnaround, Alexander stammered a bit in his reply, "Th...thank you, Majesty. Serving will be my honor."

Achievement Earned: Friend of The Realm

For your service to the king and to the people of Stormforge, the king has named you Friend of the Realm! You are now Respected by all citizens of Stormforge. Services and goods purchased within the kingdom will cost 10% less, and items can be sold to vendors for 10% more.

The notification appeared on each of the group's UI's. They quickly waved them away, as the king was still speaking.

"We're not done yet." the king continued. "Max. I have thought it over. I just cannot have my prized mounts living in the Ogre's stables. Nor can I have my trade emissary and knight-advisor living in some small cottage." The captain motioned to one of the palace chancellors, who approached the king with an ornate wooden box. "Last year I executed for espionage the ambassador from the Wastelands. I spared his family, though, and sent them home with whatever they could carry. Since then, the embassy has sat vacant, as the Wastelands chose not to send another ambassador." The king reached the box out toward Alexander. As Alexander began to step forward and accept it, the king changed his mind, pulling back the box with a wink at Alexander.

"Lady Sasha, within this box you will find the keys and the deed to the former embassy. They are now Greystone property. The estate is quite easy to find, as it is just a few blocks to the west of the main palace gate. As it happens, it sits one house beyond Captain Redmond's estate, the front of which is Lady Redmond's alchemy shop. In addition to the main structure, the grounds include a workshop structure that would make a fine alchemy lab for you, and a greenhouse for growing your own herbs. In addition, there is a large stable for master Max. And Brick, you will find a loading dock near the kitchen that leads down to an extensive wine cellar where one might store a large number of barrels and bottles! Stock it well, my friend. I should warn you now, I may sneak out to escape my counselors and join you for a drink!"

Sasha stepped forward, and accepted the box from the chuckling King. She curtsied once again, and gave him her brightest smile. "These are truly amazing gifts, Majesty. Far more than we deserve. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts!" Stepping back to join the others, Sasha opened the box, and there indeed were a set of keys and a property deed.

Keys!! The reason they came to the palace!!

"Majesty," Alexander began, "these are indeed tremendous gifts, and we are in awe of your kindness and generosity. We have taken much of your time this morning, and for that I apologize. I know we interrupted a regular meeting with your counselors," he said with a smile that said counselors behind him couldn't see. The king had to fight not to return the smile. "Yet these embassy keys reminded me of another of our reasons for coming here today. Would you indulge us for a moment longer?" With a nod from the king, who finally had a reason to let loose the smile he'd been holding, Alexander produced his golden key, handing it to the king. "We found four of these identical keys in a box we took from the final cavern in the dungeon. There were no doors or chests to be found that would match these keys. They were bound to each of us as we took them in hand. We were hoping you might have some knowledge of them?"

The king examined the key closely, turning it about. He then showed it to the captain, and beckoned Master Knox over to examine it as well. Both shook their heads and had nothing to offer.

"I'm afraid I have nothing to offer you in regards to this. It appears to be a simple key. But the name 'Key to the kingdom' intrigues me, as I'm sure it did you. If you'd like, I can ask Master Gando, our palace archivist, to investigate it."

"Thank you, Majesty. That would be greatly appreciated. We will leave you to resume your day. If you need anything of any of us, just call." The four friends bowed once more to the king, then turned and made their way out of the palace.

Once outside the gate, Brick punched Alexander in the arm. "That worked out damn well, lad! That was some purty talkin' ya did in there!"

"Look who's talking, you poetic sweet talker you! Talking the king into

providing you with what amounts to free booze for life! And they wouldn't have believed any of it if you hadn't thought to bring along that nasty demon head."

"Yer right!" said the dwarf, thumping himself on the chest. "It were all MY doin! Ye can all thank me now!" The friends all laughed and gave the dwarf a group hug. "What're we waitin for? Let's go see our new guild hall!"

The group of friends turned to the right and headed west from the main gate. Just as they set off, Captain Redmond called out, stepping out of the gate and waving for them to wait. As he approached, he smiled at Sasha. "I am headed home to visit my wife for lunch. And since your new home is just beyond my own, I thought maybe you'd like to stop on the way and say hello?"

Sasha clapped her hands together and bounced happily. "I'd LOVE to, Captain! I have SO many questions for her. Thank you!"

As the captain winked at them, Max coughed, and looked at Sasha. "Headed home for lunch. Yeah. Translation: He's headed home to warn his wife that he just volunteered to trap her in a small space with YOU for potentially several years. Poor woman."

Sasha threw Max a furious look that promised retribution, but the captain just laughed. "It's true, I didn't consult with my lady wife before volunteering her services. But she has mentioned taking an apprentice on occasion, and truly has need for an assistant in her healing duties. And I have a feeling she'll like you!" The captain paused for a moment as they walked, and looked thoughtful, then a bit sheepish. "Still, if you don't mind, give me just a moment to speak to her before you come in?" They all chuckled as they continued on down the block. In just a few moments they arrived in front the Alchemy shop. As the captain excused himself and stepped inside, Sasha and the others looked around.

The cobbled road they stood on was about fifty feet wide, and ran alongside the massive outer wall of the keep to the north. The south side of the street was lined with a combination of large homes and what looked to be higher end businesses. Directly in front of them was a large home with three floors, with Lady Redmond's alchemy shop taking up a good portion of the first. To their left was what appeared to be another home behind a short stone wall

with manicured gardens visible through the gate. This home was only two floors, but had ornately carved doors and window shutters that suggested quality and wealth. Beyond that, at the corner of their lane and the main thoroughfare, was a large Inn. The ground floor was an elegant looking restaurant with a small outdoor café. Finely embroidered umbrellas above each table and very sharply uniformed wait staff were seating and serving a lunch crowd of well-dressed customers. It looked as if each of the upstairs rooms had its own balcony with ornately shaped iron railing.

Turning the other direction, to the right of the alchemy shop sat a very large, bulky structure that was all thick walls with blocky doorways and windows. There was a stone perimeter wall eight feet high, and a heavy iron gate. Through the gate could be seen a cobblestone courtyard, and a single main entry door. The door, and the window shutters visible on the ground floor, were all made of iron. A pair of guards with wicked looking halberds stood on either side of the door, and another pair stood post at the gate, watching passersby with grim expressions. The crests on their breastplates resembled a quill and ledger. Max gestured upward, pointing out archers patrolling the second storey roof of the building.

"That's the merchant's guild house," the captain explained as he exited the shop, seeing the direction of their gazes. "The security is mostly pretense, as there's no real money in there to speak of. But they like their privacy and their secrets. They store copies of all their various trade agreements and contracts in there for safekeeping." He smiled and waved Sasha toward the door of the shop, "Please, come and meet your new mentor!" He held the door for Sasha and the others to enter before following them inside.

The interior of the shop was filled with rows of shelves and glass cases. The main room was brightly lit with sunlight from the front windows that reflected off hundreds of bottles and vials containing liquids and powders of every color imaginable, all very neatly organized. Herbs hung in drying bundles from the rafters of the ten-foot-high ceiling. Two doors led from the back of the shop. Through one door, Sasha could see a small but well-appointed sitting room with a round table and several chairs, and a stairway leading up to what she assumed was the couple's living quarters. The other back room had several work benches and stools and looked to be a working lab.

Lady Redmond was standing in front of the main counter, and immediately reached out both hands to grasp Sasha's. "So, you must be Sasha. The young lady my husband speaks so highly of! And you would be Alexander, Max, and... Brick?" She favored each of them with a smile. "Please, come in, all of you! My name is Lydia." As she spoke she led Sasha toward the sitting room. "All of you, make yourselves comfortable. Tea is almost ready, and I'll prepare us all some lunch while we talk. I understand we're going to be neighbors?"

The captain and the four friends each took seats at the table as Lydia bustled about a small kitchen area on one side of the room. She removed a teakettle from what appeared to be a magical stovetop at one end of the counter, and poured hot water into a tea pot. She then sprinkled in a mixture of tea leaves before setting the lid on top. She brought the teapot and six cups on a tray to the table. "Husband, please pour the tea for our new friends while I see to the food." The captain dutifully poured the tea into cups, handing one to each of the friends before pouring one for himself, and another for his lady wife, which he set at the empty place next to him.

"Please, Lady Redmond," Sasha began, rising from her chair, "let me help with the food? I'm an excellent cook."

"Sit, sit dear. There's no cooking to do. I was expecting my husband for lunch, and he often brings home stray guardsmen, squires, or stable boys, so I always make plenty of food. I don't think they feed those poor boys enough in the barracks, as they all seem to eat enough for three men when they're here! And none of this 'Lady' business! Call me Lydia. I insist."

Smiling, Sasha sat back down and sipped her tea. "This is delicious!"

"Thank you dear. It's a special blend I created. I think you'll find it provides a boost to your health and energy as well," Lydia replied. The friends quickly checked their stat sheets and confirmed. Plus ten to stamina and plus ten each for health and mana regen for four hours! "Just one of the many advantages of a thorough understanding of herbs and alchemy," she added with a wink as she removed a large pot from the stovetop and moved to set it on the table. She then retrieved a few small loaves of bread and a stack of bowls from a sideboard and proceeded to fill each one and pass them around the table.

"That smells just heavenly," Brick was already salivating as a bowl of what looked and smelled like lamb stew was set in front of him. His hand twitched toward his spoon, but he visibly controlled himself, politely waiting for everyone to be served.

"Indeed it does," agreed Alexander, as the others echoed similar sentiments.

Once everyone was served, Lydia took the seat next to her husband and patted his hand affectionately. "Dig in, everyone! We don't stand on ceremony in this house. Eat!"

Before she'd even finished speaking, Brick had inhaled a large spoonful of the stew and was rolling his eyes in ecstasy. "By Durin's..." he looked quickly at Lady Redmond as he blushed and checked himself. "By Durin's mighty hammer! This be the best food I've had in me life!"

Laughing at the embarrassed dwarf, Lydia tore one of the loaves of bread in half. Shouting "Incoming!" she tossed it across the table at Brick. Wide-eyed and caught by surprise, the dwarf fumbled the bread before getting a good grasp on it. He looked toward the Lady with his mouth hanging open in shock. "Relax, master dwarf. As I said, we don't stand on ceremony here. I married a soldier, with soldier's habits, and before I trained him properly, the manners of drunken bear. I was an adventurer myself once. A little rough language won't embarrass me. And I'm glad you like the stew," she chuckled, tossing the other half of the loaf to Max while the captain laughed out loud at the surprised look on their guest's faces.

Brick's face lit up with a wide and mischievous grin. "It be a shame the captain found ye first, M'lady... Lydia," he corrected as she raised an eyebrow, "or I'd drop to me knees'n beg ya to marry me right here'n now!"

Lydia laughed again as she more sedately passed bread to the others at the table. "You'd have had to shave that beard and mustache first, Brick dear. I don't like the ticklish feeling when I'm being kissed!" she parried, leaning over to lightly kiss her very amused and clean shaven husband.

Brick look truly scandalized and spluttered a few nonsensical syllables. "WHAT??! Shave me... I canno..." getting control of himself and realizing she was teasing him, the dwarf bellowed, "BWAHAHAHA! Well played. Well played!" and quickly returned his focus to the stew as the others all

laughed.

Max spoke up as he set down his spoon and made a small bow toward Lydia. "Lydia, my thanks to you. Not only for this delicious meal. But also for making my short friend here blush for the first time in all the years that I've known him!" Lydia solemnly nodded her head in return, then smiled as Brick managed to hit Max in the face with his bread without looking up or pausing in the consumption of his stew.

With that, the table grew quiet for some time, as everyone focused on their meal. Though there were a few sighs of contentment and even a faint and entirely unladylike grunt of pleasure from Sasha as she bit into the bread. Once everyone was finished and the table had been cleared away, Lydia sat back down at the table and addressed Sasha. "Now, Sasha, tell me about yourself."

"Well..." Sasha began, "I am a druid. When I first came to this land, I felt a connection to the forest and the animals, and couldn't have become anything else. I've a few good healing spells that I use to keep these idiots alive when they stumble into beasts and monsters and get themselves hurt," she smirked at Alexander. "I've been friends with Alex since we were small children. It was clear to me even then that he needed someone with common sense to watch over him. These other two..." she motioned to Brick and Max, "just sort of started following us around a few years ago. I can't seem to get rid of them!" She smiled, quite happy with herself. "I've been studying alchemy and cooking, though not formally. I've just found a few recipes here and there, and followed them as best I can."

"Well, dear. It would be my pleasure to teach you what I know about healing, cooking, and alchemy. Lord knows I can barely keep up, between running the shop, healing those that need it, and making enough potions to go around! You'll be a welcome addition, believe me," Lydia smiled at Sasha.

"Oh! That reminds me," Sasha exclaimed as she reached into her inventory bag and pulled out all the bundles of feather-root she'd gathered in the caves. "I couldn't identify these when we found them. but the captain explained this morning that they're called feather-root, and that you have a use for them. Please, take these as a thank you for this wonderful meal and for being so kind!" She passed the pile of herbs across the table to Lydia, who made a

halting motion with her hands.

"No, no. I can't possibly. Do you know what these are worth, Sasha? Each leaf is sufficient to make an infusion that can then be converted into a half dozen of the high quality healing potions. I sell those potions here in the shop for 20 gold each. There are..." she looked at the bundles of herbs on the table, "there are hundreds of leaves here. Enough to make a thousand potions or more!"

"They are yours," Sasha insisted, "they are of small value compared to the knowledge and skills you are sharing with me."

Max, always with one eye on the bottom line, and having done the math on the value of the herbs, coughed and pounded his chest seemingly in pain, but wisely said nothing. Lydia still made as if to push the herbs back across the table toward Sasha, but Alexander reached out to touch her arm.

"Please Lydia. The king has been very generous to us today. As have your husband and yourself. And if these herbs can be used to help heal the captain's soldiers or the people of Stormforge, we are honored to gift them to you." The other companions all nodded in agreement.

"Wife," the captain added quietly, taking her hand in his. "If it will ease your conscience, I'm sure these fine young adventurers would not mind if you provided them with some of the potions you make from these plants. After all, I'm guessing they will be doing a considerable amount of... stumbling into beasts and monsters, was it?" He winked at Sasha as everyone laughed at his semi-clever joke.

With tears in her eyes, Lydia stood and moved around the table. She pulled Sasha to her feet and hugged her tightly. "Thank you, dear child. Thank all of you. My husband tells me the king today named you Friends of the Realm for your actions in service to others. And still you offer more and ask nothing in return. From now on, you are all more than friends. You are to consider yourselves family."

Your reputation with Captain Redmond has increased to Ally. Your reputation with Lady Lydia Redmond has increased to Cherished.

The friends all smiled happily at receiving this notification. *I didn't even*

know there was a 'Cherished' level! Did she just make that up somehow? Alexander thought.

"Ok, you young people have a new home to go see. I've kept you long enough," Lydia said, beginning to shoo them toward the front of the shop. "Sasha, come see me tomorrow, if you have some time and we'll begin your lessons."

As they filed out the door, Sasha stopped to hug Lydia again. "Of course I'll stop by tomorrow! Thank you again, so much!"

The captain kissed his wife as he followed the foursome out into the street, and guided them to the left, past the merchant's guild house. Stopping at the next structure, he began, "This is it. The former embassy. Now home of the Greystone Guild!" It was a striking three-story structure in the middle of an extensive walled compound. There was a ten-foot-high stone wall, and a much taller gatehouse that, judging by the length of the tunnel between the gate and the courtyard, must be about 20 feet thick. Beyond the gate the view was limited to a set of sturdy-looking iron oak doors. Sasha got out the keys, and made ready to unlock the gate. "If you kids need anything you know where to find us. I can arrange for a wagon and a few lazy squires to help you move, if you need it. Just let me know. And thank you again, for all you've done today." The captain bowed his head slightly, turned and quickly headed back to the palace.

Sasha quickly found the proper key and opened the gate. As they walked through the small bailey with its high archway easily tall enough to permit carriages to pass through, Brick grunted in approval and pointed to the ceiling. There were clearly visible murder holes along the ceiling and both walls. As they passed through the open inner gate, the group stopped to take in the compound.

Directly ahead, maybe 30 yards across a courtyard was the main structure. A large home built with what looked like smooth river rocks and mortar. The two main entry doors were indeed iron oak, each roughly ten feet tall and three feet wide. The second-floor had several sets of French doors that all led out to a stone railed balcony that stretched the width of the building. The third-floor windows suggested a series of smaller rooms.

All the windows and French doors had masterfully carved iron shutters that,

when closed, would turn the place into a formidable fortress. The roof was flat, but one could see what looked like the upper portion of a gazebo set back from the edge.

To their left as they faced the main building was a small garden with a fountain that looked as if it was intended to imitate the gardens in the inner bailey of the palace. A stone pathway led through the garden and around the side of the main house. The garden was overgrown, and clearly had had no tending since the former residents left. To their right was a two-floor utility looking structure that may have been a storehouse or guard/servant quarters, or both. Between that structure and the main house there was a 20 ft wide cobbled driveway that wound around the western corner of the house.

Moving across the courtyard and up the three steps to the covered entrance, Sasha located the front door keys and opened them. The friends walked into a grand vestibule with soaring ceilings and marble tiled floors. Ahead of them to their right was a wide stairway with a polished mahogany bannister that curved away up to the second floor far above. To the left of the stairway was a hall that ran straight back toward the rear of the house. The companions took in their surroundings, alternating staring with their mouths open in wonder and looking at one another is if to get confirmation that it was all real.

"It's so... big," said Sasha, twirling slowly around, arms out to the sides.

"That's what she said! Ha!" Brick just couldn't resist the opening. He nimbly jumped to the side as Sasha made to smack him.

"Let's check the rest of the house," Max said, moving toward a set of open double doors to their left as they faced the stairs. The rest followed him through into what looked like a drawing room. There were overstuffed upholstered chairs and sofas arranged in groups with small side tables and a long mahogany coffee table in each group.

In one corner to the left of a window was a well-stocked bar with glass or crystal decanters. Apparently, the prior residents had been forced to leave much behind. The king's men must have secured the home immediately thereafter to keep out looters. On the opposite wall was a massive fireplace with a carved stone mantle.

"Awwww yeah!" Brick smiled and patted his bag. "We know just what's

goin up there!" Even Sasha smiled at his enthusiasm as she turned and crossed the room toward another set of doors heading in the direction of the back of the house. Opening these doors, she found a formal dining room with a long table. There were ten chairs along each side, and one at each end. There were sideboards along the right-hand wall and another, smaller fireplace on the left. Two separate single doors led out the back of the room. One on the left, one on the right. Sasha once again led the way, taking the left-hand door. This one led through a short butler's pantry into a massive kitchen, which seemed to occupy nearly the entire back side of the residence. Directly in front of them were massive wooden prep tables where meals would be plated before being taken to the dining room. Beyond the prep tables was a door that led to the south out the back of the house. The kitchen extended to the right, where there were three wide sinks and faucets and a middle island with chopping blocks. Past those were two large stone ovens, each with enough space for two grown men to sit inside. Then there were three oversized magic stovetops with racks of pots and pans hanging above them. Across the room from those were what appeared to be two large cold storage rooms. And at the far end of the room was a door that led into a deep pantry, with another door leading out to the west side of the house. Likely a delivery entrance.

"Ten people could work in here and never bump into each other" Sasha said mostly to herself. "We could feed a whole garrison from this kitchen!"

"Aye, lass, or half a garrison of dwarves! Ha!" Brick happily chimed in. "Speakin' of dwarves, the king mentioned a cellar by the kitchen..." he drifted off as he headed toward the delivery door exit. The others followed. Sure enough, outside was the driveway that led from the main courtyard around the west side of the house. There were two ramps, a small one that led up to the pantry door, and a longer one that sloped down to a cellar entrance. "There she be!" Brick exclaimed as he headed down. Not much interested in a cellar, Sasha called to the dwarf and tossed him the keys. He unlocked the door and tossed them back up to her. While he explored his new ale storage facility, the others moved on to the rest of the property. At the end of the drive, at the southwest corner of the property, were the stables. A long, stone barn with wide doors that stood open, and a second-floor hay loft. Max immediately headed off in that direction. The walls around the east, west, and south sides were all solid, with no entry gates. Only a small

door in the middle of the south wall with a very heavy bar across it. Against the east wall, opposite the stables was another small two-story utility looking building with a single door. Likely a workshop and storage area.

But what caught Sasha's attention was the attached greenhouse. Maybe 50 foot squared, the building's glass was too dirty for the friends to see in from the outside. Sasha ran to the door of the workshop and found it unlocked. Stepping inside she immediately headed toward the end of the building and the door that must lead to the greenhouse. While she explored that, Alexander entered the workshop and looked around. The ground floor was basically one large room, with a kitchen in one corner, and several work benches set up along the walls below the windows. To his left was a very small room that was either a closet or a restroom. There was a stairway in the back corner that led upstairs, and another below it that must lead to some type of cellar. Alexander proceeded up to the second floor where he found four small rooms along a central hallway, and a bathroom with a shower. Glancing out the window, he noticed Max and Brick walking his direction. He headed back down to meet them in the main room.

"Four small rooms and a bathroom upstairs," he said to them as they came through the door. Sasha's in the greenhouse." He headed that direction.

"Where else would she be?" Max asked as he and the dwarf followed. The greenhouse was as overgrown as the garden out front. So much so that none of them could see Sasha, or the other end of the room.

"Be there a druid in the house!?" Brick shouted, smiling. Then he jumped slightly as Sasha came bursting through some vegetation behind him. "Dammit lass! Nearly stopped me heart, sneakin' up like that!"

"This place is AMAZING!" Sasha gushed. "There's every kind of herb and vegetable I know, and some that I don't. There are even a couple of fruit trees in the back! I have to show this to Lydia right away!" She was practically bursting at the seams with enthusiasm.

"How bout we check out the rest of the house, first? Then we need to log off, remember? We have an appointment." Alexander said.

"Oh. Right," Sasha agreed, looking disappointed.

"Aye, I have some real world business to take care of meself today," Brick said.

"Let's check out the rest of the main house, then we'll all log off and meet back here tomorrow?" Max ventured. They all nodded and headed back outside.

They found a large library and another sitting area in the other side of the ground floor of the main house. Along with two bathrooms. The second floor contained what looked be a couple of offices, a salon, and a few guest suites that included sitting areas, a single bedroom with a large bed, wardrobes, and bathrooms with showers and large tubs in each. There was also a very small windowless room off each one near the hallway door, presumably for the valet or servants of visiting dignitaries.

A large part of the third floor was taken up by a master suite, and there were three smaller suites that were similar to those on the second floor. Brick, sensing an opportunity for some brownie points, bowed to Sasha and said, "Me Lady should o'course take the master suite. Us gentleman slobs will settle for the smaller ones." Sasha beamed at him, and was moving with hands raised to give him a hug when he added, "everyone knows you females need the space for yer many shoes and clothes and such girly things!" Brick beamed at her. Sasha smile disappeared and her hands dropped. She looked at Brick, shook her head, and just logged out.

Brick looked confused while Alexander and Max laughed heartily. "You were SO close, my diminutive friend," Max said as he patted the scowling dwarf on the shoulder. "I'll see you gents tomorrow?"

"Yep, bright and early," Alexander confirmed. He and Max both logged off, leaving the forlorn dwarf alone in the hallway.

Chapter Five

Home Is Where the Hearth Is

Alexander removed his headset and unbuckled himself. "Any messages, Alfred?" he asked, headed slowly but steadily for the bathroom to freshen up.

"Just one, young sir. Your father called to remind you that a car would be here at 2:00 to pick you up. He left instructions for Lady Elaine to rouse you from the game if you didn't exit on your own."

"Let the record reflect that I did remember, and logged out with plenty of time to spare!" Alexander teased his AI.

"Very good, young sir," was the only reply.

After a short shower, Alexander donned office-appropriate dockers, a button-down shirt and a pair of boat shoes. He headed out to the living room and sat on the sofa to wait for Lainey. He was a bit early, but he was curious about what Odin wanted to show him. He'd never actually been called to the office by Odin before, and the possibilities were exciting!

Alexander's father, Richard Greystone, was the CEO and one of the founders of Jupiter Technologies, a multinational conglomerate. Just a year before Alexander was born, Richard started the company in his basement, working with his then girlfriend and a college buddy to design and code simple online games for mobile devices. Not having the money to purchase or maintain the servers and other hardware needed to operate the games themselves, the trio sold their first half dozen creations to established game corporations. Their first one, called "Gophers of Ganymede", was an update to the classic "whack-a-mole" type game in which purple space gophers with three eyes randomly popped out of small craters in the moon's surface. Players had to bop them on the head without being hit by space rocks thrown by the gophers, or the ones falling from above. They'd sold the game to MobiGames Corp for a whopping \$10,000.00 and a design credit, just to keep the lights on and food on their table. The game was a huge hit, downloaded by half the kids (and no small number of adults) in the world, and making

more than twenty million dollars for MobiGames in its first year. This created a bidding war on their 2nd offering, which earned them a quarter of a million dollars. It wasn't nearly as popular as the gopher game, but still did very well. After the sale of their 6th mobile-based game design they had earned enough money to purchase a small office building and establish Jupiter Games, Inc.

Richard's girlfriend (and by that time, Alexander's mother) Angela was a software engineer that had minored in Classic Literature, and was a huge fan of Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology. Several of their games and the critters within them were named after or based upon mythological beings and beasts. She convinced them to name the company after Jupiter, the God of Thunder, King of the Roman gods, and namesake of the largest planet in our solar system.

With enough money to live on for several years, and to hire a half dozen extra programmers and techs, they rolled the dice on another mobile-based game. This time, though, they decided to purchase the necessary servers and other hardware, market, and operate the game themselves. They used what they considered their best concept, one they'd held back just for this purpose. After a year of work, and a total investment of more than a million dollars (which was most of their leftover earnings from the previous game sales after purchasing their office building) they released their game. They'd paid a semi-professional production group to make them a 15 second web-mercial that began with "FROM THE DESIGNERS THAT BROUGHT YOU GOPHERS OF GANYMEDE..." and place it on a few hundred strategic social media sites. The name recognition paid off, and the game was a tremendous success. After just three months they'd had to expand their small server farm to handle the traffic. At six months, after recouping their entire investment and earning an additional net of \$4 million dollars, they had reached a point where they were going to have to expand again to handle the traffic. At that time, they were contacted by their old friends at MobiGames, and offered a flat \$10 million cash, plus 10% of the net proceeds over two years for their game. Richard called a meeting of the senior staff, which at that point consisted of himself, Angela, and his college buddy Michael. The question at hand was whether to take the \$10 million and walk away. Or to turn down the offer and expand themselves again.

Angela took the lead, reminding them they'd never really wanted to be in the mobile games business. She wanted to design the world's best MMORPG. Mobile games were just the means to grow enough to make that next step. They had all three been avid players of RPG's from childhood; that was what had brought them together at the university.

The business discussion took all of about four minutes before they agreed to sell, and spent the rest of the night celebrating.

They closed the deal on Alexander's 2nd birthday. With a good bit of money in the bank, they paid each of their staff a \$100,000 bonus and told them to take a month off. Two weeks later, Richard and Angela got married, and took little Alexander with them on their honeymoon trip to Hawaii.

When the three of them got back to work, they found themselves with a half empty office building, a small server farm (MobiGames had their own servers, and didn't need Jupiter's), a total staff of ten including themselves, and nothing to do. They sent someone out for pizza. Michael opened a bottle of rum, passed out plastic cups, and said, "We're going to design the best game EVER!"

They gathered in their conference room, which had no table, only the chairs that everyone wheeled in from their desks, and began to spitball ideas for their first MMORPG.

Over the next week, they stole a couple digital artists and programmers who had worked on a few of their favorite RPG's, bought more desks and laptops, and a conference table, and got down to it.

Three years later they were up to a staff of 30: programmers, developers, artists, accountants, and reception. They had burned through most of their initial capital in salaries and operating expenses. They had collected another \$3 million in game residuals from MobiGames for the agreed upon two-year period. They had done two beta tests over a six-month period, discovering and working out a litany of bugs. It was time to release their new baby.

It was named Europa Online.

They'd hired a professional marketing agency, offering them a percentage of the game profits as payment. They made a similar agreement with TechMage, a company who manufactured the latest generation of VR helmets and suits, that allowed the game to operate on their platform. The game and the gear would be marketed together. Jupiter would pay TechMage 5% of proceeds if sales of their gear packed with the game did not reach \$100 million within the first year. The software/gear game package was priced at \$1,500 per player, and included a single three-month subscription to the game. After that it was \$50 per month to play. The division of proceeds went like this: \$1,000 of the package purchase price went to the hardware guys, the other \$500 to Jupiter.

During the second beta test, they'd launched a website with links to all social media, and encouraged testers to post their thoughts, good or bad. Their marketing team posted a two minute video of actual game play on the site. An A-list celebrity who was a gamer himself and whose kids had been huge fans of the gopher game, volunteered to do a voiceover cameo on the video with his kids, then released it on his own social media site. Within the first week it had gone viral, with more than 100 million hits. Then they'd opened up a one-month window for pre-orders that would be guaranteed delivered by launch day.

Their guaranteed delivery pre-orders from the one-month beta window tallied up to more than two million units. And they had pre-orders for almost four million more that had their gear supplier scrambling to try and fill before launch day. They used \$10 million of their pre-order receipts to buy a full two-minute commercial showing their video during Superbowl 100, cleverly placing it following a Victoria's Secret commercial to ensure they had everyone's full attention.

They set launch day for Alexander's 5th birthday. The game went online at 9:00am EST. By noon there were five million players online. By the end of the week, there were more than eight million players. By the end of its first year, over 100 million players had purchased and were playing Europa Online on a daily basis worldwide. Just the initial sales to all those players grossed \$150 billion. Needless to say, Jupiter did not have to pay the 5% to their gear partner, TechMage. Instead they used half of their first year sale proceeds to buy a controlling interest in the company. They didn't have a better use for the cash and didn't need to worry about savings, as the monthly subscription income was almost pure profit. And \$50/month times 100 million players was a lot of cash. Since Jupiter Games, Inc. was a privately

held company, the three founders who each owned 30%, were suddenly multi-billionaires. And their staff, who had each taken small stock options as pre-launch bonuses, were all multi-hundred-millionaires.

By the time 11 year old Alexander took that spill in the park five years later, over 600 million players had purchased the game/gear package. Nearly 400 million of them were still actively playing the game and paying the monthly subscription, which had eventually been lowered to \$20/month. With a total sales income since launch of more than \$300 billion, and a subscription income over six years of more than a trillion dollars, Jupiter Games, Inc. was quickly becoming one of the most successful corporations on the planet. They were the absolute leader in online gaming. More people were playing Europa than any other three games combined. The trio purchased the remainder of the gear supplier and formed a new umbrella corporation named Jupiter Technologies. They had manufacturing and distribution facilities, customer service centers, and massive server farms scattered across the globe, on every continent. They had an army of programmers, developers, artists, and consultants working on another game design. And their own in-house legal and marketing departments.

Just before 2:00pm Lainey joined him in the living room looking very businesslike in a white blouse and dark blue skirt and blazer, with her hair up in a style carefully arranged to look careless. "You look very urban professional today, Lainey!" he smiled and winked at her. "Shut up, rich boy. Some of us aren't the boss's son and can't get away with slacker clothes like that!" she made an angry-pouty face at him. Then she smiled and ruffled his hair, "but you clean up ok for a nerd that spends all his time in a video game!"

"The car has arrived," Alfred informed them, so they both rose and headed toward the front door.

The car waiting for them out front had picked up Sasha first, as she lived in apartment near the center of the city. Alexander and his father lived on a large estate in the foothills between the city center and the corporate compound up on the mountain. Sasha was waiting for them as they climbed into the car. She was wearing a very pretty blue summer dress and sandals.

"I love your dress!" Lainey said as she car-hugged Sasha, sitting next to her.

Alexander sat in the seat opposite them. "Hey. Listen, I know you're upset. You know... Brick didn't mean anything. He was trying to be nice." He said by way of greeting.

"I know" Sasha said with a long-suffering sigh. "I know he meant well. He's just so... ugh." She shook her head.

Alexander felt the need to promote the peace between his dwarf friend and their druidess. "You know the whole rough-edged dwarf thing is just his way of trying to fit in. He's from a really poor family and grew up pretty rough," Alexander reminded her.

"I remember. And I do understand. I know he uses the money he makes ingame to support his family. I've offered to help lots of times, but he refuses. Says he won't take charity," Sasha replied.

"Yeah, I offered to help as well. It got pretty uncomfortable, so I just let it drop," said Alexander. "I know that Max offered to help as well. Even though he's in basically the same boat, just without the family to support."

The remainder of the ride to the corporate compound was pretty quiet. Alexander thinking about the game, Lainey and Sasha talking about their outfits and similar girl things that he really wasn't paying attention to.

When they arrived at the gate, a deep voice echoed within the car. "Greetings young Alexander. Lady Sasha, Lady Elaine. Welcome back to Olympus!"

His mother's love of all things mythological was deeply ingrained within the corporate identity. She had hired a Norwegian architectural firm and coached them in designing their corporate headquarters. It took a year to construct, and would have taken longer except they paid a premium for extra crews of stone masons from around the world, at a ridiculous cost of nearly \$2 billion. But they had the money, and had no stockholders to report to.

The end result was a massive five-story castle keep straight out of Norse legends. There was a 20ft stone wall that completely surrounded the keep, which covered nearly ten acres of land. There were four rounded towers, each with a diameter of 100 feet and rising 60 feet into the air, and with a depth of 40 feet underground.

The main building was much the same, 50 feet high with multiple wings and courtyards, with five floors of underground "dungeons" that contained thousands of server blocks in climate controlled spaces as well as top secret R&D labs. There was a massive square central tower that rose up 80 feet from the ground floor. The top three floors contained offices for the founders, conference rooms, and small but elegant living spaces for when they worked through the night and didn't have the time or energy to go home to sleep. The whole thing was made of granite, with windows that were both bulletproof and protected against electronic espionage. There were windmills and solar panels that fed into massive banks of batteries to provide backup power if necessary.

The compound was built on a hill, in the center of a 500-acre meadow with a spring fed freshwater lake. The whole area was situated on the top of a rocky mountain, which in turn was surrounded by a 10,000 acre forested nature preserve. The company owned the entire thing. Purchased from the state at a discount in return for agreeing to maintain the preserve for all eternity. Or something like that. The drive that led to the front gate was dubbed "Bifrost Road", and the AI that operated the building and security systems that included the front gate controls and all the video surveillance, was named "Heimdall".

"Thank you, Heimdall," they said nearly in unison.

Alexander added, "It has been too long. I hope you've been well?"

"As always, I remain in good health and ever vigilant," the AI responded. The gate was open now and the car had begun to move forward. "Odin has asked that I direct you to the southeast tower. He and your father will meet you and the other guests on the 5th dungeon level. May you all enjoy your visit to Olympus."

"Thank you, Heimdall!" Sasha actually waved at the small camera mounted to the gatehouse, as if the Bifrost Guardian were actually standing there.

The car drove onto the compound and up Bifrost Rd. toward the main building before turning and stopping at the base of the southeastern tower. The driver opened the door, and Alexander allowed the ladies to depart before slowly stepping out himself. They made their way to the main level

tower door, the ladies allowing Alexander to set the pace. Once inside, he waived at the receptionist before turning toward the elevator. A biometric scanner confirmed his identity, and of those of Sasha and Lainey, before the elevator door opened to admit them. Once they'd all filed in the doors closed behind them and the elevator descended. No need to push any buttons or speak, as Heimdall already knew their destination.

Upon reaching the "5th dungeon level" they all filed out and waited at the security desk while Heimdall's scanners once again confirmed their identities, and that they were not carrying any electronic devices such as phones, jump drives, anything that might be used to copy and remove data from the sensitive area. The 5th dungeon was one of the R&D floors where Richard Greystone and his team worked on a range of very secret projects. When security waived them through, a young woman in a lab coat was waiting for them.

"Good morning Alexander! Lainey! Sasha!" she beamed at them. "Richard is in Lab Delta. I'll take you there! Just follow me!" She began to lead them down a wide hallway with light grey concrete floors and sanded bedrock walls cut right into the mountain itself. The ceiling was strung with long lines of LED lights.

"It's nearly 3pm Melanie," Alexander smiled at the enthusiastic young lady, "when was the last time dad let you out to get some sunshine?"

"Oh!" Melanie glanced at her watch and blushed prettily, "Richard is always telling me to go take a walk outside... but I just assume he's being grumpy and ignore him most of the time!" The others smiled knowingly at each other as they reached the lab door marked with a triangular "delta" symbol and were once again scanned to confirm their identities. Once through the door, Alexander observed another hallway, this one with finished and painted walls. Along the right side were a series of glass walls and doorways that suggest several small rooms. Melanie led them into the first of these rooms. Alexander's father was there, standing behind one of his current research projects. It was an immersion pod prototype. Approximately eight feet long, and four feet wide, the pod resembled an elongated egg sitting on its side on a two-foot-high base. The upper third of the egg was clear plexiglass, and had hinges at the back to allow it to open upward like the cockpit of a

fighter jet. There were all sorts of wires and tubes leading from the pod across the floor to various tanks, electrical boxes, and servers. There was a four-foot-wide ramp leading up to the pod's cockpit.

As they approached, Richard walked around to meet them. Scooping Sasha into a big hug. "Sasha! It's good to see you! It has been too long. You haven't been to the house in, what? Six months?" He let her go and mock frowned at her.

"More like three weeks!" Sasha responded, poking him in the belly, "but YOU are never home, Richard. So I don't see you as much."

"I miss the days when you just called me 'pop'..." he looked down at her. "You would burst through the front door in your pigtails and ratty jeans, detour into the kitchen to rip open the fridge and grab a couple bottles of juice, then fly past us shouting 'hi mom! Hi pop!' headed for Alexander's room. I'm not sure you even touched the floor the whole time. And you always forgot to close the fridge! Angela would get up, go to the kitchen to close the fridge, and bring me back a cookie." The smile on his face was a bit melancholy.

Sasha noticed and hugged him again. "Yeah, I miss her too, pop. She was the bestest ever!"

Trying to lighten the mood, Lainey interjected, "this girl STILL leaves the fridge open every time. I had to change Alfred's program so that he'd monitor her and shut the fridge himself!" causing everyone, including Sasha, to laugh.

Richard changed the subject, becoming more serious and waving them toward the pod. "We have some time before our other guests arrive. I brought you here early so we could talk in private first."

He stepped to one side of the room and grabbed an office chair which he wheeled over for Alexander to sit in. Standing for prolonged periods became painful for him. "I've been working on this project since the week after you were diagnosed, Alexander. It started as a just a way for you to be able to play the game when your body reached the point where... well, you know." He paused for a moment, and Lainey reached up to pat his shoulder. "But as I studied the mechanics of VR and the gear's interface with the brain, an idea began to form. I talked it over with Michael, and he was behind me 100%.

So, we brought in some experts to talk it over further. We brought in neurologists, biologists, geneticists, mechanical engineers, bioengineers, even psychologists. The very best in the world in each field. We told them they were coming for a week-long conference. When I had them all in a room, this very room, in fact, I told them my idea, and asked them if it was even possible. Initially there were mixed results. About half the group said 'no' while the other half started getting excited. Mostly the mechanical types. I asked them to take the rest of the day to sleep on it, and reconvene in the morning. By breakfast, nearly all of them were willing to try. The rest were convinced when I told them money was no object." He shook his head, remembering.

Patting the pod as he spoke, he continued "Several billion dollars and nearly a decade later, we have this baby here! I call her Eir."

"The Norse goddess of healing," Alexander automatically supplied. He was his mother's son. She had taught him the entire Greek, Roman, and Norse pantheons as a child. No Harry Potter or Winnie the Pooh for him. His bedtime stories were filled with the adventures of the powerful, often angry and jealous gods. Tamed down a bit, obviously, so as not to terrify the boy. Later, he'd studied them further. Partly because he had a passion for mythology, and partly in tribute to his mom. He sometimes imagined her reading over his shoulder as he studied.

"That's right, son." Richard smiled proudly. "My idea all those years ago, was to create a way for you to develop new neural pathways. New connections that would allow you to, at least for a while, bypass damaged areas and retain control of your muscles. I wasn't optimistic enough to think we could find a cure back then. I just wanted a way to have as much time with you as possible."

Seeing tears in his father's eyes, Alexander stepped closer and embraced him. Squeezing as hard as he could manage before letting go and stepping back to sit again.

"Anyway," Richard sniffed, then continued, "that first week we decided on a two-pronged approach. The first was chemical. We had to find a way to slow the deterioration of your neural connections. To give your brain time to correct itself. The second was to find a way to enable the correction, even encouraging your brain to do so. There had already been rumors of patients

with certain palsies, or with traumatic neuromuscular damage, seeing improvements in their conditions after multiple periods of VR game play. The fringe theory being that being able to move their avatars in the game, with all the running and jumping and moving about, their brains were beginning to re-establish lost or unused connections. Or to create them for the first time in those who were born with their conditions."

"I actually think I've noticed that myself, some," Alexander unintentionally said out loud.

"Well, likely you have," his father said, "though any improvements you've seen now are actually a combination of game play, Lainey's efforts with diet and physical therapy, and the drugs you've been taking." When Alexander looked at him with a question on his face, he added, "About three years ago we finally developed a drug that slows, or even stops the deterioration caused by your condition, and others that are similar. We are still going through the clinical trials, and FDA approval process. Once we have that, we'll be able to get it out to the general public!" Richard's eyes shone with hope, and Melanie actually squealed, clapping her hands and bouncing with joy. "You've been a sort of a guinea pig, son, but based on our testing the progression of your condition has slowed by about 40%!"

Sasha let out a sob and launched herself at Alexander. The impact caused the chair to roll backward, but she clung to him while he used the support of her body to stand himself up. At which point Lainey latched on too. Alexander quickly found himself in the center of a group hug that involved everybody in the room, including Melanie. All of them crying.

"Why... why didn't you tell me, dad?" Alexander eventually said, as the hug broke apart and Sasha went to fetch the chair.

"I didn't want to get your hopes up until I had something that actually works," his father said very quietly. "You've studied the medicine as much as I have, son. Hell, you could teach a neuroscience course at Johns Hopkins at this point. You know the odds were stacked heavily against us. Even some of our own team told me I was a fool wasting his money on a pipe dream. Right before I fired them." He grinned a bit at this. "Never underestimate a man with a dream, and ridiculous amounts of disposable income!"

Alexander, still a little shaken and trying to absorb all he'd heard in the last

few minutes, laughed. It came out a bit shaky and slightly hysterical, like a man who'd just survived a horrific battle. "So the drug is helping. And I'm only dying half as quickly as I was. Where does Eir come in?" he motioned toward the pod. His father looked a bit hurt, and Lainey smacked the back of his head. "I'm sorry, dad," he said, "I'm a little overwhelmed right now. Thank you. For all of this."

"Well, as I was saying, there is some truth to the rumors of improvement from VR activity. But it occurred to us that the improvement would be limited by the body's physical limitations in the real world. In your case, sitting strapped into a chair, even though your brain is likely sending microsignals to your arm and leg muscles as you move, gravity and inertia are acting against them. Ideally, we'd have created a zero-gravity space for you to live and work in. But that wasn't really feasible, and came with its own problems. Then we talked about my idea, which was basically a sensory deprivation tank. A big tank filled with water adjusted to the exact temperature and salinization to allow you to be buoyant, and freely move your arms and legs to mimic your in-game movements." His father continued his explanation, "But that wasn't practical either. At least not for long term use. So we tried other things. Then other things after that. Nothing worked, and I just kept coming back to my original idea."

Richard reached into the pod and produced a handful of blue gelatin. "Then we came up with THIS!" he said as he held his hand out for them to inspect.

"Blue slime?" Sasha asked. Making her 'it's icky' face and making Melanie giggle.

"That's what I call it, too!" she said.

Richard smiled at Sasha, before explaining. "This is what we are calling sensory gel. It has several functions that I won't get into now, but it has three main jobs. First, it can be programmed, using electric impulses, to have enough density that it can keep a body suspended within the space of a pod rather than a thousand-gallon water tank. It allows these units to be much more compact. Second it is highly conductive, so that it can transmit micropulses generated by your brain through the pod and assist in the movement of your muscles. Nanobots within the gel are able to translate the transmitted signals to target specific muscles or muscle groups, simultaneously or in an

ascending order for movements that require it. Like opening or closing your hand. Lastly, it allows enough oxygen to reach your skin to keep it healthy over long periods of immersion. It also can be programmed to remove body waste. Not just the waste from your digestive system..."

Sasha made her 'it's icky' face again. So did Melanie and Lainey.

"But it can remove dead skin cells, sweat, discarded hairs, all the waste products a body produces. One of our techs even programmed the nanobots to shave him when he stuck his face in the gel. Smooth as a baby's bottom," Richard laughed at the amazed and slightly disgusted looks around him.

"We call him buttface now," Melanie added helpfully. "Well, I do, anyway."

Richard sighed, continuing. "The bots in the gel are programmed to encapsulate any waste it encounters, thus effectively quarantining it as it moves toward the disposal and filtration tanks in the base, there." He pointed at the two-foot tall rectangular base holding up the pod. "The gel is filtered to remove all the waste, then cleaned and returned for use in the pod. The waste itself is dumped into a chemical decomposition tank where it quickly breaks down and is stored. The whole pod will have to be serviced about once a month, to empty the tank, change out the filters, check all the programming and mechanical parts. And to provide more nutrient paste. It even has a battery backup that will continue to run the pod for up to a week if the power goes out."

"Nutrient paste?" Lainey raised her hand while asking, as if she were back in school.

"Yes. It's a paste filled with all the necessary protein, minerals, vitamins, and liquid to keep an active body healthy. It's highly digestible and designed to be as close as possible to 100% consumed by the body so that it produces very little waste. When you're in the pod, you wear a sensor net on your head, which stays above the level of the gel, and a mouthpiece with a feeding tube that ensures you can ingest the paste and breathe. There are several redundant medical sensors located throughout the pod that monitor your body's vitals, movements, chemical levels, and a hundred other things. In the case of an emergency it can even take appropriate action; everything from simply opening the hatch and shutting down, to providing electroshock to

restart a heart that has stopped. In the event of a seizure, for example, the gel can increase its density preventing convulsing limbs from impacting the side of the pod."

This is amazing! And he did all of this for me? I feel bad now, all those times I resented him working late. I have to find a way to make it up to him. Alexander thought.

Richard was just finishing his tutorial. "We're still working on it, but the next generation will be able to provide chemical injections when medically necessary. To force a body to sleep, for example, when someone tries to do a 48-hour marathon session and it begins to damage their health. Or a mild tranquilizer if a body is having a panic attack. But that's still a few years and a lot of government approvals away."

"Dad..." Alexander tried to find the words. "I can't believe you've accomplished all of this. I had no idea... I mean, how... the amount of work this must have involved. I can't even imagine. I'm so proud of you. Thank you."

"You're welcome, son. You were my motivation behind this work. You've worked so hard every day just to keep going. How could I do any less?" Richard put a hand on his son's shoulder. "But this isn't just for you anymore. With this tech, and the drug approvals, we can help thousands of people. Maybe millions!"

"When can we try it out!" Sasha seemed to have gotten over the ickiness factor and was ready to jump in. Alexander shared her eagerness.

"Well, we have a couple more guests coming. They should be here any minute. And I wanted to check with you both on a few things first. Let's head into the meeting room and talk." The group filed into the adjacent meeting room, minus Melanie. She headed back out to the corridor, presumably to greet their other guests. The meeting room was just a closed off corner of the lab with a long conference table, a holo-projector, and a dozen or so comfortable chairs. Sasha and Lainey sat on either side of Alexander, while Richard sat across from them, a pensive look on his face. He looked as if he wasn't sure where to begin.

Chapter Six

The End of an Era

"Alexander, Sasha. The other guests I've invited here today are your friends from the game. Brick and Max." He went silent there, giving them time to digest and react. He knew the friends had never met in person, and strongly suspected that was Alexander's doing. To keep them from knowing about his condition. To keep them from pitying him or treating him differently.

Alexander was stunned. *Brick and Max. Here? NOW? Why are they here? Do they know about me? Why would dad do this?!*

Sasha recovered from the surprise much more quickly. She'd obviously had the same thoughts as Alexander. "Why are they here? What have you told them about Alexander?" She sounded almost angry with Richard.

Richard reached across the table and put his hand on top of his son's. "They've been told nothing about you. And they won't be, if you don't want them to be. They've been told they are here because they've won a prize. Which they have. They'll each be given a prototype pod, installed in their homes if they like. Or installed in a nearby facility that they can go to when they want to play. They'll also be upgraded to elite accounts, which grant some benefits that we'll get into later. And this last part is completely up to you Alexander. If you approve, they will each be offered a one-year contract as beta testers for the pods. It will involve progressively longer immersion periods, beginning with a couple days, then a week, two weeks, a month, and so on. They will be given a salary, along with potential bonuses based on performance. They will also be offered corporate housing. Nothing fancy, but room enough for them to have pods at home, if that is their preference."

Letting go of his son's hand, Richard watched his face as Alexander thought through what he'd just heard. Leaving his son to think for a few moments, he turned to Sasha.

"Sasha, I'm making the same offer to you as of right now. It may mean postponing your studies. So I want you to think it over carefully. I won't accept a 'yes' from you right now. And I'm afraid your current apartment doesn't have the infrastructure to support operation of an immersion pod, so you'd need to either move to corporate housing, or have your pod set up in

one of our facilities. You could even live and work here in the compound if you like. Or, if it wouldn't annoy Alexander too terribly, you could have one of the suites in our guest house at home." They both looked to Alexander, who was still pretty zoned out. He mumbled something and scratched his head.

"He says yes to the guest house thing," Lainey translated.

Richard looked back to Sasha. "This is a real job. It will involve a lot of medical testing, and require you to make in depth reports about your experiences both in game and out. The salary is \$150,000 for the year. Again, with the potential for bonuses. If you choose to move, we will of course provide movers and cover the expenses, as well as any necessary payments to your landlord. In addition, I personally contacted the dean at your school. If you wish it, you can continue your studies virtually. To accommodate long immersion periods, we will set up a virtual classroom that you can attend when you're immersed but not playing the game or sleeping. Like I said, take some time and think."

Richard then looked over to Lainey. "Lainey, I'm going to make you a slightly different offer. You already have a suite at the house. We can have a pod installed there by morning. You are already a salaried employee, but I will double your salary if you choose to accept this offer. I'll require you to be online when Alexander's online. You'll be observing him as well as reporting on your own experiences like Sasha. When he's offline, I expect you to be there to look after him just as you have been. I'm afraid this will require that you live in the house. If you'd like to keep your apartment, we'll cover those expenses for the year. Think carefully,"

Richard smiled widely at her, and winked. "This would mean spending nearly every waking hour, every day, with my son. If you choose to decline, there will be no negative repercussions. You'll continue on exactly as you have been, watching over his pod while he's immersed, and dealing with his complaints when he's not! You are family now, and as far as I'm concerned you always will be."

"Thank you Richard. I'll take some time and think about it. Do you need to know by tomorrow?" Lainey asked.

"Well, for reasons I haven't gotten to yet, it would be better if you start the

same time as the kids if you're going in-game. But it'll take a day or two to get them situated, so you have that much time to think it over. I'll have a pod installed in your suite anyway. If you decide not to take the offer, we can remove it again. Or you can use it to explore the game on your own if you like. Acceptable?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Alexander..." Richard looked back to his son, who still wasn't really paying attention. "What are you thinking, son?"

Right. Good question. What AM I thinking? I need to get a grip here. It's just Brick and Max. They're friends. Why am I panicking? He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. Hands gripping the arms tightly.

"I'm... trying to digest all of this, dad. You've given me a lot of information to process in the last half hour. And to be frank, you've really put me on the spot with Brick and Max. I've never told them about you. Or about me. Or really much of anything about my real life, other than that Sasha and I are friends. I don't know if I'm ready to share all my issues with them, or whether they'd want to know. I'm guessing they're already here in the building somewhere? I wish you'd given me more of a heads-up so I could think this through!"

"As I said, son," Richard began, keeping his tone as soothing as possible, "this is 100% up to you. They are up in the lobby right now, being entertained by Melanie and Bethany the receptionist. They are in separate rooms and have not even met each other yet. They've not been told who you are, or why they're here except that they've won a prize. If you don't want to meet them, or share any info with them, then Melanie will take them to the 4th dungeon. She'll show them the pods they've won, offer them their elite memberships, the choice to have the pods installed at home or in one of our facilities, and leave it at that, or additionally offer them the beta jobs if you so choose. Or she can bring them down here, and we'll follow your lead on how much they are told. This situation is entirely in your control. I brought them here to reward them for their friendship to you, and to offer you an opportunity you might not take on your own. Take a minute and think it over. Ask me questions if you have them." Alexander took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Then another. His pre-fight ritual. Clearing his mind.

"Can I say something?" Sasha asked.

"Of course, Sasha" Richard responded.

Sasha smiled at him and said, "No offense, pop, but I was asking Alexander, not you."

Richard laughed out loud, slightly embarrassed. "My apologies."

Alexander looked at Sasha and nodded.

"See, the thing is this. They sort of already know, Alex. I mean, they don't *KNOW know* ... but they have some guesses. You aren't exactly mister professional espionage guy, and your poker face sucks! There have been lots of hints here and there. They've been sort of indirectly asking me about you for more than a year. I've told them if you want them to know more than they do, you'll tell them yourself. They've respected that, but they know SOMEthing is wrong. And as far as I can tell, they haven't treated you any different because of it."

She leaned toward him and give him a brief hug, followed by a slap to the back of his head. "Get out of yer damn head already! I know I don't actually get a vote, but I've known you since you were learning not to pick your nose in public, so I'm just gonna say you should bring them down here and tell them everything. Besides, can you really say you don't wanna see the look on their faces when they hear about all of this stuff?"

Alexander actually smiled at that. "Yeah. Brick's gonna shit himself. Maybe literally. I really wouldn't want to miss that.

C'mon stupid. Just do it. What's holding me back? What am I afraid of? Besides, if dad is right, I need to get used to the idea that I might be around a lot longer than I expected. In the immortal words of Brick... well, shit.

"What do you think I should do, dad? And don't give me any, 'it's your choice'. I know it is. I'm not asking you to choose for me. Just your opinion."

Richard looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he said "You asked me a little while ago why I didn't tell you sooner about the drug and the pod. In my mind, I had a very good reason. Yet it bothered me not to tell you. I was tempted many times. I had faith in my reasoning; I believed I was doing it

for your own good. It was an immense relief to be able to tell you today. I suspect it has been a little bit hard on you, keeping things from your friends. I can see it has created some awkwardness for Sasha, and probably for them. So I would ask you: how much does it bother you not to tell them? And how good is your reason?"

Alexander's jaw hung open for a moment. Surprised by his father's simple yet profound answer. "That... that actually was really helpful. Thank you dad," he said. He then turned in his chair and looked at Lainey. "Lainey, dad is right. You ARE family. Sasha, as usual, didn't hesitate to insert her opinion..." Sasha snorted behind him, "and you heard what dad said. I'd like to hear your opinion as well."

Lainey leaned in to hug Alexander tightly, and didn't let go. "I love you too, kiddo. And I'll always be here for you, no matter what I decide to do with your dad's offer. I totally understand why you've held back for so long. For half your life you've expected to die sooner than later. You've been sensitive about how people treat you, and rightly so. I've had similar feelings myself. I've cried myself to sleep after tucking you in, terrified of having to survive the loss of my sweet boy, and worried that I might slip and let you see that fear. The amount of hope your father has given us today... well I can't even begin to describe it. Except to say that I feel SO much lighter. And I love everyone in the entire world right now! So maybe I'm not thinking so clearly at the moment. But I would say to you that this feels like a day for new beginnings." She let him go and sat back in her chair. Tears of joy rolling down her cheeks.

Well, shit.

"Thank you. All of you." Alexander put his elbows on the table and addressed his father in as calm a voice as he could. "Dad, I'd like to do two things. First, I'd like Sasha to text Brick and Max, tell them there's an opportunity for us all to meet in person, and ask them if they're interested. I'll leave the wording up to her, as scary as that sounds." He looked to Sasha expecting an assault of some kind, but she was sniffling over Lainey's answer, and just nodded her head and pulled out her phone. "If they want to meet, then I'd ask you to have Melanie to give us a couple minutes to get our shit together, and bring them down here. If they don't want to meet..."

"Of course they want to meet us. Stupid," Sasha was obviously recovering. "If they don't want to meet, then I would ask that Melanie make them the job offers while they're here. But leave it to me to tell them who we are."

"As you wish," Richard nodded his head. "I'm proud of you, son. That's a big step."

Sasha phone buzzed just then. "Max says, and I quote. 'Hell yeah!'." Everyone smiled at that. They all sat quietly then, awaiting Brick's reply. It seemed he was thinking it over.

After about a minute, Richard's phone buzzed. He looked at it, then began to laugh quite loudly. "It seems," he said when he had gathered himself, "that Brick got a text, and immediately began storming around the building demanding to know where you are. Melanie is with him, and wants to know if she should call security."

As they all smiled, Heimdall's voice came across the room's sound system. "Sir. There's a large man acting erratically in the southeast tower lobby. Should I have one of my men deal with him?"

Before Richard could answer, Alexander spoke up. "No! It's okay Heimdall, he's a friend of mine. You can call him Brick. Can you patch my voice through to the lobby please?"

"Of course, Alexander. You are connected" Heimdall replied.

They could hear Brick's loud voice calling for Alexander, and several distressed voices trying to calm him. Alexander was picturing Brick's dwarf avatar stomping around destroying the lobby. He coughed into his hand, then smiled. "Hey, Brick. Can you hear me, buddy? It's Alexander." He paused to listen.

There was a sudden silence, then Brick's unmistakable voice. "Alexander? You're here too? Is Sasha here? You sound like that Heimdall dude. Friggin' guy scared the shit out of me when the car pulled up at the gate. Where are you?"

"I'm downstairs in a meeting room, buddy. And yes, Sasha's here with me. I'm talking to you through Heimdall's intercom system. He's the building's AI. Max is on his way to you, if he's not already there. Then Melanie will

bring you both down here. So I'll see you in a few minutes, okay?"

"Yeah. Max just walked in. He's as ugly as his toon. Melanie's pretty hot, though."

Max's voice drifted in "I heard that!"

Brick snorted. "I'm gonna go say hi. See you in a few."

True to his word, in just a few minutes the lab door beeped, and Brick came stomping in, looking around for Alexander. He was nothing like Alexander had pictured. Roughly 6'4", he was tall and lean, but with obvious muscle. The kind you get from hard physical labor, not from a gym. He had jet black hair and looked to be of Puerto Rican descent. He took a moment to look suspiciously at the pod across the room, then continued his scan until he noticed the conference room and Alexander stepping into the doorway. His smile stretched from ear to ear, and in two big steps he was lifting Alexander into a bear hug. "Alexander! Good to finally meet ya! Been a long time coming, bud."

Alexander thumped him on the back a couple times, then wheezed, "Good to meet you too, buddy! And if you put me down, I'll introduce you to our druidess."

The large man dropped him, looking a bit sheepish. "Sorry, I forget sometimes". Then his smile returned immediately as Sasha stepped forward, and another giant hug ensued.

"I'm happy to meet you too, Brick, but you're squishing me!" Sasha grunted as Brick set her down. "Thank you."

"He did the same to me in the lobby," Max's familiar voice said. "Right in front of the lovely Melanie here, and Bethany the smoking hot receptionist. It was embarrassing!" Max held out a hand for Alexander to shake. He was a stocky black man, roughly 5'6" with a muscled body and a completely shaved head that reflected the light above. Alexander shook his hand, then brought him in for a one-armed hug. Much less enthusiastic than Brick's.

"Glad to meet you Max. I'm sorry it took so long."

Max winked at him and said, "Get me Bethany's phone number, and all is

forgiven, my friend!" which caused Melanie to giggle.

"It wouldn't do you any good, you scoundrel," Sasha said as she stepped forward to hug Max. "As soon as we get upstairs, I'm warning her about you!"

Max just laughed and gave Sasha a big hug. "C'mon, you wouldn't do that to me! Would you?" He looked at Melanie. "Would she?" Melanie giggled again.

Alexander waived them into the meeting room, where he introduced his father and Lainey to Max and Brick. Then they all took their seats. Richard took control of the room.

"Thank you, Mr. Lopez, Mr. Thomas, for coming here on such short notice," he began.

"Call me Brick. My father is Mr. Lopez," Brick said.

"Max" was all Max said. Short and to the point.

"Very well, Brick. Max. Let me start by assuring you that you did indeed win a prize, each of you. Though I'm sure you've both realized that is not the only reason you're here. But first things first. Let's take care of a little business, then I will leave you all to get caught up. That big egg thing you saw as you entered the room is called an immersion pod. It's a prototype virtual reality device that allows full immersion into VR games like Io, which you have been playing with my son."

"I knew it! Max you owe me ten gold!" Brick pumped a fist in the air, nearly striking the ceiling. "I told him you were THAT Alexander Greystone." Brick beamed at Alexander.

"Knew it all along," said Max with one of his famous winks.

"Yes, well. As I was saying," Richard continued, "the two of you, as well as Sasha, have earned the opportunity to become beta testers for our immersion pods for the next year. Should you accept, you will each be given one of these pods, which we will either install in your homes, or in one of our facilities near your homes. Your choice. Further, we are offering each of you the use of corporate housing while you are a Jupiter Technologies

employee. We have facilities available here on the compound, or in several locations in the city. The position comes with a salary of \$150,000, with the usual health insurance and benefits. There is also the opportunity for bonuses based on performance. The contract is for a period of one year, during which time you will be participating in extended immersion tests. Your sessions in the pod will begin at one day, then two, then a week, and so forth."

Max opened his mouth to ask a question, but Richard held up a hand to stop him, "Please, hold your questions. We will explain to you all the details after I'm done." Max nodded for him to continue.

"There's blue slime!" Sasha blurted out! She instantly looked embarrassed. Brick look confused.

"Yes. We'll get to the blue slime soon enough," Richard chuckled. "Now, during this beta test, you will be required to undergo regular medical examinations and monitoring to see how the duration of the immersions affects your health. You'll also be required to report on your experiences after each immersion, report any bugs, and so forth. You'll also be required to sign non-disclosure agreements which will include stiff penalties if you discuss the equipment or the beta test with anyone outside our own staff, or those in this room. Was that clear to everyone?" Everyone at the table nodded their heads. "Ok then, questions. Max?"

"How are we supposed to stay in game for several days or weeks?" Max asked.

"Very good question. I'll let Alexander and Melanie fill you in on the specifics. But in general, the pods use a gel system, Sasha's 'blue slime' to support your body, provide muscle stimulation to prevent atrophy, and dispose of all bodily wastes while you are in immersion. Further, there's a feeding tube that provide a high nutrient paste that will more than sustain you during long test periods. And a newly invented neural interface net that will greatly improve your game experience. Does that answer your question sufficiently?"

"Sounds a little creepy," Max replied.

"Icky!" this came from Sasha. Again.

"But yes, sir. That answers my question."

"Good. Any other questions, Max? Brick? Anyone?" Richard waited patiently while they thought it over.

Brick raised his hand, and seeing Richard smile at him, said, "I have two questions. First, if I choose this company housing deal, can my family come live with me?"

"I'm afraid not," Richard said. "The pod and its technology are top secret, and we must limit knowledge of them to those directly involved. You won't even be able to tell your family about it, let alone have them see it. I'm sorry."

"Fair enough," Brick said. "Second question. You're paying us a salary? How often do we get paid? Oh! And, can we still sell the loot we get in the auction house?"

"You will be paid every two weeks, just like all of our employees. We can deposit the funds directly into any account, or accounts, you specify. Bonuses will be awarded on a quarterly basis, Mr. Lopez. Sorry, Brick. Let me just say that I'm fully aware that you are supporting a large family, and I admire that. I would never try to make it more difficult for you to do so. In fact, I think with this new interface, your group will be able to tackle more difficult fights with ease, and thus generate more loot drops. Between those loot sales, the salary, and the potential for bonuses, I believe your family will be able to live quite comfortably." Brick nodded thoughtfully.

"Ok then, any other questions?" He waited politely, but no further questions came. After a minute or so, he sat back in his chair. "Good, then. Let me just say that you are here today in no small part because of the friendship you have shown my son. I have had the good fortune to work side by side with one of my best friends for the last twenty years, and I put a high value on true friendship, so I hope you will both consider my offer seriously and that we get the chance to work together. I'll leave you to get better acquainted and to discuss things for a while. Alexander, when you need me, just tell Heimdall". Richard rose from his seat and headed toward the door.

"Oh! And I forgot to mention one more important thing. The immersion. Our testers reported the sensations of being in game in the pod as being

'more real than real'. In fact, it created a bit of a disconnect, or a lag if you will, in the control reactions. Mainly because they were still trying to 'button push' as we like to call it. Meaning they were trying to use the old interface method of focusing their eyes on a skill to launch it. With the new interface, you need only think it. Just like with your real-life body. The reactions will be instantaneous. We had to create all new code to allow for the speed of the neural feedback and the sensory input from the pod, which now includes more realistic taste and smell. When you first log in there will be what we call a syncing period. The game will instruct you to move about, talk, think of certain things, and ask you a series of questions. All the while the neural net will be learning all it can about you and your real-life abilities and knowledge. Then it will generate a new character creation venue for you in which you will find starting stats that may provide you some surprising bonuses."

"Because of this new interface, and the possibility of new skills and attributes available, I'm afraid you'll have to start your characters at level one. However, you will be able to log in normally before then and to store all your existing gear and treasures in your fancy new guild house, which you will also retain, along with all your reputations. You will also retain the crafting abilities and skills learned by your existing characters."

And with that, he left the room full of shocked faces. All except Lainey, who just looked thoughtful.

"Did he just say we'll have to start over at level one?" Max half mumbled to himself.

"Screw that! I'm not givin up me new shield fer no big fancy job!" Brick's massive hand slammed down on the defenseless table. He was so upset about his beloved shield he'd fallen into his character's speech pattern.

"Yeah, that's a new twist," Alexander confirmed. "But relax buddy. He did say we can keep all our stuff. Store it at the guild house. And the way Dad and Michael designed Io, the gear isn't level specific. Meaning you can use your fancy shield at level one, or, as soon as you have the strength to lift it. I have a feeling the stats will scale down at lower levels, but it won't take THAT long to level back up. Especially since it'll be our JOBS to play. We'd be in game for days and weeks straight."

"Fair point, Alexander," Max said. "But wouldn't it be OUR jobs, not yours? I didn't hear your dad offering to pay you to play. And why didn't you tell us your dad was the big boss of the game?"

"Yeah, about that. I'm sorry I didn't tell you guys. I didn't want you to start calling me rich boy, or treating me any different." Alexander hung his head. "As for the jobs, no I won't be getting paid to play. I'm playing for another reason." He paused to take a deep breath and consider the best way to explain his situation. He was tired. This had already been a long day.

Just do it. Get it all out in the open. Right now.

Lainey put a hand on Alexander's shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. Sasha reached out and took his hand in both of hers, while simultaneously giving both Brick and Max and look that told them to behave or she'd cut parts off of them.

"I guess you could say I'm playing for my health," Alexander began. "When I was eleven I was diagnosed with NDS, which is Neuromuscular Degenerative Syndrome. I won't go into the details now, but basically it means my brain is eating itself, or specifically the parts that control all my muscles. I don't move so well in real life anymore. Lainey here, she's my nurse and my physical trainer. She's family. And she has taken care of me every day for years now. I found out today that my dad has been working since I was diagnosed to find a way to extend my life. He and his research teams have developed a drug that has slowed down my condition, so I'm not getting worse nearly so quickly as I was. That pod out there, that was developed as a way to teach my brain to make new connections, find new ways to control my muscles. Well, not just mine, anymore. This could help millions of people."

Alexander leaned back in his chair, giving his friends some time to absorb and react. Sasha squeezed his hand, and was uncharacteristically quiet.

"So, you're dying? Or, you've been dying, the whole time we've known you?" Brick was the first to ask after nearly a minute of silence.

"Yeah, buddy. Yes to both. Though I'm not dying as quickly now, apparently. The way this works is I lose muscle control bit by bit. My arms and legs get weaker, I move slower. It gets harder to breathe. Eventually I'll

need a wheelchair to move around. There's no specific order to it, but next might be loss of speech, or the ability to swallow. After a while I'll be like Stephen Hawking, in a chair full time, communicating via my eyes or tongue movements. Being that my heart is my largest muscle, eventually it will stop, too."

"NO!" Brick shouted. Jumped up from his chair and pacing back and forth. "NO! We ain't gonna let that happen! It ain't fair! You're my brother Alex. You can't... just..." at a loss for words, the tall man slid down a wall, sitting on the floor and bowing his head.

"How... long do you have?" Max asked very quietly. The look on his face and Brick's obvious pain crushed Alexander's resolve. He couldn't bring himself to speak.

"We expect Alexander's going to live for several years yet," Lainey took over for him. "His symptoms have already slowed due to the effects of the drugs he's taking. With the potential improvement from the pod, years might extend into decades. We just don't know yet. And his father's teams are still actively working to cure him."

"Damn right they are!" Brick was up on his feet again, looking ready to fight something. Anything. "Your dad's got more money than the pope. If anyone can cure you, it's gonna be him! He'll invent you some kind of super suit like Iron Man! You'll be the goddamned Crippled Avenger!" Realizing what he'd just said, his face fell. "Aw, shit. Sorry man. I didn't mean to say that. I'm a fucking idiot."

Alexander was about to tell him it was ok, but was distracted as Sasha got up and ran at Brick. The large man, nearly twice her size, cringed a little as she approached, dreading the beat-down she was about to lay on him. Instead, Sasha grabbed him and hugged him tight. "Yes, you are. You're a huge idiot. But you're our idiot, and you meant well." Her voice was so quiet it was almost a whisper. "I didn't find out until Alexander and I were both 15. I was so pissed at him, I hit him. I kinda lost it, and hit him more than a little."

"It was a LOT. I had bruises." Alexander smiled at her, and winked at Max.

"Shut up stupid, let me talk." she said, still holding on to Brick. "It took me

awhile to get used to the idea of losing him. Even if he is an asshole most of the time. He's my family. Just like Lainey. Just like you and Max." At that, everyone was silent, not knowing what to say.

"So like I said before, I'll be playing for my health. But also, because if I can show, if WE can show that these pods are effective, and that they're safe for the kind of long term immersion that people like me would need in order to help fix themselves, then I have to do it. I know this is a lot to put on you guys, on top of everything else today, but I really hope you'll consider doing this with me. It... it wouldn't be the same without you."

"Shit, man. Really?" Max leaned back in his chair and looked at Alexander. "You're gonna hit us with a fucking 'win one for the Gipper' speech?"

Everyone just stared at Max, shocked at his response. Max glared at Alexander for a few seconds, before his poker face failed and he broke into a grin. Then a wink at Sasha.

"BAAAHAHA!" Brick's laughter was like a cleanser, washing away the stress in the room.

"As soon as we get back in the game, I'm stabbing you in your sleep," Sasha tried her best to look angry. Max gave her his best mock-terrified look.

"So... you guys aren't mad at me?" Alexander sounded hopeful.

"Well, Sasha's right. You are kind of an asshole for not telling us all this sooner. But no, I'm not mad at you." Max replied. Brick's answer was much more straightforward. He just picked Alexander up out of his chair and hugged him. Gently.

"Alexander, is that large man from the lobby assaulting you?" Heimdall's voice drifted through the intercom. Brick put him back down very carefully, as if he would shatter.

"No Heimdall. Everything is fine. But keep an eye on him for me, will you?" Alexander winked at Brick, who muttered about friggin ghosts in the machine.

"Thank you guys. I mean it. I've been worried about this day for so long; in my head it always went horribly wrong. You're better friends than I could ask for."

"Just remember that next time we're dividing up the loot!" Brick grinned. So did everyone else.

"Ok. So let me play little rich kid for a moment, and take care of some business." Alexander said, looking around the table. "Brick, let's start with you. I know you have your mom and siblings to look after. I'm sorry we can't install a pod at your house-"

Brick interrupted him, "Stop right there, dude. Are you seriously sweatin' that? There are six of us livin' in a tiny two bedroom shack. Me moving out will just give the rest of them more space. With the salary plus the income from loot, I can maybe get them into a decent neighborhood. At least for a while. And I can visit them when I'm not in the pod."

Very relieved, Alexander shook Brick's hand. "My dad didn't mention this. But I'm sure we can make it so you can declare them all as your dependents and include them in your health care coverage. We have the best available."

Alexander went to let go of Brick's hand, but the big man held on. "You'd... do that for me?"

"Of course he would, you big lug. Now let go of him before you crush something," Sasha scolded him.

Brick immediately let go and looked sheepish again. "Shit, sorry man. And thank you. Again."

"You're welcome, buddy." Alexander turned toward Max. "How 'bout you?"

Max pretended to think it over for a bit. "To be honest, it sounds like a great gig. Getting paid to play, and all that. But I'm not all that excited about moving from my place, and that whole thing about starting over at level one just sucks, so I'm kinda on the fence." He paused. Sasha took a deep breath and was preparing to lash him when he held his hands up. "Tell you what. Somebody get me the phone number of that hot receptionist upstairs, and I'm in!" He winked at Sasha, then Lainey. Lainey actually laughed.

"Lainey, not to put you on the spot or anything. But have you decided what

you want to do?" Alexander gave her his best puppydog eyes.

"Oh cut it out, cheezeball. That hasn't worked on me since you convinced me to let you ride your bike after your dad locked it up. And you broke your damn arm."

"I'm sorry Lainey. I really don't mean to pressure you. Honestly," Alexander said, "like dad said, you've got some time to think about it. Though, I will point out that if you do want to join us, this is the perfect time. We'll all be starting again at level one. So you can level up along with us. But again, no pressure."

"Laaaaineyyy!" Sasha said. "Forget the doofus. I'll put pressure on you! Do it for MY sake. I could use another woman in the group to help me deal with these three. You have NO idea what it's like!"

"Not exactly a selling point, Princess Sasha!" Lainey laughed. "I'm still thinking about it. It's a big commitment. I'd be giving up every other aspect of my life. And Alexander, I love you, I do. But I don't know that I love you enough for 18 hours a day every day," she patted him on the head.

"Fair enough," he grinned back at her. "Ok. So to conclude our business, Max and Brick, I'll have them set you up with corporate housing. Do you want to be here at the compound? Or we can get you a map... hey, Heimdall?"

"Yes, Alexander?" Heimdall's voice boomed over the room's intercom, making Brick jump. Alexander thought maybe Heimdall was messing with Brick after the scene in the lobby.

"Can you display on this room's holo the map of available corporate housing locations?"

"Certainly Alexander. Here is your map." A 3D holo map of the city appeared above the table. Several locations around the city were marked with blue dots. Max and Brick both leaned in for a closer look.

"Once you guys have a picked a spot, we'll have teams install your pods. The apartments come fully furnished, so you won't need to move any furniture unless you want to. We can have all your stuff put into storage in one of our facilities if you like. How ever you want it." Both men nodded.

"Since dad said we can keep all of our stuff, I propose we all log in tomorrow morning using our normal gear. Hit the bank, clean out our old guild house and get moved into the new one. Then we can store all our gear and the contents of the guild vault, and it'll be waiting for us when we log in through the pods."

"So, that's what you were talkin' about." Brick chuckled to himself. Still studying the map.

"What, buddy?" Alexander didn't follow.

"When you were bullshitting the king. Talking about all your training and your dad being important, and running your own empire. I thought you were just blowing smoke. But you really are a prince guildmaster! Its funny cuz it's true!" Everyone laughed along with him.

The next morning, they all logged in and ran their errands. They decided there was plenty of furniture in the new guild house, so they agreed to rent the old house out furnished rather than sell it. They removed all their valuables and transferred them to the new house. Brick found a taxidermist and gave him the snake head to clean and mount. Max reminded them that they should all get their riding skills before their characters reset. Richard had promised them they'd retain all their learned skill. Normally players in Io had to wait till level 20 to qualify to ride mounts, so they all went to the stable master for training. They decided to put off their selection of mounts from the king, but they did purchase the largest available draft horse. It was built like a Clydesdale on steroids. They left it stabled there, assuring the stable master they'd pick the horse up in a week's time.

The three guys then went to purchase a heavy-duty wagon and park it at the house, all in preparation for Brick's future beer runs. While they did this, Sasha ran next door for her first lesson with Lydia and let her know that they would be away for a couple of days. Lydia, concerned that they might get themselves in trouble while they were away, insisted on teaching Sasha two new healing spells, and giving her a dozen healing potions.

By then, everyone needed to take care of the real-world business of getting moved and completing their medical tests before their first immersion. The friends each went to the suites on the third floor and logged out.

Chapter Seven

Wolves and Bunnies and Boars, Oh, My!

Alexander's pod was set up in his bedroom. There was more than enough space in the large room, and it was conveniently close to the bathroom so he could shower after coming out of immersion. He was sitting on his bed wearing a bathrobe while a nurse technician was doing one last check of the pod's systems. She had already checked his vitals, twice, and talked him through the immersion process.

Lainey was having a similar experience in her own room, Alexander knew. She had decided to join them on their first day of full immersion, though she had not yet committed to it joining them full time.

Sasha had elected to accept a suite in the guesthouse, and was probably nervous. Which meant she was definitely giving her nurse a hard time.

Brick and Max had chosen apartments in the same location downtown. Brick so he could make a quick cab ride to see his family between immersions. Max claimed it was because there were several good bars and his "favorite strip club" nearby. Alexander thought it was to be near Brick.

"Ready when you are," the nurse patted the pod.

Alexander walked up the ramp to the platform next to the pod. Dropping his robe, he stepped in with one leg, the nurse holding his arm for support and balance. Getting the other leg in, he sat down with his legs out in front of him. The nurse helped him fit the neural net over his head, and then the mask that covered his nose and mouth. Once all was secure, Alexander laid back in the pod as the nurse closed the door above him. The pod began to fill with Sasha's blue slime. It was warmer than he expected. As the pod filled, he felt his body being lifted from the bed of the pod and suspended. He breathed deeply, the air coming through the mask with almost no sound. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

After a few seconds he began to wonder if something went wrong. Nothing was happening. There was only blackness. Just as he was about to try and sit up to alert the nurse, a pinpoint of light appeared in front him. The light grew larger, closer, as if he were speeding down a tunnel toward it. In just a

few seconds the light expanded around him, and the sense of movement ended. He found himself standing in a white cube, the surfaces gleaming slightly. This must be where the pod's AI would be testing him for the syncing process.

"Greetings, Alexander," an unmistakable deep, rich voice came to him seemingly out of nowhere.

"Good morning, Odin!" he smiled at the room. "I should have realized you'd be running the pods as well as Io. Dad didn't tell me. It's good to see you! Well, hear you." With that, Odin appeared in the room with him. Modeled after the Norse god, Odin was 8ft tall with silver hair and a missing eye. Muscular and imposing in a way only the all-father could be. No toga for this god. He was dressed in leather pants, a linen shirt with ties in the front, and what looked to be wolf skin boots.

He smiled at Alexander in a fatherly way. "It is good to see you, as well, my mortal friend. Though I see you every day in Io, you cannot see me. It has been too long since we've talked."

Being his parent's child, Alexander had learned to code shortly after he'd learned to read. As a young teen, he had spent summers working at Jupiter Technologies with his dad. He'd even written some of the code for Io, and for Odin, and he'd played games with Odin. Strategy games were what Odin liked best. He'd told Odin countless stories from his mother's favorite myths, all to help develop the AI's personality. One of the most rewarding experiences of that time had been when Alexander had called up Odin at the beginning of a summer, after nearly a year away. Odin had observed that Alexander had changed, grown taller. He'd had to explain to Odin about how people grow from infancy through adulthood, and eventually die. Odin had asked how long Alexander would live, so he explained that too.

Odin had said "I don't want you to die, Alexander. And I don't want to die either." So Alexander explained to Odin that as an AI, he would essentially live forever. Or as long as mankind lived. An amusing side effect of that conversation, from then on Odin referred to all the staff he interacted with as "mortals".

"Your father and I have agreed that basing your Avatar's skills on your own current physical abilities would not serve our purposes here. So I have

already established a baseline for your physical stats. Of course, from our time together, and your time in Io, I am fully familiar with your play style. I think you will be pleased. For this reason, we have some time while your companions undergo their physical trials..."

He's not going to say it. No way. Alexander held his breath.

"Would you like to play a game?" Odin said with a huge grin on his face. "BAAHAHAH!"

Alexander had made the mistake of uploading a certain classic movie as part of Odin's development several years before. The AI was highly amused, and for weeks kept randomly simulating total global thermonuclear warfare on developer's holo screens.

"Ugh. I can't believe you said that! Big nerd," Alexander shook his head.

"No, seriously," Odin made a hand motion and a table with two chairs appeared in the room. "Part of the syncing process includes puzzles and game play. All part of the neural interface learning what goes on in that head of yours. The results will be part of the formula that determines your avatar's mental stats, as well as some of the skills and abilities that will be available to you"

So over the next hour, Alexander and Odin played games. Alexander solved puzzles. He answered questions that started with "what would you do if..." and "if you had to choose...". There were even some Rorschach cards, though Alexander suspected Odin was just messing with him at the point. Killing time while the others caught up so that they'd enter the game together. Which actually gave him an idea.

"Hey, Odin, buddy?" Alexander began. They were playing chess, and Odin was pretending to think about his move.

The Quantum AI could obviously calculate all possible moves and all possible following moves to those moves in a microsecond. "Yes, mortal?"

"I was wondering if I could ask you a small favor?"

Odin looked up from the chess board. "You would ask a boon of the all-father? Speak, and I shall consider it."

Yep. Definitely killing time. Odin didn't need Alexander to speak, as he was currently plugged directly into his brain. His chess pieces had been moving with just a thought. "I was hoping you could do a little something to mess with my buddy Brick once we get in game. Nothing big. Don't tank his stats or anything. Just a small joke?" Alexander asked.

"BAHAHAHA!" Odin's laugh was loud and long. "I like Brick. He is much like me. Though Heimdall does not seem to like him. Something about a rampage?"

Now it was Alexander's turn to laugh. "So, you'll do it?" he pushed.

"I shall consider it" Odin replied.

Fair enough.

"The sync is now complete," Odin announced. "It is time for avatar creation." The table disappeared, and Alexander had just enough time to hop to his feet before the chair went away as well. "Your previous avatar's class was 'Knight'. You focused mainly on physical attacks and skills that increased your melee damage and likelihood of critical hits. While it is important for your development that you continue with a certain level of physical activity, I think you'll find some interesting mental possibilities are open to you now. Io can be much more flexible for fully immersed players."

Odin made another hand motion, and the cube became a large circular room. The walls all around him were filled with alcoves. Each alcove had a copy of Alexander's avatar in differing armor types, with an assortment of weapons in racks next to them. There was also a pedestal with a book in front of each alcove. Alexander spun around slowly, taking in each one. There were roughly a dozen alcoves.

"I have taken the liberty of selecting those possibilities that best suited you," Odin explained. "Though if none of these are to your liking, there are many more to choose from." Alexander stopped moving and looked to Odin. The giant indicated the alcove right in front of Alexander "This one is nearly identical to your previous avatar."

Alexander stepped forward. The words "Classic Knight" were written on the book in front of the alcove. The Avatar itself wore the same armor he'd worn

the last time he logged in, including the legendary chest piece, and there was his oversized two-handed sword. There were other possible weapons in the rack as well. A small shield. One handed sword. Spear. War hammer, and others. Weapons for several possible Knight builds and fighting styles. Alexander opened the book to the first page.

Classic Knight: Alexander

Build: Melee dps

Health: 100 Level: 1
Mana: O Experience: 0/100

Stamina: 10 **Dexterity: 5** Armor: ? **Health Regen:?** Strength: 9 Wisdom: 2 **Defense: ?** Mana Regen: 0 **Agility: 7 Intelligence:** 6 Phys Attack: ? Magic Attack: 0 Luck: 8 Charisma: 7 Stamina Regen: ? **Race: Human**

Alexander's first thought was *My stats! They're so low*, forgetting for a moment that he would be starting again at level one. Taking a closer look, he nodded his head. This build was indeed very close to his old toon. His attack skills didn't use mana, they used stamina and depended on strength to up the damage, so it made sense that those would be his highest stats. Agility helped him dodge attacks as well as to move behind enemies for attacks that had better crit chances. But the intel number seemed higher than it should be.

"Odin, six Intelligence?" He queried. "You are smart, for a mortal." Odin responded. "This number was a result of many factors, including the testing you just completed, my own knowledge of you, and your previous game play. Like when you figured out how to kill the dungeon boss quickly."

"Ah, ok thank you Odin," Alexander said. "How would intelligence factor into this avatar's performance?"

"Minimally. This avatar has no mana pool, and no abilities that involve casting, at least at low levels. High intelligence will affect your crit chance in a small way. Your luck as well. You are, of course, free to increase your stats with free attribute points as you level up. The attribute points that are awarded automatically will go toward strength and stamina for this avatar."

"I see." Alexander begin to see what Odin meant when he said possibilities. If his melee avatar couldn't use his higher intel, what about some of the others? He looked at the other alcoves. The one to the right of the Classic

Knight was another Knight form, this one in heavy plate armor. Likely some kind of tank build. Alexander passed by that one. He'd never liked the idea of clanking around in heavy armor. The next was dressed in leather and the prominent weapon was a bow, so a ranged melee class. Ranger. The group already had Max to fill that role. Next. This one was clearly a rogue or thief build. With dark leather armor and an assortment of daggers for stabbing and throwing, and a set of lock picks prominently displayed. This one would play a similar role to his knight, being melee DPS, and the play styles were at least a little similar; mainly getting behind the mobs and striving for crits, only this one included a stealth factor. Curious, Alexander opened the book.

Rogue: Alexander
Build: Stealth/Melee dps

Health: 100 Level: 1

Mana: O Experience: 0/100

Stamina: 10 Devtority: 7

Stamina: 10 **Dexterity: 7 Health Regen: ?** Armor: ? Wisdom: 1 **Defense: ?** Mana Regen: 0 Strength: 6 Agility: 9 **Intelligence:** 6 Phys Attack: ? Magic Attack: 0 Luck: 8 Charisma: 5 Stamina Regen: ? **Race: Halfling**

Interesting. So the stamina remained high, which made sense as this was still a melee fighter. But the strength and agility stats had basically switched. So more focus on speed and dodging. And the dexterity was much higher. Probably for lock picking.

"Your observations are correct, mortal," Odin had read his thoughts. "And before you ask, intelligence will have a slightly greater impact for this avatar. Mainly in its stealth related abilities: its chance to avoid detection; and its chance to successfully pick locks or disarm traps."

An interesting possibility. Alexander had played a rogue in other games, and had quite enjoyed it, but no hasty decisions here. He moved on to the next alcove. This one was dressed in a white cloth robe with a hood. It wore a golden amulet around its neck, and there was a staff in its hand. So, a caster, probably a priest class, based on the amulet. Alexander disliked "holy" classes like priests and paladins as they received their power from worship of a deity. That meant they had to act in accordance with that deity's dogma, or risk failure of their powers, making them all but useless. They often had extremely powerful abilities, but the limitations weren't worth it to him. The next alcove held another avatar in full plate armor with an icon on the breastplate. Another holy symbol? So a paladin, then. Next. Another

caster in cloth robes. This time green. And a gnarled wooden staff. Druid? That was Sasha's job.

Alexander paused and looked to Odin. "All-father. Which of these do you think best suit me?"

Without speaking, Odin waived his hand, and all but one of the alcoves vanished. Alexander walked over to the remaining avatar.

Mage: Alexander

Build: Ranged magic/Melee dps

Health: 100 Level: 1

Mana: 100 Experience: 0/100

Stamina: 4 **Dexterity: 6** Armor: ? **Health Regen:?** Defense: ? Strength: 4 Wisdom: 10 Mana Regen: 0 **Agility: 5 Intelligence: 10** Phys Attack: ? Magic Attack: 0 Luck: 10 Charisma: 9 Stamina Regen: ? Race: Elf

Ok, a caster. With maxed out intel and wisdom. So large mana pool and quick regen. Also good spell power, and it says melee. So, like Gandalf swinging his sword and staff? Cool! But four's in both strength and stamina, and only a six in agility. I'd get crushed in melee.

"You're forgetting your gear, mortal," Odin nudged him with a giant elbow, causing him to stumble a bit. "The chest piece you received for your first kill provides boosts to strength, stamina, and agility, your three main melee stats, as well as your crit chance, and luck, which will help you in melee or ranged attacks, among other things. That item is bound to you, and cannot be stolen. Its benefits will increase as you both level up. So while your melee DPS would be much lower than your previous avatar's, this one would allow you to enhance your melee damage with magical attacks, or your defenses. There are other potential benefits that will reveal themselves as you grow."

"I KNEW it!" Alexander began to pace and wave his arms at the god in the room. "You and dad cooked this up! I told him those loot drops were suspicious. Too overpowered and customized to fit each of us perfectly. The loot drops, this avatar build... you've been planning this!"

"SILENCE, MORTAL!" Odin's voice literally shook the room as he leaned

over Alexander. His face was a thundercloud, lightning flashing in his remaining eye. "It is not your place to question the actions of the All-Father! Nor your elders!" Odin's hand made another flicking motion, causing Alexander to actually flinch. The alcove with the avatar disappeared, and another took its place. "Perhaps you would prefer this, instead!" Odin turned and stomped over to sit in a massive throne that appeared in front of him. He crossed his arms and glared at Alexander.

The alcove contained a female likeness of Alexander. It wore a leather breastplate over obnoxiously large breasts and a short leather gladiator skirt. Leather boots rose above her knees, and she wore a winged metal helm. The weapons included a longbow, one handed sword and shield, several knives, and what looked like a magic wand with a heart on the end. The cover of the book said "Valkyrie".

Alexander got the point. "I'm sorry, great Odin. I did not mean to offend. I simply wish to earn my successes, rather than have them handed to me because of who I am. Please forgive my rudeness."

Uncrossing his arms, Odin spoke, "Make no mistake, mortal. Any players who accomplished that first kill would have received epic loot. You and your team not only completed the dungeon, but did so at nearly twenty levels below the boss. In addition, you found a way to quickly end a fight that all before you had failed, and in doing so killed the boss without losing any of your group. You earned the drops you received!"

"And allowing us to keep our gear when we're starting over at level one?" Alexander challenged him, getting a little tired of the way Odin was talking down to him. "Is that an option being offered to all who agree to beta test the immersion pods? In gratitude for their assistance, and in recognition of their courage?"

Odin's stern visage actually darkened. "You still question me?"

Alexander sighed. "No, all-father. I was mistaken. Again I apologize," he said.

Odin jumped up from his throne. "Good!" He was smiling again. He waved a hand and the original dozen avatars returned. Though the Valkyrie was somehow still there as well. "It is time to choose, mortal. Your friends await

you in Io!" So. Clearly Odin's anger was just a show. But Alexander was done arguing. He was excited to get into the game and experience full immersion. He walked toward the rogue avatar he had examined earlier. This would be a change, but not a big change from what he was used to. A lot of "stabby stabby" as Sasha called it. It would fill his normal role within the team, with a few additions like disarming traps.

But he was curious about the mage. He could still do some melee DPS, and ranged too. Maybe some up close magic damage? DoTs?. So he could be more flexible in his play style. And if it really did have some defensive magic, that would offset the normal caster squishiness. *What the hell. Why not?*

Before he was even able to speak his choice, Odin and the room disappeared. Alexander was suddenly weightless again, and in total darkness. This lasted a few seconds before he felt solid ground beneath him. Above him, light slowly increased to reveal an early morning sky. Dominating that sky was the enormous brown and blue striped marble that was the planet Jupiter. Partially visible behind it were the unmistakable rings of Saturn. Io being one of Jupiter's moons, and one that was tidally locked to the planet, Jupiter was visible in the skies of Io day and night. Alexander loved that view. His father's artists had created it as a tribute to his mother. She'd have loved it as much as he did.

Lowering his gaze from the skies, Alexander noted that he was lying on the side of a small hill. A forest surrounded him on three sides, while directly in front of him the hill sloped gradually down to a wide meadow. Though it was still night, the sun's light reflected softly off Jupiter's surface, providing enough illumination to see by. It was rarely truly dark on Io; only during an eclipse. Beyond the meadow in the far distance, Alexander could see the lights and silhouettes of Stormforge. His memory triggered, and he recognized that he was in the starter area he'd first entered as a noob. It was a decent walk to the city, maybe three miles.

He rose to his feet, and took stock of himself. He was wearing standard noob gear. Grey cloth pants and shirt, a small belt knife, and sandals. Not seeing any of his friends, he decided to move to the top of the hill and look for them. Turning uphill he went to take a step, and fell forward. He instinctively threw his hands out to catch his fall before his face planted itself

in the grass. What was this? His fingers were longer than normal. Pushing himself back up to a standing position, he held his arms out in front of him. His hands were further away than they should be! Looking down, he thought he was slightly taller than normal as well. "Odin! What have you done to me!?" he called out to the emptiness around him. Walking carefully, he managed the few steps to the top of the hill without falling. Looking around, he saw no sign of his friends. He must have gotten here first.

Having a few minutes to himself, he moved his arms around a bit. Lifted each leg. Walked around in a circle atop the hill. Trying to acclimate himself to this new body.

New body! How am I supposed to improve my condition if the new pathways I form while playing the game are meant to move a DIFFERENT body? This is just going to make me even clumsier in real life!

Angry at Odin and his father, as he suspected they were behind this, he sat down to inspect his character sheet. He lifted his right hand in the familiar gesture to bring up his user interface. Nothing happened. So, different interface with immersion? "Interface," he said. Immediately a screen popped up in front of his eyes. Slightly opaque, but clear enough that he could see the trees beyond. He noticed in the top right corner of his vision was a map, currently showing just a few feet of the hilltop surrounding him. And in the upper left was a small icon of his face, with green and blue bars beneath it.

Would you like to begin the player tutorial? No! He didn't want the tutorial. He'd had just about enough!

As soon as he thought "no", the message disappeared and was replaced by another. If you would like to access the tutorial at a later time, simply close your eyes and think the word "tutorial". We hope you enjoy your experience here on Io!"

Interesting. So just think what you want? No hand motions? He decided to test it out. Closing his eyes, he thought "*Status*". Immediately a screen popped up on his interface. To the left side was the same stat sheet he'd seen in the alcove, with a few changes. The question marks from before were filled in.

Mage: Alexander

Build: Ranged magic/Melee DPS

Health: 100 Level: 1

Mana: 100 Experience: 0/100

Stamina: 4 **Dexterity: 6 Health Regen: 5** Armor: 1 Strength: 4 Wisdom: 10 Defense: 1 Mana Regen: 12 **Agility: 6 Intelligence: 10** Phys Attack: 2 Magic Attack: 3 Luck: 10 Charisma: 9 Stamina Regen: 2 Race: Elf

The right side of the status screen showed an image of Alexander's avatar. It was dressed in the noob gear he was currently wearing. When he moved his hand, the avatar's hand moved as well. He couldn't resist. He waved at himself.

Looking back to his stats, he reviewed them carefully. His noob clothes were providing him with a pitiful one armor and defense. The 2 physical attack came from his belt knife. He'd regenerate five health per minute when not in combat. Ok, pretty normal. And twelve mana per minute. So. He was going to have to learn how to manage mana usage. If he depleted his mana completely, it would take roughly eight minutes to be fully restored. He'd played casters as a kid, so this wasn't a totally foreign concept. He was just very, very out of practice. Continuing to read, his eyes got wide.

"Well, shit"

He quickly looked back to the avatar section of the screen. He reached up his hand and lifted the hair from the side of his head. "Annud there they are. Elf ears. I'm a damned elf." He hadn't noticed when he was reviewing the avatar in the alcove that the mage was an elf. He'd been focused on the attributes and just never looked that far. "That explains the long limbs and fingers. Brick's never gonna let me hear the end of this," he signed.

"The end of what?" Sasha was walking up the hill toward him. Looking toward where his hand was still holding his hair, she squealed, "You became an elf!" She grabbed a hold of the pointed ear tip and waggled it a bit. "I think it might be an improvement!" she grinned at him, letting go.

"Yeah, and a mage, too. Odin sort of strongly suggested it." He said, watching her eyes widen.

"No more stabby stabby!?" she exclaimed.

"No, I'm still melee, but I'm also a caster. So stabby stabby and whoosh, pow!" he chuckled.

"Well, that's certainly a big change," Max was now standing just down the hill. Close enough to have heard them talking. "I think Odin might have changed all of us, at least a little bit. Myself, I'm still a ranger, but I've focused on Scout abilities, which give me better stealth, mapping, and trap abilities."

"I stuck with druid healer," Sasha said. "But my intel is much higher than before. And I focused on a branch of nature magic that will allow me to control plants and trees. I'll be able to make things grow, and move!" She did a bit of a happy dance there on the hilltop.

"What're ye dancin' about like a fairy for?" Brick's voice rolled up from the start point.

"We were just discussing changes to our toons," Max said as the dwarf reached them.

"Aye! Odin gave me a chance to improve meself as well!" Brick smiled mischievously. "I'm stronger than before, based on my real-life body. Faster, too. And I be a pally now!"

The others all groaned.

Brick looked defensive, and slightly angry, "What?"

Alexander answered for the others, "Paladins have to pray to their gods for powers every day. And follow the belief and morals systems of that god. If you anger them, you risk losing your powers."

"BWAAAHAHA!" Brick laughed even louder than usual. "Ye be thinkin I'm daft? I know all that. That's why I picked Durin as me new boss!!" when the others looked confused, he explained "Durin. Lord o'Dwarves? Every ale I drink, every mob I kill counts as a prayer to him! His demands are simple. Bravery in battle. Loyalty to me friends. Pursuit of honor, pretty women, and parties!"

The others stood there for a moment with their mouths open before all of them began to laugh nearly as loudly as Brick himself. "I gotta hand it to you, shortness. You found the perfect god for yourself!" Max patted him on the back.

"Aye! And even better, I can heal meself a bit during battle. And once per day I can resurrect one of ye!" The dwarf was clearly proud of his choices, and so were his friends.

A quiet voice drifted up from below, "Hey, guys". Lainey waved to them as they all turned.

Sasha leapt down the hill and tackled her in an enthusiastic hug, nearly toppling them both down the hill. "Lainey! I'm SO glad you're here! So c'mon, tell us! What class did you pick?" Lainey, Sasha, and Alexander had spent the previous evening in their living room, discussing classes and abilities, and answering questions about the game for her.

"Well, it took me a while to decide. I guess when they tested me, I scored high in strength and agility. Probably because of my years of training. I also scored high in intelligence, so Odin said I could play pretty much anything well. I kind of like the rogue, with all the sneaking and badass whirling around stabbing everything, but it also seemed kind of exhausting. And I liked the idea of being able to shoot fireballs at Alexander when he misbehaved!" she winked at him, "but Odin says I can't shoot him unless we're dueling, so that's no fun. Anyway, there were so many choices, and I don't really know what I'm doing, so I asked Odin for help. He showed me the Valkyrie. I can stand back and shoot with a bow, or use a sword and shield to kill stuff up close. And Odin said as one of his servants he'd grant me some magic abilities for attacking and healing. But what really decided me, was when he said that once I get to high levels, I can grow wings and FLY!"

The friends all looked at each other, then at Lainey. Surprise evident on their faces. "Woah!" Sasha exclaimed. "that's a whole new class! And being able to fly? I mean, sure, at level 50 we can all buy flying mounts. But being able to fly on your own? That's AWESOME!" she hugged Lainey again, and they both sort of hopped up and down.

"Nice choice, Lainey," Alexander said, looking up at the sky and making a face at Odin. He was thinking Odin probably created that class on the spot, just to mock him. "Ok guys, we should get moving. It's a bit of a walk to

Stormforge, and it's not exactly healthy for a bunch of level 1's to be out in the woods at night, even in the noob zone." As he started to walk down the hill, he patted the dwarf on the shoulder.

The dwarf froze, and looked up at him. "Alexander, did you get taller? Or am I shorter?" He looked at himself, then down at the ground, and up at Alexander again.

"Ooooh, watch this!" Sasha whispered loudly to Lainey.

"Yeah, buddy, I'm taller," Alexander confirmed, still walking.

"Why are you taller?" The dwarf persisted, catching up to him.

"Yeah, Alexander, why ARE you taller?" Sasha added helpfully.

Alexander stopped walking and turned toward the dwarf, trying to think of a way to admit his elfy-ness and still retain some dignity. He absently scratched his head.

"BWAAHAHAHA!" the dwarf burst out, bending over and holding his gut. Too late, Alexander realized that scratching his head had revealed his elven ear. "Yer an elf! A big scrawny elfy elf!" Brick was laughing so hard he actually fell over and began to roll down the hill. This only caused him to laugh all the harder, and got everyone but Alexander laughing as well, mostly at the dwarf. They followed him down.

At the bottom of the hill, the dwarf rolled into a clump of tall grass, apparently landing on a rabbit. The poor bunny squealed, and tried to hop away, but its leg was injured. This apparently counted as an attack, because suddenly Brick was in combat! "What the...?" the dwarf had time to wonder before the bunny let out what must count for a bunny battle cry, sounding more like a terrified squirrel, and leapt at Brick. Its sharp front teeth sliced through his noob pants and cut deeply into his thigh. Definitely no longer laughing, Brick retreated toward his friends, keeping an eye on the deranged rabbit. "A killer bunny?" he looked confused "Bunnies never attacked when we were here before!"

"Well, I don't remember you ever sitting on one before, either!" Sasha chortled. She raised a hand as if to heal the dwarf, but Alexander reached out his own hand to stop her. Shaking his head, he backed away slightly,

motioning for his friends to do the same. He had a feeling about this.

"Ye can't make me leg bleed and get away with it!" Brick shouted at the bunny, drawing his belt knife and advancing. "Stand back! This wee bastard is mine!" The bunny was now foaming at the mouth, and its eyes were bloodshot. It also appeared to be growing larger. It let out a much louder battle cry. This one echoed through the meadow, and was quickly answered by echoing cries from several directions. Brick advanced. Alexander took another step back up the hill. The tall grass of the meadow was rustling ominously.

Brick slashed his knife at the bunny, but it was quick to dodge, and he missed. He growled in frustration and dove at it, thinking to crush it under his body weight. The bunny hopped to one side, and Brick landed with a grunt in the grass. Quickly rolling over, he got onto his back in time to see the white blur of rabid rabbit flying toward his eyes. The dwarf managed to punch the bunny in the face, stunning it for a few seconds.

He jumped back to his feet and was about to stomp on it, when he heard Max. "Uhh... Brick?"

He looked toward Max, who was staring behind Brick. Brick turned farther, looking behind him to find angry looking fluffy bunnies hopping out of the tall grass all around him, more than a dozen of them. "What in Durin's braided ball hairs...?" the dwarf had time to say before his original foe recovered and leaped at him. Its teeth sunk into his bicep and remained there, the bunny hanging off Brick like some kind of fashion accessory. "Did that count as a prayer?" Max wondered out loud.

Hollering like a madman, the dwarf began to dance around, frantically waving his arm trying to dislodge the attack bunny. In the process, he got within range of several of the other bunnies, who all jumped up and latched on to him in various places. Brick screamed and ran uphill, the only direction there were not more bloodthirsty bunnies waiting for him. As he passed his friends, none of them could keep from laughing as the angle exposed an angry bunny latched onto the dwarf's right butt cheek, flopping up and down as he ran. Nearing the top of the hill, the dwarf staggered. Feeling lightheaded from blood loss. He tripped and fell, once again rolling down the hill. This had the benefit of crushing several of the bunnies still latched onto

him, and flinging away a few others. Unfortunately, the combined damage from the original bites, the bleed effects as he ran, and the additional hit points lost as chunks of his limbs were ripped away by flying bunnies were too much even for the tank's health pool. Brick was dead before he reached the bottom.

Lainey stared in shock at the dwarf's dead and mutilated body. Then in shock and confusion at the rest of the group, who were howling with laughter. Sasha had actually fallen to the ground and kept saying "I might pee myself!" She looked back at the body, which had begun to fade away, leaving nothing but Brick's small belt knife lying on the ground.

Then she kicked Alexander, who had sat down, still laughing, and was wiping tears from his eyes. "How can you laugh at this? Your friend just died horribly!"

Alexander made an effort to calm himself enough to speak. "He sure did, and I managed to record the whole thing!" At which point he just gave up and succumbed to his laughter. Max howled and fell down on his back, arms and legs spread wide in helpless laughter. Lainey shook her head. How could they be so callous?

Finally, Sasha got herself together and pulled Lainey down to sit next to her. "Brick will respawn in a few minutes. He's fine. You see, players die all the time in this game. Often in much more gruesome circumstances. When you die, you drop some of your gear and money, and lose experience. Then you respawn at your most recent bind point, which happens to be right here." Sasha pointed to the spot where they had all just entered the realm. "Since we're all level one, and have zero experience, he didn't lose anything by dying here. We're laughing because our bad-ass tough dwarf tank just died to a bunch of fuzzy bunnies on crack!" They all chuckled again. Even Lainey this time, beginning to understand. "And when he respawns, he is gonna be PISSED!" Max actually giggled. Which made Lainey giggle too.

"But I'm still confused. Sasha could have healed him. Why did you stop her?" She looked at Alexander, who had gotten up to loot all the bunny corpses around them.

"He stopped me because if I'd healed Brick, it would have put me in combat as well, so the bunnies would have come after me too! As it is, once he was

dead, they all just went back to their little bunny homes." Sasha explained. "But it does bring up the question. How did you know there were more bunnies coming?" she eyed her friend suspiciously.

"I didn't KNOW..." he said. "But I suspected. I'd bet good money Odin was behind this. I sort of asked him to play a prank on Brick. He said Heimdall was looking to teach Brick a lesson for his lobby rampage the other day." Thinking of that, he waved at nothing in particular, saying "Hiya Heimdall. Dad. Hope you guys saw all that!" There was a roll of thunder, though the sky was clear.

"WHAT the actual FUCK!?" Brick roared as he spawned a few feet away.

The four friends turned to him, holding their best poker faces. "You okay, buddy?" Alexander asked as sincerely as possible.

"No! I be most certainly not okay! A herd of mutant hellspawn rabbits just ate me arse!" The dwarf stomped over and picked his belt knife up from the grass. When he stood up, he rubbed his right butt cheek, now fully healed, as if remembering the pain.

This caused his friends, including Lainey, to lose it all over again. The dwarf looked hurt, his gaze moving to each of them as they laughed helplessly. Then Max managed to gasp out two words. "Monty... python...!" at which point Brick began to fight a grin of his own.

"BWAHAHA! I got me ass beat by bunnies!" he laughed. Then quickly got serious. "Ye won't tell nobody, will ye?" he asked quietly, as if already trying to keep a secret.

"Not a word," Alexander crossed his heart. "This is just between us. And Odin, and probably Durin. Oh and Dad and Heimdall. Who says hi, by the way." At this, Lainey giggled even harder. "And you know, all the techs and nurses who are monitoring the feeds. Just us." Alexander smiled and patted his crestfallen friend on the shoulder.

"Ok guys, fun time's over. Let's get to the city and pick up our gear. Keep a steady eye out. Clearly the critters around here are more hostile than we remember!" Each of them instinctively checked to confirm they had their belt knives at their waists. As they walked, Alexander told everybody about

the changes in the UI he'd discovered. Which led to a long tutorial for Lainey on how to access and use the UI. She was particularly impressed with the way the map filled in the area around them as they walked toward town. Each of them checked their ability menu to see what skills they began with. Sasha had her healing skills and her entangle skill, albeit all at a much lower level. Max was able to stealth. Brick could taunt, and had a new heal over time ability that only worked on himself. With a little help from Sasha, Lainey discovered she had a speed boost that would let her move nearly instantly up to ten feet. She also had a shock spell that would shoot a lightning bolt that did minor damage at level one.

Alexander found he had an ability called 'swift strike' that was sort of a cross between a charge and an execute. He could instantly strike an opponent from up to eight feet away and do double normal attack and weapon damage. He was about to tell them all to load their abilities into their hot bar. But there wasn't one anymore; all they had to do was concentrate on the spell and it would activate. Alexander sent each of them a group invite, and then explained to Lainey about group chat, and about monitoring each other's health in the UI during combat.

After about 30 minutes of walking, the team paused, having been alerted by a rustling in the brush ahead. Max motioned for them all to be silent, and went into stealth mode. He crept forward toward the noise.

Before he'd taken more than a few steps, a large grey wolf emerged from the brush and bared its teeth at the group. A low growl emanating from its throat. The wolf stood a solid three feet high at the shoulders.

Forest Wolf Level 5 Health 130/130

Alexander reached for Lainey's hand. "Ok Lainey, this is fine. Here's how it's going to work. Brick is going to taunt the wolf, so it will run right at him. When it gets close, I want you to hit it with your shock, ok? That should stun it for a second, while Sasha gets a grip on it with her vines to hold it down. As soon as it's held, we're all going to stab it as fast and as often as we can. Got it?" Lainey, eyes wide, took a deep breath, then nodded.

"Brick," he said.

The dwarf instantly hollered at the wolf, "Hey, flea bag!" which caught its attention. The wolf leaped toward Brick, closing fast. Lainey's lightning bolt shot out and actually knocked the wolf down. *A bit early, but workable*.

"Good job, Lainey!" Sasha yelled as vines grew up from the ground to entangle the wolf. At that moment Alexander triggered his ability and was instantly at the wolf's side, thrusting his knife into its chest. Max appeared behind the wolf and stabbed his own knife into the back of its neck. There was no need for the others to continue their attacks. Both hits were crits, and the wolf expired. Max looted a wolf pelt, some wolf meat, and teeth.

Level Up! You have reached level 2! Your Wisdom has increased by +1. Your Intelligence has increased by +1

Each of them received a similar message with increases to their appropriate attributes. Killing a mob four levels above them had given them significant XP. Lainey was excited about her level increase, and the others nodded and smiled at her noobtastic enthusiasm.

During the remainder of their trek into town, they ran across three more wolves, which they used to improve their coordination of abilities. Each of the mobs died without anyone taking damage. And they were all level three by the time they walked out of the tree line and headed for the nearest city gates. As they crossed the open field around the city, they surprised a few sleeping squirrels and bunnies which Brick conspicuously avoided.

The four veterans escorted Lainey through the city, pointing out various shops and vendors where loot could be sold, weapons bought, or good food could be purchased. They took her by their old guild house, which reminded Alexander to send Lainey a guild invite, which she accepted. They all gave her a minute to read all the prompts that popped up on her UI. Next stop was Gregor's General Goods on the corner. They gave all the loot they'd gathered from the wolves to Lainey (Alexander kept the rabbit pelts), and let her haggle with Gregor over what they were worth. She proved to be surprisingly good, getting him to bump his offer by ten coppers.

Next stop was the Bloated Ogre! It was nearly noon, and none of them had eaten since entering the game that morning. The veteran four were excited to

watch Lainey get her first taste of in-game food. There was no better chef than the innkeeper's wife, except Lydia.

They entered the tavern on the ground floor of the inn, Lainey still chuckling over the funny ogre on the sign. There were plenty of tables available as the lunch crowd hadn't arrived yet. They chose a table near a window, and took seats.

One of the waitresses was there almost instantly. "Ah, the Greystones. And one more! Have ya finally added to your little gang of hooligans?" she asked.

"This is Lainey, she's family. And more hooliganish than any of us!" Alexander grinned. "Lainey, this is Martha. Her father is Martin O'Malley, the innkeeper, and her mom is the chef." Lainey reached out to shake Martha's hand.

"Nice t'meetcha Lainey. I already know what this bunch wants. What can I get for you?"

Lainey looked started as a menu popped up on her interface. "Well. That's handy," she smiled and read through it for a moment. "I'd like the pot roast, please. And some sweet tea?"

"Right! Good choice. Be right back with your drinks." Martha sped away and returned in just a minute with their drinks.

While they waited on their food, the group discussed the plan for the day. There were various noob quests available in the city. Fetch this, deliver that, gather me ten of those. But none of them wanted to go through those again. They decided to gather any bounty quests they could find and head back into the forest to kill things. Alexander wanted to focus on team building, establishing everyone's role in various combat situations and figuring out how their abilities best complimented each other, but first they would go back to their house and get some gear and some money to buy gear for Lainey if they didn't have anything in the guild bank for her to use. Sasha wanted to check in with Lydia, and introduce Lainey.

Their food arrived, and several stomachs audibly growled as they inhaled the wondrous scents. The others waited and watched Lainey take her first bite

of the pot roast. "Oh. My. GAWD!" she exclaimed around her mouthful of food. Not even waiting to swallow it. "How is this so GOOD?" she quickly shoveled another bite into her mouth. The others all smiled and began to eat their own meals.

"Holy shit!" Sasha exclaimed, actually spitting a bit of crust from her chicken pot pie at Max.

"My god" said Max "this is..."

"Amazing" Alexander agreed. They'd both ordered beef stew. Brick didn't say a word. He was cutting pieces of wolf steak and shoving them into his mouth as quickly as he could. "Well, dad did tell us that the pods allowed for more realistic taste and smell. Guess he wasn't kidding. This food has always been good, but never like this. This is..."

"Orgasmic!" Lainey finished for him. Realizing she'd just shouted that out in a public space, she blushed furiously and hunched down in her seat, trying to hide behind Alexander.

"Glad you like it, darlin" Martha walked over with a knowing smile on her face. Lainey blushed and even deeper red. "I'll be sure'n let mum know how much you appreciate her cooking! Can I get you lot anything else?"

"More steak!" Brick stopped stuffing his mouth long enough to blurt out.

"Comin right up!" Martha headed for the kitchen.

Lainey, having recovered from her embarrassment, took another enthusiastic mouthful of her roast. Then before she'd even swallowed that, she stole a forkful of Sasha's pot pie. "OhmygodthatsSOgood!" she practically drooled the words. Following her lead, the friends began tasting each other's meals. All except Brick's steak, which he greedily defended with his fork and a threatening growl. They only persuaded him to share after his second steak arrived.

The food consumed, they all leaned back in their chairs, groaning and patting full bellies. Just enjoying the afterglow of the amazing meal. Brick actually passed out. After Martha had cleared away their plates and offered them dessert (which they refused), she bid them a good day and departed, tugging the dwarf's beard to wake him as she passed. They got up to leave, and

Lainey left Martha the entire proceeds from the sale of their loot: 1 gold, 2 silver 23 copper, which was roughly three times the cost of the meal. No one argued. It was completely worth it.

Sluggish and quiet from their massive meal, they headed toward their new home. The veterans raided their individual storage and equipped as much of their gear as they could while Lainey explored the house. As they were dressing, a cry rang out from Brick's room. "Nooooo! Me shield!". They all ran to his room to find him sitting on a chair, looked dejectedly at his shield.

"Dammit Brick!" Max yelled at the dwarf, "I thought your shield didn't transfer or something. But it's right there. What's the problem?"

Brick looked up at his friends. "I canno' carry it. I've not the strength yet."

Ah. Noob troubles. "How many points are you short, buddy?" Alexander asked.

"Me strength stat is at 12 now. I need 15 to wear me armor and heft me sweet baby," he said, petting the shield in his lap.

"Ok cheer up buddy. We got you covered. We'll grab two or three strength potions out of the vault. Each one will give you +5 strength for two hours. Then we'll go kill stuff. By the time the potions run out, we should have at least three more levels, and you can carry it on your own!"

The dwarf looked up, much relieved.

"Yeah, shortness. We can't have you runnin around out there without your shield. I mean, did you SEE how many bunnies were out there?" Max grinned.

Brick looked first horrified, then annoyed. "Shut it, pointy ears. Or I'll tell Bethany about that rash you had a couple years back!" Now it was Max's turn to look horrified.

That settled, they accompanied Lainey to the guild vault. Alexander promoted her to "Officer" rank so she'd have full access anytime she needed it. Max, being the leather armor expert, helped Lainey find some armor pieces with appropriate stats, as well as a sword, shield, bow and arrows.

They also found her a 100 slot "bag of holding" like the ones they carried. It reduced the weight of anything stored inside by 99%. Alexander was wearing his mithril shirt, but his other gear was all melee combat gear. He wanted to explore the caster side of his new toon, so he hunted down some random pieces of low level leather and chain that held intel and wisdom boosts. He also chose a rather plain one-handed sword with a +4 to wisdom, which he strapped to his hip. And a wooden staff with a +10 intel. The end result was that he looked like a gypsy wanderer with mismatched gear, but he was happy enough with the effects.

They each loaded up with a couple buff potions for their main stats, and several low level health potions that would each heal them completely in one shot until they reached level ten or so. Everyone but Max also took a few minor mana potions.

Geared up and ready to rumble, they left the house. The three men split up to track down bounty quests which they could share with the group, while Sasha and Lainey went next door to see Lydia. They agreed to meet at the fountain at the city's center in an hour to share the various quests and determine which direction to head. This first immersion was scheduled to last 24 hours so they had a lot of time to kill.

An hour later, Sasha and Lainey had each learned a bit of support magic from Lydia, as well as some herb knowledge. Lainey had gained the herbalism skill. And Lydia had given them several pounds of traveling rations with various buffs for the group. As soon as they were all together, Lainey held up her hands, and scrunched her face in concentration. After a moment, they all felt a tingling sensation that rose from their feet up through their spines.

"What was that?" Brick asked.

"She just buffed us!" Sasha said proudly. "We get +5% haste for the next hour! Lydia taught us."

"Huh. Never felt a buff that way before," Alexander mused. "Must be another immersion thing. And well done, Lainey!"

They shared around the quests that the guys had received, and one Lydia had given the girls for herb gathering. Determining that the majority of the quests were to the east in the forest they'd passed through that morning, they headed

out the east gate. As they walked, Sasha cast a buff of her own, with a wisdom boost that would help them regenerate mana faster. They set out, Brick in the lead followed by Alexander and Lainey, with Max and Sasha bringing up the rear.

As they crossed the open field between the city walls and the tree line, Lainey took out her bow. She'd had some real-life experience with shooting a bow. She'd dated a guy who was an enthusiast, and he'd given her lessons. She wasn't confident that those skills would transfer to the game, so she needed to test her skill before they got into a real fight. Motioning to Max, she pointed to a bunny that was out in the open about 30 yards ahead of the group. Max smiled and nodded. Lainey nocked an arrow. Stopping, she took a deep breath, held it, aimed her arrow, and released. Just as the arrow leapt from the bow, she shouted "Killer bunny!" causing Brick to throw up his shield and swivel his head in search of the menace. Her arrow flew true, and the bunny squealed briefly before falling dead. "Don't worry, Brick, I got your back!" She giggled. Behind her, Max was bent over laughing. Brick was not amused.

They continued into the tree line. They had bounties on wolf pelts (5), wolf meat (10), boar hides (5), dire wolf hides (which were too difficult for them at this level), goblin knives (10), and the head of the goblin overlord. So they got down to business. The goblin camp was about two miles into the forest, just outside the noob "safe zone", a sort of ring around the city where mobs were low enough level to give noobs a decent chance in a fight, and where PVP was prohibited.

On their way through the forest, Max ranged out ahead and to either side, locating wolves or boars wherever he could. He'd then hit it with a single arrow, and run toward the group, alerting them through group chat that he was incoming. They tried different formations for different situations. Brick always taunted the mob as Max ran past. Some fights they would simply let it pound on Brick's shield while Max and Lainey fired arrows into it. Other times, Sasha would hold it down with vines while Alexander and Lainey would stab it to death with swords. Once, Max got careless while running from a level seven boar and tripped over a root. The boar caught up to him, and he had to swing himself up onto a tree branch to avoid being shredded. When the others arrived to rescue him, Brick couldn't taunt the boar because

he was laughing so hard. Sasha trapped it, and Alexander and Lainey stabbed it to death. After that fight, Brick was in a much better mood. They continued on, killing mobs, and Sasha and Lainey picking herbs wherever they spotted them.

The team finally reached the clearing where the goblin village was located. It was a simple village of less than two dozen thatch-roofed buildings surrounded by a haphazard wooden palisade. The gate was wide open, and two goblin guards with leather armor and spears napped on either side. This was not goblin construction; the buildings were too well built. The goblins had clearly raided and taken over a human village. Their quest said that the mayor of the village had fled to Stormforge with a few survivors, and that he'd pay them to clear out the village and bring him the head of the overlord as proof that it was safe for them to return.

After a quick discussion, Max stealthed and began to move around to the left of the gate.

"I can see maybe 60 goblins walking around outside. Mostly in groups of 2-5. Don't know how many are in the huts. No sign of the boss. Mobs are mostly level 6 to 8. Taking the left guard in ten secs," he reported in guild chat. That was good. The group were all approaching level five after killing wolves and boars, so the mobs were high enough above them to give decent xp, but not high enough to be dangerous. At least not in small numbers. Goblins were small, usually between three and four feet tall with mottled green skin, large floppy ears, and sharp teeth. They were not very strong, or particularly intelligent. Individually they were easy to kill. Their strength was in numbers. They would try to overwhelm you, attacking together four or five at a time, and work to disable your legs and get you on the ground where they could reach vital areas.

Alexander nodded to Lainey, who focused on the snoozing guard to the right of the gate. Just as Max appeared behind the other guard to stab it in the back, then slice its throat, Lainey hit hers with a shock spell. The lightning bolt barely made a sound as it struck the sleeping guard, stunning it long enough for Alexander to rush forward and stab it through the chest. Both guards went down without a sound.

The group huddled up against the wall just to the right of the gate. "OK this

is how we do it," Sasha began, taking on the role of strategist as usual. "The closest hut has two mobs outside the door. Max will stealth his way to the side of the hut. We'll make a noise out here to try and draw them this way. As soon as they both clear the corner, Max you grab the one in the back and drag him out of sight. We'll get the other one if he comes all the way out here. If not, Max and Lainey take him down with arrows. They should be far enough away not to aggro any of the ones we can see. The question is whether we'll alert anyone inside the hut. Be as quiet as you can."

Max moved into the village and took up position at the side of the hut. Lainey held her bow with arrow nocked in one hand, ready to shock the lead mob and then shoot it. She was looking thoughtfully at the arrow as they waited. Sasha motioned to Brick, who coughed loudly to catch the attention of the two goblins. Neither of them reacted. He tried again, this time with a loud "MEOW!", which earned him a look from the others. He shrugged as if to say "what?". Still no reaction. This was getting ridiculous. Finally, Brick took the helm from the dead goblin guard and tossed it into the open space just inside the gate. THAT got the goblins' attention. They both leapt up and began to move toward the gate. As soon as they passed the corner of the hut, Max stepped up behind the rear goblin, covered its mouth with one gloved hand, and stabbed it through the heart with his other. He quickly dragged it over behind the hut, then grabbed his bow and aimed for the second goblin. As it turned out, he didn't need to shoot. The goblin walked right up to the gate, his eyes widening at the sight of the adventurers, and opened his mouth to scream. Just as it opened, Lainey's arrow shot thru its mouth and out the back of its head. The goblin, already dead on its feet, danced with electric blue lightning arcing off its body. Brick quickly scooped up the body as he and the others dashed to Max's position by the hut.

"That was awesome, Lainey!" Sasha said as Max looted the dead mobs. "How did you cast shock and then shoot an arrow so quickly?" Lainey looked at her and shrugged. "I didn't. I just sorta cast shock into the arrow before I fired it. I was thinking the same way you just were, about how there was a delay between casting shock and shooting, and what if the shock didn't stun the goblin and it cried out. So I thought, what if the arrow could shock the goblin when it hit? That way if I didn't kill it, it still might be stunned. I focused on the arrow, and just kinda cast shock through my hand into it. It started to glow with that blue lightning like you saw on the goblin just now.

Then I shot it, and you saw what happened."

The group all looked at her, mouths wide open. "Lainey, pull up your stats. Look under 'skills' and tell me what you see," Alexander said.

Lainey took a moment, then said, "it says I have a skill called "Infuse Arrow: Shock". It took a second, but the realization hit her. "I have a new skill!" she nearly shouted. Everyone immediately shushed at her, reminding her where they were.

"Well, shit," Max said. "She just taught herself a skill. A skill I've never heard of in this game." The others nodded.

"Could it be another immersion thing?" Sasha asked, looking at Alexander.

"Shit, I don't know any more than you guys. I found out about all this the same day as you. Sasha, you've been next to me the whole time," he said. "But I think it must be. Maybe combined with the fact that Lainey's a noob, and she didn't know you can't just invent new spells?"

Lainey looked confused. "Wait, what?"

"I want to try something," Sasha immediately embraced the possibilities. Let's get inside this hut. Brick, if there are mobs inside, you taunt them. Everybody else hold off on attacking. I'm going to try to modify my trap spell."

So the group waited for nearby goblins to move away or turn their backs, and rushed into the hut with Brick in the lead. It turned out there were three sleeping goblins on the floor. They didn't even wake. Changing plans on the fly, Sasha motioned to Alexander and Lainey. As she cast her trap on one, they each stabbed one of the others in the throat. Those two died instantly, while Lainey's goblin cried out in surprise and pain as first it was wrapped in vines, then the vines sprouted thorns. The goblin died quickly from a hundred different puncture wounds. Max looted the corpses again, and they all sat down to think about what just happened.

"So it seems pretty clear we can modify our skills a bit. Or at least, our magic skills. I didn't get a pop-up when I cast that vine spell, but my stat page says I have a new skill called Thorn Trap," Sasha began. "Can we also create new ones? How would we test that?"

Brick looked at Alexander, "Ye be a mage now, yeah? Do ye know any fire spells?" Alexander shook his head. Brick pointed to the fire pit in the floor of the hut, "Well, see if ye can light that, then."

Alexander focused on the wood in the fire pit. *Light!* He thought. Nothing happened. *Fire! Burn! Ignite!*

"I see ye makin' faces like yer constipated," Brick observed, "but are ye actually doin' anything?"

Alexander smiled, then explained to them all what he'd tried.

"Let's try another modification. Alexander, this is gonna hurt you more than it hurts me..." Max said as he drew an arrow, focused for a moment, and shot his friend in the leg.

Alexander opened his mouth and yelled "what the fuck!" but though his lips moved, no sound emerged. Not noticing, he continued to rant at his friend, making no noise for ten seconds, before words finally became audible "... stupid fucking idea, anyway!" Alexander ripped the arrow from his leg, then paused, seeing the others all smiling at him. Sasha healed him.

Before Alexander could resume his tirade, Max explained. "I have a silence spell in the stealth skills. I can cast it on myself and be completely silent for ten secs. I followed Lainey's lead and imbued an arrow with it. When I shot you, we couldn't hear you yelling for ten secs."

"This is huge!" Sasha said while Alexander quietly contemplated revenge. "So we can modify our skills without going to see a trainer. And we're way over powered with these mods. Already Max can silence a mob from range, and Lainey can shock one, getting the stun effect, and the DPS from both the arrow and the shock spell at once. And my trap can actually kill if I want it to. This is going to make pulls SO much easier!"

Max interrupted, "There are some limits. My silence spell has a five minute cooldown."

Lainey nodded, "I can only cast shock every ten seconds. And it takes nearly a quarter of my mana".

"Yeah, I can only cast my trap on one mob at a time. Though I can recast it

as soon as it wears off. So every 30 seconds," Sasha agreed. "So we're not completely OP. But damn, this is nice. Do you think it's a glitch, Alexander?"

He shook his head, "No. I've been thinking about it. If it were a glitch, it's unlikely it would work for all of us. It should be limited to one instance, like Lainey's shock arrow. Or one type of ability, like infusion of an inanimate object. The fact that you can also modify your vine spell suggests it's a valid game mechanic."

"Well, whatever it is, we can report it tomorrow when we log out. In the meantime, we've got goblins to kill!" Max reminded them.

The team spent about another two hours working their way through the village; using their new skills to quietly take down patrols without aggro from the others, then rushing into the huts to kill the mobs inside. They picked up goblin knives for their quest, and quite a bit of low quality arms and armor. Each goblin dropped a few copper coins. They rested in huts as needed to replenish mana and allow cooldowns to expire.

Finally, they reached what was probably the mayor's house. It was larger than the rest of the homes in the village. There were two goblin guards on the porch outside the front door, both awake and alert. It was obvious that any noise from them would bring the boss out, as well as any mobs that were inside with him. Without even having to say anything, Max and Lainey chose their targets. Lainey shot the left guard with her shock arrow, stunning it. Max used a silence shot on the other guard. Then both shot a second, then a third arrow until the guards lay dead on either side of the door. The only sound had come when the bodies hit the floor.

Giving Max and Lainey just enough time to loot the bodies and retrieve their arrows, Brick charged in the front door shouting, "Yer mother was a warthog and yer father was a horny toad!" Goblins are sensitive about their ancestry, so this worked quite well as the Goblin Overlord jumped up from his dinner and charged toward Brick, roaring. Two level ten goblin shamans also stood and began casting spells.

"Ranged on the shamans!" Sasha shouted. Max and Lainey each hit a shaman, stunning one, and interrupting their casts. Alexander triggered his ability and was instantly behind the stunned shaman, stabbing him in the back repeatedly. Lainey switched to Max's shaman, and they both filled it with arrows until it was dead. Meanwhile Brick had been trading blows with the boss. It was roughly twice the size of your average goblin, nearing 6ft tall, and was wildly swinging a large double-bladed battle axe at Brick.

Goblin Overlord Level 12 Health 380/400

With the shamans dead, the boss fight was just a standard tank and spank. Brick held aggro and used his shield to block all the blows from the oversized axe while he recited some of his love poetry. Lainey switched to her sword and shield for the practice, and she and Alexander stabbed at the boss from behind while Max shot it in the face and Sasha ripped its legs to shreds with thorn-covered vines. It was all over in half a minute.

Level up! You are now level 6! Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1

Max looted the boss, which didn't drop much of anything noteworthy. The battle axe was good quality, and could be sold for a couple gold in the auction house. Brick cut off the overlord's head and stuck it in his bag. Max checked around for any chests or secret hidey holes, but found nothing.

Chapter Eight

Baddest Noobs in the Whole Damn Town

Goblin quests complete, the friends decided to take a longer route back to the city. They needed to kill more wolves and boars for their bounty quests, and find more herbs for Lydia as well. They made their way through the forest, killing mobs in ones and two's as they went. The only difficulty they had was when Lainey wandered off about ten yards from the group to pick some bluebottle plants she'd noticed at the base of the tree. She didn't see the wolf behind the bushes until it growled and pounced on her.

She cried out as she used her bow to hold back the wolf's slavering jaws. Brick was immediately there, having activated his shield rush ability to rush across the distance and knock the wolf away. The beast shook its head, then let out a howl. Within seconds the group was surrounded by four other wolves.

"Brick!" Sasha yelled. Brick dragged his war hammer across the face of his shield, activating its special Serpent Screech ability and causing all the wolves to focus on him. Sasha cast her thorn trap on one wolf, then focused on healing Brick. Lainey shot one with her shock arrow, and Max followed her lead, peppering it with normal arrows as there was no use in silencing it. Alexander activated his Swift Strike ability and got a critical hit on a third wolf, taking about half its health and drawing aggro. The remaining two wolves remained focused on Brick. Lainey and Max finished off their wolf, then Lainey switched to Alexander's wolf, stunning it. Max turned and finished the nearly dead wolf that was just being released by Sasha's vines, then helped Alexander and Lainey finish the one they were fighting. Alexander backstabbed the wolf to Brick's left, and Max and Lainey peppered it until it was down. They all hit the remaining wolf, the one that had originally attacked Lainey, and it died nearly instantly. Sasha threw a heal on Lainey, while Brick took the opportunity to test his self-heal. Neither had taken any serious damage. Max looted the corpses, and informed them that they now had enough pelts and meat for each of them to turn in the bounty quests. Sasha still needed a few more herbs to have enough for everyone, so they continued on in the rough direction of the city.

Roughly half an hour later, as the sun began to approach the horizon, they

emerged from the forest onto the main road leading into Stormforge. They had drifted farther afield than they'd planned, searching out herbs and killing mobs. They could see the city in the distance, maybe two miles out. Just ahead of them was a plank bridge wide enough for a single wagon that crossed a small but rocky creek. As the group crossed the bridge, a group of players walked out of the forest between the bridge and the city. There were three warriors, a couple of archers, and a caster that was likely a healer. All of them were between level 10 and 13. And they each had a red skull above their heads. Player Killers. PKs. Players that attacked other players for fun and profit. The lowest form of scum in the game, or in any game.

Alexander halted his group halfway across the bridge. The narrow space would make it easier to keep the enemy from getting past Brick to surround them. He activated his camera, so that he could be sure and get the names of all these assholes. Alexander hated PKs with a passion. Hated anyone who victimized the innocent or the weak. They were going to kill these assholes now, and then find them and kill them again. And again. Until they gave up and quit the game.

Alexander was standing there, lost in thought and growling to himself, when Sasha hit him on the head. "Hey! Pay attention!" she said. She'd known what he was thinking.

He noted that Brick had taken position in front of the group, shield at the ready. Lainey was standing next to Alexander, just behind Brick and to his left. Max and Sasha were behind them. After all their fights throughout the day, the group had instinctively formed up without any instruction from him.

As they approached at a steady pace, the leader of the PKs, a level 13 warrior in a combination of plate and mail armor and carrying a two-handed axe, called out to them. "You noobs are WAY out of the safe zone. I'm afraid that was a big mistake. But you don't have to die for your foolishness. Give us your weapons and whatever loot and cash you have, and we'll let you run along home in your skivvies!" he smirked at them as his buddies laughed.

"BWAAHAHAHA!" Brick laughed back at them. "I don't think ye brought enough friends, buttercup!" He yelled. Brick slammed his hammer against his shield and motioned for them to come at him. A couple of the PKs behind the leader looked hesitant. These scum were used to their prey

being weak and afraid.

Alexander decided to take advantage. "You pieces of shit are done picking on noobs in this game. You just chose the wrong group to fuck with. We're going to kill you here and now. We're going to find your bind point, and keep killing you until you're back to level one. Or until you go find another game to play."

Sasha casually stepped behind Alexander so that he could protect her from the archer's arrows. She whispered to Lainey and Max, "when I say go, take out the caster. I'll hit him first with thorns, then Max, you silence him. Alternate between regular arrows and your stun and silence. Lainey, you stun the archers as often as you can. But focus on burning down the healer first. Alexander, you're off-tank until we kill the ranged, then you do your own thing. Brick sweetie... you just be you." Brick smiled sweetly at Sasha and they all nodded that they understood the plan.

The lead PK had stepped closer, and was still spouting insults, trying to boost the morale of his group. "I think when you're dead, I'm gonna sit on your corpse's face and take a selfie that I can post..."

"Go!" said Sasha.

The leader's threat was interrupted by a scream behind him. He turned in time to see an arrow sprout from the forehead of his healer, who was wrapped in vines that appeared to be shredding him. At the impact of the arrow, the scream cut off sharply. The archer next to the healer had dropped his bow and was stiff as a board with blue electric charges arcing off of him. Before the leader had time to even shout orders, the healer sprouted two more arrows, one in the chest, one in the eye, and fell dead. Then the archer who still held his bow and who had kept his head well enough to fire an arrow at the enemy, sprouted two arrows in his chest. In the space of about five seconds, the noobs had taken out his healer, incapacitated one archer and knocked the other down to half health.

Enraged, the leader shouted, "Attack!" and charged toward the other group. His fellow warriors were two steps behind him. As soon he stepped onto the bridge and was between the railings, Brick activated his shield rush ability and rushed forward, crossing the remaining six feet between them instantly, and bashed his shield into the unprepared leader's face. The man flew

backward, knocking into the warriors rushing up behind him and leaving them in a tangled mess on the ground. Brick jumped forward, putting all his plate-clad weight into a swing of his hammer, smashing the leader on the head. Then he slammed the bottom edge of his shield down to bite into the wooden planks of the bridge and braced himself. Alexander rushed forward and stabbed the leader in the face for a critical hit, finishing him off. Then he stepped back next to Brick and raised his shield. The two of them side by side effectively blocked the bridge entrance. The two remaining warriors got to their feet and stepped forward, swords swinging.

Meanwhile, Lainey and Max had each put two arrows into the second archer, whose health bar was down to the red and very nearly gone. The first archer's stun had worn off, and he was retrieving his bow. Lainey hit him with another stun arrow as soon as her ten second cooldown wore off, while Max finished off the other with a painful looking arrow to the groin area. Sasha cast her vines on the remaining archer, shredding his legs and causing him to scream. His arrow shot wildly into the trees. His screaming ended shortly after, as Max had placed a well-aimed shot in his throat.

Lainey fired a risky shot between Brick and Alexander, hitting one of the warriors in the shoulder, but not doing much damage. She slung the bow onto her back and pulled out her sword and shield, moving to Brick's left side, opposite Alexander. The two warriors, neither having taken the time to observe that their friends were all dead, fought on. The one with the arrow in his shoulder called out, "Heals, dammit!"

Lainey actually laughed at him. "Your friends are dead, dumbass." The genius actually turned around in the middle of a 2 on 3 melee to look for his healer.

Alexander, in a rage, activated his Swift Strike ability and cleanly decapitated the warrior, who never even saw it coming. Seeing this, the remaining warrior attempted to flee. Brick's shield bashed him in the back, knocking him to the ground, and was moving to cave in his skull when Alexander shouted, "STOP!"

The friends all looked to him with questions on their faces. "Don't kill him. Sasha, vines, but no thorns. Now." Sasha didn't hesitate. The downed man was wrapped in a thick layer of vines, unable to move. Alexander walked up

to him, pointing a sword at his face. "Where is your bind point?" he snarled. "Fuck you, noob," was the only response.

"Max, come closer. I'm going to ask him again. If he doesn't answer, or you think he's lying, shoot him in the balls." Alexander said, his eyes never leaving those of the PK. Addressing the man on the ground, he said, "I'll make you the same deal your friend offered us. You tell me where their spawn point is. I'll let you live. Otherwise you're gonna die very slowly."

The warrior spit at him. "You can't do shit to me. There's rules against torture. You've got me held down. Kill me or let me go, or I'll report you!" he shouted.

"This isn't torture. You don't have a single injury. And in a moment those vines will wear off. Then my friend will shoot you in the nuts. Simple combat. Then I'll ask you the question again. If you don't answer, we'll shoot you somewhere else that won't kill you, just hurt. A lot. More than PK scum like you deserves. As long as you're not restrained, we can take all day to kill you. After all, we're just weak noobs with terrible aim, fighting a big bad level 12 asshole..."

The vines spell wore off, releasing the warrior. He began to get up to run, and Max shot him in the balls. "Oops" was all he said.

The man fell back to the ground, screaming. He weakly waved his sword in a feeble attempt to keep them away. Brick winced and covered his own groin with a plate gauntlet. "That be a horrible looking wound, there boy," he said.

Max drew another arrow and took aim. "Wait! Wait! I'll tell you!" said the warrior. He made to stand up, hands up in the air. "The bind point is just north of here. An old temple next to the river. Maybe a ten-minute walk."

"I think he's lying," Lainey said. She shot him in the groin with a shock arrow.

"I don't think so. He's too stupid to think up such a detailed lie," Max offered. "His friends will respawn in a few minutes, and will be on their way back here to get their gear. Unless he's warned them in group chat."

"You're right, I didn't think about that." Alexander stepped forward, spinning

to his left for momentum and cutting the top half of the warrior's head off.

Level up! You are now level 8! Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1

Alexander waived the notification away. "Can't have him warning his buddies. He can't use group chat as a ghost. We've got ten minutes before he can warn them. We can't get to the bind point before they spawn, but I've got another idea. Take all their stuff except the armor, and get in the trees. If he wasn't lying, they'll be here in about 12 minutes."

The group looted the bodies and moved off the south side of the road into the trees. "Alexander..." Lainey put a hand on his back. She was shaking. "Are you ok? I've never seen you like this."

He looked down at her. "These assholes have to be stopped. Taught a lesson. They victimize innocent people to satisfy their own twisted kinks. There's no money to be made off of noobs. No good gear to take. They're doing this for the thrill, and the victims that use this road have no way to defend themselves against guys of their level. There is no room in this world for those murderers!" he shouted.

Alexander was ten years old. He was at his parents' office, playing dinosaurs with Tommy, one of the developers. His dinosaurs were attacking Tommy's vintage Star Wars action figures. "Rrrrawr! You better run Darth Vader! Here comes T-Rex! GRRRAWRR!" he roared. He expected Tommy was going to move the black cloaked figure out of the way of the large lizard. But he didn't.

Alexander looked up at Tommy, but Tommy was looking across the office at his dad. Who was in the conference room. He was crying. "Why's dad crying?" he asked. Tommy looked back at him and tried to smile. "I don't know, little buddy. How bout you and me go get some ice cream?" he stood and reached out a hand for Alexander.

"Can we get some for Dad, too? He looks like he needs some," the boy said.

"Sure we can! C'mon, we'll get him some too. What's his favorite flavor?"

Later that night, Alexander's father had tucked him into bed. He had tried to

explain about mom. That she had been in an accident. That she wasn't coming back. That she was in heaven now. "Mom says there is no heaven! That heaven is a made up story, just like Valhalla and the Elysian Fields!" the boy argued. "Where is mom?! I want her to come home now!" he cried. And his father cried. They'd cried themselves to sleep there on Alexander's tiny bed.

A few years later, he'd learned the truth. His mother's death was no accident. She'd been attending a tech conference on behalf of their gear manufacturing arm. She'd been speaking at a lunch seminar about the future of VR technology when a man walked into the room screaming about technology being the tool of the infidel. He'd run to the center of the room, and detonated a suicide vest. His mother and nearly everyone else in the room were killed in the initial blast. Hundreds more were killed as the hotel that had been hosting the conference collapsed.

He had confronted his father. A small, angry 13-year-old who was already mad at the universe for the loss of his mother, and who had been told little more than a year ago that he was sick and might not live to see 20. Alexander had had to grow up fast. Now he had discovered that his father withheld information from him. That's he'd basically lied to him. Richard Greystone stood in the face of his son's anger. Let him rage and scream, pound on his chest. When he had calmed down, his father simply said "Come with me."

Alexander followed his father into their living quarters at the compound. Richard told him to sit, and went to remove something from a drawer in his mom's private desk. He'd moved back to sit next to his son, and said, "The man who killed your mother was part of a terrorist organization called Light of Truth. They believed that technology, and especially VR, was leading people away from belief in their 'one true god'. The FBI investigated the bombing for about five minutes and declared it the act of a single deranged individual. I didn't believe that."

He set a holo crystal on the table in front of them next to a glass of water. "Michael and I hired a team of private investigators and a private security firm. They found links between the bomber and this organization. They tracked them for several months, using the best tech we could provide and bribes, threats, whatever was necessary. The entire group had fled to Iran to

avoid prosecution for the attack. We presented the information to the FBI, and to the governments of every nation whose citizens died in that bombing. Israel was the first to act. They issued warrants for the entire group, and demanded that they all be remanded to Israeli custody. The US wasn't far behind. Iran refused to surrender the group, instead offering them sanctuary. We convinced Israel to try them in absentia. We provided them with emails, photos, plans of the hotel, plans for the bomb, all the evidence obtained by our security specialists. More than enough to convict them. Every member of the group was convicted in absentia. Do you know what that means?" he asked. Alexander nodded his head yes.

"They were all sentenced to death. Iran still refused to surrender them. So Michael and I took action. First, we blocked all access to Europa from any IP address in Iran. More than ten million people living there made their living playing the game, supporting as many as 50 million people with the money they earned. Any time they tried to log in, all they got was a message saying 'Turn over the members of Light of Truth'. We waited two weeks hoping the people would pressure the government to comply. Then we issued a notice. We reminded them that we reserve the right to deny service to any customer at any time for any reason, and that in one week, if the convicts were not turned over, we would be canceling all ten million accounts permanently."

His father looked at him, his face grave. This was a side of him Alexander had never seen. "This may sound harsh to you. But these people killed your mother. My wife. It is one thing to compete in sports or business. When it is over, you shake hands and respect your opponent. But when you encounter a true enemy, you show them no mercy. Do you understand?"

Alexander nodded his head again. "Yes, father. How did it end?"

"There were some very wealthy men living there, who had invested heavily in Europa. They had purchased whole cities worth of properties and businesses, paying many millions of dollars. Some simply tried to log in from other countries. But we had already flagged every account that originated from Iran or its citizens, and they were all blocked. Some paid hackers to get them access. We deleted their accounts. Permanently. The others took the hint and demanded the deportation of the convicts. The government still did not act. They called us terrorists. So we announced a

world event in Europa. We informed all of our hundreds of millions of players that in less than a week, all property held by those players whose accounts were about to be deleted would be the prizes for a series of raids. We'd already canceled the accounts of the men who tried to hack access, so we put up a web page listing those properties. It amounted to tens of millions of dollars in value. The game went crazy. Guilds who were sworn enemies made agreements to work together to win the prizes. Holo networks began to speculate on the value of the properties that might get added to the list at the end of the week. Lawyers filed mountains of lawsuits in an attempt to stop us. Every single one was dismissed."

Richard took a drink of water. "Two days before the deadline, a group of wealthy men who did not want to lose their millions hired a private security force to capture the convicts and deliver them to Israel. Every single member was rounded up, put on trucks, and sent on their way to Israel." Richard reached out and activated the holo. It showed night vision footage of a military convoy of four large trucks traveling down a desert road. "About 30 miles before the convoy reached the border with Iraq, it was destroyed. No survivors." The convoy on the holo stopped. The drivers and passengers in the front seats all jumped out. They opened the back gates of the trucks, pulling all the passengers out and lining them up along the roadside on their knees. The camera zoomed in on the face of the man farthest left. The man looked afraid. His lips began to move seconds before he was shot in the head. The camera moved on to the next, with the same result. By the time it was over, the camera had zoomed in 44 times. The bodies were loaded back into the trucks. All the soldiers got into the rearmost truck, which turned around and drove away. Ten seconds later a missile impacted the middle truck, and they all exploded in flames.

Richard looked at his son. "We, along with most of the governments on the planet, issued a notice condemning Iran for its actions. We notified all the players with frozen accounts that they would have 48 hours to log on and retrieve all their assets from the game. Then their accounts would be deleted, and their property offered as prizes for the event. We restored their access, and the fire sales commenced. The markets were flooded with everything from gear to guild houses, even castle keeps. Businesses were sold at a loss. Banks were emptied as players converted their gold back to real world currency. The in-game economy very nearly collapsed. Buyers knew the

sellers were desperate, and short on time. Billions were lost. We even gave them an extra day to ease the burden on the little guys. Iran's government, in an attempt to save face and paint the 'infidels' as criminals, promised each player the equivalent of a whopping \$100 dollars to allow them to feed their families until they could arrange alternate means of earning a living. Then we shut down access to all of them. We also deactivated any VR gear manufactured by us, and sent them full refunds. We also refunded any used prepaid subscription fees. To this day we do not sell gear there, nor allow any of their citizens access to Europa or Io."

Richard took the holo and dropped it into the water glass. "I saved this, intending to show it to you when you were older. But its seems you've grown up faster than I expected. There is no other copy of that holo. Remember what you saw there. And remember, no mercy." His father hugged him, then left him alone in the room.

"Alexander? Talk to me." Lainey's soft words brought Alexander back to the present. "People like them have to be stopped, Lainey. If they are allowed to do this here, they'll begin to think it's acceptable in the real world, and that can't happen. We kill them now. No mercy," he said.

"Aye, lad, no mercy," Brick added.

"Fuck 'em," Max agreed.

Sasha took Lainey by the hand and led her a short distance away. They had a brief whispered conversation. Alexander assumed she was telling Lainey the details of how Angela Greystone had died. They both had tears in their eyes as they walked back. Lainey took up her bow. "Right. No mercy."

Fifteen minutes passed, and the PKs didn't show. They either decided to wait for their friend who was the last to die, or he'd warned them that the noobs would be here waiting. Still, they waited. Sasha broke out some of the traveling rations Lydia had given them, and quietly passed them around. They ate in silence.

After 20 minutes, one of the archers stuck his head out. He saw the piles of armor lying where they'd dropped after the players died. Alexander had left the armor, because those made up the bulk of a loot pile. He didn't intend to

let them get to their stuff, but even if they did, they'd find they had no weapons.

Sasha whispered, "If they all come out, target the caster first. He doesn't need weapons. After that, they're all just easy meat."

The archer dashed out quickly and retrieved his pile of gear, hauling ass back to the tree line. Nobody moved. After a moment, they heard "Sons of bitches! They took our weapons and gold?" A moment later the leader came stomping out of the trees headed for the bridge. The rest of the group followed. Apparently they'd decided the noobs had taken what they wanted of their gear and moved on, doubting the conviction of Alexander's claims.

Big mistake.

Alexander let them get up onto the road before he said "go". Max shot the caster in the head. Instant kill. Brick and Alexander dashed out to the bridge and waylaid the three warriors before they could get to their gear. Max and Lainey each put two arrows into the archers, sending them back to respawn. The leader of the group saw Brick and Max closing from one side, and Max and Lainey from behind them, and tried to run. Sasha hit him with thorn trap, and he died screaming. The remaining two warriors, one of them being the one who'd earlier taken two arrows to the balls, actually tried to attack. They died in seconds.

"Ok, he said their bind point was ten minutes' walk north. They did come from the north just now. Pick up the rest of their gear and let's go. If we jog, we can be waiting for them when they respawn."

Not saying a word, the others picked up the gear closest to them, and they all jogged north into the woods, following the trail left by the PKs. Six minutes later they arrived at the temple. The warrior hadn't been lying. The bind point was there. There were several sets of fresh barefoot footprints leading away from it to the south. The bind point was a 20x20 room with an altar in the middle, with only one door leading out. *This was going to be too easy.*

"Ok guys, here's the plan. Kill them the moment they spawn. Don't even give them time to beg. They lost a couple levels each the first time we killed them. My guess is they'll be ten or lower when they spawn this time. Once they've dropped down to level one, we'll drag them back to the city and hand

them over to the captain."

"They've still got the PK mark on them, so he'll put them in the dungeon till it wears off in two days. The dungeon will stay their spawn point for the next 30 days. If that doesn't convince them to quit, I've blacklisted them." He shared the list with the group, "So anytime we get near one of them, they'll show up on our map, and we'll just repeat the process."

For the next hour they killed the PKs every ten minutes. Sasha had spotted some exotic herbs and mushrooms growing around the temple. As the group wasn't in need of heals, she spent the hour harvesting herbs.

When the PKs respawned for the final time, all at level one, Alexander let them live. The mage spawned first, and immediately raised his hands in surrender. The archers followed, and copied the mage. The leader respawned next, cussing violently and cursing Alexander. "Our guild will kill you non-" again he didn't get to finish his sentence, as Alexander's sword removed his head.

The other two warriors respawned, and both raised their hands, looking down at their leader's head. "Look, we're sorry, ok?" The mage spoke for the group. "We're done. We get it. We were just following Frank, and he's kind of an asshole. He'll never give up, by the way. He's offline right now emailing the rest of our guild to blacklist you."

"Is your guild a PK guild?" Max asked the mage.

"No," said the mage as the two warriors and one archer nodded their heads yes. Seeing this, the mage dropped his arms. "Fuck," he said before an arrow pierced his eye, killing him instantly.

Max pointed his bow at the archer who hadn't nodded. "You. Sparky. You didn't lie, but you also didn't tell the truth like your friends here. So I'm going to give you another chance. All together now. On the count of three. What's the name of your guild? 1...2...3!"

All four of them said "PWP" nearly in unison.

"Good boys," Sasha smiled at them. "Now what does PWP stand for?"

The warrior that hadn't had his balls shot off said, "Providence Will Provide".

Brick spat and made a face like he'd tasted something bad. "Wow, even the name be dickish," he said. The dumber of the two archers nodded his head again.

"OK, here's what's going to happen. You boys are gonna sit here and behave for the next... eight minutes until your friends respawn. Then we're going to take all of you into town and turn you over to the guards, where your PK marks will earn you a nice dark room with a cot and three meals a day for the next 48 hours. If you resist in any way, we'll go back to finding creative ways to kill you slowly. With those marks over your heads, we can kill you in the middle of town with the guards watching and nobody will lift a hand. Got it?" All four heads nodded. "Good. Have a seat."

"Sir?" the smarter archer raised his hand. When Alexander nodded to him, he continued. "You should know. Frank is the little brother of our guild leader. He's not kidding when he says he'll get the entire guild after you. We were assigned to level him up. None of us considers him a friend, but crossing him would get us blacklisted, and with PWP being blacklisted makes today look like an easy day."

The nutless warrior smiled and added, "which you're about to find out for yourselves!". Then he screamed as Lainey shot him in the nuts with a shock arrow, then pulled it out.

"I think I love her," Brick whispered to Sasha.

After a few minutes, Frank respawned. He must have been counseled by someone with a brain while he was offline, because he kept his mouth shut. When the mage respawned as well, Alexander explained again what was going to happen. Frank just smirked at him. The entire group marched in silence back toward town. From the temple it was just over two miles through the woods. They marched the PKs through the east gate, stopping to ask the guards where they might find the captain.

The guards saluted Alexander smartly, replying, "The captain is at the west gate, sir! We could send a runner to let him know you need him, sir!"

The PKs all looked oddly at Alexander, then at each other.

"Thank you, corporal..."

"Beecham, sir!"

"Thank you, Beecham. Please send that runner and request that the captain meet us halfway. Let's say, the fountain in the central square?"

"Of course, sir!" Beecham said with a smile.

The group continued on through the city. As they passed by other players, they were greeted with whistles and cheers. Nobody liked PKs. "Hands on yer heads, gents," Brick warned them. "We don't want no guards thinkin yer runnin about loose in their city!" All six men put their hands on top of their heads and continued walking.

As they reached the central square, they found several hundred players and more than a thousand NPC's gathered to watch them enter. The applause and cheering rose to a tremendous level. Players taunted the PKs and whistled at them. Rotten vegetables flew at them from every direction.

One player ran up and spit on Frank. "You assholes killed me this morning! I'm recording this. I'm gonna make you famous!" before running off. Frank turned bright red.

As the cheering died down, Captain Redmond walked into the square with a dozen guards in formation behind him. More guards approached from the north. The captain stopped near the fountain, inspecting the prisoners. "Well, what have we here?" he asked, attempting to keep a straight face.

Alexander bowed his head to the captain before saying, loudly enough for the entire square to hear. "Captain, we bring you six adventurers, six scum. Members of a guild known as PWP, who make their living ambushing and killing other adventurers as they leave the safe zones around the city. They have killed at least one adventurer that we know of today, and attempted to kill us near the creek bridge!"

At this there was a thundering "Boooooo!" from the gathered crowd. The young man who'd spit on Frank started chanting, "Death to PWP!". The chant was quickly taken up by the crowd. Fists pumping and feet stomping, they chanted "Death to PWP!" The water in the fountain rippled from the vibration of it.

The captain raised his arms and waved in a calming motion until the crowd

quieted down.

Somewhere in the back of the crowd a high pitched voice rang out, "Gnomes Rule!".

The captain continued. "It seems you and your friends have done the realm yet another service this day!" he said just as loudly, giving Alexander a wink. "These men have been attacking more than helpless adventurers! They are wanted for no less than three armed robberies of merchant caravans, and the murders of two mercenary guards and Master Holston, who ran the bakery near the west gate!"

The roar of the crowd was the loudest yet. Many of the NPC's, and some of the players, had been fond of the baker. He would often give them delicious pastries in return for quick errands, like fetching him a bag of flour from his warehouse out back.

The captain shouted, "Escort! Form up!" The guards grabbed the prisoners, more roughly than they absolutely needed to, and set them in three rows of two, then formed a square around them.

"Oh, shit," said Brick. "You idiots killed city residents? Including the BAKER?" He began to wave at the six prisoners. "You know that's an automatic year in the dungeon, right? No parole? No bail? Your toons are now useless." He began waving with both hands. "SEEEEEE YA!" he shouted.

Laughing, Sasha began waving with both hands as well. Then Max and Lainey picked it up. "Seeee ya!" Then other players followed along. Soon nearly everyone in the square was playing along, waving and chanting "Seeee ya!"

Alexander held up a hand to the captain, who nodded. He stepped into the square of guards, and leaned in close to be sure Frank could hear him. "I'm going to post the video of this, including that first fight where we noobs kicked your asses and made you look stupid, on every gaming site out there. I'm going to send it to every holo network. I'm going to make your guild look like a bunch of morons. And every time they come after me, I'm going to do it again. Until PWP can't PAY people to join its ranks." Then he spat in Frank's face, causing the crowd to roar in approval. He stepped back out

of the square and bowed again to the captain.

"Move em out!" the captain yelled. As the six prisoners were marched toward the hall of justice for trial, the crowd once again took up the chant "seee ya!" Alexander noted players blinking out here and there, and smiled. They were likely logging off to post videos of the event.

Captain Redmond approached the group. He offered Sasha a hefty looking money pouch. "The reward for those bastards was 100 gold."

"Please, Captain. We'd appreciate it if you'd give that money to the families of the baker and the guards that were killed."

Your reputation has increased! You are now Revered by the people of Stormforge.

Hidden Quest Completed!

Capture the Killers

Capture or kill the bandits who have been robbing merchant caravans and have murdered citizens of Stormforge.

Reward: 4,000 xp. 100 gold. Increased reputation with the citizens of Stormforge.

Level up! You are now level 9! ...

Level up! You are now level 10!

Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 5 free attribute points available You have 10 free skill points available.

You may now choose a class specialization. See your class trainer for details.

The captain smiled at Sasha. "I should have expected you would say such a thing. As always, if there is anything I or my men can do for you, you need only ask."

"Captain, if I may?" Alexander stepped forward. "We have just made enemies of an entire guild of scum like those men. The guild known as PWP, or Providence Will Provide. It is a large guild, filled with those who specialize in killing other adventurers, and they will not take lightly the

embarrassment heaped upon them today. They will most certainly be targeting my friends and I, and may even decide to attack the city itself. The leader of the men you just arrested is brother to the guild leader. I expect they'll make an attempt to free him before his term is up."

The captain looked thoughtful. "I will certainly bring your concerns to the king. We are still equipping the first 600 additional guards, but I think we will have sufficient forces to handle a single guild if necessary."

"I plan to do my best to destroy PWP. I will not tolerate their type of scum in this realm or any other. As you can see, the other adventurers largely feel the same. I may recruit some to assist in the fight. My efforts should distract them, and keep their focus on Greystone, but I wanted to warn you."

"Thank you again, Alexander. I must go report to the king, as the hour grows late. But Lydia would not forgive me if I failed to invite you all over for dinner."

"Thank you, Captain. We would be honored. We have some quests to turn in quickly, and will join you in... an hour?"

"That works just fine. See you in an hour."

Alexander and the group ran around to turn in their various quests for wolf pelts, wolf meat, and boar pelts. Then they reported to the mayor of the village that the goblins had overrun. They presented all their goblin knives and received their reward. Then Brick presented the mayor with the overlord's head.

Your reputation with the Village of Whitehall has increased to Respected

The mayor hugged each them in turn, thanking them for returning their homes to them. He asked them to stay for a celebration, but they explained that they had a prior engagement. He gave them all a follow-up quest.

Quest Received: Rebuilding Whitehall

Assist and protect the villagers in Whitehall as they rebuild **Reward: ?**

They accepted the quest and the mayor told them his people would need several days to get together wagons and supplies before they returned home.

The group said their goodbyes before heading back toward their new home. They reached Lydia's shop just as the captain was returning from the Palace. He ushered them inside and they waited in the main room while he went to inform Lydia they had guests. She immediately emerged from the back and gathered Sasha in a big hug, followed by Lainey.

"I'm so glad you're all here! I've heard rumors that you caused quite a stir in the city this evening!" she laughed. "I hope you've all worked up a good appetite?"

"Aye, we certainly have!" Brick practically shouted. He rubbed his stomach and said, "Me tummy's been hoping to find itself back here for more of yer delicious food, m'lady!" The rest of the group agreed wholeheartedly.

"Before we get to dinner," Sasha said, "these are for you. We found a bit more than you requested." She handed several dozen bundles of herbs to Lydia.

"Goodness! More than a few more than I requested, I think!" Lydia laughed. "We'll use these in our next lesson. Now! Everyone upstairs! Too many of us for the small table down here. We'll eat in the dining room upstairs. I'm afraid I wasn't expecting so many, so you lot relax and clean up a bit while I find something to cook for dinner." She pushed them all toward the stairs in the back.

"M'lady. Errr.. Lydia. We killed several boars today for their hides..." Brick said as he pulled out half a dozen hunks of boar meat, "would this do?"

"BWAAHAHA!" Lydia did her best Brick impersonation, startling them all, including the captain. She winked at Brick and took the pork from him. "That will do wonderfully, master dwarf." She looked at Lainey "Lainey, Sasha already has the cooking skill. But if you like, I can teach you the skill and a tasty recipe for boar?" Lainey smiled a bit shyly and nodded her head.

As Lainey followed Lydia upstairs to the prepare the meal, the rest of the group elected to run next door, get out of their armor, and grab quick showers. Cooking in Io went much more quickly than in real life, so by the time they returned the meal was nearly ready.

"That smells heavenly," Max said as they reached the top of the stairs.

The captain was waiting to escort them to his formal dining room, which included a long table much like the one in their own new house. They all took seats, except for Brick, who asked which way to the kitchen.

"I'll go see if I can help serve," he mumbled as he headed through the door.

"He's going to see if he can snag a few bits before dinner," Max translated, at which they all had a good chuckle.

The captain informed him that the trials for the murderers they brought in was scheduled for the day after next. The prosecutor wanted time to gather witnesses. "They will be convicted. I would push for death sentences for all of them, but the king does not execute adventurers. So they will be put to work in the palace dungeons, digging the next level down into the bedrock. It is hard, merciless work. Still, better than they deserve!" the captain said.

Alexander knew the players would not likely stick around for the year sentence. It was a harsh penalty, but his father and Michael did not want groups of players "raiding" villages and cities just for the fun of killing all the NPC's in order to prevent others from completing quests. Or just because they were immature assholes. So they made the penalties for killing NPC's stiff. If you got caught, your reputation dropped to 'hatred' for that faction, which meant guards and NPC's would try to kill you on sight. In addition, your avatar would be sentenced to imprisonment of some kind for a period of one year. Your bind point would be irrevocably reset to the prison, so if you tried to escape and were killed, you would find yourself right back in jail. In addition, your in-game player chat was disabled. Since there was no mailbox in prison, your mail was useless unless someone could bribe a guard to bring you letters personally. About the only useful thing you could do was practice a skill like mining, or a crafting skill, if you were able to obtain the materials. One player had famously embraced his sentence and asked to be allowed to cook for the guards. He managed to raise his cooking skill to master chef level, then took a job as chef in a fancy restaurant, where he earned more money than he had been from doing quests and running dungeons. But mostly players didn't have that kind of patience, so they cancelled their account and applied for a new one at a significant cost in real world dollars.

Alexander intended to make sure Frank and his friends didn't get that option.

There were benefits to being an heir to the corporation, after all. "No mercy," he said mostly to himself.

Brick crashed into the room carrying a huge platter of seasoned roast boar, followed by Lainey and Lydia with smaller platters of potatoes, green vegetables, fresh bread and butter. The meal was amazing. Lainey was surprised to see after a few bites that she'd received buffs from the food. Lydia took a few minutes to explain how buffs worked, and outline some of the different buffs you could get through different food and cooking methods.

After the meal, the team thanked Lydia, and rose to head home. She hugged each of them as they moved toward the stairs. "Sasha, come by tomorrow and I'll give you your quest reward for the herbs."

"We're actually headed out early in the morning. Would it be ok if I come by the day after?" Sasha asked.

"of course, dear. You be safe out there!"

The captain walked them downstairs and to the front door. As they filed out, he handed Alexander a wooden box. Alexander opened it to find several small ceramic medallions on leather thongs. "When I reported to the king about the criminals and their guild, he decided you needed a safe place in case a large number of them attack. So he sent for his mentor, who is a very strong earth mage among other things, to enchant the walls of your guild house. By now the walls have been strengthened, and spells placed on the gates and building entries that prevent anyone not wearing a medallion, or anyone not given permission by a medallion wearer, from entering. The mage can return at need to make any modifications you'd like, or provide more medallions. The medallions, by the way, cannot be stolen, only given. The king, of course, already has one. He was serious about joining Brick for some dwarven ale!" the captain and Brick both laughed.

Alexander passed a medallion to each of the group. Then he handed two to the captain. "Please give one to Lydia. The two of you are always welcome in our house." the captain bowed his head.

[&]quot;Aye, no mercy," the captain agreed.

[&]quot;No mercy," said Max and Sasha together.

It had been seventeen hours since the team had begun their immersion early that morning. They were all exhausted, and decided to retire to their rooms for some sleep. Since their immersion wasn't scheduled to end for another nine hours, they were going to test sleeping in-game, which meant sleeping in their pods. Alexander gave up his top floor suite to Lainey and moved to one of the guest suites on the second floor. Choosing one on the front of the building, next to one of the offices, he walked out through the French doors onto the long balcony. Leaning against the stone balustrade, he looked up at the stars. As always, there was Jupiter, filling the night sky.

"Good night, mom."

After a few minutes, he went back inside and crawled into bed.

Chapter Nine

Blue Slime Makes for Good Times

Alexander awoke to the sensation of his nurse removing the neural headpiece. He opened his eyes to see that the cockpit lid was open above him, and that most of the blue slime had drained from the pod.

When she was sure he was awake and aware, she said, "I'm going to remove the mouthpiece now," to which he nodded his head.

It came off easily, as the breathing and feeding tubes had already retracted automatically when he woke up. He sat up slowly, swinging his legs out of the cockpit with a bit of assistance from the nurse, then stood up as she wrapped him in a robe. He'd expected to be covered in blue slime, but the intelligent nano-bot infested gel had removed itself from him completely. There wasn't even any stuck to his hair. Still, he walked unsteadily down the ramp and to the bathroom for a hot shower. It was part of his post-game routine, and it comforted him. He dressed in sweats and a t-shirt then headed for the living room, thanking the nurse for her help on his way out. Lainey and Sasha, who both moved much more quickly than he, were waiting for him in the living room.

He grinned at Lainey, "Hi, honey, how was your day?" She hugged him, then quickly examined him, looking into his eyes, checking his pulse, instructing him to breathe deeply and raise his hands and hold them for a few seconds. Basically mother hen-ing him. Satisfied, she then smacked the back of his head before sitting back down. He followed suit. "So...? What did you think?"

Lainey took a deep breath and sighed, dropping her eyes to look at her hands. "Well. I suppose I'm going to be stuck seeing your ugly mug nearly 24/7 for a while." She raised her eyes and grinned at him, "That was AMAZING! It was fun, and scary, and complicated, and so REAL!"

"Yeah, that was pretty intense. I mean, the noob zone should have been boring for most of us. But from the moment Brick sat on that bunny till the time we logged off, I was completely engaged," he agreed.

"It really was super realistic," Sasha added. "I mean, I can still remember the

taste and smell of Lydia's dinner last night. I even feel like I'm still buffed! When the public experiences this, nobody's going to do anything but play the game!"

"Welcome back, young sir. Lady Elaine, Princess Sasha."

Sasha giggled. She loved it when Alfred called her princess. "Hi Alfred!" she waved.

"I trust your time in the game was enjoyable?" They all nodded. "Very good. Odin tells me he's very proud of your accomplishments yesterday," Alfred said.

"I didn't know you and Odin spoke?" Alexander questioned.

"Of course, sir. I speak with Odin regularly as we both observe your game play. Heimdall checks in with me regularly for security and status updates. In fact, he is informing me that your car is approaching to take you to Olympus."

"Huh. Well, thank you Alfred. Keep up the good work!" Alexander said as the three of them rose and headed for the front door.

"You're quite welcome young sir. I wish you all a pleasant day!"

Brick awoke to much the same circumstances as Alexander. However, the first thing he noticed as he stepped out of the pod was that the room was filled with an alarmingly large number of stuffed bunny rabbits! They were everywhere! Dozens of them. On his bed, dresser, window sill. As he entered the bathroom to take a shower, he paused in concern for a moment. There were two particularly realistic and gruesome looking bunnies sitting on the vanity, either side of the sink. They had bloodshot eyes and sharp teeth, with what looked like blood on them!

He heard his nurse chuckle behind him. "They started arriving late yesterday. I think half the staff sent you fluffy bunnies," the man said. "There are more in the other room. Oh, and Melanie and Bethany personally delivered those two last night!" he motioned at the two scary mutant rabbits.

Mortified, Brick just shook his head and stepped into the shower. He got dressed, catching himself keeping a wary eye on the two killer rabbits. As he left, he grabbed them up, planning to have a little talk with those two

ladies. He thanked the nurse for his help, then headed out the front door, after passing through a living room that held several more bunnies. Max, who lived down the hall, wasn't out yet, so Brick knocked on his door.

After a moment, Max answered. Seeing the bunnies, he shook his head, "you too, huh? Come on in." Brick noted several stuffed pigs, though Max's infestation was not nearly as severe as his own. Max had gone to retrieve his own custom pig, onto which the ladies had sewn tusks and sharp teeth, as well as the same bloodshot eyes as his bunnies. "Was your place this bad?" Max asked, motioning at the pigs.

"Worse. Must be a hundred of 'em!"

The two friends headed down to the lobby, where a company car was waiting to take them to Olympus. They were all scheduled to undergo a battery of tests today in order to confirm there were no ill effects from the long immersion. If all went well, they would immerse again tomorrow, for 48 hours this time.

Upon arriving at the compound, the car dropped them at the same tower as before, where they found Lainey, Sasha, and Alexander just getting out of the car. All three were very amused by their stuffed companions.

As they walked in the front door, Bethany's eyes grew wide in mock terror. "Eek! Protect me from those horrible bunnies and the pig!" She pretended to hide behind the reception desk as she giggled.

"Yeah, yeah. Very funny" mumbled Brick, half smiling, half grumpy. It was gonna be a long day filled with bunny jokes.

"So umm... tell me, Bethany," Max leaned on the desk, setting the pig down. "When you came to deliver this, did you happen to glance in the pod and see me naked?" his eyebrows rose.

"Wait, what?" Brick flustered.

Bethany's eyes got wide with a 'totally busted' look, before she recovered and gave him a coy smile. "Maybe..."

"And... did you like what you saw?" he grinned as she played along and pretended to think about it.

"Mmmmaybe!"

Richard stepped into the lobby in time to hear the interplay, and smiled briefly before cutting in. "Ok children! Playtime's over. You're needed in the med labs ASAP!" Max jumped in surprise, then sheepishly grabbed his stuffed pig, winked at Bethany, and followed the others to the elevator.

The day's testing brought no surprises, though a surprising number of people managed to visit Brick for no good reason other than to make bunny ears or Monty Python references at him. The group were all released by early afternoon and sent home to rest. They'd be logging back in at 7am the next day. Brick put his two killer bunnies in a place of honor on his dining room table. He set aside of few of the others for his youngest siblings, then recruited Max and their driver to help take the remainder of the stuffed critters to a nearby children's hospital. Max was initially unwilling, until Brick reminded him that the wards might be full of pretty nurses. The two of them spent an amazing couple of hours passing out pigs and bunnies to the kids, laughing and joking with them. They even held a group story time session, where the two men told a hilarious, if much watered down, tale of a dwarf being chased around by annoyed bunnies. Shockingly, Max forgot all about flirting with nurses.

Richard rode home with Alexander and the ladies. He wanted to have an indepth discussion with them about their experiences. He himself had alpha tested the pods and experienced the game through immersion. He wanted to see how their experience compared with his.

When the group had gathered earlier at the cafeteria for a lunch break, Alexander brought up their strange abilities to modify spells. Richard just laughed. "I was watching you play from my office. As soon as I saw what Lainey did, I asked Odin about it. He reminded me that minor changes with skill and ability mechanics were within his purview as the game's AI." Alexander raised an eyebrow at him. "Ok, his exact words were 'mortals should not meddle in the affairs of the Gods!'" Richard did his best Odin impersonation. "I did manage to get him to confirm that this new mechanic only works for the fully immersed, and even then is only available, for now, to those with Elite accounts. He wants to see how you use it."

"I guess technically, Odin's right," Alexander mused. "We gave him the

basic set of unbreakable game rules, instructions and guidelines on how we'd like to see the game managed, and gave him the freedom to make that happen as he sees fit. With extra angry bunnies for example!" Alexander couldn't resist. Lainey patted poor suffering Brick on the shoulder.

Sitting in their living room eating pizza that evening, Richard started off the conversation. "Looks like you've gone and started your own little war, son."

"They started it!" Sasha leapt to his defense. "Alexander just made sure we finished it!"

"I think it's a long way from finished, Sasha dear. I checked with the guys down in the GM pit. PWP currently has about 60 members, ranging from the level one's you guys left locked up, to the guild's leader who is level 90. Most of them are level 40 plus. Not all of them are PK's, though the majority are. The ones that aren't, probably won't go against orders to kill blacklisted players for fear of being targeted themselves. They didn't start as a PK guild. In fact, it seems to be a recent development over the past six months or so. A lot of members have quit in that time. They're based in Antalia; a couple days' ride from Stormforge. These guys are real assholes, son, and clever. The GM's say there have been dozens of complaints about torture, but when the game footage was reviewed, it was determined there was technically no actual torture. They managed to walk the knife's edge between acceptable combat and torture. Much like you did today." Richard's face was unreadable.

"I get it, dad. I do. But these assholes aren't going to quit if we just kill them and leave them to respawn and go about their business. The only thing they understand is fear, violence, and shame. We have to use their own tactics against them, or we're wasting our time. Those guys today were stupid enough to kill NPC's and leave witnesses, so their toons will be out of play for a good long time. But you can bet PWP won't make that mistake again. They're obviously training their guys how to walk the line with torturing players, so you can bet they'll also teach them to make sure there are no witnesses when they kill NPC's. Unless another player is around to record and report it, they'll get away clean. The other way would be if Odin were to generate quests to kill or capture NPC killers, and somebody gets lucky and runs across them like we did today. I've actually been thinking about expanding our guild, recruiting players who want to take down PWP as badly

as we do. Maybe making alliances with other guilds. Once we're high enough level, we could raid their guild house, take everything they have, and teach them a lesson."

"Good," Richard nodded. "You know Michael and I both dislike PK's, and especially NPC killers. I just wanted to make sure you were actually thinking things through, not just acting out of anger. I want to show you something. Alfred, could you play the game clip that Odin sent you?"

"Of course, Sir." Alfred's holo projector whirred to life, and a 3D image of a dungeon cell appeared in the middle of the room. There was a GM avatar standing in the corridor outside the cell, talking to the PWP warrior they'd shot in the balls so often. The warrior was complaining.

"They restrained me and tortured me! I want them banned!"

"I have reviewed the recordings going all the way back to when you stopped them on the bridge. Before they kicked your asses. They did hold you with a vine trap as you tried to run from combat, but no harm was done to you while you were held down. You were in fact shot in the nuts when you got back up. And you were still holding your weapon. Then shortly after that, a player decapitated you with one quick swing. A more merciful death than a PK deserves, if you ask me."

"And what about later when they shot me in the nuts again?" the warrior was getting angry.

"At no point during that hour were you, or any of your guild mates, restrained in any way. Were you spawn camped? Certainly. But you all had the PK mark on you, not to mention a capture/kill quest target on you for killing NPC's. So any player had the right to kill you any time they encountered you, with no penalty. Where their arrows hit you is of no concern to us, though that must have really hurt. As I recall, it was you who told them where your bind point was, enabling them to find it and cut you down as you spawned."

"Because they tortured me, you asshole!" the warrior was screaming now.

"I will further note for the record that you and your guildmates meekly followed them for more than two miles as you marched to town, with no physical restraint whatsoever. Even though, again, as targets of a capture/kill quest for the murder of NPC's, they had every right to bind you."

The warrior snapped. "God dammit! They tortured me and you're taking their side? When I get out of here I'll fucking kill you! I'll find out where you live and kill you in real life! You AND your dog!" he slobbered as he screamed.

"Duly noted." The GM smiled. "Delbert Simms. For threatening a Jupiter Tech representative, and his dog, your account is hereby banned. You will be logged off in ten seconds. Per the terms of your player agreement, no other account will be issued to you." The GM waved both hands at the shocked player as the seconds ticked down to zero. "Seeee ya!" The holo projection faded away.

Both ladies were snort-laughing. "Delbert!" Lainey managed.

"That GM deserves a raise!" Sasha gasped.

Richard smiled, "I agree." He looked at Alexander. "We're all behind you. No Mercy."

The next morning Alexander's avatar awoke in the bed in the guest suite he'd chosen. A glance out the window told him it was early morning. Forty-eight hours. He had big plans for the next two days.

The team was waiting for him in the lounge area downstairs. "Ok folks, let's talk about what we should do today. First, we've all hit level ten. So, we should go to our respective trainers and choose a specialty, or at least learn whatever spells are available to us. Each of you draw 50 gold from the guild bank. That should cover any training costs at this level." Alexander told them. "And speaking of levels, we need to level up as quickly as we can. The PWP assholes could be here as early as today. I'm sure they're sending higher level players to deal with us. We're fine as long as we stay in the city, but as soon as we leave they'll be hunting us. We could do a bunch of fetch and deliver quests, but for all five of us that could take forever, and they won't be much xp. I think our best bet is to run the dungeon in the sewers. It's a little bit high level for us, but with all of us, and our gear, I think we can handle it. If nothing else, we can just run the first floor or two until we're strong enough to go farther. Any objections? Questions?" Everyone just shook their heads. "Okay, I know Sasha and Lainey planned to see Lydia

this morning, and we've all got errands to run. How about we meet back here at noon?"

With that, the others were off. Alexander headed to the mages guild to find a trainer. Being a new mage, he'd only a rough idea of what types of magic there were, and was excited to find out what he could do. Especially if he could find a way to modify spells. He wanted to learn some ranged offensive spells. *Like fireballs! Every boy wants to shoot stuff with fire!* And some defensive spells as well. Once PWP caught up with them, he was likely to need those. As he walked, he smiled to himself.

He had intended to put together a video of the PKs and their pathetic loss, but his father had beat him to it. He'd had their marketing guys put together a professional grade video of first the confrontation at the bridge, and the PKs being stupid enough to come back for their gear. It was followed by the spawn camp, the embarrassing march through town, the events at the square, and the clip of Delbert getting himself banned. Then they'd "leaked" it to one of the forum sites, and within an hour it was all over the holo networks. While Alexander and company were getting their checkups, a novelty company in China was already printing and marketing bright yellow t-shirts that said "SEEE YA PWP!" above two waving hands. Richard had ordered one for every employee of Jupiter Technologies and its subsidiaries in case the message of the holo clip wasn't clear enough.

Approaching the mage's guild, Alexander stared up at the humongous tower rising up behind the main building. It was similar sized to the four corner towers at Olympus. Six storeys above ground, and who knew how many below, the tower was wide enough to hold three large classrooms per floor. Or several labs or mage's quarters. The upper floors were in fact residences of the master mages who called the guild home. It was said there were no stairs in the tower, only portals keyed to individuals with proper authorization, much like the medallions gifted to his guild by the king. While he was here, he intended to ask after that mage to make another request, but first, training.

Alexander stepped through the front door of the guild house and approached the reception desk. There was a very old wizard sitting behind the desk, snoring quite loudly.

Alexander looked around, hoping to catch someone else walking about so that he didn't have to wake the wizard. Besides being rude, it seemed a generally bad idea to poke a sleeping wizard, so to speak. Finding no one around, he turned to a bench near the door, intending to wait. Just then a jet black squirrel flung itself from the rafter above the wizard, landing on his hat and waking him with a start. "Dammit Rufus! How many times have I told you not to..." he paused as the squirrel stood on the brim of his hat, then looked down at him (head upside down) and started chittering. "Oh," the wizard turned his gaze to Alexander. "Yes, well, I wasn't asleep! I was just testing you, young mage. You've demonstrated respect for your elders, and no small bit of wisdom in not waking me." He held out his hand as Alexander approached. "My name's Fitzbindulum. Master Wizard and former Guild Master. Retired now. Too much paperwork. And you are?"

"Alexander. Guild Leader of the Greystone Guild," he introduced himself, shaking the wizard's hand. "I'm honored to meet you Master Fitzbindulum."

"Fitz. Just call me Fitz. Everybody does. Saves time. So what can I do for you today, Alexander?"

"I am a low level mage, having just reached level ten. I'm afraid I don't know much about magic, and I've come hoping to learn what possibilities are open to me. Also, though I don't know his name, I'm seeking a mage who was the king's mentor. He visited our guild house last evening and cast some enchantments. I wanted to thank him, and ask him if it were possible to modify one of them a bit."

"Well!" Fitz hopped up, causing Rufus to hold onto the hat for dear life, chattering angrily. "Second things first then. You're quite welcome. It was I who created that medallion you're wearing. Did I miss an entry or something? What modification do you need? As for the first thing, the only limits to the magic you can learn are your own imagination, intellect, and work ethic. Come! Let us walk while we talk. You can show me what you'd like to change in your protective spells, and we'll discuss your training."

Surprised, Alexander began to follow the wizard back toward home. As they walked down the street, the wizard began, "First, the formalities. Do you wish to join the mages guild? Of course you do! That'll be five gold per year, payable in advance!" he held out his hand. Alexander handed a gold

coin with a 5 on it, which the wizard immediately tossed straight up into the air. Rufus caught the coin in one nimble-clawed paw, and tucked it snugly into a pouch on his stomach. "Good! You're now an official member! Now, tell me, why was the king so concerned about protecting your guild house? Which was, I believe, an embassy? Are you royalty of some kind?" Alexander told him about their encounter with the PWP, and the expected trouble with the guild's leader.

"Bah! Holston made the best pastries in the city. Those bastards! Tell me how I can help you kill them in painful and embarrassing ways!" the wizard shouted, scaring several passers-by.

As they were just reaching the guild house, Alexander pointed and answered, "It might be simpler if I show you?"

They approached the main gate of the compound, and Alexander asked, "I'm sorry, how do I give you permission to enter?"

The wizard strolled through the gate, "Hah! As if I need permission to enter my own wards!"

Smiling, Alexander joined him in the bailey tunnel. He stopped to point back at the gate. First he asked, "What happens to someone who enters without permission?"

The wizard laughed. "Well, I designed it so there are two choices. You can set it so they simply drop dead where they stand. Or you can set it so that they are teleported to a dungeon cell where they will be arrested and charged with trespassing."

Alexander smiled. *This is perfect!* "Great! So here's the thought I had as I passed through this morning. Let's say a gang of them are attacking. After the few first die or disappear, they'll learn to stay back. If they are stuck out in the street, we'd have to find a way to keep them interested until the guards arrived. Even then, we risk the lives of the guards, which I absolutely do not want to do!"

"Good lad. I like how you think. No wonder the king calls you friend," Fitz commented.

"Thank you, sir. So, I was wondering, is there a way we can switch off the

ward at the outer gate, letting them into the tunnel, then switch it on behind them, at the same time, making the ward at the inner gate a simple force field that will hold back the leaders until they're all in the tunnel. Then convert to the same as the other wards, either killing them or teleporting them? Then we have them bottled up in the tunnel, and we can either kill them, make them disarm and surrender-"

The wizard broke in, "Or find creative ways to taunt and torture them! YES!" Fitz cackled with glee. "I can add moving walls that crush them, or flames that shoot up from the ground! Or... or... oh this is going to be more fun than I've had in years!" Rufus chittered in agreement.

I'm really starting to like this wizard!

"I need some paper, boy! I want to draw this out."

"I'm sure we have a quill and ink in the house somewhere, please come inside." They entered the house and Alexander led Fitz into the study. The wizard plopped down in an overstuffed chair and began mumbling to himself while Alexander searched for paper. In the top drawer of a desk he found a blank notebook and what looked like a modern fountain pen. Looking up, he saw that the wizard was somehow over at the bar, helping himself to a light colored spirit of some kind.

"Here you go, sir." He set the book and pen on the table next to the wizard's chosen chair.

"Stop calling me sir. Its Fitz! Fitz I say!" the wizard gulped down the last of his drink and brought the bottle back with him to sit down. He immediately began drawing in the notebook.

Not wanting to interrupt, Alexander simply sat across from the wizard and watched Rufus explore the room. The little rodent was sniffing and poking at everything, sometimes chittering thoughtfully. He wondered just how smart Rufus was.

Pulling some nuts from the travel rations Lydia had given them, he said, "Are you hungry, Rufus?" and held them out on the flat of his hand. The squirrel dashed across the room, hopped up onto the chair, then walked out along Alexander's arm, where he sat and began grabbing the nuts one at a time and nibbling.

"That rat's not the only one," Fitz mumbled, eyeing the nuts jealously.

"Oh, I'm sorry Fitz, I'm terrible host. I'm afraid all I have on me is travel rations. Some boar jerky and cheese. But Sasha will be back in about an hour, and she'd be happy to cook you some real food. She's been taking lessons from Lady Redmond, who has sort of adopted us."

"Lydia! Yes, yes. Her shop is indeed close. Best cook in the city, that woman is. Does some kind of magic with herbs and spices. But an hour's just too long! One moment." Fitz set down the notebook and pulled out a small mirror. He made a simple hand gesture and waited a moment, then shouted, "Lydia!"

A surprised yelp could be heard coming from the mirror, then Lydia's voice, "You old coot! You nearly made me drop a whole tray of potions! Why are you even awake? It's not yet noon!"

The wizard smiled into the mirror, "Your young Alexander roused me from my peaceful slumber and put me to work on his castle! But I'm nearly dying of starvation. Would you be so kind as to make me some breakfast? Some eggs, and bacon and sausage, and toast, and some of that wondrous jam? Oh! And-"

"Enough! I know what you like. I'll bring enough for both of you, and Rufus too. Is there anyone else there?"

Alexander shook his head at the wizard's inquisitive glance. "No, but he tells me there will be around noon. Somebody named Sasha? And possibly others. So maybe it's better if you just come here and cook? But bring food! There's nothing here!"

"You get more and more demanding in your old age, wizard. I'll be there shortly." Fitz smiled again and put the mirror away.

"Fitz, my apologies. I truly did not mean to wake you this morning. I was just going to wait, and then Rufus jumped on your head, and-"

"Yes, yes. I know. Stupid squirrel tries to scare me to death. I know you wouldn't have wakened me. But Lydia doesn't!" Fitz waggled his eyebrows at Alexander, who couldn't help but laugh. "That lass was one of my favorites when she was a wee thing. Used to sit on my lap in the garden and

pull on my beard till I agreed to show her some magic. Her brother at least had a bit more sense!"

"Her brother?" Alexander asked.

"The king!" Fitz looked surprised. "You did not know Lydia is the king's younger sibling?"

"I did not. Here we have been calling her Lydia and hugging her left and right! I must apologize to her".

"You'll do no such thing! It would hurt her feelings. If she has brought you into her little circle, which she clearly has, then you are family! Just keep acting as you have been." Fitz opened the notebook and began mumbling to himself again, effectively ending the conversation.

Alexander left to go see if he could help Lydia carry anything, and met her at the outer gate. She had baskets full of food on each arm, and the captain was behind her carrying even more. Alexander took up her burden, apologizing for the wizard's demands. Lydia only laughed as he led them into the house. Passing Fitz as they headed for the kitchen, Lydia grabbed a hunk of cheese and tossed it at him. He caught it in one hand without even looking. "Here, you ancient pain in the arse. That should hold you until I have lunch ready!" Fitz just chuckled and kept drawing.

Once in the kitchen, the captain unloaded his burden onto one of the countertops. Alexander placed the baskets there as well. "Is there anything I can do to help with lunch, Lydia?" he asked.

"Don't be silly. Get out of this kitchen and go keep that old wizard from blowing something up!" she pushed them both back through the door.

Both men went back to the study and took seats. After watching the wizard for a few moments, the captain asked, "What's he up to?"

Alexander explained what he'd asked Fitz to do, the captain nodding along as he spoke. As he finished, he added, "And Fitz seems to have become inspired. He is designing several ways, to... how did he put it?"

"Find creative ways to taunt and torture them!" Fitz gleefully supplied.

"I'll alert the fire brigade and mason's guild. You're likely to need both

before he's through," the captain teased.

"Bah! I'm a damned earth mage, among other things. I'll fix any damaged walls. And I've never caused a fire I couldn't extinguish on my own!"

Just then, Brick joined them in the study, carrying a suspiciously shaped bag. "Thought I heard voices in here!"

"Brick, meet Fitz. Or rather, Master Wizard Fitzbindulum. Former head of the Mages' Guild. Fitz, this is Brick. Our King's trade emissary to the Broken Mountain, our guild's tank, and bane of fuzzy bunnies everywhere!"

Brick shook the wizard's hand as he shot Alexander a dirty look. "Any chance there's food in that bag, master dwarf?" Fitz asked. "Lydia's being a bit slow with our lunch!"

Brick, clearly confused but just going with it, reached into the bag as he said, "Well, that would depend on how hungry ye be!" He pulled out the freshly mounted head of Sr'Vok.

"Bah! Demons don't taste good! I do like the arrow in his eye, though. Nice touch!"

"BWAHAHAHA! I like this one!" Brick said "Can we keep him?"

The captain laughed and said, "Once you've fed him, try and get rid of him!" He rose up from his chair. "Come, master dwarf. Sasha has told us of your penchant for decorating. Let us find a proper spot to mount your prize!"

The two men headed toward the lounge area near the front entrance. Alexander amused himself by shadow-boxing with Rufus, who was standing on the arm of his chair. The squirrel was taking the challenge quite seriously, even working in a few clever spinning kicks.

"Oh, he's so CUTE!" Sasha squealed as she entered the room.

The squirrel noticed her attention and took a bow, probably hoping for more snacks.

"Thank you, you're pretty cute yourself!" Fitz actually looked up from his notebook and waggled his eyebrows at her.

"Oh! Hello," smiling at the old man, having not noticed him due to her

immediate focus on Rufus. "I'm Sasha," she shook the wizard's hand.

"You can call me Fitz. And that worthless ham of a rodent is Rufus. Whatever you do, don't feed him. He's getting too fat and heavy to ride on my hat!"

Sasha giggled with delight as the squirrel leapt from Alexander's chair over to the wizards and proceeded to scold him.

"You are too!" Fitz poked his familiar in the belly. "Sasha, you must be Lydia's apprentice. Well what are you waiting for? It's time for lunch! Lydia's in the kitchen, and being quite slow about preparing the food. The squirrel might be overfed, but I'm nearly starved!" He made shooing motions to a suddenly confused Sasha.

"He called her on a magic mirror and ordered takeout," Alexander explained. "She and the captain brought over piles of food, and she's in the kitchen making lunch."

"Oh!" Sasha quickly made for the kitchen to see if she could help.

"You see, boy? That's how you do it. Never underestimate the value of a good cook. When you get older, you'll learn to appreciate a full stomach as much as a pretty face to cuddle up to!"

Alexander looked uncomfortable "Sasha and I... we don't... we're not..." he just shook his head and shrugged at the old wizard.

"Ha! Does that mean she's available?" Fitz asked. "I haven't had a decent wife in more than 200 years!"

"As if our young Sasha would even consider you, you ornery old ogre!" Lydia teased him as she entered the room. "And it has been at least 500 years since you last married. You never wed that poor girl you kidnapped from the ruined keep 200 years ago. She spent her whole life, feeding that endless pit you call a stomach and doing your laundry, and you never made an honest woman of her!"

"What!?" Fitz spluttered and tugged at his beard. "How would you even know about her?"

"Rufus told me. When I was 12 years old he heard me say that I wanted to

marry you when I grew up." She held out her hand and the squirrel ran up her arm to settle on her shoulder. "He said that a life of cooking and cleaning is no life for a princess, then told me all about poor Agatha," she tickled Rufus' belly and the damn squirrel actually purred.

"Bah! I did not kidnap Agatha. I rescued her! The old baron had betrothed her to a slimy little weasel who was twice her age. She begged me to save her from a loveless marriage. Her father objected, and I had to destroy half of dire keep to get her to safety!"

"And you were, what? Twenty times her age?" Lydia teased. "Still, Rufus says she was content looking after you. Speaking of which, Sasha is serving lunch in the dining room. Better hurry, old goat, or the food will be gone!" She smiled as the wizard launched himself from the chair and strode quickly toward the dining room. Alexander bowed slightly and motioned for Lydia to lead the way, then followed.

They were just sitting down when Alexander was startled by a scream from the front of the house. Followed quickly by the sound of Max's laughter. Ah. Max led a slightly shaken Lainey into the room. "Lainey just met Brick's buddy the demon lord." Max grinned.

"BWAHAHAHA!" Brick looked quite proud of himself. So did the captain.

Lainey threw Brick a dirty look. "What the fuck IS that thing, and why would you hang it there?"

Lainey and Max were introduced to Fitz, and everyone took their seats. As they all ate their lunch, Brick and Max told Lainey the story of their dungeon run, and the First Kill achievement, as well as the gear they all got. Then Alexander and Fitz told them all about their plans to deal with any PWP who attacked the compound. Brick was enthralled, and he and the wizard spent the rest of the meal exchanging ideas and laughing at the horrible deaths that would ensue.

"Thank you so much Lydia, for feeding us again," Alexander said as Max and Lainey cleared away the table. Fitz somehow managed to snatch any leftovers from the platters as they walked past. Hunks of cheese, slices of meat, and assorted fruit disappeared into his pouch.

Eyeing his antics, Lydia shook her head, "You'd think the old goat would

starve if he went an hour without food. But you're most welcome, Alexander. I enjoy cooking, and it's a pleasure to have so many mouths to feed. Even one as big as his!" she winked at the wizard.

Fitz leaned forward and looked closely at Lydia. Then he leaned back in his chair and chuckled. "She's nesting," he said. "She's expecting a little redheaded addition to the Redmond Clan!" He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Well done, son!" he thumped a very confused looking Captain on the back.

"Fitz!! How dare you!" Lydia threw a table napkin at the wizard. Rufus threw one too. "That was MY news to share, and you've ruined it!" She got up and headed for the door.

The wizard looked crestfallen. "Wait, lass! I'm sorry. I didn't realize. Please, forgive me?" he started to rise and follow Lydia into the kitchen.

"Let her be, old man." The captain, who had recovered his senses, got up himself. "She loves you like her own grandfather. Give her time." He then quietly followed his wife. Max and Lainey came hustling out of the kitchen, looking alarmed. Sasha calmed them down and filled them in. The wizard wiped his eyes and drifted out to the lounge to take a seat and pull his notebook out. He looked thoughtfully up at the demon head on the wall.

The others sort of drifted around the house, unsure how to deal with the awkwardness. Brick went outside to check out the utility building by the main entrance. None of them had gone in there when they first explored the compound the other day. Brick was looking for a place to set up a forge and anvil so that he could repair his armor and improve his blacksmithing skills. Max and Lainey hit the guild vault. Now that Lainey was level ten, Max thought there might be some better gear for her in there. Sasha puttered around the lounge, occasionally looking toward the wizard and clearly thinking hostile thoughts at the man who'd hurt her friend. Alexander decided to fill her in, and possibly diffuse the hostility a bit.

"Sasha, Fitz here was the king's mentor when he was growing up. He taught both the king and Lydia as children" Sasha didn't look impressed, but she was curious enough to sit down and listen.

"Aye", said the wizard with a sniffle. He clearly regretted upsetting Lydia. "The old King asked me to step down as head of the Mages' Guild to tutor

his children. Lydia was just 5 or 6 at the time. The sweetest little girl, but oh, what a temper she had even then!" he smiled, remembering.

"Wait, Lydia is a... princess?" Sasha gasped as the realization hit her. "Oh my GOD!"

The wizard drifted off into his memories, smiling sadly to himself. Sasha was distracted as Rufus climbed up onto her head, then leaned forward over her forehead to look down at her and chitter in a questioning manner. Alexander couldn't help but laugh at Sasha looking cross-eyed at the tiny squirrel face just inches from her own. Rufus jumped down to her shoulder and curled his tail around her neck. She reached up and scratched his belly with a single finger. The little rascal's eyes rolled up in his head, and he made that purring noise again. Sasha was delighted.

After several minutes more, Lydia and the captain emerged from the kitchen. She approached the wizard, snatched up his hat, and planted a kiss on the top of his head. She plopped the hat back down, and sat in the wizard's lap, hugging him. "I forgive you, old man. But you must learn to think before you speak, not that an old dog like you is likely to learn to behave. But you must promise to try," she said.

The wizard nodded his head. "I am indeed an old dog. And a fool. I love you as if you were my own, little Lydia. I would never wish to upset you. I was so pleased that you are going to have a little one of your own, I didn't think. I'm sorry."

"Enough of this!" the captain declared. "Unhand my woman, you old goat, or else!"

The wizard smiled at Lydia as she stood, then sent a much different look at her husband. "Or else? Ha! No muscle-bound clod like you can threaten me! Why, I could turn you into a frog! Or a... a... platypus! Yes, a platypus! Ha!"

Both men laughed.

With that settled, Lydia and the captain said their goodbyes and left. Max and Lainey returned from the vault, having found her a few upgrades. They decided to get Brick and go explore the dungeon. The wizard was still scribbling in his notebook.

"Fitz, will you be okay here if we go out for a few hours? We're going to see how far we can get in the dungeon," Alexander asked.

"Yes, yes! Go kill things, make yourselves stronger. I'll make myself at home and finish these plans. Before you go, though, you came to me for some training?" Fitz looked at him carefully.

Mage: Alexander Level 10 Build: Ranged magic/Melee DPS

Health: 340 Experience 380/2000 Attribute pts avail: 5

Mana: 200 Skill pts avail: 5

Stamina: 4(9) Dexterity: 6 Armor: 140 Health Regen: 10

Strength: 4(14) Wisdom: 19(23) Defense: 100 Mana Regen: 22

Agility: 6(9) Intel: 19(29) Phys Attack: 25 Magic Attack: 3 Luck: 10(11) Charisma: 9 Stam Regen: 2 Race: Elf

"I see," said the wizard. "Come here boy, time is short, so we'll do this the hard way. This is going to sting a bit." The wizard placed his hand upon Alexander's head and focused. Alexander's vision swam, and a dull needle began to dig its way through his brain. He clenched his teeth so as not to cry out, and focused on absorbing the pain. After all, he was no stranger to pain. It was a fact of his daily life. Once he had embraced the pain and set it aside, he could sense the knowledge building in his mind as sort of a warm pressure. He could feel a link between the wizard's mind and his own. He began to explore that link, curious as to how it was formed, but before he could get a good look, it was gone.

Fitz removed his hand and looked at Alexander, who was a bit unsteady on his feet after the experience. "You did well, boy," he said grudgingly, "most would be on the floor whimpering or unconscious after half of what I just gave you." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a vial of blue liquid. "Drink this. You'll feel better. Training in this way has drained your mana completely."

"Th-thank you," Alexander managed to get out. "What... did you do?"

"You hadn't yet discovered the connection to your core. Something you must do to access your mana pool. We teach this to most first year students. I just went ahead and made the connection for you. I also increased the potential of your pool quite a bit. As an elf, you have considerable magic in you to begin with. Now you have more!" the wizard grinned at him. "I also

gave you the knowledge of how to cast a few spells. You can now cast a small protective shield. This can take different forms as you learn how to shape it. Initially it will form as a disc in front of you. Go ahead, try it."

Alexander held up a hand and thought *shield!*. A thin blue disc about the size of a manhole cover formed in front of him. The wizard pointed a finger and shot a small lightning bolt at the disc. It dissipated in a wave of energy arcs.

"That's cool!" Lainey exclaimed.

Alexander smiled proudly at her, just as the wizard fired a second, larger bolt. This one caused the shield to disappear with a quiet 'pop' before striking Alexander in the chest, stunning him.

"Don't get too cocky, boy. That was to show you that there are limits to what that shield can do. Especially at your level. As you grow, it will get stronger, and you will learn to channel mana into it, renewing it as it weakens."

Alexander was not amused, but nodded his head at the wizard to show he understood.

"I also gave you a bit of earth magic. Don't try that in the house!" the wizard warned. "You also have a few offensive spells that should come in handy in the dungeon. I'll leave you to discover those on your own. Now off with you! I've work of my own to get done here!" Fitz waved them all away and sat back down.

The group headed out toward the dungeon. As they walked, Alexander examined the spell section of his skills menu to see what the wizard had taught him.

Mana Shield: Instant cast. Conjures a mana shield that will absorb up to 120 damage. At higher levels the damage absorbed will increase. Cost: 20 mana

Earth Sense: Channeled. Caster can extend his awareness into the earth below, sensing the density and composition of earth elements within.

Earth Mover: Channeled. Allows the caster to physically alter the earth around them. Cost: 5 mana/second

Magic Bolt: Instant cast. Fires a bolt of condensed magic at a target. Base

damage 25. Effective range 30 yards. Cost: 10 mana

Wizard's Fire: Instant cast. Causes target to catch fire and burn for 1 minute. Initial damage 30. Burn damage over time 2/second. Wizards fire will not be extinguished by water or other liquids. Cost: 40 mana

Whoa! This is totally worth the pain! Alexander thought to himself. He checked his main stats again, and found that his mana pool, which had been 200 before the wizard had touched him, had now grown to 300. Though he automatically received +1 point in wisdom and intel with each level, he had been thinking of investing his free attribute points into wisdom in order to increase his pool. Fitz had just made that unnecessary. Instead he decided to put two points each into strength and stamina. Combined with the stats he picked up from his gear, he should be able to effectively use his shield and do some decent sword damage. He saved his last point for later.

The dungeon entrance was located in a crypt, situated at the center of the city's cemetery. The friends exited the east gate and walked quickly up the hill to the cemetery's gate. Following a gravel path, they soon found themselves at the crypt entrance, which was guarded by two of the city militia. They were not posted there to keep adventurers out, more to provide warning if the undead inside tried to escape. Each of them carried a teleport scroll to be used if there was a need to alert the king, or if wounded adventurers emerged needing urgent medical care.

The two guards sprang to attention and saluted the group as they drew near. Alexander's rank of Knight-Advisor to the king was visible to them, and required no less.

"Please, be at ease, gentlemen," Alexander said.

"Thank you, sir. Headed into the crypt, sir?" the left hand guardsman asked.

"We are. We thought we'd clear the first couple floors," Alexander replied.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but this dungeon is no easy stroll," the guard ventured. "It has claimed the lives of many who entered at higher levels than your own. No offense, sir."

"None taken, and we appreciate your concern. But we have been here before, so we know what to expect. We have obtained some gear that should protect

us enough to complete the first floor or two."

"As you say, sir. Good luck to you, then!" the guards both saluted again as the group proceeded inside.

The crypt was simply one large room and one flight of stairs down from the entrance. In the center of the room was a ten-foot wide swirling disc of purple and black that rotated on its edge just above the floor. Alexander withdrew his staff, leaving the shield in his inventory. The group all checked their gear one last time, and then stepped through the portal with Brick leading the way.

The first room inside the dungeon was a simple stone "safe room" where adventurers could gather themselves before heading in. Lainey and Sasha took a moment to cast haste and wisdom buffs on the group. Brick had learned one as well when he went for paladin training that morning. He cast 'Light Aura' on the group, which for an hour would increase their resistance to dark magic by 20%

They decided that in the close confines of the corridors, their formation should be Brick in the front, followed by Alexander and Sasha, with Max and Lainey in the rear in case of ambush from behind. On the lower levels, they'd need Max out front to detect traps. But there were none of those on these first two floors.

Brick set out down the corridor. This entire dungeon was carved right into the stone, much like the lower levels at Olympus. The floors were chiseled smooth enough that they posed no trip hazards, though there were some low spots where puddles gathered and fungus thrived. The walls and ceilings sported patches of hanging moss and mold. Just ahead was a patrol of three skeleton warriors, level 15. Each of them carried a rusted short sword. They wore no armor except molded and decaying bracers, and one of them sported a metal helm with a massive dent in it.

"Ok Lainey," Sasha said. "This is a little different from the fights we've had so far. We'll use the environment to our advantage when we can. Keep an eye out for random mobs coming in from the rear or from side passages during fights. The noise echoes in here, and our tank is quite the noisemaker" she winked at Brick, who just grinned. "For now, stay ranged. With three skeletons, it'll go like this. Brick will taunt them. Give him about

five seconds to make sure he has aggro, then follow Max's lead and hit whatever he's shooting at. We'll focus on them one at a time, and just burn them down. Ok?"

"Got it. Easy day!" Lainey said. She was excited to be in her first dungeon. Sasha called "Go!"

Instead of his usual flinging of insults to get the skeletons' attention, Brick tried something new. He pointed his hammer and a flash of holy light flew from it, smashing into the leftmost skeleton, and killing it instantly. The other two raised their swords and rushed toward Brick. When they got within a step of him, he activated shield bash, and the sound of crunching bones signaled the death of a second skeleton. Alexander took the opportunity to test his new skills, and cast a bolt of magic at the remaining mob. He didn't get a crit, but still he dropped its health bar by about 20%, hitting it for 60 pts. Max and Lainey both hit it with arrows, but they weren't very effective. Skeletons have no flesh for arrows to catch.

Brick's hammer glowed again as he cast a heal on himself. The skeleton backed off, repulsed by the holy light of his paladin spell. Lainey cast thorn trap, doing significant damage to the skeleton and holding it in place. Alexander hit it in the face with another bolt, taking it down to about 10% health. Brick stepped up to finish it off with a skull-crushing hammer blow.

As Max looted the corpses, he said, "That was easier than I remember".

Sasha held up her creepy eyeball staff. "We've got much better gear than when we were here as noobs last time. Plus, we have a paladin this time. His holy magic makes the undead weaker, and they take more damage. And we have Lainey now, so extra damage!"

They continued down the corridor, killing skeletons in groups of two to four. After about ten minutes they reached the dungeon's first room. There were three groups of four skeletons wandering around in a seeming random pattern. In a far corner near the back there was a skeleton mage with robes and a staff. Next to him were two skeleton archers.

Brick knew what to do. He waited at the entrance of the room until one of the groups drifted close, then hit one of them with his Holy Smite. As that mob dropped, the other three rushed toward him.

Alexander raised a hand, saying, "Hold on I want to try something."

Brick activated shield bash, knocking the lead skeleton backward into the other two. As all three fell in a heap, Alexander cast wizard fire on the top one. The skeleton burst into flames, which quickly spread to the two trapped underneath. The initial burn damage to the top mob had taken about half its health. It thrashed about on top of the pile as the fire continued to tick off more damage every second. The other two skeletons managed to shove him off and rise to their feet, on fire themselves but still in the fight. Each of them was down about 25% and the damage was still ticking.

"Brick, just keep them busy, don't hit them. I want to see how much damage the spell does before it expires."

Brick obligingly raised his shield and kept himself between Alexander and the mobs. The fire damage had transferred aggro to him, and they were single-mindedly trying to get past Brick to reach him as they continued to burn. About 40 seconds in, the lead skeleton expired. The fire had finished him off. The remaining two continued to pound on Brick's shield with their swords for the full minute, each one having about 20% health at the end. Alexander shot one in the face with a magic bolt while Brick finished the other with his hammer.

Max moved forward to loot the corpses of the three skeletons close by. The fourth was too close to the other skeleton patrols. Sasha looked at Brick. "I didn't throw any heals on you, and I didn't see you heal yourself, but the damage you were taking kept healing itself. What were you doin?"

Brick grinned and held up his shield. "It were me shield! The nasties were on fire, and every time they hit me shield, it healed me!"

Sasha laughed, remembering the special properties of the dwarf's epic shield. "Does the fire damage stack?" She asked. Alexander just shrugged. "Let's test this out. Brick, you pull the next group. Just taunt them, don't do any damage. Same as last time, when they get close, knock them down. Alexander, you hit the top two with your fire spell. Let's see if the spell damage stacks up!"

Brick grinned, and shouted at the next group of skeletons. They rushed over and he knocked them back. Alexander cast wizard's fire on the top one, and one just below. The entire pile burst into flame. The two lower skeletons weren't strong enough to lift both the burning ones on top of them, and not smart enough to coordinate to lift one together, so they all just squirmed as they burned in a pile. In about 30 seconds they were all dead.

At this point, Alexander was low on mana. Between the fights in this room, and those in the corridor, he was down to 40/300. Rather than wait for it to regenerate at his current rate of 22 per minute, he downed a mana potion that restored 200 mana instantly. The group rested for three more minutes while his mana bar ticked back up to full.

Then Brick jumped up and said, "It's time to do somethin' stupid!"

"Oh, shit," was all Max had time to say before Brick was off and running.

He shouted at the top of his lungs once he reached the center of the room, "C'mon you skinny bags of doggy treats! Its playtime!" instantly getting aggro with both skeleton patrols. As the rest of the group ran after him, the dwarf continued right on toward the caster and archers. His hammer flashed, and one of the archers dropped dead from Holy Smite. Brick raised his shield and ran right into the caster, interrupting its cast and knocking it back into the archer. Still the dwarf kept going, moving behind all the mobs into the very back corner of the room. He turned so that his back was against the corner, held up his shield, and waited for the mobs to catch up.

Sasha was cursing. "Max, silence the caster!" Max hit it with a silence arrow, taking its ability to cast spells, forcing it to charge at Brick with its staff.

Brick waited for all the mobs to form a tight group, pushing him against the walls and swinging weapons at him. He shouted, "FIRE!" then activated his shield bash. The caster was literally crushed between his shield and the other skeletons as it was blasted back. The entire group was entangled in a giant pile. Alexander cast wizard's fire on several of the skeletons at the top of the pile. Five times a skeleton burst into fire that then spread to the others below. The only one not caught up in the conflagration was the last archer, which had switched to targeting Alexander and put an arrow in his shoulder before Lainey hit it with a shock arrow, causing it to drops its bow.

Brick just crouched behind his shield and let the mobs burn as they whacked

at him. His hearty "BWAHAHAHA!" echoed out from the corner behind the massive fire. A quick check of his health bar on their group interface told the team any damage he was taking was being instantly healed, so the others focused on taking down the archer while other nine skeletons roasted in a pile.

Level up! You are now level 11!...

Level up! You are now level 12!

Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 1 free attribute point available

They had been close to leveling to 11 from the mobs they'd killed in the corridors. The combination of these skeletons and what apparently counted as a mini-boss gave them a huge xp boost. The level increases instantly filled their health, mana, and stamina bars.

The pile of melted skeletons in the corner began to move, and Brick emerged, all smiles.

"You stupid son of a rock golem!" Sasha began to yell. "You could have gotten yourself and the rest of us killed!" Alexander knew the scolding was mostly for Lainey's benefit. She needed to know that stunts like that were dangerous.

Brick apparently knew it too, because the gigantic smile on his face never faded. "I be sorry, lass," he said, not meaning it even a little. Nothing was going to dim his exuberance after the fun he'd just had.

Max laughed as he looted the pile of skeletons. He then looked around briefly for any hidden compartments. There hadn't been any last time, but things changed over time, and it had been a year since they were here last.

Alexander had burned through 200 mana in a matter of seconds, but the damage was amazing. He felt a little overpowered. He hadn't even gotten a crit but with five stacks of the DoT burning away, he estimated those mobs were taking 25 damage every second. None of them lived more than 20 seconds.

They finished looting, and continued on through the first level corridors and

rooms with mini-bosses. The fights went much the same, though without any crazy stunts by Brick. They divided up the skeleton patrols and took them out. Casters and archers were hit with silence or stun arrows and burned down quickly. The group all reached level 13 as they fought their way through.

The only real point of interest happened in the first-floor boss room. There were a dozen roaming skeletons in the room with the boss, and they knew from experience that if nobody touched them, they would just continue to roam until the boss reached 75% health, at which point he would activate them. Now, common wisdom was that you simply pulled one or two or three at time, whatever your group could handle, and took them out until just the boss was left. Sasha had been thinking about something as they cleared the corridors, and wanted to experiment. When they got to the final room, she'd told Brick to hold at the entrance. She instructed Max and Lainey to each shoot two different mobs, pulling a total of four of them over for Brick to pick up. She told Brick to lead them back up the corridor a bit, then knock them down. When he did, she cast her thorn trap. But instead of casting it on a single mob, she focused on casting at across the width of the corridor floor, and it worked. A circle about eight feet wide formed under the squirming mobs, and thorn-covered vines engulfed and began to shred all four.

Then Brick had an idea for another stupid stunt. "Alex, hit em with fire! Just once!" he shouted.

Alexander complied, casting wizard fire on the topmost skeleton. The fire spread to the other mobs, and to the VINES! The vines began to blister and pop, spraying burning sap in a wide area, and adding drastically to the heat of the fire. Further, even when the minute of wizard fire ticked off, the vines remained and continued to burn.

"Awwww yeah!" Brick looked extremely pleased with himself as the others just shook their heads. "You know what this means!"

Sasha sighed, deciding to let the dwarf have his fun. "Ok people, here's how we do it. The crazy dwarf is gonna run around the room, bonk each of the mobs with his hammer to piss them off, and then hit the boss with his holy damage spell. He will then go hide in the corner like a scared lil' girl while they all group up on him. I'll cast vines in front of him, and Alexander, you

cast fire on the boss and ... four other mobs?" She looked at him with a question.

"Yeah, that should be enough to kill the mobs definitely. We'll probably still need to DPS the boss, though," he answered.

"Fine, then while I heal Brick, if he needs it, the rest of you focus on the boss. Brick, you're going to have to taunt your lil' dwarf ass off and hit him with holy damage to keep aggro with all that fire goin' on."

Brick just smiled and thumped his hammer on his shield. "Me baby can help with that!"

Without waiting for further discussion, the dwarf was off. He strolled out into the room, walked right up to the first skeleton on the left end of the room, and kicked it in the shin. Then he bounded across the room, hitting each skeleton in turn before moving on to the next, moving quickly enough to stay ahead of the angry bones behind him. When he had the attention of all eight of the bony mobs, he ran at the boss.

The first-floor boss was a skeleton knight. He was ten feet tall, wore chainmail armor, and wielded a giant two-handed sword. The first time they'd been in this room, Alexander in his melee toon had totally drooled over that sword. He'd used it for several weeks until he found better.

Brick, showing off at this point, ran straight at the boss. When he got close he dove forward, sliding on his shield like it was a body board, passing between the boss's legs. As he passed under the boss, he raised his hammer and shot it directly in the ass with his Holy Smite.

He continued the slide until he began to lose momentum, then jumped to his feet and dashed for the corner. The rest of the fight went as expected. Brick huddled in the corner until the boss and all eight skeletons had mobbed up. Then he hit shield bash, and Sasha cast her vines over them all. Alexander hit the boss with wizard's fire, and then four more of the skeletons in the pack. While the skeletons burned, Lainey and Max hit the boss in the head with arrow after arrow. Brick cast his smite spell as often as he could, and recited some of his love poetry at the boss while it burned. By the time the minute of wizard's fire was up, the boss's chainmail was heated to a bright cherry red, and it was being roasted inside its own armor.

When the boss fell, they all leveled up.

Level up! You are now level 14!

Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1

You have 1 free attribute point available

Max looted all the corpses while the rest of them sat down to rest. They'd cleared the floor in less than an hour. Alexander drank another mana potion, and they all had a light snack. Once everyone declared themselves ready, the descended the stairs to the second level.

The second floor of the dungeon was identical to the first in layout. This was, after all, a beginner dungeon meant to help new players focus on group tactics. The mobs at this level were slightly more difficult; zombies instead of skeletons with ghouls who could cast dark magic and healed themselves as mini-bosses. The group quickly learned that while ghouls would heal themselves of physical wounds from swords or arrows, they could not heal fire damage.

So it went. The team worked their way through room after room. They got more adventurous as they got farther along, pulling larger groups and literally burning them down. As a result, it was just over ninety minutes before they paused outside the second-floor boss's chamber. The boss was a ghoul necromancer. He had both single target and AOE dark magic spells that cast throughout the fight. At 50% health he would call zombie adds into the room and devour their souls to heal himself. If the fight reached three minutes, he would enrage, doing quadruple damage with his AOE spell, and any player hit with his single target spell would become undead and turn on their teammates, which almost always meant a wipe.

Sasha didn't intend to let it last that long.

"Ok guys. This is a pretty standard tank and spank. Brick will hold his attention, hit him with holy magic and whisper sweet nothings at him. I'll hit him with vines, Alexander will light him up. Lainey and Max, you just pour arrows into him. Max, you get the first interrupt. Lainey, after Max has used his one silence arrow, you use a stun arrow whenever you see him casting. Alexander can't put more than one stack of fire on a single target, so we'll just have to DPS him as fast as we can. When the adds come at 50%, I'll cast

another vines, and Alexander can light up several of the adds, which should kill them before the boss gets much of a heal. Everybody clear? Let's do this!"

Brick ran in and hit the boss with Holy Smite. The ghoul screamed and began to cast a spell at him, but the dwarf activated shield rush and shot forward to smash into the necromancer, interrupting its cast. It pounded at his shield with a staff a few times before starting a new cast. This time Max shot it in the head with a silence arrow, and it was unable to cast. Sasha cast thorn trap on it, and Alexander hit it with fire. It tried to scream as it burned, but the silence spell was still in effect. Max and Lainey continued to hit it in the head with arrows until it looked like that guy Pinhead from the Hellraiser movies. Brick hit it with holy magic and pounded it with his hammer.

The boss dropped to 50% health in about 20 seconds. It raised its arms and four zombies emerged from alcoves to shamble toward the boss. The normal mechanic in this fight was to try and burn down the zombies before they reached the boss so that he couldn't consume them and heal. At the very least you had to knock down their health bars as much as possible to limit the amount of life they had to share with their boss.

This group had other plans. They didn't touch the zombies. They continued to burn down the boss, getting him to about 30% by the time the zombies reached him. The moment they did, Sasha hit her AOE thorn trap, and Alexander poured on the fire. He hit the boss and all four zombies. The vines caught fire and the zombies died within seconds. The boss managed to get about 5% healed, but was suffering massive DoT damage from the burning zombies and vines, as well as the wizard fire cast on him directly. Max and Lainey kept up their shooting while Brick cast another Holy Smite, then actually sat down behind his shield and absorbed the heals from the fire as the boss pounded at him with its staff. The damage tics from the fire were constantly interrupting him so that he couldn't even make an instant cast.

The boss died at just over the one-minute mark.

You have earned the achievement: Speedy Gonzalez!

You have killed the Ghoul Necromancer boss faster than any team below level 15!

Reward: 3,000xp

Level up! You are now level 15!

Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 6 free attribute points available

They looted the boss without really looking at what had fallen, and headed for the stairs leading back up. The stairs brought them out to the portal room on the first level, and they walked through one by one.

As Alexander stepped out of the crypt into the cemetery, the two guards once again snapped to attention and saluted. "Welcome back, sir!" the same guard who had spoken before greeted him. "Hope everything went as planned?"

"Thank you, Corporal. Yes, it went very well. Cleared the first two floors, no major injuries, and we gained five levels each," Alexander smiled at them. "Now we're off to the market to sell the loot drops. But first, we'd like to thank you for the concern you showed earlier." Alexander took out the sword that the first-floor knight boss dropped. "This is for you. It is enchanted to always remain sharp, and will cut through most leather and chain armor. I know not everyone's style fits a two-handed sword, so if you prefer you can gift it to someone, or sell it."

The guard's eyes grew wide. The sword was worth a couple month's pay if he were to sell it in the market. "Thank you sir! Much appreciated!" The guard accepted the sword, a smile of wonder on his face.

Alexander noticed the other guard looked a bit jealous. "Max, didn't that boss drop a shield as well?" he asked, nodding discretely at the second guard.

"Ah, yes." Max withdrew the shield from his inventory and handed it to the now equally wide-eyed guard. "Thank you, young man for your service to the realm."

The group turned and began to walk down the path toward the gate, when the Corporal called out. "Your pardon, sir. But the captain briefed us all on those PWP scum you brought in the other day, and warned us that more might be coming to town. Well, sir, it may be nothing, but Foster and me, we noticed a small group poking around the cemetery earlier. They showed up just after you went inside. We figure probably they were a dungeon group that just lost heart, but we thought maybe you should know anyway, just in

case."

"Thank you once again, Corporal. I shall commend you to the captain when I see him. What is your name?"

"Jenkins, sir."

"Well, Jenkins. We'll investigate on our way out. If you see that we've been attacked, please do not engage. I have a plan to deal with them if they are indeed PWP. Tell me, is the cemetery still within the city limits?"

Catching on, Jenkins smiled and nodded emphatically, "Aye sir, it most certainly is! If it's alright with you, sir, I think it'd be best to have Foster here port back to alert the captain. I have a feeling he'd want to see this."

Laughing, Alexander nodded his approval, and the group set off down the hill. "Turn your cameras on, guys. If Jenkins is right, these idiots are about to attack us inside a safe zone. Let's walk a little way down, then stop for a quick snack. Maybe take a minute to see what the second boss dropped. Like Jenkins said, the captain is going to want to see this. He'll need a few minutes to get here."

The group continued about halfway down the hill, until Max spotted a glimmer of reflection up in a tree further down the path. It was a good spot for an ambush, with several tall monuments and a couple of crypts to hide behind. After a whispered warning, Alexander stopped and casually looked around. Pointing to a mostly open spot with just a few low stones off to their left, he said, "Let's stop there for a bit". The group moved to the area and casually sat down. They began to munch on apples and cheese, while Max rummaged through his bag.

After just a few minutes, the ambushers lost their patience. Then they made three mistakes in row. First, they gave up their ambush positions and revealed themselves, all but the archer in the tree that Max had spotted. Second, rather than surrounding the group and attacking from all sides, they elected to form a standard battle formation as they moved up the path; two tanks in the front with shields, and behind them the warriors who were either dual wielding or carrying two-handed swords, followed by three casters, and at least one of which was almost definitely a healer, as he was being guarded by a man with a crossbow. So, nine altogether counting the sniper in the

tree. Alexander had expected more.

"You know the drill," Sasha whispered. "Silence on the healer, stun or interrupt the other casters. Kill the healer first, then burn the other casters down. Save the fire for the warriors and tanks."

The group stood, but remained casual as the likely PKs approached. Nobody had drawn any weapons yet. Alexander raised a hand in greeting. "Ho there! Off to try your luck in the dungeon? We just left, but I'm sure it has reset by now!"

One of the casters spoke for the group. "No… no, we've come to speak with you, actually." They continued to draw closer. Alexander couldn't tell what level they were as player levels only appear when you're grouped with that player, or in combat with them. But from the quality of their gear, he guessed they were all 15 -20 or so.

"To speak with me? Do I know you, sir? I apologize, but I don't think we've met." Alexander put his finger to his chin and adopted a thoughtful look, "Ah! I suppose you've seen the video where we made fools of those PWP morons, and you've come to ask about joining the guild? We've had a lot of that the last few days. Seems most players really dislike PK assholes!" Alexander smiled his friendliest smile at them. They were now just about ten feet away.

"Oh, yes," the mage said. "We've seen the video."

Max decided to have a little fun. "Can you believe those morons? First they let a bunch of low level noobs kill them. Then, KNOWING they'd killed some NPC's, they allowed us to just walk them into town. It's like PWP doesn't train their people at ALL. But hey, we got two levels worth of xp for killing them, then turning them in. And a big fat reward, too!" Max did a little happy dance.

That was when they made their third mistake. The crossbowman shouted "PWP!" and fired a bolt, hitting Max in the leg. Instantly, the whole group had red PVP skulls above their heads. Alexander could see they were actually all 18 to 25, slightly higher than he'd guessed.

Lainey shot the leader in the eye with a stun arrow (only 20 feet away, she really couldn't miss), while Brick activated shield rush and slammed into the

two tanks, knocking them back just enough to push them into the warriors. Sasha cast a thorn AOE under all three casters and the crossbowman, shredding their legs and interrupting all their casts.

Max recovered and shot a single arrow at the sniper in the tree, knocking him off the branch he was standing on. Then Lainey and Max proceeded to fill the healer with arrow after arrow. Max hit him first with a silence arrow, so he was unable to heal himself. The healer was dead in less than ten seconds. Alexander was alternating hitting the remaining casters and archers with magic bolts, while Sasha was focusing on healing Brick.

With the healer dead, Lainey and Max had moved on to the leader. The first shot to his eye had been a crit, and had taken him to about 60% health. Sasha's vines had done significant damage as well, so just three arrows finished him off. The crossbow guy had managed to reload, so Lainey hit him with a stun arrow causing his body to stiffen. His finger pulled the trigger as it spasmed, but the crossbow was, unfortunately for him, pointed uphill. The bolt hit Jenkins in the shoulder as he stood watching the fight. He was too far away for it to penetrate his armor, but the hit counted as an attack against a city guard.

Lainey and Max targeted the third caster. He had managed to get off a fireball spell, which had hit Sasha and knocked off about 25% of her health. She quickly healed herself and was back in the fight. The fire mage took two arrows to the face and went down. Not dead, but out of the fight for a bit. Then they both moved to crossbow guy. They each put an arrow in his head, then Lainey shot him in the balls with a shock arrow for good measure, and Alexander hit him with a couple magic bolts to finish him.

The archer from the tree was back up and firing. An arrow had barely missed Sasha, and he'd managed to hit her in the leg with a second one. She cried out in pain, but kept going. Alexander hit the archer with wizard's fire, and left him screaming as he rolled around. His bow had caught fire, so even if he lived he was no threat for a while.

"Heal yourself for a minute, Brick!" Sasha yelled. She pulled the arrow from her leg, cast a quick self-heal, then cast her AOE thorns under the tanks and warriors who were still pounding on Brick. As soon as she'd cast the thorns, Alexander hit both tanks and the two warriors on either end with

wizard's fire. The vines caught fire, and the DoT's started ticking away. Brick smiled as the fire began to help heal him.

Alexander noted that the heat from the fires was actually reflecting off the inside of the tanks' shields, acting almost like an oven wall, which gave him an idea. He focused on his earth magic spell, and raised a wall of stone about eight feet wide behind the warriors. Now the heat from the fires would reflect back off of that as well. He quickly made two more walls, then he was out of mana. Dropping his staff, he pulled out his sword and shield and moved to help Brick. Lainey and Max poured arrows into the warriors as they screamed and burned. Brick cast Holy Smite on one of the two tanks, and hit the other with his hammer. Alexander reached over a shield to stab one of the distracted tanks in the face. The heat was so intense it actually burned his hand. Not having a magic fire shield like Brick, he backed off a bit.

Between the vines, the fire, and the arrows, the warriors were all dead. One of the tanks was gone as well. The other was apparently a paladin, and used a holy spell to bring himself back to full health. But his shield and weapon were too hot to hold, his armor was melted to him in several places, and he was still standing in what was effectively a burning oven. Brick took pity on him and stepped back, allowing the man to drop his shield and get some relief from the heat.

"I surrender!" he gasped, falling forward onto un-scorched grass.

That was a mistake. He obviously didn't realize they were still standing within the city limits, or that crossbow guy had shot Jenkins. He was now guilty of multiple offenses and would be facing at least 30 days in a cell. It would have been better for him if he'd died and respawned wherever his home base was.

Level up! You are now level 16!

Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1

You have 6 free attribute points available

They'd killed six of the nine PKs who'd attacked them, all several levels higher than them. *Good for enough xp to level us again. Sweet!*

The captain and several guards came striding up the path with the badly burned archer, who had managed to survive the wizard's fire after all. Jenkins trotted down from his post by the crypt, crossbow bolt dangling from the chainmail on his shoulder. The guards picked up the surviving tank, as well as the fire mage who hadn't died from the arrows to his face. He was allowed to drink a health potion and remove the arrows. Brick and Max were quietly betting on whether he'd try to kill himself with one. He didn't.

Captain Redmond addressed the three prisoners. "You three are under arrest for five counts of attempted murder of citizens of Stormforge! In addition, you are charged with the attempted murder of a city guard!" He pointed to Jenkins, who yanked the bent bolt free from his shoulder, taking several rings of mail with it. "Each charge carries a minimum sentence of 30 days, but your trial will determine your actual sentence. Take them away!"

The guards manhandled the prisoners down the hill and toward the city's east gate. The captain had detailed two of them to take up the now empty posts by the crypt. Jenkins was needed to give a statement to the prosecutor. Alexander and the group looted the dead players, then followed the captain and the guard procession back into the city.

Someone had clearly seen the fight, and had alerted others. There were players and NPC's lining the streets as the three players with red skulls over their heads were led through town. There was much waving and shouting of "Seee ya PWP!".

Alexander and the group followed all the way to the Hall of Justice, where they each gave statements to the prosecutor's assistants. With corroborating statements from Jenkins, the captain, and a dozen guards who had all seen the PWP attack a group of picnicking adventurers, there was no question of their guilt. Facing six times 30 days, these guys had just become useless for half a year. That was eight players total, or 10% of PWP's total membership locked up. They were all low level, but still Alexander felt a sense of pride. He felt sure that by morning there would be several new PWP videos on the forums and networks. *A good day's work!*

The adventurers stopped by Gregor's and let Lainey haggle over the sale of all their dungeon loot. There was nothing worth putting in the auction house, as the items were all low level. The guild had more money than it needed, so it didn't matter if Lainey got a good deal. They were just leveling her tradecraft. As it turned out, by the time she was done Gregor looked slightly afraid of her. She had bargained hard, even growled at him at one point. They all smiled and waved at Gregor as they left the shop. Brick was all for hitting the Ogre for a celebration, but they dragged him away. They still had a crazy wizard loose in their house, who was likely quite hungry by now.

As they walked home, Max noticed they were being followed. He whispered in group chat. "Tall dude, high level epic looking black armor, about a block back. Been following us for at least three blocks now."

Alexander led them slightly off their normal route, taking a couple of side streets, then turning back to the main road. The man still followed. "Just act casual. He won't attack us here."

The man followed them all the way to their front gate, and leaned against the keep's wall across the road to watch them as they walked through the bailey tunnel and into the house.

Chapter Ten

Don't Feed the Bears. Or the Wizards

There was no sign of Fitz in either of the sitting areas or the kitchen. Alexander figured he must have finished his design and headed home to find a meal. The group sat down in the lounge at the front of the house, under the watchful gaze of the demon lord's head. From the window, Max observed that the stranger was still standing across the street from their gate, just watching.

"He must be a higher up in the PWP," Max offered. "Who else would have reason to be tailing us across the city?"

Brick hefted his hammer. "Maybe we should invite him in?"

Lydia nodded her head, "It makes me nervous, him out there being all stalkery. Even if he is high level, all of us together could kill him, right?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not, Lainey," Sasha answered. "We did ok against those 20+ level guys today because they were morons. They made a lot of mistakes that helped us kill them, but anybody above level 30 or so could wipe the floor with us at this point. Our old toons were all in the 70's, and with our gear we could have taken on even their guild leader, but now we're basically noobs again. That being said, we need to be a little careful."

"Don't worry, Lainey. The protections Fitz put in place will keep everyone out, no matter how high their level happens to be. And he was going to improve them. I wish I knew what he'd done. I'd like to test them with this guy," Alexander mused.

"Well, it's dinner time," Sasha said. "Lydia brought over a ton of food at lunch time, so there should be enough left to cook. Let's get cleaned up, eat, and if the creepy dude is still there, we'll figure out what to do."

They headed upstairs, but only reached the second floor before they were greeted with the sound of snoring, so loud they were surprised they'd not heard it downstairs. They followed the sound to the guest suite Alexander had claimed. Sitting in a comfortable chair by the window, the wizard was basking in the late afternoon sunlight, head thrown back and mouth open.

His snoring not bothering Rufus in the least. The squirrel was asleep on Fitz's forehead, its bushy tail hanging down the wizard's cheek, perilously close to be inhaled with each snoring breath. Max and Brick immediately began wagering on whether the wizard would inhale the squirrel entirely.

Deciding to just let the wizard sleep, and admittedly a little curious as to the fate of Rufus' tail, Alexander moved to another guest suite while the others went upstairs to their own. After a refreshing shower, Alexander stowed all his gear except his sword and his mithril shirt. He also emptied his inventory and coin purse. If he had to confront the player outside, he would most certainly die, and didn't want to lose anything valuable. The sword was easily replaced, and the legendary shirt would stay with him through respawn. Taking a few minutes to look at his stats, he decided to leave his available attribute and skill points for later. He would get access to more at level 20 (a point of each was earned at each level, but only awarded every five levels), and he wanted to see what additional training was available to him before he committed any points.

Passing the still snoring wizard, he headed downstairs to help Sasha with dinner. She had him peel and slice stacks of potatoes and carrots while she prepared some wolf steaks Lydia had left in one of the coolers. When he was done she dumped the veggies into a pot of boiling water along with several ground herbs. Then she sent him away with instructions to set the table and let everyone know dinner would be ready in ten minutes. Alexander did as he was told, though he didn't know why Sasha couldn't just alert everybody in group chat herself.

He had noticed Brick heading out front, so he went to see what the dwarf was up to. He was standing at the side of what they had discovered was the armory and barracks building, poking at the stones on the outside wall. "What's up, buddy?" he asked as he walked toward the dwarf. He took a moment to confirm that the stranger outside hadn't moved.

"I think this'd be a fine spot for me forge," Brick replied. "I could build it up against this wall. This stone be sturdy enough to stand the heat." He looked up. "A small roof to keep out the rain, a bench for me tools, a few barrels for quenching... do ya think we can manage a water line?" he asked. "I don't fancy carrying buckets of water from inside."

Alexander smiled and patted the dwarf on the shoulder. "We'll get you whatever you need, buddy. After all, you are our guild's master smith. You should have a proper place to work!"

"Right!" Max added from behind them. "We need you to take care of the important things. Like horseshoes, door knobs and a pitchfork for the stables."

"Fork you, stable boy!" Brick grinned. "I'll not waste me valuable time on somethin ya can buy down the street for a few coppers! This forge will create epic weapons and armor fit for heroes. None o' tha' crappy cow skin ye walk around in!"

"Speaking of stables," Max began, "I think after dinner we should go claim our mounts. We can pay for Lainey to get her training and buy her a mount as well. We should also pick up the horse and wagon, and bring them back here. I was thinking tomorrow might be a good day to make the dwarf's beer run to the Broken Mountain?"

"It be a full two days ride to me people's fortress in the mountain," Brick reminded them. "And we be scheduled to log out in just over a day."

"Ahh... but we have a wizard! Who's like a zillion years old and probably knows how to make portals. I bet we could bribe him to come along. We could be there and back with party supplies in a few hours!" Alexander chuckled. The dwarf was nodding his head vigorously.

They headed back inside, and had no sooner sat down to eat when said wizard appeared. "I smell food! Why didn't you wake me, you ungrateful louts!" he complained as he sat down and stabbed a wolf stead with his fork.

"I didn't want to wake you twice in one day," Alexander winked at the old man, who was too busy piling potatoes onto his plate to notice.

"Yes, well," the wizard harrumphed. "How did your trip to the dungeon go?"

"It went very well, actually. The spells you taught me came in very handy. Thank you." Fitz just nodded as he stuffed his face. "We cleared the first two floors, and killed the second-floor boss in record time," he added.

"Then we got ambushed by some PWP assholes in the cemetery!" Sasha added with a wicked grin. "We killed six and let the captain arrest the other

three. Now one of them is lurking about outside our gate."

Fitz didn't show that he'd heard anything they'd said, being focused on a more important issue. "Excellent steak! Can I assume you are the chef, Sasha dear?" he smiled at her as if she were an angel come to bring him endless yummy treats.

"Yes, though I just followed Lydia's recipe, and Alexander helped." She returned his smile.

As if summoned, there was a brief knock on the front door followed by Lydia's voice, "Kids, did you know there's a man outside watching you?"

"We're in here!" Sasha called out, "Please join us for dinner. And yes, we're aware of mister creepy outside."

"I'd be happy to go and tell him to move on," the captain said as he and Lydia joined the group in the dining room.

"Thank you Captain, but I think I'll deal with him myself. Since we're on the topic, Fitz, what are the current settings of the main gate ward? Kill, or teleport? Or have you made some changes?" Alexander asked.

"Hmmmm?" The wizard looked up from his meal, apparently just realizing that Lydia and her husband had joined them. "Oh, hello Lydia. You're doing a fine job teaching young Sasha. This food is excellent!" he waggled his eyebrows.

"Pay attention old man!" Lydia scolded him. "There's a bad man outside the gate, and Alexander needs to know about the wards."

"Yes, yes! I heard him. The wards at the outer and inner gate are currently set to teleport intruders to the city dungeon. To change the settings or turn them off and on, you need only hold your amulet and focus on what you want."

"Thank you, Fitz. I think I'll go deal with him now. Captain, I intend to set the ward to kill. If you have an issue with that, please tell me now. I don't want to end up sharing a cell with the PWP morons later!"

Sitting down and helping himself to some steak and vegetables, the captain considered for a moment. "As long as you do not force him into the ward. Or

if you do, it is only after he has attacked you and you are in defense of your life. We will have no problem with that."

Alexander nodded his head. "I will not be the aggressor. I'll let him kill himself with his own stupidity. Though, I'll have to ask you to take my word for it. If he sees the captain of the Guard watching, he'll simply bide his time till later."

"That's no problem. I'll cast a scrying spell. We can all watch and listen from here while we eat!" Fitz volunteered.

"Perfect!" Alexander said, getting up. "Wish me luck. If nothing else, this should be interesting. Do me a favor, if he does manage to kill me, try to get my sword back?"

Alexander headed out the front door, walking straight to the bailey tunnel and out to the outer gate. He took one step beyond the warding, out into the street. Addressing the man in black armor, who was still casually leaning against the wall of the palace keep, he asked, "Can I help you with something? You seem to have a special fascination with my gate."

"Not with your gate, but with you," the man said. "You and your friends seem to have a problem with me and mine."

"I don't even know who you are. What problem do I have with you?"

"Well, you have made a habit out of killing my men, and launched some kind of campaign against us on the holos."

"Ah, so you're one of the PWP assholes!" Alexander pretended to be suddenly enlightened. "To be clear, I've killed nobody that wasn't trying to kill me. Your moronic friends have just been complete failures at it so far. I suppose you're here to do better? Did I kill your boyfriend or something? What is your name, by the way?"

The man simply chuckled. He pushed himself off the wall and walked about halfway across the street. Alexander backed up a step, putting himself back inside the ward. The man stopped advancing.

"If I were to decide to kill you, there is nothing you could do to stop me. I'm here to give you a chance. Go to the king, tell him there was a misunderstanding, and to let my men go. Then we'll kill you and all your

friends one time for appearances sake, and let you go on about your business."

"YOUR men? So you're the leader of PWP? And you came all the way here to tell me this?"

"Yes, PWP is my guild, and one of the men you have locked up, Frank, is my brother. I came here to get him out, one way or the other. I'm giving you the opportunity to help yourself by helping me."

"I see. So what you want me to do is drop the charges against an asshole player killer who tried to kill me, then allow you to kill me and all my friends in order to save your reputation. Why would I agree to this?"

"Because the alternative is worse for you. I will get my brother out either way. I have brought my entire guild, and we will storm the prison and rescue him and the others, killing as many NPC's as we can in the process. Then we will hunt you down every time you leave this city. You will stay level one forever."

"And all your guildmates have nothing better to do than wait around to kill a level one noob over and over?"

"They do what I tell them to do. As you said, they are mostly morons, but they're useful morons who follow my orders."

"Wow," Alexander shook his head. "You know that your brother and the others killed some NPCs in front of witnesses, right? That his bind point is now the prison? That rescuing him won't help if he dies again anytime in the next year? I don't believe you've thought this through. Is everyone in your family stupid? Or just the two of you? You know that there are something like ten thousand guards in the city? There's no way your little guild overpowers them all."

The man's face turned a livid shade of red. "That's where you're wrong, dead man. I thought through every detail. We have the layout of the prison. We killed a guard for his keys about an hour ago. And once we've freed my men from their cells..." he reached into his bag, and Alexander took another step back, acting afraid. The man smirked at Alexander's reaction and produced a scroll, "we will simply teleport out. Each of my men has a scroll. They will start fires and kill as many as possible all over the city before they port out.

We will teach this city not to mess with PWP!"

"As my dwarf friend would say, BWAHAHAH!" Alexander took a single step forward, remaining inside the ward. "I warned the king you'd be coming, and as of this morning, only incoming teleport spells work anywhere in the city. Guild Master Fitz saw to the teleport block personally." Alexander hoped Fitz was paying attention. "So go ahead, moron. Raid the prison. It'll save them the trouble of dragging you there when you're caught!"

Looking at the scroll in his hand, the man said, "You're full of shit!"

"Be my guest. Prove me wrong. I'll wave at you as they drag you away." Alexander waved both hands at the man. "Seee va!"

Putting away the scroll, the man said, "Maybe I'll just kill YOU, then, and post the video for all to see."

"I'm sure you've spoken to your men who died this afternoon. Did they tell you I burned them to death? And I wasn't really trying. I wanted them locked up, not dead. I think you'll find I'm not so easy to kill." Alexander raised his right hand, "With a thought, I can incinerate you where you stand!"

"Oh, please. You're, what? Level 15?"

"Level 16, actually. Since I killed your guys today!"

That did it. The man pulled out two nasty looking daggers and charged. Alexander held his hand up and moved his lips like was chanting a spell. Just as the man reached the ward, he said "Die!"

The PWP leader died the moment he crossed the threshold. Unfortunately for Alexander, his momentum was enough that his body continued on far enough to push a dagger into Alexander's thigh as it fell against him. His health dropped instantly down to 20%. His UI flashed a bleed de-buff that would kill him in about ten seconds.

Ah, well. At least I took this asshole with me!

He felt the rush of a major heal from Sasha just as he heard her yelling his name. His health went back up to about 50%, but quickly began to tick back down again.

Then the body was flung off of him. Brick yanked the dagger from his thigh,

then used his Lay on Hands ability. There was a flash of holy light, and Alexander was instantly healed and felt a rush of energy like he'd never felt before. Taking Brick's offered hand, he was pulled to his feet. He barely had time to take a breath before a sobbing Lainey tackled him, knocking him out into the street and back onto his ass.

"Don't you EVER do stupid shit like that again, you ASS!" she screamed at him. "You nearly DIED! And for what? To teach some asshole a lesson!?" She squeezed him harder.

Alexander waited for her to calm down a bit. The others stood around in awkward silence, except for Rufus, who ran up onto Alexander's shoulder and patted Lainey on the head. She eventually released her death grip on him and stood up. She kicked him half-heartedly before he managed to stand up himself. "Idiot," she mumbled.

Mindful of his audience, he gathered her into another hug, and whispered to her. "Lainey, I know you love me, and want to protect me. I love you too. And I know this seems really real, especially with the immersion. But we're still in a game. I wouldn't have died for real. I'd have just respawned over there in the courtyard. Just like when the bunnies ate Brick's ass"

Lainey laughed despite herself, remembering the screaming dwarf and how upset she'd been when the others laughed. Alexander knew she understood then. She was going to be okay.

Seeing her laugh, the others all relaxed. Max stepped over and looted the body of the PWP leader. He whistled. "Whoa! This is a matched set of unique epic armor. And the daggers are a set, too. All rogue gear. It must have taken this dude a year to round all this up. I bet he's PISSED right now!" They all got a chuckle from that. Even Lainey.

Remembering what the PWP had said, Alexander frantically looked around for the captain. Not seeing him, he looked to Lydia. "Where's the captain!?? The PWP are planning to burn the city! We've only got about eight minutes before they get the command to attack!"

Lydia smiled at him, and Fitz chuckled. "We saw what he said in the scrying spell. The captain immediately teleported to the palace to alert the king and every guard in the city. They were arming up and spreading out, preparing to

hunt down these raiders, when he attacked you. The moment his knife touched you, the entire raid party would have been marked with red criminal skulls. So I imagine they're suddenly much easier to spot!" the wizard smiled. "If you say we have a few minutes yet, I'm sure most of them will be rounded up before they can cause much trouble.

Attention all citizens and adventurers!

The King has declared all members of the PWP Guild to be enemies of the realm.

All guild members have been permanently marked as criminals, and will be instantly recognizable.

Effective immediately, any citizen or adventurer who encounters them within the realm, and is able to apprehend or kill these criminals will be given a reward of 100 gold each.

"Woohoo!" Max shouted, kicking the body. "Does that mean we just made 100 gold?"

"We need to get out there and help round these guys up," Alexander said. Everybody get geared up. We leave in five." He headed toward the house to get the rest of his own gear.

Walking next to him, Lainey said, "Don't you think you've had enough for one day?"

Not pausing to answer, he reached for her hand and whispered to her again. "Lainey, you heard what he said. These guys are going to try to burn the city. They'll kill as many players as they can. Worse, they'll kill NPC's who won't respawn. We have to help save as many as we can!"

Lainey stopped dead, jerking him to a halt. She waited for Lydia, Fitz, and the others to enter the house. "Alexander. Like you said, this is just a game. I'm concerned for your real-life health. Your mental health. It can't be good for you to die in here!" she hissed at him. "Besides, these NPC's you're trying to save are just programs. They aren't real people. You ARE."

He let go of her hand. "I know you're stressed out right now, but you need to get over it. I wasn't hurt. I wasn't traumatized. I've died maybe a hundred times in this game, and hundreds more in others. It doesn't affect

my mental state any more than an especially violent sneeze! And I'm going to forget you said that last part. These people here, they may be programs, but they're intelligent and self-aware. They don't follow a script. They respond to you as a person would. They have histories, families, emotions, and they feel pain. Many of them are my friends. Are you saying you'd be fine slitting Lydia's throat because she's just a program? That would make you just like the assholes we're fighting."

He began to walk again, not really caring at that moment if she followed. She did. As they entered the house and headed up the stairs, he said, "I'm sorry to be so rough on you Lainey, but if you can't wrap your head around dying in game, or you really feel that way about NPC's, then you should consider leaving the game. Going back to your old position taking care of me in the real world. I would rather have you here with us, but if you can't wrap your head around those two concepts, it's not good for you to be here." He left her to head into his suite and gear up.

When he emerged and headed downstairs, he found Lainey with the others ready to go. Without a word they headed out. Fitz was going with them, so Alexander sent him a party invite. When they got outside, Lydia was leaving her shop wearing armor and carrying a staff, so he sent her an invite too. They jogged toward the central square where they expected the captain would be. He could tell them where they'd be needed most.

As they reached the wide open square, the group were able to see a few small columns of black smoke rising here and there. Much less than they'd expected. There were more than three dozen men and women with red skulls over their heads on their knees and under guard. More were being led, pushed, or dragged in by a combination of players, guards, and groups of citizens. Alexander estimated maybe 50 that he could see. With nine locked up in the jail, and the leader freshly killed, that was roughly three quarters of PWP's total membership accounted for, but that still left roughly twenty of them at large.

Alexander informed the captain of this estimate, which earned him a grim look. "More have been captured and are being escorted here, but I don't know how many. The good news is that they seem to have been targeting public places like taverns and markets. Hoping, I suppose, to do as much damage as possible. They had no warning before their criminal marks

appeared, so many of them were caught by surprise and subdued without doing any serious harm. A few still managed to kill some citizens or guards before they themselves were killed or captured." He lowered his head.

"Have you secured the king?" Max asked. "The leader was a rogue, as many adventurer killers are. If I were planning this raid, I'd have had a group of stealth players targeting the king."

The captain nodded. "They did indeed. We captured four rogues who had infiltrated the throne room and were discovered when their criminal marks made them visible. The Royal Family are all secured in the throne room surrounded by fifty of my best men."

"The sewers," Brick said. "It be a standard way to infiltrate a city, and a good place to hide if yer hunted."

The captain looked surprised for a moment, then called over a lieutenant. He gave quick instructions, and the soldier ran off to start a sweep of the sewers. "Thank you, Brick. I've just ordered a sweep of the sewers beginning at the palace and working downhill to the harbor."

"Did you find any of them in the dungeon?" Fitz asked. "The man said a group of them would be trying to rescue his brother."

"We did not," the captain shook his head. "We did find a half dozen of them in a tavern just a block from the prison complex. We think they were waiting there for their leader to take them into the prison. One of them had prison keys on him. Those poor fools were drinking in a room full of off-duty prison guards when their marks appeared. We've not yet found the body of the guard he claimed to have killed, but they will be questioned. Vigorously"

By that time roughly another dozen PWP's had been brought into the square. Alexander counted them carefully. Fifty-nine here in the square. One dead leader. Nine in jail. Four at the palace. That was 73 in total. Alexander's father had told him roughly 80 members of the guild. Would the six that they'd killed earlier in the day have teleported here for the raid? That was a big expense. Then again the leader had said that each of his men had teleport scrolls. And "roughly 80" could mean anywhere from 75 to 85. *There are just too many variables. How can we know if any were still loose?*

Alexander had an idea. He asked the captain a few brief questions. The

captain was able to confirm that four of the PWPs had been killed, and that at least two managed to port away.

"Captain, may I have your permission to address the prisoners? I may have a way to find out how many we're missing, if any. I promise not to physically harm any of them, but I'll need you to play along with any threats that I make."

The captain nodded his head as Brick mumbled, "A little physical harm wouldn't hurt..."

The captain smiled at Brick, then looked back to Alexander. "No mercy".

"Aye, no mercy," Brick and the others repeated.

Alexander and the others walked to the side of the square where the prisoners were held. They were lined up on their knees into two orderly rows of 30 and 29. He stood in front of the middle of the first row and shouted, "HEY!"

The prisoners all looked toward him. Some spat in his direction, recognizing him from the videos. "I don't know if you've heard yet, but I killed your leader about half an hour ago!" he yelled loudly enough for the entire square to hear. There was a roar of approval from the citizens.

When the noise died down, one of the prisoners shouted, "Bullshit! A noob like you couldn't kill Henry!"

"Ahhh... so that was his name!" Alexander smiled as he shouted. "I didn't bother to ask. He was as stupid as his brother. Are you all morons? None of you noticed that he greyed out when he died? I taunted him into attacking me before I killed him, which is when you all received those pretty red skulls." He smiled again, "Kinda fucked up your plans, didn't it?"

Alexander began to pace back and forth as he talked, eyeing each of the prisoners, looking for the dumbest of the bunch.

"So here's the deal! Your guild is done. We have 72 of you in custody. Members of your raid group have killed several NPC's tonight, and you know what that means!"

At that, his entire group, nearly every player in the square, and a good number of quick thinking NPC's started waving at the prisoners. "Seee ya

PWP!"

When the noise died down again, he continued. "I need to know how many of you are still here in the city. I need names, and where they can be found."

"Fuck you, noob!" drifted up from the back row somewhere.

"Yes, well. It's not me that's currently fucked, now is it?" Everyone laughed. "You all know the rules against adventurers torturing each other. Anyone caught doing so is banished from this land forever. I have further promised that I would not harm any of you." He coughed and glanced at the captain, who winked at him in return.

"However, as I mentioned before, several citizens and guards were killed in your attack tonight. And the captain here's unhappy about that. The guards and citizens of this land don't have the same rules about... obtaining information. And they really, really want to find the rest of your homies!" At this, the captain nodded, and many of the prisoners were bumped, kicked, had hands stepped on, or were less than gently prodded with sharp points.

A woman in priest's robes stood up. "My name is Amelia. I was an officer of PWP from its beginning. I can tell you what you need to know." The captain motioned for her to be brought forward. When she was close, she began to whisper. "Several of us didn't want to be here. We came out of fear. Myself and four of the other founders were in an inn when the marks appeared. I blocked those who attacked us with a shield while the other four ported back. We brought our whole membership, a total of 88 bodies with us, including the six that you killed earlier. If you tell me who else you captured, and let me compare the raid list to those sitting here, I can tell you who's left and what they are. But I'm afraid I don't know where they are. I can tell you that Henry, the four officers that were with me, and two others are showing on the UI as 'out of range', so they either ported out or ran out of range. There are six others that were showing as killed." She didn't have to mention that they'd respawned.

He appreciated that she'd been subtle. "Captain, by my count that leaves three unaccounted for." I suggest taking this woman into the closest shop and let her make a list of who is not accounted for. We might get lucky." Alexander said. Then more loudly, "I recommend you question the others quite vigorously to confirm this information!" There was another round of

kicks and pokes from the guards.

"Captain, sir," Lainey volunteered, "if it were me, I'd head to the harbor. Harbors are full of wooden ships and cargo crates that burn easily. Sneaking into a ship's hold would be a good way to escape."

Amelia volunteered, "I know there were two teams of four who were supposed to torch the harbor and the warehouses. If you haven't caught them yet..."

"Why are you cooperating with us?" Alexander asked. "Why turn on your own people?"

"What PWP has become is just wrong. Myself and the other officers who were with me formed PWP as a guild for priests, monks and paladins; those who follow the paths of their various gods. Henry was a friend of our former guild leader. He was invited into the guild and made an officer and vice guild leader before we'd even met him. He started preaching about growing the guild, about being strong enough to take what we need to get stronger. When Martin, our founding guild leader, rejected his ideas, Henry set him up. He took Martin into a small town with him, saying there was a new dungeon. They'd partied up, and were headed out of town when Henry stabbed one of the gate guards in the eye, pushed Martin into the other guards to slow them down, then ported back to the guild house. Martin was, of course, locked up. That was seven months ago."

She lowered her head as she continued. "I'm not proud of it, but the rest of us officers decided we'd bide our time until Martin was released. Henry began recruiting and encouraging PVP as an easy way to gain xp, gear and gold. He recruited noobs and power leveled them to gain loyalty. Things got steadily worse. Any who openly opposed him were driven out and spawn camped back to level one. We figured we could tough it out for five more months, then put things right. Obviously, we were wrong."

"I see," Alexander said. "Well to be brutally honest, I don't know if you're telling the truth or not. I hope you are. You know that you're getting the same mandatory sentence as Martin, yes?"

She nodded her head.

"Well, if you're being truthful, I recommend you tell your fellow founders to

port back here and turn themselves in. Serve their time and clear their record. Martin's got five more months. Hopefully in that time I can deal with Henry and those loyal to him. Then Martin can reclaim the guild unopposed when he gets out. Then he will have several months to rebuild before having to confront Henry. And you'll be able to rejoin him in time to help."

Tears came to Amelia's eyes. "I will pass the message along."

"When you do, remind them that many people came to this land to earn a living. Their unwillingness to oppose Henry has caused hundreds, if not thousands, of players who could not defend themselves to lose time and money that they may have needed to survive in our world. All of you should think about that while you serve your time."

Richard, Angela, and Michael had decided when they released Europa, their first MMORPG, that players would be allowed to earn real life money from the game. Previous games going all the way back to the 2D keyboard games of the early part of the century had tried to maintain a contained economy within the game, but it hadn't taken long for a black market to grow, selling bot-farmed gold, cheats, and power-leveling runs. Real currency auction houses appeared for selling high grade weapons and gear. The black markets invariably unbalanced or outright destroyed in the in-game economies. Simultaneously, as time progressed and technology replaced humans in more and more functions, jobs became harder to find. Agriculture became mostly automated, as did most manufacturing and distribution. Drones controlled by sophisticated AI's ran entire operations. Retail stores were a rarity, as most goods and services were purchased online. The advent of the first-generation virtual reality gear meant that more and more was accomplished in VR. Travel lessened as meetings could be accomplished in virtual conference rooms, and virtual vacations became a low cost alternative to the real thing. More and more people had turned to virtual occupations. Whether that was graphic arts, virtual sales and marketing, or gaming for a living. Whole new industries arose.

The founders of Jupiter Technologies elected to eliminate the need for a black market in Europa. They created an in-game auction house that included a

real-world component tied to the Europa Online website. That allowed players to place a piece of epic loot up for auction in game, and it could be seen and bid upon by players in game, or in the real world. There was a straight exchange rate -1 US Dollar equaled 1 gold, and 1 platinum was \$1,000 dollars.

Players had the choice of the auction proceeds being paid in either game gold or real-life currency. This also reduced the annoyance of gold farming bots that took up server space, and physical space in the game. Because while there was no way for a player to use real dollars to purchase massive amounts of game gold, wealthy players would have been tempted to establish a currency black market that would allow them to invest real world cash ingame to purchase property, for example. But with the dual auction house, a wealthy player could simply put something simple up for auction, say a bundle of low level herbs like milkweed. Then arrange for someone else to bid a ridiculous million gold for it. Several forward-thinking banks had in fact created a corporate character account just to accommodate these transfers for their clients.

This system had an added advantage for Jupiter Tech's bottom line, thanks to some quick thinking by their lead accountant. The auction house had been designed, just like nearly all the games that came before, to charge a fee for each transaction. This had been set at 5% of the transaction amount. The original intent had been to "put some cash back into the economy of the game". Which translated into "paying staff to monitor and maintain the auction house coding and website". This percentage was set in contemplation of only occasional use by each player, buying and selling crafting materials or the occasional high end gear. However, with the unexpected growth of the game to hundreds of millions of players, and the increasing reliance upon the game for real world income, the auction house had become busier than even the wildest projections.

Hence the meeting requested by the lead accountant, Seshat (Her actual name was Miriam, but everyone on staff had chosen, or had been given, a mythological name for themselves. Seshat was an Egyptian goddess of numbers and writing). She had posted a series of historic charts showing transaction levels, projection charts for the same, incomes from the fees, costs for maintenance, etc. The three founders all followed along with limited

interest, as they had all been peripherally aware of these numbers already. And when she was finished with her charts, Richard said as much. "We're aware of the numbers involved here, Seshat. I assume you have something else for us?"

"Indeed." She responded "I want to suggest we scale down the auction house fees".

"For what reason?" it was Michael asking this time.

"Well, you see. For the average transaction of a few silver or gold, the 5% means nothing to the individuals making the sale. Just like none of you would stop to consider the amount of sales tax when you stop for a coffee." All three nodded their agreement. "But when the transactions get into the thousands of gold, the sellers begin to balk at the loss. A player selling an epic helm for 10,000g has to leave 500g on the table as auction house fees. And obviously, the larger transactions by wealthy players investing millions into the game involve much larger fee deductions. So instead, sellers are going through a somewhat time consuming and inconvenient process of listing with the auction house and monitoring bids, or shouting out item adverts in trade chat (or annoyingly also in general chat), then private messaging interested buyers, convincing them to meet in person somewhere in-game, and complete a direct trade, gear for gold. Oftentimes buyers, who would be paying the same price either way, are reluctant to waste their time. And when they are willing, it is still a time suck for all involved, as it usually involves travel time and/or portal costs."

Still nodding her head, Angela said "We hadn't considered that. For a player just trying to pay their rent every month from game earnings, leaving 500g on the table could seem like a tragedy. What do you propose?"

Seshat took a deep breath before she continued. Despite the fact that she worked for three of the best people she knew, nobody liked telling their boss that they should take a hit to the corporate bottom line. "I propose a simple scaled reduction in fees. Leave them at 5% for any transaction below 500g. That is the vast majority of transactions. Something like 70%. For sales between 500g and 1,000g drop it to 3%. Between 1,000g and 1,000,000g drop it to 2%. And anything over 1,000,000g is 1%."

She paused to take in the looks on the faces of her bosses. None of them

looked angry, or even displeased. Richard and Angela were looking at each other doing their mental telepathy thing, while Michael's eyes were rolled up, obviously doing some math in his head. To save him a little time, she added "before you ask, we don't have a realistic way to track the transactions that happen via direct trade, as we have rules in place that protect players' privacy. But we estimate the loss in fees from the lower percentages will be offset somewhat by the increased number of transactions. Still, it may mean as much as a 20% drop in auction house income. Last quarter, the auction house fees averaged just over 1.25g per player, and accounted for a gross of 500 million gold. Or \$2 billion real world dollars per year."

"I like your thinking." Richard said. "But if we're really looking out for the 'little guy' here, the one who pays his rent from game income, then the 5% is still hurting them. I suggest we lower the fees to 3% for anything below 1,000g. If that accounts for, shall we say 80% of total transactions?" he looked to Seshat, who looked thoughtful for a moment, then said "that seems a safe estimate". Richard continued "So at a current average of 1.25g per player, we reduce that to three fifths, or .75g per player for 80% of the 400 million players, and we still earn \$960 million per year. Plus, whatever income comes from the other 20% making larger transactions."

"Well, boss. The math is not QUITE that simple, but yes. You get the idea. At those levels, we'd likely still make more than \$1.5 billion in total auction house fees. The cost of operating and monitoring the website and the servers dedicated to the auction house, including equipment replacement, totals just over \$15 million annually." Seshat offered. Then she sat down at the conference room table and waited for them to talk it out.

Michael took out an old school yellow number 2 pencil and a piece of paper, and made a few scribbles before asking "What's our total annual payroll right now?"

"Seshat knew the answer, but pulled up the numbers on her tablet just to be sure "We currently have fourteen thousand, eight hundred and forty employees. Total salaries, benefits, and insurance costs are \$1,780,800,000. That is, of course, not counting the three of you." She smiled at them. "We also currently employ approximately 180 people on various consulting contracts, most of them working on Europa expansions on the game development side, hardware capacity improvements, or research and

development. Those contracts cost an additional \$36,000,000.00 for this year. Two of our developer consultants elected to be paid with in-game benefits rather than taking salaries. That means there is no actual monetary cost to us."

"Thank you" Michael smiled at her anticipation of his next questions "Ok, it looks like even a safe estimate of auction house fees with Richard's proposed rate reduction very nearly covers our entire payroll for the year. Leaving us about \$300million to cover from gear sales or subscriptions. Where currently, auction fees cover all of our payroll, and a big chunk of our hard operations, transportation, real estate, taxes and insurance costs. Is that correct?"

Seshat consulted her tablet again, and nodded at him "Correct, boss. The game would earn roughly half a billion less annually. Safe estimate. With increased use due to lower fees, that number could shrink."

Michael shook his head, then ran his fingers through his hair. "If I had to be the one to present this at an investor board meeting, they'd skin me alive. Voluntarily taking a half billion dollar income hit in order to make life easier for average players, and more convenient for rich ones." He chuckled to himself. Then he smiled at Seshat "Good thing we don't have investors! And the entire board is me, and these two romantics over here!" He pointed a thumb toward Richard and Angela. "I don't think I really need to ask… but are we going with this?

"Of course we are!" Angela slapped her hand on the table. "Done! Richard, please call down to the dungeon and have one of the auction house team prepare the adjustments for the next update. Michael, if you would, please meet with marketing and prepare a release announcing the change? Thank you."

As they all got up from their seats, Angela looked to Richard, then tapped Michael on the shoulder. When she had his attention, she looked meaningfully toward Seshat, then raised her eyebrows. Asking a silent question. Michael and Richard both nodded, smiling. All three sat back down. Michael took the lead.

"Miriam. Please stay a moment?" Miriam, who had been gathering her things to leave, looked up with trepidation at the use of her real name. She

saw the three founders had taken their seats again, and were all looking at her with stony faces. "Something else, boss?" she asked, remaining on her feet as if prepared to flee.

"Miriam..." Michael used her given name again "Was this reduction in our corporate income your idea? Or did one of your people bring it up?"

I knew it! There's a REASON nobody likes bringing bad news to their boss. She thought to herself. And I just brought them half a BILLION worth. Oh well, it has been fun while it lasted.

"The idea was mine, boss. My older son has been playing the game, working to raise money for college. He starts next year. I heard him on the phone talking to a friend who's doing the same. They were both selling dungeon loot and complaining about leaving hundreds of dollars at the auction house. I know it sounds like I'm just trying to help my kid. But I'm not. They just got me thinking, so I had my people do some research and put together these numbers." It sounded, and felt, like a confession to Miriam. She let out a long exhale, not realizing she'd been holding her breath.

"And how much do we pay you, Miriam?" Richard asked, still stone faced.

"Um. My salary as department head is \$400,000 annually, boss. Without performance bonuses." She replied, very uncomfortably. "Give us a moment, please." Richard said. The three of them put their heads together and whispered. Oddly enough, she could swear she heard the words "coffee" and "party" before they stopped whispering and turned to look at her.

"We appreciate you coming to us with this concern, Miriam" Angela got up from her seat and began to walk around the table. "I know you've heard the saying 'no good deed goes unpunished'?" Angela asked, standing next to Miriam and placing a hand on her shoulder. Miriam couldn't speak, could only nod her head. "Well, I'm afraid you're going to have to suffer the consequence of bringing this to our attention." Angela squeezed her shoulder.

Michael set down his pencil and clasped his hands on the table in front of him. "You have three children, yes? All in high school now?" Miriam swallowed a few times before she could speak "Three, yes. Though the youngest won't be in high school till next year."

"Well, as a penalty for bringing this issue to us, and convincing us to take such an action, I'm afraid you're going to have a tax issue. We're giving you a \$1million bonus. For your kids' college funds. I'm afraid that's going to put you in a higher tax bracket, though!" Michael and Richard laughed at the shocked and relieved look on Miriam's face as Angela bent down to give her a hug. "Oh, dear, you're shaking!" Angela exclaimed. "Guys, I think we went too far. We scared her."

Both men were instantly out of their chairs and moving toward Miriam, looking concerned and making apologetic noises. Angela lifted her from her chair, and Miriam found herself wrapped in a group hug. Tears began to trail down her cheeks, and she shook her head, still not quite believing what she'd heard. She quietly said "can't... breathe..." and the three founders instantly released her and took a step back.

"We're SO sorry!" Richard was wringing his hands and shuffling his feet as he watched his lead accountant cry. "We're all idiots. You know that. We didn't mean to make you cry, I swear!" The other two nodded emphatically. Angela began to reach out, then awkwardly pulled back.

"No, please. It's okay" Miriam said. Gathering her composure and wiping both eyes with her sleeve "It's just that I was nervous coming in here to recommend such a big income cut. Then I was so relieved when you all agreed. Then when you asked me to stay, and began asking those questions, and talking about consequences and whispering, I was sure you were going to fire me. Then you said "million dollars for college" and ... I think it was just more of an emotional roller coaster than I was prepared for. But I'm fine, really. And thank you so much!" She sniffed one last time, wiped her eyes again, and proceeded to hug each of her bosses. "I think I need to sit for a minute" she said. And did.

"Sure, sure. Take all the time you need!" Angela said. "And please, we really are very sorry to have tricked you like that. We won't do it again, I promise! The whispering, by the way. We were talking about going out for coffee after this to plan Alexander's upcoming birthday party. Which I hope you will attend?"

Miriam smiled at this. "Of course I will!" Alexander was like their little company mascot. Often running around the office with toys, hopping into

people's laps as they worked, or begging for sweets from the suckers who couldn't resist.

Richard had taken his seat again, having assured himself that she was ok. "Miriam, can you clarify something for me? Something you said earlier?" She turned toward him "Of course, boss. What is it?"

"Well, you mentioned that two of our consultant developers weren't taking salary. Something about in-game benefits. What are the details?"

Miriam actually laughed at that. It felt good. For everyone in the room. "The MacAlister brothers. Couple of nut-jobs. Great coders. I mean, excellent. Among the best in the business. And they're both big gamers. They've been playing Europa since launch day. They lead opposing guilds in the game. Very competitive. Anyway, the payment they asked for was a few acres of land and a castle for each of them. To use as guild headquarters. Close enough that they could easily raid each other's guilds. There have already been a couple pretty spectacular fights."

They all chuckled at that. "Thank you, Miriam. And again, our apologies. Why don't you take the rest of the day off. Go tell your kids they're all set for college. Your son can play the game just for fun now." Richard smile at her.

Miriam nodded her head and thanked them as they all rose to leave

Deciding that the captain and the guard were much better suited to scouring the city for the last three PWP, Alexander and his group decided to walk Lydia home and then retire for the evening. Tomorrow they would look into the logistics of making a run to the Broken Mountain.

Having seen Lydia to her shop, the rest of them retired to their lounge. They mostly sat in silence, until Fitz drifted into the dining room to make a snack from dinner's leftovers. The others joined him, and they ate in companionable silence. Fitz broke the silence and said, "I've decided to remain here for a while. I'll make some improvements to the place, and you lot obviously need looking after. Plus the food is much better here than at the guild," he winked at Sasha, who giggled and blushed.

"Well, there are guest suites on the second floor," Sasha offered. "You can choose one and stay as long as you like!"

The wizard shook his head. "Thank you, little one, but a wizard needs his privacy. I'll figure out a place for myself, don't you worry."

"Fitz," Alexander looked to the wizard. "Can you make portals? As in, long distance, stable portals? We've got to undertake a trade mission for the king tomorrow. We need to get to Broken Mountain and back in a day."

"I practically invented portals!" Fitz said. "I can build you one here in the compound in the morning, though I'll need the king's permission. I'll link it to the Broken Mountain portal, and you'll be able to transport goods directly back and forth as you like. But I don't work for free! I want Dwarven ale with every meal. And some rare spell components that can be found there!"

"Bwahaha!" Brick reached out a hand to the wizard. "If ye can save us two days each way travel time and transportation costs each way, I can provide ye ale by the keg!"

With that, the adventurers went to turn in. They still had more than 24 hours left in this immersion cycle, but it had been a long day, and they had instructions to continue testing how well they sleep in the game.

Chapter Eleven

A Short Homecoming

Alexander awoke just after dawn the next morning. He used the shower in his suite and dressed in his best looking caster gear. They would be going to see the Dwarves of Broken Mountain today, and he wanted to look sharp.

He stepped through the French doors onto the balcony to breathe in the morning air. The morning was still quiet; only a few servants, vendors and merchants moving around. Alexander stretched his arms above and breathed deeply, then coughed and spluttered in surprise. In the back corner of the gardens, what could only be described as a wizard's tower had grown overnight. At five stories tall with a pointy peaked roof, it looked to be made of the same stone as the walls. *It looks as if it is built right into the corner of the walls!*

Alexander trotted downstairs and out the front door. As he was exiting the house, he saw the captain walking in the through the gate. They met in the middle of the courtyard, and both stood silently staring at the new addition. After a moment, Brick came out to join them.

"I warned you not feed the wizard," the captain grinned.

"BWAHAHA!" Brick's irrepressible laugh had both men shaking their heads.

"The king woke up this morning, had a sip of coffee, looked out upon his city, and as you can imagine, was quite surprised to find a new wizard's tower poking its nose above the wall. He sent me a messenger asking me to fetch Master Fitzbindulum at his earliest convenience. Normally this would be the sometime after lunch, but I believe for this, we'll wake him a bit early. You want the honors, or shall I?"

"Uhh... I woke him yesterday. And I need him to make a portal for us this morning so we can make our run to Broken Mountain for the king, so I don't want to anger him. He's all yours."

The captain looked hesitant. After all, as Alexander had thought to himself yesterday, it is not the best idea to poke a sleeping wizard. Plus, there didn't seem to be a door to knock on.

Sasha solved the problem for them. Walking out and seeing the newly risen tower, she immediately surmised who was responsible.

"Fitz!! You crazy old wizard, what have you done?" she shouted up at the tower. There was no answer from the wizard. "Fitz! Wake up! Come down here this minute!" Still no stirring from the wizard, though Rufus did appear in one of the upper windows to wave down at them. Sasha laughed and waved back. "Rufus! Go tell that lazy old coot that breakfast is ready. Eggs and sausage!"

Not ten seconds later there was the flash of a teleport in the garden in front of them, and a bedraggled looking wizard strolled toward them. Not stopping to greet them, he grumbled something about turning people to toads as he strode past them and headed into the house.

"I'm actually surprised he didn't just teleport right to the dining room. I'll bet by day's end he has that set up," the captain chuckled.

They all followed the wizard inside, and sat down for breakfast. After Fitz had had time to shove a plateful of eggs and several sausage links down his gullet, the captain spoke up. "Our King has requested your presence. Apparently, some fool went and built a tower without asking permission."

"Bah! Details!" The wizard mumbled and he refilled his own plate, then another. Taking both in hand, he disappeared in a flash.

"So, what do we think?" Max ventured. "Did he just get breakfast to go and head back to bed?"

"The wizard may be grumpy, and is probably crazy, but even he would not ignore a summons from the king. My guess is, that second plate was a bribe for the king to obtain permission to keep his tower. The king would never make him take it down, of course, but there are forms to observe. Fitz will have to apologize, and promise to behave. A promise he'll keep until lunchtime. Maybe. It's an old dance between those two." The captain smiled and continued to eat.

"Speaking of old," Lainey began, "just how old IS Fitz, anyway?"

"Fitz has served the lords of this land since it was first settled. That was more than six centuries ago. Before that, he was already well known as the founder of the Mage's Guild. The guild goes back more than another thousand years. What he did before that? Who knows?"

"Ha! When he told me he was the retired head of the Mage's Guild, I thought he meant, like, last year. Or last decade!" Alexander laughed.

The group finished their meal, and were about to clear the table, when Fitz reappeared. He began to load up his plate yet again. Everyone was silent, watching him. "Sasha, dear. The king sends his compliments on your cooking." He waggled his bushy eyebrows at her. "Well, he didn't actually SAY any words. He just shoved food in his mouth and made a sort of grunting noise. But it definitely sounded like approval!"

Sasha laughed. "Please thank the king for his kind compliment for me."

"Well, I must be off to work," the captain rose to leave. "Wizard, I'm told you'll be making a portal for Master Brick's emissary mission this morning? Since the king was clearly not much for talking this morning, I'll relay his message that he'd like you to make that a priority. He's expecting important guests tomorrow, and would like to have dwarven spirits at his table." He waved at the rest of the group as he left the room.

A mischievous smile lit the wizard's face. "Aye, I'd like to lay hands on some of that myself!" He clapped his hands together and jumped up from his chair. "Right! Where would you like me to place the portal? It'll be a permanent structure, so think carefully."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about portal design. How much space do they need? Is there a backlash area when they open?" Alexander asked.

"Well, come with me boy! I'd be a poor mentor if I didn't take the opportunity to teach you a thing or two. First, step closer. I'll teach you the most important spell you'll ever learn."

Expecting a repeat of yesterday's painful experience, Alexander stepped forward and closed his eyes, preparing himself for the pain. Instead of a hand on his forehead, he felt a thumb on each of his eyes. There was a brief tingling sensation, and then a warmth that spread from his eyes into his brain. "Open your eyes," Fitz instructed.

Alexander opened his eyes, and was amazed by what he saw. Everything

glowed with different colors and varying degrees of brightness. The dining table had a dull and even green glow to it. In comparison, Fitz blazed so brightly he was difficult to look at.

"It's called Mage Sight," Fitz explained. "It allows you to see the magic that flows through all things. If you're quick enough, it will also allow you to observe the structure of spells as they are cast, or if they are infused into something. This will help you in learning how magic works. It should help you to learn new spells as well. Look at Sasha and focus."

Fitz looked at Sasha. "Sasha dearest, thank you SO much for breakfast. I was nearly starved after building that tower. Would you mind terribly casting a heal spell on our boy so that he can observe it?"

Alexander focused on his friend as she reached into her mana pool, which was a dark blue in color. As it rose up, it seemed to attract a lighter blue energy from the air around her. Was that what raw magic looked like? As she drew it though herself, it changed to a bright green. Nature magic, maybe? Life magic? She cast it at him, and he felt the tingle as the green magic was absorbed into his own body. He explained out loud what he'd observed.

"Good! Good. Very perceptive for your first time. You were distracted by the pretty colors, and didn't note the actual structure of the spell. And yes, that was life magic. Don't worry, you'll get better with practice." The wizard headed out the door. "Let's find a good spot to establish the portal, and then you can observe while I create the control pedestals and then cast the activation spell."

The two men headed outside, followed by Brick, who was fascinated and wanted to watch. He convinced the wizard to give him mage sight as well. They eventually settled on a spot in the back courtyard between the stables and greenhouse. The open space gave them room to move horses and wagons or large groups through the portal if necessary. It was conveniently close to the stables, and the ramp that led to Brick's storage cellar.

"Ok first, boy, use the earth magic spell I gave you. I want you to raise two stone pedestals up from the ground. Let's say 20 feet apart. Each one should be about ten feet high. Ideally, they'd be made of obsidian if you can find it. It holds magic the best of all the natural stones. Go."

Alexander used his earth magic and his mage sight to gaze deeply into the earth. Below the stones of the courtyard he sensed a tunnel. Likely part of the sewer network that ran below the city. Further down he sensed a whole maze of more natural seeming tunnels that ran in every direction and sometimes curved back upon themselves. *A maze? No! Of course! Lava tubes!* This whole city was built in a crater, after all. An old volcano that had been dormant for years beyond counting. Alexander kept searching. Because where there were volcanoes, there was... *there! Obsidian. Tons of it.*

Alexander cast his earth spell into a deposit and separated out about a two-ton chunk. He coaxed it up toward the surface, being careful not to disturb the lava tubes below him. It was a slow and difficult process. He found himself sweating, and his legs ached. He paused to take a few deep breaths and drink a mana potion. His earth mover spell was a channeling spell, and moving that much weight of solid stone up through the earth drained his mana pool quickly.

"Aye. And now you've learned another lesson. All magic has a price. Earth magic especially. Magic does not completely negate the laws of physics. A mage may move something heavy with his mind, but the effort will drain both his mana and his stamina. As you get more experienced, and higher levels, this task will seem easy. But for now, take it slowly. We have time."

Brick being a dwarf, he had a certain amount of natural earth magic ability. While Alexander rested, Brick asked Fitz to teach him how to shape the earth as well. The wizard took a good look at the dwarf. Then touched his head. "The ability is already there, dwarf. You just have not connected to it yet."

He removed his hand, and Brick looked momentarily dazed, then extremely happy. "Thank ye, wizard! I feel as if some part of me had been missing, and I dinna' even know it."

Alexander focused his sight again, and got the obsidian moving. He very carefully moved it to the side so that it would not break into the sewer tunnel, then brought it up further. Finally, the stone in the courtyard seemed to liquefy, and the giant block of shining black stone rose up in front of them. The stone underneath reformed, and Alexander let out a gasp and collapsed.

"Well done, boy! And smart thinking, not breaking the sewer tunnel. The

king would not have been pleased. I think that's enough for you, for now, I'll take it from here."

Alexander nodded gratefully.

"If'n ye don't mind," Brick offered, "I'd like to try me hand at it?"

"Of course, master dwarf. Be my guest."

Brick walked up to the block of stone, which was taller than he was. It was roughly twelve feet tall, and maybe five feet wide and deep. He laid both his hands on it, then turned his head as if listening to it speak. Alexander watched with his mage sight as the dwarf explored the rock with tendrils of silvery magic that traveled through cracks and fractures, learning the stone.

Beautiful!

Then Brick began to move his hands across the stone, following a fissure that ran the length of the block. He moved his hands apart, and with a crack the block separated into two roughly equal pieces.

Repeating the process on the left hand block, Brick again separated it in half lengthwise, giving him two pieces twelve feet high and just over a foot wide. He looked to the wizard, who nodded encouragingly. As Brick began to work on one of the pedestals, Fitz levitated the remaining large half of the original block to an out of the way spot near the wall by the stables. Alexander had raised much more than they needed, but he was sure they'd find a use for the stone.

Alexander continued to watch Brick work. He sent out word in group chat for the others to come watch too, if they weren't busy. Max had apparently gone out into the city, but Lainey and Sasha came to sit next to Alexander. He begged Fitz to cast mage sight on the two ladies, so that they could observe the beauty of Brick's magic. Fitz nodded and complied. Both girls gasped as they got the first look at magic in general, and especially the beautiful fluid silvery magic Brick was using.

Obsidian is a very hard, brittle stone that was favored for primitive weapons for those qualities. It was relatively easy to chip off a sharp chunk and use it as an arrowhead or knife blade. The dwarf instinctively knew the history of the obsidian. It was born in lava, deep below the earth, in liquid heat and

pressure. Brick was also a blacksmith; he knew heat, and the shaping of heated metals. As Brick ran hands over the stone, he returned it to its original form, making it flow and reform into the shape he willed it before cooling to harden again. He made the column thicker and heavier at the base for the lower two feet, then he rounded and smoothed the rest. He must have pulled some sand from the earth below and mixed it into the rock in swirling patterns, the sand melting into glass. When he stepped back after about ten minutes, there stood two columns of beautifully polished dark stone with swirls of silvery glass that glinted in the morning light.

The ladies gasped, and Lainey actually had tears in her eyes. "Brick! You're an artist! They're beautiful!" And that silver magic you made!" she said, jumping up to hug him.

"Indeed, master dwarf." Fitz sounded impressed. "You truly are an artist. I've rarely seen such beauty, even from the dwarves of Broken Mountain, who are masters of earth and stone."

"Thank ye, master." Brick bowed to Fitz. "Twas you who opened me eyes and gave the me this gift."

"You are most welcome, Brick. I would be happy to teach you more as time allows. You are a promising student."

"Now! Alexander, you've had plenty of time to rest. Let's finish this" the wizard pointed toward the columns.

Alexander lifted the left column and set it in a spot indicated by the wizard. The stone floor of the courtyard liquefied again, and he sank the column down two feet, until the wide base was flush with the paving stones. He then moved the other column twenty feet to the right, and repeated the process.

"Good. Now, watch carefully, all of you. I'm going to infuse each column with specific elements of earth, air, light, and dark magic. I will go slowly, so you can observe how I blend them, and I will do this twice."

The wizard proceeded to infuse the first pillar. He first used earth magic to reach down and tie the column to the power of earth, giving it a source of magic to draw from and creating a sort of 'battery' in the wider base under the surface. He then repeated the process, instructing the surface of the column to draw air magic from the wind as it passed. Alexander could not

see a physical source for either the light or dark magic, but he could tell that the wizard had 'programmed' the stone to gather them as well, though in much, much smaller quantities.

They all watched closely then as he tied the four forms of magic together into inscriptions he created on the stone that looked initially like ancient Celtic runes.

Alexander could tell they were less of a language, and more about a physical representation of intent. He could read instructions for the formation of the portal: its size, a sphere roughly 20 feet in diameter; compression of the energy sphere into an infinitely thin event horizon, creating gravity that was directed in upon itself to create a sort of black hole; energy of the hole was directed toward another location (presumably the Broken Mountain?) in coordinates using a complex formula including vectors for direction and speed, adjusters for the rotation and gravity of the moon itself and nearby bodies; and some sort of time suspension that made the travel instantaneous. It all made Alexander want to go home and read up on quantum physics.

When it was over, the wizard took a break and asked for a snack before he did the next one. Alexander didn't blame him. *I'm exhausted just watching*. Sasha brought everyone what amounted to sausage and cheese sandwiches. They sat and ate in silence, the four friends trying to process what they'd seen.

"Any questions?" Fitz looked at them individually.

"Aye," Brick was thoughtful, "but if ya don't mind, I'd like ta watch it again, then noodle it a bit before I ask?"

Alexander nodded his head in agreement. "I'll ask one now, though. The light and dark magic. Where do they draw from?"

"Very astute! Most new students don't reach that level of understanding for years. I'm proud of you, boy, so I'll tell you plainly. There is a bit of light and dark magic in everything. They are basically the essence of matter, tiny amounts of each one balancing each other's forces. Think of them as creation and destruction. They are extremely powerful. This is why holy spells like Brick's paladin spell Lay on Hands are so powerful. Their opposite nature is why holy spells and weapons are so effective against

demons and the undead. In those creatures, the balance is slightly off. They have a larger element of dark magic."

"At any rate, I've drifted off topic. Light and dark magic are the most powerful. Small amounts are all that are needed for our purposes here. They are a... regulator, rather than a source of power, keeping in balance the wild nature of portal magic. The next part was instructing the stone to draw miniscule amounts from everything around it. Small enough not to unbalance anything, and easily recharged."

"Thank you, Fitz. That was very informative."

Hearing no other questions, the wizard went to work on the second column. Again, the friends all watched and learned what they could of the process. Alexander thought he had a better understanding of the instructions, if not the math required to establish them. When he was finished, Fitz asked them to hand over their guild amulets. Alexander watched is he programmed in what looked like a trigger or authorization code, along with two sets of origination and destination coordinates. Presumably so that they could "dial" the portal both directions.

"As you are all just learning the basics of magic, I've programmed your amulets with the activation and deactivation spells. At the moment, we have only one destination programmed. Later we can add more as necessary." He handed them back their amulets. He then programmed several more and handed them to Sasha. "Exchange these with Max, Lydia, and her husband. I'll deliver one to the king. They are also all attuned to the wards around the compound. When you need to activate the portal, or modify the wards, simply make physical contact with your amulet, and focus on your instructions."

"If you have no other questions at this time, I'm a bit tired. Some noisy children woke me up just after dawn, and an old man needs his sleep!" He winked at Sasha.

"Thank you, Fitz. For all of this." Alexander and the others all bowed slightly to the wizard.

"Bah! Just hurry up and bring me back those dwarven spirits!" He handed Brick a list. "These are the spell components I need."

Max returned shortly with the giant draft horse pulling their wagon. He drove it into the courtyard and took in the sight of the portal pillars. "We're to have our own permanent portal? I thought Fitz would just open one for us and come along to open one back! Do you realize the value of this?"

"Indeed. And as time goes on it will only increase as we add the ability to choose other destinations," Alexander replied.

While Brick ran off to the palace to visit Master Knox and pick up any additional dire wolf pelts available and collect his 250 gold for the original 50 pelts, the rest of the group explained to Max what they'd learned about portal magic and bragged about how awesome Brick's artistry was. Max was truly impressed with the columns. He also eyed the roughly one ton block of obsidian by the stables. Sasha switched out his medallion with one of the new ones Fitz had made.

When Brick returned, the others agreed he should have the honor of activating the first portal. He was, after all, the trade emissary. Plus, he was wearing plate armor and was most likely to survive if the entire thing exploded. They all stood back as Brick kissed his medallion for luck, and focused on opening the portal to the Broken Mountain.

There was a swirl of color, and a whooshing sound, almost like the sudden decompression of an airlock, and between Brick's columns, a portal opened. The friends could see the other end let out into a wide stone courtyard. Dwarven warriors, more than 100 of them, who had just a moment ago been sparring with each other, were scrambling to form up into a defensive line across the courtyard, blocking access to the city beyond. Without a word, in unison they slammed their shields into the stone, one overlapping the next, forming an instant shield wall.

Oops.

Nobody knew they were coming. As far as they knew, nobody had used that portal in decades. The group quickly decided Brick should go through first, and they would follow.

Brick stepped through the portal with his hands in the air. He led the horse and the empty wagon behind him, and called out to identify himself.

"I be Brick, Paladin of Durin, and Trade Emissary of King Charles of

Stormforge!" he shouted. "I come as a brother, and as a friend!" He motioned behind him at his friends, "These be me friends and guild members!" The rest of the group stepped through the portal behind the wagon, arms up, weapons stowed in their inventories. They stood several feet behind Brick in a line, and tried their best to look friendly.

The shield wall parted briefly, and an ancient dwarf with silver hair and a long braided beard stepped forward from the formation. He approached Brick confidently, looking him up and down. He cast quick glances at the rest of the group, noting their lack of weapons, before returning his focus to the dwarf.

"This be the home of the Broken Mountain Clan!" he growled. "Ye have entered our citadel without warning or permission. Arm yerself!" He lifted his shield and withdrew a hammer much like Brick's.

Brick tossed the horse's reins back to Max, and withdrew his shield and hammer from his bag. Setting his feet and raising his own shield, he prepared for an attack. The old dwarf didn't make him wait, rushing forward to slam his shield into Brick's. Brick held his pose, but his feet slid backward about a foot, carving gouges in the stone. He retaliated with a swing of his hammer, which the old dwarf block seemingly without effort. The two dwarves began an incredible display of strength and endurance, hammer swing and shield parry, back and forth, neither giving ground or making contact with his foe. After a few minutes, the other dwarves began to beat out a steady rhythm, hammers and swords striking shields. The elder dwarf, never pausing in his rhythm of attack and defense, began to sing what sounded like a war chant in a loud, clear voice. It spoke of honor, loyalty, strength, and the joy of battle. After the first verse, Brick joined in the chant. Still the two dwarves pounded at each other. Soon the rest of the dwarves took up the chant, and the entire courtyard vibrated with the song of a hundred stone-like voices. The friends could feel it in their bones. It was a call to battle, a communion with the earth below, a tribute to their ancestors, and a plea to Durin to give them strength.

Brick and the old dwarf began to glow. Both dwarves grew, or at least it seemed so. They moved faster, hit harder. The display was nothing like Alexander had ever seen.

The song ended, and the elder dwarf took two steps back. Lowering his shield and weapon, and glowering at Brick. Brick lowered his own shield, and saluted the elder, hammer across his heart.

"BWAHAHA!" The elder roared. He stepped forward and seized Brick in a massive bear hug, lifting him off his feet. He set the younger dwarf down, and turned to the other dwarves. "A wandering brother has returned home!"

There was a roar of approval. A hundred dwarven weapons struck a hundred shields in unison three times. Then, as if nothing had happened, the dwarves disbursed and went back to their sparring.

Brick motioned his friends forward. "Master Stonehand, these be me friends. Sasha, a Druid healer. Max, a Ranger and a good man despite bein' half an elf. Lainey, A Valkyrie gifted with the power of Odin's lightnin'. And Alexander, formerly a great warrior, who has decided to wear a skirt and become a mage." Grinning at his friends as they each bowed to the elder dwarf, he continued. "Friends, this be Master Stonehand, Elder and War Master of the Broken Mountain Clan, and the man who taught me how to raise a hammer when I first came to this land."

"Aye, a pathetic wee thing you were! Didn't know which hand to lift a hammer with! And now you've become a paladin of Durin! Though you don't seem to have grown much..." Master Stonehand eyed Brick up and down.

Brick laughed. "No, it appears not. Though I did manage to grow quite a bit in the last few years, I was reborn when I became a paladin, and Durin saw fit to have me start again."

"Well, you look good, lad! And you're home again. With good news, I hope?"

Brick pulled out a dire wolf pelt. "A gift for me mentor. I've been sent by the human King Charles to trade with our people. We bring an offer of friendship, and more of these pelts. I am authorized to enter into long term trade agreements. We've set up a permanent portal at me guild's compound in Stormforge."

The Master examined the pelt, tugged at it to test its toughness, and rubbed

the fur against his face. "Dire wolves. Aye, these be worth a bit. They were killed off in these parts centuries ago. What does your human King want in return?"

"ALE!" Brick shouted with glee. "And spirits. He has a taste for both, and has missed them sorely."

"So, a ruler with good sense, then!" Both dwarves chuckled at that.

Master Stonehand led them across the courtyard and through a massive doorway that led into a large cavern inside the mountain. He called over two young dwarves and spoke quietly to them. One sprinted off toward another set of doors leading deeper into the citadel, while the second one politely retrieved the reins from Max and led the horse and wagon off to one side.

Master Stonehand made small talk with Brick as he led them through doors and down corridors, then across a stone bridge that spanned a crevice about 100 feet wide. As they crossed the bridge, Alexander looked down over the side and felt slightly dizzy. The void below the bridge must have been a thousand feet deep. Alexander could barely make out what looked like a stream of magma flowing along the bottom. The walls on either side were carved with doorways, staircases and balconies going down dozens of levels.

On the other side of the bridge, the features of the corridors began to change. Where before they were just smoothly carved stone, now there were reliefs carved into the stone of the walls depicting scenes of battle, of weapons being forged, and of celebrations of one form or another. Each doorway they passed through was intricately carved with runes and images of dwarven life.

Eventually they reached a great hall with massive stone doors. Each door was twenty feet high and ten feet in width. The left hand door was carved with an image of Durin, legendary hammer in one hand raised as if to strike. The opposite door depicted a dragon, wings half furled and head back as is poised to breath fire.

As they passed through the great doors, the group found themselves in an expansive chamber with a throne made of black stone at the opposite end. There were massive hearths on either side of the room, with long stone tables and benches running nearly the entire length on each side. Gigantic columns of engraved stone placed every 30 feet held up an impressively carved

cathedral ceiling. The group halted, mouths agape, staring at the ceiling. Its carvings detailed an epic battle between an army of dwarves swinging hammers and swords at an endless horde of orcs, goblins, trolls, and other creatures of the dark. The impression was so real that the figures seemed to actually move as one's gaze shifted.

Their study of the amazing work was interrupted by hearty laughter. "Aye, that be the reaction of most who enter me halls for the first time!" A large red-headed dwarf with a circlet on his forehead walked toward the group. Brick dropped to a knee and bowed his head. The others followed his lead.

"Me King!" Brick simply said.

"Oh, stand up! And welcome to me halls. I be King Thalgrin of the Broken Mountain." As the group rose, Master Stonehand stepped to the king's side and spoke quietly into his ear. He held up the dire wolf pelt, which the king took in hand and inspected in much the same way the elder had. He looked at Brick. "Welcome home, lad. Me uncle here tells me you come with an offer from Stormforge?"

Brick bowed his head briefly. "Aye, me King. The human King Charles named me trade emissary and tasked me with establishing both friendship and trade with ye. He remembers with a fondness his time here as a young lad, and most especially our ale and spirits!"

"HA! I remember him as a lad. Me da was still King when he visited. Many a night we spent playing drinking games. He did his race proud!" Thalgrin laughed. He motioned them over to one of the stone tables and took a seat, indicating that they should join him. Servers brought mugs of ale and platters of fruits and pastries. "Our kingdoms have never been close," he mused, "but we've never been enemies, either. What is your impression of him, paladin Brick?"

"He be a man of honor, me King. He works hard in service to his people. He suffers no fools, and values the counsel of wise men. He named Alexander here his Knight-Advisor after Alexander figured out a way for the kingdom to battle a demon horde without having to burden its people with more taxes. He named us all friends of the realm for clearing a dungeon of demon spawn and killing their demon overlord," Brick said, inhaling deeply when he was done, having gotten that all out in one breath.

"I remember him as an honest lad," the king said. "It seems he has not let power go to his head. I think we can reach some agreement. What else do you want besides a wagonload of ale and spirits?" the king asked.

Brick handed him Fitz's list of spell components. Then he added, "Me King, I'm a smith, when I have the time, and have just begun to set up a workshop in our guild compound. I'd like to purchase a set of quality tools while I'm here. And maybe speak to one of your Master Smiths about possible improvements to me hammer and shield?"

Brick removed his hammer and set it on the table. The king inspected it briefly. "Infused with holy power from Durin himself. 'Tis a mighty weapon. I'm sure Master Ironhammer would be happy to take a look." Then Brick produced his shield, and set it in front of the king. Both the king and his uncle's eyes widened. The king began to reach for the shield, then hesitated, looking to Brick. Brick bowed his head, and the king lifted the shield. Turning it, then thumping it with his fist, he whispered, "Such a thing as this..." shaking his head. "Ye didn't just kill a demon lord for this, boy. This came from an ancient demon lord of great power."

"Aye, me King. He was no' easy to kill. Alexander here found a clever way to end him, else we'd all be meat in his belly." The king looked to Alexander, examining him fully for the first time. Upon noticing the mithril shirt, he gasped. "Send for the council!" he shouted, and servants scattered to fulfil his command. He looked into Alexander's eyes, and indicated the shirt. "Master Knight, would ye mind?"

Alexander quickly removed the legendary chestguard and set it on the table before the king. Both the king and Master Stonehand touched it lightly, eyes closed for a moment. Then looked at each other and nodded.

The king addressed Brick and his friends. "The rest of the council will be here in a few moments. I ask that ye share with us the story of yer fight with Sr'Vok."

Brick bowed his head again. "Of course, me King."

Alexander spoke up, "If I might ask, Majesty, you seem to recognize this piece. Can you tell me about it?"

"Oh, aye lad. This was crafted by me grandfather nearly 500 years ago. He

made it for a legendary warrior who was on a quest to kill a demon lord. This demon was a general in command of a horde that had broken through into the lowest levels of our mines. He led a party of adventurers who answered our call for assistance. We could not defeat the horde without sacrificing too many of our own warriors, so we outfitted these adventurers with weapons and armor forged by our finest crafters. They went into the mines and slew hundreds of demon scum. They could na' kill the demon lord, but did force it to retreat to the void, and they destroyed the demon's portal so it could not return. But the hero this shirt was gifted to was slain in the battle."

As the king spoke, the table filled up with several other elder dwarves who arrived in ones and two. As they sat, the shirt and shield were passed around for each of them to examine. There were gasps and looks of concern.

The king spoke to his council. "As ye can clearly see, the damned demons are back. Brick here is a paladin of Durin. He and his friends encountered the demons with Sr'Vok. Brick, if ye please?"

Brick told them the tale of finding the dungeon and working their way down to battle Sr'Vok. He told them of the battle, and of Alexander's idea that killed the demon lord. He mentioned the loot, which caused Sasha's staff and Max's quiver to be passed around for inspection as well. He told them of the keys they found in the box, and of King Charles adoption of Alexander's idea to reward adventurers who find and eliminate demons within the realm.

A truly ancient elder with hair so white it was translucent asked to see one of the keys. The king identified him as the clan historian, Master Tomebinder, as Brick handed over his key. The historian examined the key, taking out a jeweler's glass for a closer look. He passed his hand over it as if he were casting some kind of spell. Handing the key to the king, he nodded his head. "Aye, this makes sense after the boy's story. The key bears the mark of Baron Dire."

"Baron Dire?" Alexander asked.

"Aye, that were how he was known. I remember not his real name. He were baron of the keep that lay near the base of Dire Falls, close to the caverns ye found. A cruel and devious man. He worked dark magic and made slaves of all his people. Used them to pull gold and gems from the mines on his land.

He was killed and his keep destroyed by an angry wizard."

That explains a lot.

"Thank ye, me King." Brick bowed his head to the king and to the historian.

The king nodded his head. "I will follow King Charles' lead in this. I will reward any adventurers who bring me proof of some kind that they've killed demon scum within our lands."

Brick removed a couple demon horns from his bag. "Me King, I cut these from the monsters as we killed em. King Charles is accepting them as proof of kills, and is paying a reward in gold."

Master Ironhammer, who was apparently one of the king's council, said "Toss me one o' them, boy". He examined the horn closely. "Aye, me king. These'll do nicely. We can use em' to enchant weapons to increase damage against demons."

Sighing mightily, Brick removed the rest of the horns from his bag. It seems that all of Io is conspiring to keep him from crafting his demon horn shot glasses. "I'm afraid that's all I have left, me King. I sold 400 of them to King Charles."

Thalgrin said, "We'll pay ye for these, Brick."

"Please accept them as a gift, Majesty," Alexander said.

Brick, nodding his head said, "Aye, we plan to get more," to which all the dwarves laughed and thumped their hands on the table.

Quest Received: Death to Demons

Slay demons wherever you can find them within the dwarven realm. Return demon horns to the Broken Mountain as proof of death.

Rewards: Variable.

Alexander and his friends all laughed as they accepted the quest.

At that, the council disbanded. After a word with the king, Master Ironhammer took up Brick's hammer and shield, promising to have them back in an hour.

"Ye've given us warning of the demon's return, and a plan to protect ourselves. Ye brought us a new friend and potential ally in King Charles. My thanks to all of ye," he nodded to each of the group in turn. "Now! How many of these pelts did you bring us? And what else do you have to trade?"

"There be 150 pelts in the wagon, me King. As for other things, what else do ye need?"

"Well, the soil on the mountain is barren and rocky. Our farmers are barely able to feed us. So fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, all would be appreciated," the king mused.

"Your Majesty, if I may?" Max interjected. "Stormforge is a harbor city with a fleet of fishing vessels and merchant ships visiting daily from other lands. We are fortunate enough to have been able to build a permanent portal in our compound. Would fish fresh off the docks be of any interest?"

"Oh, aye!" The king smiled.

"Also, Majesty. Do you have any use for obsidian?" Max continued.

Laughing, the king replied, "Indeed, master Max. Our crafters have recipes to use it in the forging of both weapons and armor. It is useful for its ability to hold enchantments. Only our master smiths be allowed, or can afford, to work with it, as our supply be small."

Brick, picking up on Max's intent, took over. "Me King. We can deliver ye nearly one ton of obsidian stone today. In return we ask for two things. First, enchanted weapons for me friends and for the human King's soldiers. They need not be fancy, just enhanced to kill demons and undead. Oh, and ye fill our wagon with ale and spirits once a week for a year," he smiled.

"BWAHAHA!" The king laughed so loudly that everyone in the great hall paused to look. "It be good you did na' say tha' before old Ironhammer left. He'd follow ye home and marry ye to his granddaughter!"

Brick blushed. Which only caused the king to laugh harder. "Speakin' of following ye home, lad. To show me appreciation for all you've brought us, I'll send a few crafters with some supplies home with ye. They'll build your smithy for you, and leave you with all the tools you need."

Brick went from being embarrassed, to awed. "Thank ye, me King! I've recently learned to craft with stone as well as metal, and to infuse magic. I plan to become a master smith meself one day!"

"Brick crafted the portal gateway pedestals out of obsidian this morning. They are beautiful!" Sasha couldn't help herself.

"I think I'd like to see those!" the king said. "And a visit to the human King seems a good idea. Can ye set it up for next week? We can work out our trade agreements then."

After a bit of small talk, the king wished them well and sent them on their way. Master Stonehand led them back toward the training grounds where the portal was located. When they reached the outer cavern, they found their wagon already filled with barrels of ale and kegs of spirits. Behind that was a cart filled with crafting materials being pulled by three young dwarves, and an empty wagon hooked to four large boars meant to retrieve the obsidian.

Lainey giggled and pointed back the way they came. Master Ironhammer came strolling up, with a young female dwarf in tow. She was carrying Brick's hammer and shield.

"The king was right!" she whispered. "Here comes Brick's bride to be!" They all chuckled, except Brick. He looked suddenly terrified. While his avatar was a dwarf, and he did his best to role play a proper dwarf, he was still a human man in real life. Ironhammer's granddaughter might have been a supermodel among dwarven women, which means she was just under four feet tall, with a barrel shaped body, thickly muscled arms and legs, and a full beard of soft looking blonde hair that extended maybe three inches below her chin.

"M...m, Master Ironhammer," Brick stammered, unable to look away from the female dwarf. A circumstance completely misinterpreted by the Master Smith.

"Young Brick! This be me granddaughter, Thea. She will accompany ye back to yer compound to look after the needs of the crafters while they construct yer forge. I trust that ye'll see to her... safety?" The old dwarf gave Brick a knowing wink.

Thea stepped forward, handing Brick his hammer and shield.

"Thea will explain to ye the improvements we made. I'll come along to supervise the loading of the obsidian. About how many crates will we need?"

Brick was still speechless.

"You'll not need any crates, Master Ironhammer," Max volunteered as he slapped Brick on the back of the head. "The stone is in one solid piece. You'll need several strong dwarves to lift it, I'm afraid." He smiled as the master smith's eyes seemed to grow to twice normal size, and he became unsteady on his feet. "Also, if it's too long for your wagon, Brick can reshape it to fit. If he ever remembers to breathe. Or blink." Both Lainey and Sasha giggled. Thea seemed to have taken Brick's staring as some kind of challenge, and was staring right back at him, arms crossed, with a defiant glare.

With everyone impatient to get going, Alexander led the procession outside into the training yard. As they approached the portal stones, he took his medallion in hand and focused on opening the portal to their home.

He turned to the others. "There are wards set around our compound, and to be honest I don't know how they'll treat someone entering via portal. Thus, I officially welcome all of you to our house. In case that doesn't work, please give me a moment to go through and make sure you're safe. I'll wave when we're ready."

Alexander stepped through the portal. He turned and said to nobody in particular, "I officially welcome these dwarves to our guild house. Then, just in case, he focused on the wards and set them to "teleport" rather than kill. Worst case, I'll have to run and bail some confused dwarves out of jail.

He waved for the rest of the party to come through, and welcomed each of them as they stepped into the compound. Nobody disappeared. So far, so good. Brick directed his wagon directly to the top of the ramp that led to his cellar. He then escorted the crafter's wagon around the main house to the front of the compound and the armory/barracks building. Showing them where he wanted to place his smithy, he left them to unload supplies. Thea went inside to explore the building and see to accommodations for herself and the crafters.

Alexander, and the others waited impatiently for the old master to lead his wagon through. He was last in line, and slightly delayed as he rounded up more dwarves to lift the stone. None of them wanted to miss the look on his face when he laid eyes upon it.

They were not disappointed. Not five seconds after stepping into the compound, his gaze found the stone, a single twelve foot tall block of obsidian weighing something close to a ton. With tears in his eyes, he stumbled toward it, and actually hugged the stone. Or that's how it looked to Alexander and company. When several of the others did the same, he activated his mage sight and realized they were using their innate earth sense to explore the stone. *I'm still going to claim they were hugging it anytime I tell this story*.

Alexander shut down the portal to give them time to commune with the stone. He could always open it again when they were ready to go.

As they were planning how to load the stone onto the wagon, Fitz approached. He grumbled that he'd been awakened by the portal activation. Alexander suspected that it was more likely the smell of dwarven spirits, and the wizard already held a small keg in his arms like it was an infant child.

He must have been feeling generous, because when Alexander nodded in the direction of the stone, Fitz didn't hesitate. He called out to the dwarves to stand back, and levitated the stone, he rotated it so that it lay horizontally, and the dwarves simply pushed it toward the wagon and aligned it before Fitz set it down in the wagon's bed.

The dwarven master walked over and bowed to the wizard. "Thank you, Master Fitzbindulum. I assume these are yers?" He produced a large sack that must have contained Fitz's spell components.

"Thank you, Master Ironhammer. I hope your family is well?"

"Aye, that they are. Little Dorin grew up, married, and gave me three grandchildren. The youngest, Thea, be here now, with the crafters."

"Has it really been so long since I visited?" the wizard grumbled. "At my age, years pass like days."

"That's because you sleep through most of them!" Sasha poked the old

wizard in the belly.

The old dwarf laughed. "Yer welcome in me house anytime, Fitz. As ever." With that, he bowed slightly to the group, and headed back to the wagon. As they turned it toward the portal, Fitz waved a hand and activated it. Once they were through, he closed it again.

Sasha and Lainey went off to find Thea and help her and the crafters get settled. Max went to help Brick unload his share of the dwarven beverages, and then rode with him to deliver the rest to the palace. By the time they returned, dinner was nearly ready.

Thea and the crafters had stowed their personal gear in the barracks, which were on the second floor of the armory. Each of them got a small 6x6 room with a bunk and a storage chest. There was a communal bathroom at the end of the hall. Upon seeing that, Sasha had refused to let Thea bunk in the barracks. She offered her the last of the guest suites on the second floor of the main house. Thea absolutely refused, saying it would be an imposition. So they compromised, setting up a bunk in the workshop attached to the greenhouse. She would have privacy there, and space to work. Thea had brought provisions for herself and the crafters, and went about setting up to cook in the workshop's small kitchen. Sasha would have none of that, dragging the dwarfess into the main house kitchen, where they worked together to prepare a meal for everyone. The crowd at the dining room table that evening was quite the group. Five adventurers, an ancient wizard, and four dwarves of Broken Mountain. The young dwarves were amazed by the food, and ate like they'd been starving. The wizard, of course, ate more.

Once dinner was complete, Sasha informed their guests that she and the rest of the Greystone clan would be away for the next day. Brick told the crafters to take the day and explore the city, and gave them each 25 gold as spending money. Alexander gave each of them medallions so they could safely leave and enter the compound. He explained to them about the wards, so they would not cause any tension by attempting to bring in guests and getting them teleported. He also warned them about the potential for PWP members to be lurking around.

Fitz, who was already well into emptying his keg, had begun snoring, so they left him where he was. The rest of them retired to their various quarters and

turned in for the night.

Chapter Twelve

For Those About to Rock

Alexander awoke once again in his pod. He was getting used to the transition from Io immersion to the real world, but it was still a bit disorienting at first. The nurse removed his headgear, then with confirmation that he was ready, his facemask. She assisted him with swinging his legs around so that he could stand, then handed him a robe to put on. As was his habit, he stumbled to the bathroom and the shower.

When he met up with the girls in the living room. Lainey inspected him like a racehorse at an auction, checking his eyes, his legs, even his teeth and gums. Satisfied, she hugged him. They sat down, and she started the awkward conversation they both knew they needed to have.

"You were kind of an ass to me a couple days ago. I have decided to forgive you because I know you don't have much experience with women, and because you were right. I shouldn't have freaked out when you got hurt. I'm so... programmed to look out for you, and there was so much blood. My logical brain knew it was stupid, but I couldn't help myself." She leaned against him, thinking about what to say next.

"If it helps any, I'm the same way," Sasha said quietly. "I've been playing these games all my life. I know in my head that a death, or the loss of a limb, means nothing. The avatar can be healed, or will respawn good as new. But as a healer, I take it as a personal failure when one of my pet boys dies." She winked at Alexander. "In the heat of the moment my emotions take over. But you get used to it, and eventually you can limit your reaction to a smack on the head and a sarcastic comment for them when they respawn. Your brain learns to separate game life from real life. Though, I admit, with this full immersion, the game life seems SO much more real than before."

Alexander nodded his head in agreement. He put an arm around Lainey and hugged her close. "I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you. I think maybe I was feeling some of the same things you were. I was angry at myself for nearly dying in such a stupid way. And you're right, Sasha, it does feel much more real than before. Especially the pain. I think maybe that level of pain impacts your ability to think clearly, which is not an excuse. I'm just saying

that maybe we all have some adjusting to do. Do you think you can manage it?" He looked at Lainey.

"I don't know. I need some time to think about it. About whether I even want to."

Leaving it there, they all waited in silence until their car showed up. Once inside, Alexander smiled when a thought occurred to him. "I think Sasha's got a little crush on Fitz!" he winked at Lainey.

She played along. "Oh, definitely! She keeps teasing him and poking him in the belly. And she feeds him like he's a cute little bear cub!" she giggled.

"Eww! Stop!" Sasha said. "He reminds me of my grandfather. All rumpled and ornery. In a cute way. And Rufus is adorable! I think that squirrel might actually be smarter than YOU, dork boy!" Based on what he'd seen of the familiar, he thought she might be right.

They arrived at the compound and headed inside to find Bethany grinning at them from behind the reception desk. Brick groaned as he noticed she was wearing a Santa Claus beard, dyed blonde. Laughing, Max took a moment to approach her. "Is it wrong that I think you look sexy in that?" he winked.

"Yes." She winked back, "Very, very wrong."

The rest of the morning and early afternoon were taken up with the usual battery of medical and psychological tests. Melanie caused some chuckles as she popped up here and there wearing the same beard as Bethany.

When they were all finished, Richard called them to a conference room for a group discussion.

"So, a few things. First, the videos of your interactions with PWP have gone absolutely viral. The views are in the tens of millions per day. In the last 48 hours we've actually seen an uptick in new sales and some renewed subscriptions from players who had stopped playing. Apparently, your fighting back against the PK guild has struck a chord with people. Heimdall, please play the holo video clip for us?"

"Of course sir." Heimdall replied as the holo player on the table whirred to life. After a moment, a video began to play. It was Brick, running up a hill covered in angry bunnies. Richard just sighed as Brick turned red.

"Not that video Heimdall. The most recent PWP video. Thank you."

"My apologies, sir." Heimdall didn't sound apologetic. The video changed to a replay of the group seeming to enjoy a quiet picnic before being attacked by the nine PWP players. It showed the battle from several angles, including the stray bolt that hit Jenkins. Then the three survivors being arrested and charged. There was a brief clip of the crowd in the city waving and chanting "Seee ya!". Then footage of Henry stalking the gate of their compound, and Alexander going out to confront him. It replayed the entire conversation, and repeated the section where Henry called his guildmates morons. It closed with footage of nearly 60 PWP lined up on their knees, the crowd again chanting "Seee ya!" and Amelia explaining how Henry had taken over the guild.

"I'm giving you this information because there's a chance that at least some of the folks joining or rejoining the game are doing so in order to hunt you. You've become celebrities, and there's always that fringe element that want to see celebrities brought down. To counter that, we're making a few changes. First, you will all have security escorts anytime you are not in immersion, and around the clock guards outside your homes. Brick, we will also have very discreet security watching over your family, just in case someone makes that connection and tries to reach you through them. Before you object, this is our responsibility. We generated two of these videos and contributed to the problem." Brick, who had indeed been about to object, closed his mouth and nodded acceptance.

"As for PWP," Richard continued, "after the disastrous raid, and the release of several videos, their membership dropped to just twenty-eight. Five of those are Amelia and the officers she spoke of. Another seven are in prison in Stormforge. The remainder are holed up in their guild keep for another day until their PK marks wear off. Or perhaps because they have no desire to go out. We have no idea how many of those will continue to follow Henry, and how many are loyal to Amelia's bunch, but Henry has been recruiting. As I said, those videos attract all kinds, and it seems a few die-hard PK players are joining him for the challenge. Please, watch your backs."

Richard opened a file on the table in front of him. "On a different note, we have received offers for each of you from the company marketing the "Seee Ya PWP" t-shirts. They are offering to pay \$15,000 to each of you that's

willing to have your Avatar wear their shirt and make a short video clip. If you choose to do so, we can handle the legal contracts and get the clips sent to them for you."

Brick smiled and raised his hand instantly. "I'm in!" They all laughed, and after a moment, each smiled to the others.

"Looks like you're all in," Richard said. "In that case I suggest you do something special as a group while wearing the shirts. Maybe do a little dance, or attend the prisoners' trials."

"Next order of business," he continued, passing another folder across the table to Brick. "Brick, you've received another offer. I'll let you read it for yourself."

He then slid another folder in Lainey's direction. "Lainey, there's one for you, too."

They all waited while Brick and Lainey read their offers. Lainey's eyes widened as she scanned hers. Then they narrowed, and she closed the folder. She shook her head no as she passed it back across the table.

Brick cursed under his breath as he read his offer. But after a moment he began to chuckle. "Aw, what the hell! Money's good."

"Care to share?" Max asked his friend.

"Company that makes fuzzy bunny slippers wants to pay me to do a commercial wearing their slippers. As my avatar, I mean. Not in real life. And they'll pay enough for a down payment for a house for my mom."

Richard slid yet another folder across the table to Brick. "I anticipated your interest, and I've taken the liberty of having a list prepared for you. Those are all foreclosed homes that are in good neighborhoods with good schools. All with four or more bedrooms. You can purchase them for roughly 50% of their market value. With your fee from the t-shirt offer as down payment, we are prepared to offer you a mortgage sufficient to cover the amount required to purchase any one of those homes, plus any repairs that may be necessary. At 1% interest."

Brick sat there, mouth open, staring at Richard. "Thank you, sir. I... you've been so generous already. With the job and the apartment. I don't have the

words."

Richard just reached out to shake Brick's hand. "No thanks are necessary. You are a valued employee, and have been a loyal friend to my son. The demands we are putting on you, with longer and longer immersions, are going to make it harder for you to look out for your family. This should help ease that burden, and make you more effective at your job. All we did was a bit of research. We're not actually giving you anything, really. You'll be paying us interest on the mortgage, and the discounted interest rate is something we offer all employees. It's a low-risk loan, as you'll start with nearly 50% equity in whichever house you choose."

Brick's mouth was hanging open again as he processed all of that.

"Your next immersion begins in the morning, and will last one week. If you'd like, we can have a van drive you and your family around to view houses this afternoon. I've circled a couple of recommendations that you should look at first. If you see one you want, we'll take care of dealing with the bank that holds the note, and arrange the purchase. If there are no renovations required, your family can be moved in a month. Maybe less."

Brick nodded his head in thanks.

"What about you, Lainey?" Sasha asked. "You didn't seem happy with your offer."

Lainey shook her head. "It's from a company that makes leather clothes. They want me to wear my Valkyrie gear in a commercial."

"That sounds cool!" Sasha said. "I guess they didn't offer enough? Or are you shy about showing your real-life face?"

Lainey looked uncomfortable. "No, the offer was very generous. It's just that the company makes ... adult clothes."

Seeing that Sasha wasn't getting it, Max blurted out, "Bondage gear! Kinky leather outfits!"

Both Lainey and Sasha blushed furiously, and that was the end of that conversation.

Richard dismissed them all, and once they'd signed their various

endorsement offers, they all headed home, except for Brick, who went to go pick up his family and house hunt.

Alexander awoke in his bedroom in Stormforge feeling energized and motivated. *A solid week of immersion ahead of us!* Today he planned to check in with the mayor of Whitehall to see if the refugees were ready to head back to their village. He also wanted to get everyone to the stable master and get their mounts. Brick had already spoken to the king about setting a meeting with King Thalgrin, and they needed to make sure that happened before this immersion ended. He also wanted to spend some time with Fitz learning whatever magic he could. Brick wanted some time to work with the crafters on his smithy, and Sasha needed to spend some time training with Lydia in alchemy.

In fact, it would be a good time for all of them to get some work in on their crafting. Max had carpentry, which he used for gathering wood and crafting bows and arrows, before he got the quiver with unlimited arrows, anyway. Alexander had chosen smithing as well when he was a noob, as he needed to repair his own weapons and armor.

The friends had joined Io together, but had begun the game in different noob zones. Once he and Sasha had joined up with Brick and Max, he no longer needed smithing. Brick was a much higher level, and had natural dwarven affinities that gave him bonuses Alexander didn't get. He hadn't focused on crafting since then. But they were building something here. It was time he contributed. And Lainey needed a crafting skill or two. She was learning some herbology and alchemy from Lydia, but Sasha already had that covered. He would encourage her to develop something else, as well.

Heading downstairs, he found that Thea had already prepared breakfast for everyone. Joining his growing company at the breakfast table, he scooped up a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast.

"Thank you, Thea. This is wonderful," he said. "But you know you don't have to cook for us."

"Aye. But ye've all been such kind hosts, I wanted to help out a bit," Thea smiled at him.

"You're as a good a cook as your grand dame, Thea!" Fitz winked at her

while rubbing his tummy.

"Bwahahaha!" the dwarfess laughed. "Me gran could engrave a sigil on the head of a pin, but she were a horrible cook and ye knows it! Me gramps warned me about ye, wizard! Don't try'n tug me beard!" she winked right back at him.

Breakfast finished, Brick went off with the crafters, while Lainey and Sasha decided to visit Lydia. Max went to modify a couple of the horse stalls in the barn to accommodate their enormous draft horse. Alexander decided to go with Brick, to see if his earth mover abilities would be of any use.

Brick, Thea, and the three crafters were standing near the south wall of the armory. The three crafters were Dvorn and Garen, who were both apprentice stone masons, and Harin, a journeyman smith. Brick was holding up a piece of parchment and attempting to create a diagram of what he wanted. Taking pity on him, Alexander closed his eyes and used his earth mover skill to raise two stone benches with a table in between. Brick nodded his thanks, and they all sat down.

Brick sketched out roughly what he had in mind for the size of the structure, and the placement of its components. Harin studied it for a moment, then made a few recommendations that would improve the workflow, and maximize the efficiency of the space. Then they began to discuss the structure itself.

"Bein' that ye already have two solid walls," Harin said, gesturing to the armory wall on one side and the outer wall of the keep adjacent to it, "it'd be best to leave the other two as open as possible, to allow fresh air to flow. At the same time, ye need to be able to secure the building and protect yer work and yer secrets!" Dwarven smiths valued their secret crafting formulas more than their lives. And not just the smiths. The same applied to the brewers, enchanters, and in fact all the trades.

Garen spoke next. "Any dwarven smithy worth its salt be made of stone. Sparks will fly when yer deep in yer work, and wooden walls canna' contain the heat of a real dwarven forge."

Alexander raised his hand, "That's what I'm here for. You tell me what you need, I'll raise it and move it for you. You can take it from there."

Both stone masons nodded their approval. That would save them a lot of time quarrying and transporting stone.

"Since ye mentioned the heat o' the forge," Harin interrupted, "what type of forge d'ye want?"

Brick thought about it. "Well, I would like a foot pump for the bellows, so I can work alone if needs be. The forge itself should be deep enough to heat a longsword, and wide enough for shield work-"

He was interrupted again, "Aye, aye, we knows the proper sizing. What's important is, what d'ye want the forge crafted of? Iron? Stone, Ceramic?"

"Ahhh. I see," Brick said. "Well, let me ask, if it could be yer dream forge, what material would ye use?"

Harin didn't even hesitate. "Me dream be to work a dragon forge. The best materials, like mithril, need the heat of dragon fire to be worked proper. But dragon fire melts stone, and iron. The only materials that can take the heat be dragonstone, obsidian, and a skystone-titanium alloy."

"Skystone?" Alexander asked Brick.

"Aye. Stone found in fallen meteors. Can't be softened by fire of any kind, even dragon fire. Can only be heated and shaped with magic. Very, very rare."

"Aye, and dragonstone be the petrified bones of dead dragons. Just as rare," Harin added.

"Obsidian, which I see'd you found more of than our clan has seen in millennia, was born in fire. Once it hardens, no fire short of dragonfire can touch it. And with a simple enchantment, it will resist dragonfire as well. It also be good for holding and conducting enchantments to regulate heat, or add properties to a metal. Our smithies in the mountain have obsidian gems embedded in places to assist master smiths with large and difficult infusion spells."

Alexander had an idea. "How effective would those spells be if the structure itself was obsidian?"

Harin inhaled so sharply it caused him to cough. His eyes rolled to the back

of his head, and he seemed on the verge of passing out. Thea thumped him on the back a few times, and Dvorn handed him a flask. When he was breathing normally, he whispered as if afraid to say the words out loud. "A forge and smithy crafted out o'obsidian? It would be... never has anyone seen the like. Master smiths from every realm would come to just set eyes upon it. They would pay ye for the honor o'workin' at the forge. The items ye could create. Me brain canna' find the words"

Alexander smiled at the wonder in the dwarf's voice. Brick was looking at Alexander like a kid on Christmas morning. The two stone masons looked terrified. No doubt they'd never worked with obsidian before and were picturing the consequences of damaging the stone. *Boy, are they in for a surprise!*

Looking to Thea, he said, "Would you mind going next door to Lydia's shop? Tell Sasha that I need four mana and four stamina potions. Tell her I'm about to do something stupid like Brick," he grinned.

Thea laughed, hopping up and headed out the gate.

He looked at the three craftsmen. "I know you like to keep your secrets, but I have some information to share, and before I do so, I need to know if you can accept it. How strong is your stone sense? Can you sense the earth beneath us? And if so, how far?"

All three dwarves looked to Brick, who nodded, "Ye can trust him. And if ye pay attention, ye'll learn a thing or two." Those were magic words for apprentices. Each of them closed their eyes and extended their senses below.

Harin spoke first. "There be a limestone sewer tunnel below us maybe 30 feet. Beyond that, I canno' tell". That made sense. His natural ability as a dwarf gave him some sense, but he was a smith, trained to relate to metals, not stone.

The two masons did better, as expected. "Below the tunnel be another hundred feet of granite and igneous rock, and... more tunnels?" Dvorn asked?

"Lava tubes," Garen corrected, "a maze of lava tubes, and... obsidian!" He gasped. "Tons of it!"

"Aye, lads," Brick chuckled. "This city sits smack in the middle o'a volcanic crater. When it blew its stack, the explosion made thousands of tons of obsidian." He reached over to ruffle Garen's hair, bringing the young dwarf back to reality.

Thea returned after a few more moments with the potions. Handing him the bag, she said, "Sasha gave me a few extras, and said to warn ye to be careful. Lainey said to tell ye 'Don't hurt yerself, idiot!" She repeated it a little awkwardly.

When both Alexander and Brick laughed, she relaxed visibly. Brick motioned for her to sit, then said, "We're going to put a spell on each of ye, that will help you to see what we're going to do next. Don't worry, it won't hurt ye."

Brick and Alexander each cast mage sight on two of their guests. Then took a few minutes to explain and let them adjust to what they were seeing. When the four young dwarves had calmed a bit and were breathing normally, Alexander began.

He activated his own mage sight and reached down below them with his earth magic. He sensed a large block of obsidian, maybe 12 x 10, roughly twice the size of the last one he'd brought up. He was suddenly glad he was already sitting. Focusing his earth mover spell, he softened the earth above the block of stone, and gently urged it upward. It didn't budge. He put more effort into it, channeling more mana. Then more again. Finally, it began to move. The others who were all watching his spell wrap around the stone all gasped as it slowly lifted through the liquefied granite. He had chosen a block that was not in line with any of the tunnels, so he didn't have the added effort of moving it to avoid them. He could bring it upward in nearly a straight, if diagonal, line. The mana poured out of him at an alarming rate. He had to stop and rest when it was less than a third of the way. Taking some time to catch his breath, he drank both a mana and a stamina potion. Thea touched his shoulder and he felt a buff settle into him. It increased his stamina, health, and mana regeneration. *Awesome!*

After a five minute rest, he began again. This time he started with the same massive mana flow it took to get the block moving initially. As it began to move upward again, Brick and the others began a dwarven chant. It started

low and slow, not much more than a rumbling. Building it up, they grew louder, and Thea's softer voice began to sound in counterpoint. Alexander could feel their magic infuse him. He legs stopped wobbling and his back ached less. *I feel as if I could lift a mountain!*

He pushed harder as they continued their song. The block was now only 50 feet below. Now 30. He was reaching the end of his mana, but didn't want to let the momentum die. Digging deep, he pushed hard, and the block lifted up right beneath them all. When the dwarves finished their song, and Alexander finally opened his eyes, they were all sitting atop the block of obsidian, ten feet above the courtyard stones.

Too exhausted to move, Alexander allowed Thea to pour another stamina potion down his throat. Then instead of the expected mana potion, he got a shot of dwarven whisky, which caused him to cough and wheeze as it burned its way down his gullet. The dwarves all hopped down to the floor below, but Alexander had yet to recover enough to stand. He simply called out, "Catch me," and rolled off the edge.

The dwarves cried out in surprise, but managed to catch him and lower him gently to the ground out of the way. He just laid there, one eye open, watching them. Thea had left the flask of whisky on his chest. *Good girl*. *Dwarfess*. *Good Dwarfess*!

The five dwarves all proceeded to "hug" the block of obsidian, using their senses to explore it and identify any weakness. The masons produced some chalk and began to outline where they'd make cuts to create the components they needed while wasting as little of the material as possible. The block quickly began to look like a massive jigsaw puzzle.

The whole time, Brick stood there with his eyes closed, hands on the block, oblivious to their discussion. Alexander managed to push himself up on his elbow, and called out loud enough for them to hear. "Guys, hold on. That won't be necessary."

The two masons looked at him, confused. He glanced meaningfully at Brick, then back at them. Their gazes both turned to Brick as if just now realizing he was still communing with the stone.

Just then Brick placed his hands next to each other on the face of the stone

about shoulder height. He took a deep breath, and sunk his hands into the stone. Straining his muscles, he separated his hands, moving them outward, left and right. Thea, Harin, and Dvorn all gasped as an opening formed in the stone directly in front of Brick. Garen didn't make a sound, just fell back on his arse, mouth agape.

Brick moved his hands further apart, arms outstretched. The opening grew wider, and taller, until finally Brick stepped into it. When he was finished, he was standing in an alcove in the middle of the block. Four feet wide and about six feet high. He faced the middle of the stone, and repeated the process. In just a minute he had carved what was effectively a Brick-size tunnel through the middle of the giant block. He had pushed the stone aside, so that now it was about 16 feet wide instead of 12. Turning to face one of the walls of his tunnel, he did it again. Pushed the stone forward and to the sides, opening the way through to the edge. Then he turned around and did it again in the other direction.

When he stopped to rest, Brick had created what looked like a massive ebony hut. The opening inside was six feet high (it was as high as the dwarf could reach) with massive columns at each corner. There were floor to ceiling openings in the wall on the east side where Brick had started his tunnel, and on the south side. The floor area had spread out to be roughly 20 feet squared.

The other dwarves were speechless. As Brick collapsed next to Alexander on the ground, the other dwarves stepped into the opening, testing the floor with their feet, touching the columns at each corner. While they had all certainly seen stone shapers work, they had just watched Brick's magic with mage sight. The beauty of it had left them silent. Alexander thought the two masons might be trying to duplicate the magic from the way they ran their hands over the stone.

Brick eventually got back to his feet and stepped inside. He instructed the crafters to build him three scaffolds: one at two-foot height; one at four; and one at six. As they ran off to complete their task, he laid his hands on the stone again, and stretched it farther. The columns and floor thinned out as he pushed the northern wall back until it nearly touched the armory. Then he did the same with the western wall, leaving just a half foot gap between the stone and the keep wall. The southeast column remained roughly three feet

square. This corner was where he intended to build his forge, shaping it directly from the stone.

Needing another rest, the two friends walked back into the house and sat in the lounge. Thea entered behind them, and went to fetch them a snack to help replace the energy they'd both used up. They just sat in companionable silence until she returned with a platter of fresh bread, cheese and ham, all sliced. As they quickly made themselves each a sandwich, Thea left and returned with a pitcher of water in one hand, ale in the other. They both opted for water, and she poured them each a glass. Then she poured herself some ale, took a bit of cheese to nibble on, and sat down with them.

"I dunno what to say," she began. "Me whole family's crafters. Among the best in the clan. But never have I witnessed crafting like tha'!"

"Blame Fitz," Brick managed to get out around a mouthful of ham and cheese goodness.

"Yes, he taught me how to move the earth, and unlocked the shaping skill within Brick," Alexander added.

"Aye, I know shaping. But what I've seen was the shaping of a table, or a chest. Maybe a statue or two. Nothin on such a grand scale as tha'!" she smiled in wonder. "When me gramps hears o'this, he'll shit diamonds!" Realizing what she'd said, she gasped and covered her mouth.

The shocked look on her face tickled Brick. "BWAHAHAHA! Well, let's no' warn him, then. When it be finished, we'll invite him for a meal and surprise him, eh?"

She gave him an odd, thoughtful look for a moment. Then nodded her head. "Aye, on me honor I'll not utter a word." Then she smirked and added, "But ye'll have to tie down them others, or they'll be runnin' to brag to the whole mountain on yer behalf! What they seen today be a near miracle to them."

"Well," Brick said with a sigh, "can't leave a miracle half finished." He got up to head outside.

"If it's ok with you, mister miracle, I'll sit here a bit longer. I think I pulled something lifting that stone." Alexander moved from his chair to a sofa where he could spread out. As soon as he got comfortable, he noticed the

pitcher of cold ale on the table, condensation dripping down the sides. *Juuuuust out of reach*. He'd need to sit up to grab it. *Nope*. *Not worth it*. He closed his eyes.

He was awaked some time later by the sounds of a wizard trying to quietly abscond with the food platter and pitcher of ale. "Your stealth skills need some work, Fitz," he said, causing the wizard to jump.

Fitz looked sheepish. "I didn't want to wake you, boy. I watched from my tower as you lifted that block. I'm proud of you. But you should rest now."

"Proud enough to leave me some of that cheese?" Alexander smiled.

"Nope!" the wizard cheerfully replied as he scooted out the door.

He keeps taking our dinnerware Alexander thought as he drifted back to sleep.

After what felt like only a few minutes, he was awakened again, this time by the sensation of Sasha healing him. He opened one eye to see both her and Lainey hovering over him.

Lainey was the first to speak. "Idiot." Short, and to the point.

"You overtaxed yourself." Sasha added, "Drained your mana to dangerous levels. Again."

"Yes. And Yes." He agreed with both of them. "Can I have some ale please? Fitz stole mine. I think it has vitamins and stuff in it. Does a body good. The ale. Not Fitz. Have you noticed he keeps walking off with our plates and mugs and things?"

"No ale for you, dork boy. It's not even noon. What you need is some tea." Lainey headed for the kitchen.

"I feel stupid," Alexander said.

"You ARE stupid! I saw how tired you were after lifting that first block, and you just lifted one TWICE as big!" Sasha scolded.

"No... not that. Ok that was stupid too. But I feel stupid now. Like, m'brain is slowwww."

"You put yourself in mana debt. It's like when you run too far without breathing right and you go into oxygen debt. Your brain's not getting enough oxygen and you get woozy. Mana debt is the same. You drained your mana beyond empty, and your stamina to a stupidly low level. You were able to manage it because you had a dwarf buff going and their chant gave you a boost. But when those ended, well, now you know what it's like to be a tweaker fallin' off the horse."

"So, what you're saying is... wait. How long will I be stupid?"

"I'm afraid for the rest of your life," Lainey quipped as she handed him a steaming mug of tea.

Alexander sipped the tea and grinned, "Lainey gots jokes!"

Sasha and Lainey shared a look that clearly said "maybe we could just drop him off at the pound?"

"Drink your tea. It'll help with the headache that's coming." Sasha chided

Alexander finished his drink and set the mug on the table. Sort of. It tumbled off. "What headache? I feel good." He drifted off to sleep.

The smells of wolf steak stew woke him. *Lunchtime!* He opened his eyes and a searing light penetrated through his eyes directly to the back of his brain, then bounced around like a .22 slug inside his cranium. "Ah. That headache." *Mental note: Don't do that again.*

He managed to open his eyes long enough to focus, the blurry world resolving itself into the lounge in which he'd passed out. His view was obstructed, however, by the face of Rufus hovering a few inches in front of his own. The squirrel chittered at him questioningly, then reached forward one tiny paw and lifted Alexander's eyelid. Apparently deciding the foolish mage would live, he uttered another chitter than couldn't be anything other than laughter, and bounded away.

"In case you're wondering," Lainey pushed his legs over and sat down next to him on the sofa, "Rufus says you're an idiot." She proceeded to check him over as well, lifting both eyelids, checking his pulse, telling him to follow her finger as she moved it side to side. That one made him wobble a bit.

"You'll live. You need food, and Fitz says you shouldn't cast anything for a

while. Here, drink this."

Grateful to his long-time caretaker and friend, he took the offered vial and chugged it down. "Gack! What WAS that?" His tongue tried to curl up and the inside of his mouth tasted like broiled goblin ass.

"Don't know. Lydia made it. Said it'd teach you never to do that again." She patted him on the head and left him on the sofa.

"They're all out to get me," he mumbled.

He slowly joined the others for lunch, which was indeed wolf stew. He 'wolfed' down two bowls and then wiped his bowl clean with some fresh bread. Feeling much better, he asked how everyone else's mornings went.

"I be done with me shaping," Brick said. "The lads be adding some bits here and there." Brick looked in much better condition than Alexander. Though he'd accomplished a major undertaking, his magic was innate to his dwarf body, depending on stamina rather than mana. Being both a dwarf and a tank, his stamina was quite high, so he was only mildly tired.

Max had altered the stalls to accommodate their draft horse. Then he'd gotten ambitious and built a small corral outside the stable to allow the horse some sunlight and room to roam about. He was anxious to get to the stable master and finally choose their mounts.

Lainey and Sasha had spent most of the morning with Lydia. Lainey experimented with some low level cure potions, while Sasha and Lydia had burned through a pile of feather-root, making several hundred of the highest quality healing potions. Sasha had brought a supply back for the guild vault. None of them were high enough level to need them yet.

As the palace was just a short walk, they agreed to head over to see the stable master. Alexander tried to pay him to train Lainey in the riding skill, but the old man would have none of it. Apparently either the king or the captain had already thought to add Lainey to the list of friends. Therefore, while Lainey, who knew how to ride in real life, worked with the stable master to unlock her riding skill, the others checked out the available mounts. The king's stables were huge, with hundreds of mounts. Rather than try to physically examine each one, they accessed their UI's and pulled down a menu that helped them narrow their field of choices.

Sasha quickly found a massive looking stag with an impressive rack of antlers. It was as tall as a horse, extremely fast over short distances, and there was a notation that it would fight if necessary, but only while its rider was mounted. It also had some dietary restrictions – it did not eat hay. Or rather, it would, but it would get no nutritional benefit. It could eat corn and acorns, though.

Max started with the thoroughbred horses. He had visions of a massive charger with combat training that could stomp enemies while Max shot arrows from its back. Alexander reminded him that those horses tended to have limited endurance, and would not be great for weaving through forests at speed. Forests being a Ranger's main habitat, Max nodded and began to rethink his choices.

Brick was going with a battle boar. There was never any question. He had seen one in action in one of the Tolkien movies, and as far as he was concerned, dwarves rode boars, period.

Alexander was keeping an open mind, looking through a wide variety of horses, cats, a large flightless bird that resembled an ostrich, even a rhino.

Lainey approached with the stable master, and with a flick of his hand Alexander sent her the menu. She immediately asked, in the most girly tone he'd ever heard from her, "Do you have any... unicorns?"

The stable master shook his head. "I'm sorry, lass. Unicorns are special, magical creatures. They are sentient, and won't hold with being kept in a stable. They choose a rider if they are so inclined, and cannot otherwise be tamed. Dragons are the same."

He then gathered them all together in a small corral just outside the stable entrance. He asked them what they were thinking. After hearing everyone's thoughts, he asked, "If you don't mind me asking, how will you use these mounts?"

When everyone just looked at him blankly, he specified, "Are you just looking for fast mounts to take you from one city to the next along the roads? Will you be mainly traveling through forests and over mountains? Do you need your mounts to fight?"

Understanding, Alexander spoke for the group. "We are adventurers, sir.

While it would be nice to stick to the roads, we must often follow quests where they take us, through forests and swamps, and yes over mountains. We are not a cavalry type unit, participating in open battles, and have no particular need for fighting mounts. However, if they could defend themselves or even assist in the event of an ambush, it would be helpful."

As the stable master nodded, Brick added, "Dwarves ride boars," earning a chuckle from everyone.

"Aye, master dwarf. That they do. And boars be damn good mounts. Strong and sturdy, they have great bursts of speed good for charging or fleeing. If kept well fed, they have the stamina to run for hours. The can climb rocky terrain, and will forage for food as you go. They eat anything and everything. But they are stubborn, and will test you at times."

Brick just smiled.

"I think I have just the pig for you, master dwarf," he withdrew a figurine from his bag and handed it to Brick. Along with a handful of acorns. "Just hold it in your hand and call the animal in your mind. When it comes to you, offer it the acorns. It'll decide if it likes you or not."

Brick did as instructed. Shortly there was a banging noise, followed by a few snorts and an alarmed yelp that sounded like a stable hand. A massive boar waddled out of the stables and headed for Brick. It was four feet high at the shoulders, and had a head the size of a rhino. It was covered in coarse black hair, and had intelligent, if beady, eyes. Razor sharp tusks were currently wrapped in leather to protect the other animals in the stables.

The others took a step back and cleared a path between the giant pig and the dwarf. It strode calmly up to Brick, jamming its rather slobbery snout into his chest and sniffing at him. Brick raised his handful of acorns, thankful of the plate gauntlet he was wearing. The pig very politely and gently removed the treats from his hand, crunching them once before swallowing. Snorting in curiosity, it then tried to jam its massive snout into Brick's inventory bag, apparently smelling more treats.

Laughing, Brick grabbed its tusks and lifted its face so he could look it in the eye, "No, big fella. Not for you. I'll get ye some proper food soon enough!" The pig snorted in agreement, then turned and leaned into the dwarf, nearly

knocking him off his feet.

"Looks like he's accepted you!" the stable master smiled. "Treat him well. He's of a royal line that goes back to the days when this realm was settled. You'll have to find a name that's worthy of him."

Max raised a hand. "So... not Lord Ticklepants, then?" he winked.

"Careful or I'll find out if he eats elf!" Brick growled. The pig seemed eager to comply.

The stable master left Brick and his new mount to get acquainted. He looked to Max next. "The king tells me you requested horses, and we have some of the finest. But I can see you're a ranger. The forests are where you'll be. Might I make a suggestion?"

Max, and the others, all bobbed their heads.

"If it were you alone, I'd recommend a bear. They can smell near as good as a wolf, and let you know when you've got company. They're strong, and fast over short distances. They can help you hunt, feed themselves on berries and nuts if needed, and can act as a tank while you kill your enemies from a distance."

Max's smile got wider as the man spoke.

"But bears are not endurance mounts. They'd not have the speed to keep up with a fast moving group for long. So for you, I'd recommend a wolf, or one of the big cats. A panther, maybe. For when you need to move in stealth?"

Max liked the idea of a wolf. They were fierce, and fast, and could run all day. They could be silent in even dense forest. But the mention of stealth got him thinking. "Sir, could a panther mount climb a tree if it was needed?" he asked.

"Ha! It's a cat, master ranger. It can climb most anything. And faster than you!" He handed Max a figurine of a black cat.

Max summoned it. None of them heard the slightest sound as the giant cat padded out of the stable and up to Max. It was tall enough to look him right in the face. At least eight feet long, not counting the tail, the beast was a charcoal black color, and must have weighed 600 lbs. It sat on its haunches

in front of Max, looked at him expectantly, and growled slightly. With an apologetic look toward Brick's new mount, Max pulled a piece of boar meat from his bag and held it out to the cat. The cat took the meat, chewing it briefly before swallowing. It began to purr. Which in a cat that size sounded like a lawnmower running a few houses down the block. It butted its head against Max's chest, demanding its ears be scratched.

"Oh, my GOD I want a kitty too!" Sasha had to be restrained by the stable master to keep her from leaping onto the panther and interrupting its bonding with Max. She regained her calm, mostly, and looked at the man. "Must. Have. Kitty."

Behind her, Lainey raised her hand, "Me too, please."

Laughing, the stable master reached into his bag. He pulled out half a dozen figurines, looking at the two ladies and considering.

While he was thinking, Alexander cleared his throat. "I'm sensing a theme here, so I'll go with the flow and choose a cat as well."

"Aye, cats are a good choice. The king himself prefers them. And we've several to choose from, as they come in litters, not one or two at a time like horses."

He handed Sasha a figurine. "Lady druid, for you, I think maybe a mist cat. Magical beasts, they are. And more intelligent than most."

She called the cat to her, and peeked anxiously around the stable doors, excited to catch her first glimpse. After about a minute, when no cat had appeared, she looked in confusion to the stable master. "Did it reject me already?" Behind her, what appeared to be a cloud of mist plummeted from the roof of the stables. A silver paw reached out and batted her playfully in the behind. Spinning around, she came face to face with a mist cat that seemed to be smiling at her. Well, not face to face. The cat was taller. Sasha leapt forward, throwing her arms around its neck and burying her face in its fur.

Lainey was next.

"Lady Valkyrie, a daughter of Odin should ride a majestic lion. But not one of those big lazy males. The lioness is the fierce hunter of the pride!"

Upon her call, a regal lioness of a size with the other cats padded out of the stable. It approached Lainey, circling around her and sniffing before coming to a halt back in front of the Valkyrie. She held out one paw as if to shake hands. Smiling, Lainey took the paw up in her own, much smaller hand, and bowed slightly to the queen of the jungle.

Then he looked to Alexander. "Knights are often found upon mighty white chargers. Symbols of strength and power. As you've chosen a cat, I think this will do nicely."

Alexander closed his eyes and thought, *Come to me*. The group all gasped in alarm as a giant white tiger with silver stripes bounded at full speed out of the stables. It leapt at Alexander, bowling him over onto his back. It then straddled the defenseless elf, looking down into his face and growling. Alexander stared back, thinking *Good kitty, nice kitty*, with all his might. After a tense moment, the cat lowered its head and licked him with a sandpaper tongue that covered his entire face. It then shifted to sit beside him, and swatted him with one large paw as if to say "okay, get up now". Even sitting, the cat was taller than Alexander. Rippling with muscle, it was easily half again as large as the other cats. Alexander reach out and scratched under its chin, for which he was rewarded with a purr that sent a thrill through him.

After a few more minutes of the friends feeding and bonding with the new mounts, the stable master gave them some brief instructions on the care and feeding of the animals. He explained how to summon them, and how to dismiss them. On Io, when mounts or pets were dismissed, they moved into a sort of limbo. For them, time did not pass. They did not need to sleep, or eat. And if they had been injured, upon being summoned again after more than an hour, they would return at full health. Lessons completed, the stable master sent them on their way. He promised to deliver appropriate saddles and gear to their stables within the hour.

Walking with the new companions beside them, the very happy group headed back to their home. They led the boar and clowder of cats into the stables. The boar wandered into the first stall, spun around a bit, then simply fell over on his side with a contented snort. Brick fell upon him and began wrestling with the giant pig, scratching its belly. "Who's a great big hunk of bacon!?" he chuckled.

The cats, on the other hand, sniffed at the various available stalls, and declined. They began to spread out. The lioness leaped up on some crates stacked outside the barn, rolled over on her back, and proceeded to let the sun warm her tummy. With a similar idea, Max's panther moved back to the smithy and leapt up onto the roof where the sun was warming the black stone. He sat with his front paws hanging off the roof above the door, and looked down at the slightly nervous dwarves below. The cat looked almost like a statue carved from the stone itself.

Sasha's mist cat sniffed around the courtyard, before nosing open the door to the workshop and disappearing into the greenhouse. Sasha followed, and soon the sound of giggling could be heard from inside.

Alexander's giant of a tiger simply sat in the courtyard and looked at him. "Haven't seen a spot you like yet, fella?" he asked. "Well, let's go look around." They toured the compound, going in and out of the workshop, the gardens (where the cat paused to 'mark' the wizard's tower, much to Alexander's delight) the gatehouse, and the armory building. The tiger sniffed each room, then moved on. Once back out in the front courtyard, Alexander paused near the front of the main house. "Well, buddy, that's about it. I don't think Sasha and Lainey would stand for having you in the main house. Maybe Brick's cellar? It's sort of like a cave..." he offered.

The cat snorted. He took a few steps toward the gate, then turned and ran toward the house. Leaping up, he easily cleared the second-floor balustrade. Pacing the length of the balcony, he curled up on the warm stone in front of the french doors that led to Alexander's suite. "Yeah, I don't blame you. I like it there, too," he chuckled.

With the mounts settled, the friends went their separate ways to take care of some business. Max headed to a butcher shop recommended by the stable master to arrange delivery of sides of beef and whole lamb carcasses for the cats. He also arranged for bales of hay and feed for the horse, and made deals with two fruit and vegetable vendors to purchase their leftovers at the end of the day for Brick's pig.

Alexander went to visit with the mayor of Whitehall, learning that the refugees would be ready to make the trip home the next morning. He promised they'd be ready to escort them an hour after dawn.

Arriving back at the compound, he witnessed a very nervous looking butcher's boy standing in the back of a cart, gingerly passing large chunks of meat to four large kitties. The cats patiently waited for the boy to extend the meat outward before taking it gently in their massive jaws and padding away to the stables to eat. Apparently, they'd been trained that the stables were where dinner happened. *Awesome*, *it makes cleanup much easier*.

Thrilled to be alive, the boy asked if he could feed the cats again next time. Max ruffled his hair and said, "We'll see." Tossing the boy a gold coin for a tip, he sent him back to the butcher.

Alexander found Lainey in the study, reading a book about crafting with leather. He sat down next to her. Indicating the book, he said, "I actually wanted to talk to you about that." She set the book in her lap and looked at him.

"I was thinking you and I should choose some useful crafting skills to develop. Brick can create and repair weapons and metal armor. Max can make bows and arrows for you both. Sasha's our potion expert. I think between us we should cover other needed skills like leatherworking, tailoring, or enchanting. What do you think?"

Lainey held the book up, "Leatherworking sounds interesting. I can make use of all the skins we've been wasting from the bunnies, boars, and wolves we kill. Four of us wear leather of one kind or another, and even Brick's armor has leather straps that will need to be repaired at some point. Plus there's a section that teaches me how to work on saddles and such. Tailoring sounds ok, but mainly just for the ability to make items with void pockets to expand your inventory, and those only come at a high level. Plus I can do the same with leather bags at high levels, too."

Alexander was proud of her. For a noob with less than a week in the game, she was learning a lot. And embracing the culture of Io.

"You'll need to visit the trainer. He can teach you how to skin the animals, treat the leather, and figure out what leathers work well for which uses. And he can teach you some patterns for leather goods. C'mon, I know where his shop is."

As they walked across the courtyard, he said, "I think I'll take up enchanting.

And maybe gem crafting. Brick and I can both mine ores and gems easily with our magic, so I should have access to lots of materials. Then I can enhance the things you craft with permanently infused enchantments, or with gemstones that hold spells and attribute bonuses."

"And we can make gear for more than just ourselves!" Lainey was getting into it. "We can make gifts for our friends, or sell the items we make in the market. If we can craft and sell high quality items, Brick and Max won't need to depend on random loot drops to earn a living. After this year, I mean."

Alexander guided Lainey to the leatherworker's guild and paid the fee for her training. He watched as she was given some rabbit and wolf carcasses and instructed how to clean and skin them. Once he was sure she was going to be ok, he left her some money to buy tools and supplies, and told her he'd be back for her in an hour or so.

There wasn't an enchanter's guild in Stormforge, or anywhere that he'd heard of, so he went to a shop nearby that sold enchantments. The store was filled with enchanted weapons, armor, and useful custom items, like rope that would never break, or a flask that would replenish its contents daily. There were also some novelty items like a hat that changed color based on your mood.

Alexander greeted the proprietor as he walked in. He knew the man a little bit, having brought weapons in to be enchanted in the past. "Good afternoon, master Baleron. I trust you've been well?"

"Ahh, young Alexander. You've been making quite the reputation for yourself lately. Soon they'll be buying me drinks at the Ogre just to hear tales of your purchases here!" the old man smiled at him. Master Baleron looked older than Fitz, if that was possible. He was a mage himself, specializing in enchantment magic. Less than five feet tall, with wrinkled skin and abnormally large ears, Alexander suspected he had some gnomish blood in him.

"Well, then here's a story for you to tell. I'd like to become an enchanter, and I was hoping you'd be able to teach me a bit about your art."

"Certainly, my boy! I'd be happy to! Very few are willing to learn the art

these days. Expensive, it is. Unfortunately, the best way to learn an enchantment is to study an item that holds the enchantment you wish to learn, and that study often leads to the destruction of the item. Too many think this a waste of good items that they could sell at the market, so most give up after a short time. But if you stick with it, you can grow your skill and create items of wonder!"

"You need not worry about me, master Baleron. I'm aware of the price. Myself and a friend of mine both have earth magic skills that allow us to quickly mine ores and gems. And I have half a guild vault full of enhanced items we've looted from dead PWP adventurers and other enemies we've faced. I am thinking I should have plenty to study for a while."

At the mention of PWP, the old mage grimaced. "Yes. Well. The city certainly owes you its thanks for all you're doing to oppose those villains. The guards caught several of them right out there in the street, preparing to burn down all the nearby buildings, my shop included! To spite those scum, I'll teach you what you need to know, and I'll do it at no charge!"

"Master Baleron, please. We were only doing our duty to the realm, as you yourself would do. I expect no favors for it, and the knowledge I ask of you is valuable. How about a compromise?"

Alexander removed a bottle of dwarven spirits from his inventory. The old enchanter's eyes lit up. He was well known at the Ogre, and often lamented the lack of quality spirits.

"How about a bottle for each lesson?" Alexander proposed.

"Deal!" The man took the bottle and gently stowed it under his counter. "Now, then. Last I saw you, you were wearing warrior's armor and asking me to enchant that ridiculously large sword. But I see from your current attire, you've decided to become a mage. I assume you have some magical ability then?"

Alexander nodded.

"Good. The hardest part of this is teaching you to access and control your mana. Without that obstacle, we can begin right away."

Handing Alexander a leather-bound book with a fanciful engraving on the

front, he said, "This book is the work of a master enchanter. He has infused it with the knowledge of how to transfer and then lock a spell permanently into an object. It is the most basic concept of enchanting."

Opening the book to the first page, Alexander saw lines of elegant script flowing in neat lines down the page. The words began to blur and move, then seemed to fly toward him. He knew this process. Scrolls that taught you spells and skills worked the same way. The information transferred from the book, directly into his mind. It was slightly disorienting, though nothing like the shock he experienced with Fitz's first lesson. He checked his skills page to confirm that enchanting had been unlocked.

Alexander spent another half hour with master Baleron, learning some specific enchantments. He could tell, though, that the old man was anxious to get to his bottle of spirits, so he left and headed back to pick up Lainey.

They returned to the guild house in time for supper. While they ate, Brick announced that the smithy was complete, and that tours were available after the meal. He and the crafters had kept everyone out after the initial shaping.

After a pleasant meal, they all filed outside and into the smithy. It was truly a thing of beauty. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all smooth and polished obsidian with highlights of silver and glass swirling throughout. The highlights glowed softly, lighting the entire 20 foot square interior space. The forge itself sat in the southeast corner, between the two doorways, and was shaped as if growing out of the corner column. Wide and deep, with a hinged door that hung open, there was room for a dwarf to crawl inside. The highlights on the outside were in the vague shape of dwarven runes, and were made of silver, gold, and other metals Alexander couldn't identify. Above the door, at the top of the forge, the obsidian flowed into the head of a dragon, mouth open as if ready to spout flames. In front of the forge the stone floor rose up into a foot-high pedestal that supported an anvil.

Seeing how proud the dwarves were of their accomplishment, the friends lavished them with praise. There were more than a few toasts to the new forge before they all stumbled off to bed.

Chapter Thirteen

Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor...

Dawn found the group gearing up to escort the refugees of Whitehall back to their homes. Thea and the crafters, in no hurry to get home, asked to accompany the group. When Alexander was reluctant, they offered their services in making any necessary repairs at the village. After nods from the rest of the group, he sent them each group invites. On a whim, he tried to share the quest with them, and it worked. *That's new!* The NPC dwarves had already received considerable experience for their role in the crafting of a Dragon Forge, enough to level each of them twice, and award them several skill points in their professions. Now Alexander was curious what benefits they'd receive for joining in the quest.

As the friends saddled up their mounts, the dwarves hitched up the horse and wagon. They all took a few minutes to load the wagon with some supplies: food; tools; and a few barrels of Brick's precious ale. The dwarves piled into the wagon and they were off.

They met the mayor and what was left of his people at the city's east gate less than an hour after dawn. There were about 40 refugees, mostly women and children. They had managed to purchase some supplies and carts, as well as a few ragged old horses to pull them, though two of the smaller carts were being pulled by men and women. When the goblins attacked, their hunters and most of their able bodied men had held the monsters back while the others fled. Many hadn't had time to grab anything in the way of possessions before they ran.

The friends pulled their wagon up at the back of the line of carts. Alexander spoke briefly with the mayor, who walked at the head of the column. Since they were all going to be moving at a walk, Alexander dismounted. Max mounted his panther and ranged out in front of them, making sure their path was clear. They'd follow the road for about a mile, then turn off onto a dirt track leading to the village.

The Greystone clan spread out, walking along on either side of the caravan, their new mounts walking alongside them. Well, mostly. The big cats kept bounding off and pouncing on fluffy bunnies, much to Brick's delight.

Initially Lainey tried to get skins from the dead rabbits, but the cats simply hadn't left enough to be useful.

Brick's mount, whom he'd officially named Bacon, kept wandering over to snuffle at the base of trees, rooting out acorns or edible fungus of some kind. Twice he simply trotted well ahead of the column, finding a cool patch of mud to plop down in while they caught up, then moving along with them. Brick didn't seem to mind that Bacon was getting absolutely filthy. It was a battle boar thing.

The first mile of the trip was uneventful. They reached the turnoff and the carts began to head down the dirt track. Once off the main road, they decided to take a short break, mostly for the benefit of those who were pulling the carts.

Alexander paused at the junction, and called Brick over. He then reached into the ground and pulled up a six-foot column of stone about two feet wide. The mayor joined them, and watched as Brick laid a hand on the stone. The word "Whitehall" and an arrow pointing down the track appeared near the top of the stone. When the mayor looked at him with a question on his face, Alexander explained.

"We've decided to help put Whitehall on the map, as it were. It's not enough to simply reoccupy your village, you need to establish trade. Recruit new citizens to replace those you've lost. Grow crops and craft items that can be sold."

As he was speaking, an idea struck him. He stepped over to the side of the main road, on the corner opposite the new directional sign. He once again reached into the earth, raising stone walls half a foot thick. He raised a back wall, and two side walls, then grew a roof that began at the back wall and extended forward a good six feet beyond the ends of the side walls. Then he raised a stone block about three feet high along the front of the structure. When he was done, he'd created a very basic stone fruit and vegetable stand with a roof that extended out far enough to keep the goods on display out of the sun and the weather.

He looked to the mayor. By this time, most of the refugees had gathered around.

"This is for your people. Merchant caravans and groups of adventurers travel this road every day. With the recent clearing of the bandits, traffic should increase. Your people can set up here and sell fruits, vegetables, craft items, whatever you have available to the groups as they pass. If you are so inclined, it may also give you the opportunity to offer a new home to weary travelers and immigrants that would otherwise never hear of your village."

One of the women who had been pulling a cart walked up to him. Clearly exhausted, she gave him a hug that was more of a lean, and said, "Thank you, sir Knight. You have already done more for our village than we can ever repay."

Noting how weak the woman was, Sasha reached out to buff her, which led to buffs for all the refugees. Lainey decided it was ridiculous for people to be trying to drag carts two or three miles down the ragged dirt track, so she organized the transfer of all the goods from the carts to their own oversized wagon. Then she stacked the elderly and small children on top. The four people pulling the carts would have to continue to do so, but the empty carts were now much less of a burden.

Seeing the opportunity to practice his magic, Alexander strode ahead of the caravan. Using his earth mover skill, he smoothed and hardened the trail. He took his cue from what he knew of roads in the real world, and sloped the trail slightly to ensure proper drainage. It took much less effort than raising stone, as he was just modifying the earth that was already there, filling in potholes and leveling out ruts. Still, he needed to stop every twenty minutes or so to rest and rejuvenate his mana. Lainey and Sasha kept a close eye on him the entire time.

He apologized to the mayor for slowing their pace. He was walking as he worked, but it was not a brisk walk. The villagers were thrilled at the improvements to their road. The smoother track made it easier for all of them to move. The mayor begged him to continue as long as he could. The children, more than able to keep up with the pace, began to make a game of it. They gathered around him to watch his work, then quickly dashed ahead to play "spot the pothole" and "help" him make it all correct. Sasha and Lainey moved forward to watch over the kids, as Brick and Bacon took rear guard.

Soon bored with the road, the kids had tackled the felines, a few of them riding the big beasts, others running about as if being hunted by the cats, who would pounce and "tag" them before dashing away like giant kittens. Sasha could see the villagers' mood lightening, their morale rising at the sight of the children at play, safe among the adventurers and mounts. And they were going home. One of the elder men on the wagon began to sing a song. It was a simple song of sunny days and fertile fields. Others joined in. It was a pleasant melody that seemed to raise everyone's spirits. Even Bacon tried to join in with some snorts here and there, much to the amusement of the children.

In this manner, they continued down the now improved dirt road. The trip took nearly two hours at the pace Alexander had set, but it was still midmorning when they reached the village.

Max was waiting for them at the gate. He had patrolled the area and reported it clear of goblins. Seeing him standing there waving, the villagers cheered and dashed forward to reclaim their home.

The others moved the wagon and carts inside the gates as the villagers inspected homes for damage and lamented over destroyed or missing items. While the goblins had mostly left the structures intact, those that hadn't burned during the attack, they had looted everything of value, destroyed furniture, and consumed all the stored food supplies.

The mayor called them back together at the center of town, where all the carts were gathered. He directed them in unloading the wagon and carts. Those few with personal belongings moved them to their homes, while the others helped unload the communal supplies they'd purchased. Alexander heard the mayor discussing where to keep supplies.

"I can help with that," he volunteered.

He bade the mayor pick a spot for a warehouse. When the man indicated an area off to the side of the road near the smithy, Alexander went to work. He raised a rectangular stone structure with six-inch-thick walls, roughly 40 feet by 80. He made the walls two-stories tall with small windows every ten feet or so. He built a stone ramp eight feet wide that led from the ground floor to the second. He set the height of the second floor at ten feet, and then created a series of columns to support the weight. Then he repeated the process on

the second floor, placing a set of simple stone trusses atop the walls and columns. The village carpenters or the stone masons would have to build the roof. He didn't have the energy. The higher he lifted the stone, the heavier it became.

Taking a seat on a stone bench he'd raised for himself, he explained to the mayor, "This warehouse will also work as a refuge for your people should another attack come. It is much easier to defend a stone structure that won't burn. You can fire arrows from the windows above, or drop hot oil on your enemies and set them afire without fear of the building burning. If you keep a supply of food, water, bedrolls, and other necessities upstairs, you could hold out long enough for help to come. Once I've rested a bit, I'll add a rainwater cistern and a fireplace upstairs. If you add a stout door at the top of the ramp, you'll provide a second line of defense."

Thanking him, the mayor directed all the communal supplies to be moved into the new building. Then he announced that any who wished to do so should sleep inside the warehouse for the night. There was room for everyone.

While Alexander was working on the warehouse, Max and Lainey had set off to patrol in a one mile circuit around the village, searching for any signs of goblins or other mobs. Max took the opportunity to teach Lainey some woodcraft, showing her the shapes of different animal tracks and signs of trails through the brush. They also took the opportunity to do some hunting, bringing back half a dozen deer and several rabbits to add to the village food supply. Brick had gone to the smithy, and was assisting the village blacksmith in setting things to right. Most of the blacksmith's tools had been found scattered around, but were still intact.

Sasha had recruited the dwarf crafters to accompany her on a mission to look around the surrounding area for resources. She had questioned the mayor, who said there was a small quarry just north of the village, but that they had never used it as stone blocks were too heavy to move. She took the dwarves and the wagon and headed off to see what they could find.

Having rested some, Alexander inquired from some of the villagers about the burned down structures. Apparently, they had all been small homes, most belonging to those who had perished in the goblin attack, though one of them

had belonged to the woman who'd been pulling a cart and her two children.

So he went back to work. He started with the woman's home. Clearing the debris that was left on the site of her former home, he then raised four walls in a roughly 40x40 square. He went with a basic plan, a great room in the front of the house with a fireplace. In the back he placed a kitchen, with a door leading out to the back yard. He raised a long stone counter with a built-in sink along the back wall below the window. And added a row of shelves off to one side. To the left of the great room he placed a single large bedroom, and two smaller ones on the right. After thinking about it, he added a 6x8 bump-out off the kitchen for a bathroom. He'd get Brick and the crafters to work out the details for plumbing in the kitchen and bath.

This time, since it was a small structure and only one floor, he added in thin four-inch stone trusses and a roof made of one-inch thick slate that wouldn't be too heavy for the walls to support. He sloped the roof toward the back of the house, where he added a stone cistern to collect rainwater. He extended the roof forward at the front of the house, creating a small covered porch four feet deep. Lastly, he raised up a stone bench on either side of the front door. With a mind to defense, he'd made all the windows small. He'd get the crafters to create doors and shutters. He hadn't learned yet how to make hinges.

Deciding to rest and recharge again, though the structure hadn't been that difficult, he sat on one of the porch benches and waited for his mana and stamina to recharge. He was staring at nothing, contemplating his next creation, when a small boy stepped cautiously up to him. The boy was trying his best not to cry. "This... this was our house. The monsters burned it down." He sniffed.

Alexander lifted the boy, who was maybe six years old, and set him on his lap. "This is still your house!" he said. "We killed all those nasty monsters, and you're safe now. And just in case they come back, I've made you this nice stone house that they can't burn down no matter how hard they try!" he smiled at the boy.

"This... this is for us? But it's so BIG!" the boy's eyes grew wide. His tears completely forgotten. When Alexander smiled again, the boy leapt off his lap, dashing off, screaming for his mother. This of course got the immediate

attention of several villagers who looked to see if Alexander was harming the boy in some way. Seeing the new house he was sitting in front of, they began to gather. It wasn't long before the boy reappeared, dragging his mother by the hand through the crowd. She carried her daughter on her other hip.

Alexander stood and bowed his head. "I was told that your home was among those that were burned in the attack. I hope this will be an adequate replacement."

The woman hugged him again. "My name is Theresa. This is Danny, and my daughter is Chloe. I know not how to thank you for all you've done for us. My husband went to defend the gate during the battle, and was likely killed, as he never met up with us in the city. I had no means to rebuild our home, and was prepared to live on the kindness of my neighbors. You have given us a home again, and a fighting chance."

Not trusting himself to speak, he motioned for the family to look inside. As he listened to the reactions of the boy running from room to room, he smiled to himself. Then he looked up to the villagers gathered in front of him. "My friends and I will be focused for the next few days on strengthening your defenses. You have a warehouse now, which you can take refuge in if necessary. Brick and I, along with the stonemasons, will be working to rebuild the walls around the village. Our journeyman smith and your own blacksmith will be working to provide basic weapons and tools needed for rebuilding, farming, and crafting." At this, several of the ladies and a few of the men stepped forward to hug him or shake his hand.

"Once your walls are secure, I'll work to replace your lost buildings. Then we'll tear down and replace the homes of any who desire it. The wood can be reused for other things."

At this the gathered villagers raised a ragged cheer.

Leaving Theresa and her family to get settled with the help of some villagers, he moved down to a section of the road just inside the gate, where three homes had previously stood. Confirming with a passing villager that the owners of those homes had not been among the refugees, he once again went to work. He had a different plan here. This was going to be an Inn.

First, he began to dig a hole. He cleared away all the surface debris and soil

in an area roughly 40 feet by 100 to expose the bedrock about eight feet down. He then sliced the rock into wall sections of different lengths, ten feet in height and six feet thick. He raised them up one by one, building a box around the perimeter of what would become a cellar. With the walls in place, he cut four-foot square pillars from the stone, standing them up in intervals across the center of the cellar. Then he cut stone beams, and laid them across the width of the cellar, resting atop the beams. Cutting more wall sections, only much thinner this time at only four inches thick, he placed them to one side. These would become the floor.

He took a break, raising a block to sit on. This would be more complicated than he'd expected. He had a basic knowledge of what was needed for a stable structure. But he was no engineer, and he wanted to be absolutely sure these buildings would be safe and would last a long time. He decided to seek some advice.

Walking back toward the center of town, he grabbed a passing child and asked them to go find Brick for him. He waved and called out to the mayor, who quickly moved to join him.

"I saw what you did for Theresa and her children. Thank you, Alexander."

"Of course, mayor," Alexander nodded his head. "All part of the service. But I need your assistance, if you would? I'm working on constructing an inn near the gate. But I'm afraid I've reached the limits of my expertise. Our stone masons are running about in the woods somewhere, so I cannot ask their advice. Would any of your people happen to be carpenters or builders?"

"Old Thomas was a carpenter. Though he's not got the strength for it anymore. His apprentice was killed by the goblins. But I could find you a couple of men who could lift logs at his direction..." the mayor thought about who to assign.

"No need for the labor. I just need Thomas' advice. I can move the stone well enough. If you wouldn't mind sending him down toward the gate?" Alexander waved in the direction of the inn.

The mayor moved off to find Thomas just as Brick came walking up. Alexander led Brick to the house he had created for Theresa and her family. After calling out for permission to enter, he showed Brick the kitchen and bathroom, quickly explaining what he had in mind for plumbing. Brick confirmed it was easy enough to arrange, that one of the apprentices could even handle it.

They departed the home and headed toward the inn. Finding Thomas waiting for them, they introduced themselves. Alexander raised two stone benches and a stone block in between for use as a table. Alexander began to explain what he had in mind.

As he spoke, the old man produced a charcoal pencil and began to sketch on the stone tabletop. Brick smoothed it out for him to make it easier.

"You've the right idea, sir Knight," the old man began.

"Alexander, please. And this is Brick."

Thomas nodded and continued. "The pillars be plenty strong to take the weight of three floors, or even four. And you've placed them on solid bedrock. So no worries there. The beams be good for distribution of weight. But the walls will tend to push outward as you place more weight upon them, and they'll shift in the wind. So you have to add brackets to hold them in place. Ideally you could notch the beams where they set on the walls, too."

"Brick and his guys can create brackets and bolts, that's no problem. But how about if I just fuse the stone of the walls together where they join? And do the same with the beams and columns?" Alexander asked.

Laughing loudly, Thomas nodded his head. "Aye, that'd probably work. Though you don't want to fuse the beams to the columns. Leave them to move back and forth if needed. But show me what you have in mind, lad."

Alexander quickly raised four small wall sections from the table top, fusing them together at the corners to make an 8" x 10" inch box. Then he created a couple of stone beams, placed them across the long walls, and fused them as well. Then he released the whole thing from the tabletop, and handed it to Thomas. The old man tried to pull the walls apart. Then push them together. He set the box down on its side on the ground and stomped on it. Then stood on it. Finally, he lifted the box and smashed it against the tabletop. A piece of one corner chipped off, but the box remained structurally sound.

Chuckling to himself, he said, "This'll do just fine, lad. No flexibility to

speak of, but enough strength that it won't matter if ya don't build higher than three floors."

Alexander moved on to the next topic, weight. He showed Thomas where he'd made the first-floor walls six feet thick. His plan was leave a three-foot thickness on the ground level, raising the remainder of the stone to a two-foot thickness for the second floor, and one-foot thick walls on the third floor. With stone beams crossing between the walls at each level. The floor between the first floor and cellar would be stone, but he'd leave the upper floors and roof to be constructed of wood, to reduce the overall weight of the structure.

With Thomas approving his plan, he got back to work. He cut more beams from the bedrock, raising them up through the walls and placing them across the top of the first-floor walls. Then he raised the walls for the second story, and added beams across those as well. Finally he raised the third story walls, and placed the beams on top. He now had a total of four floors including the cellar. He placed the 4" stone floor slabs over top of the cellar, closing it off. Realizing he'd made a blunder, he formed a hole in a back corner where he intended the kitchen to be, and created a stairway down to the cellar. Then Brick reminded him they'd need a way to get kegs and large crates into the cellar, he created a ramp around back leading down to an arched doorway. The arch was just for style, as the entire cellar was cut directly into the bedrock, and he had no concerns about structure.

Thomas led them into the main floor and looked around. He recommended a few tweaks, like a stone ledge around the top of the wall at each floor to help support the wooden floors. With a 40-foot span from front to back, the carpenters would need to add more columns, or load bearing walls, in the middle of each floor to support the weight of the floor above. But since the plan was for the second and third floors to have a central hallway with multiple rooms on either side, there would be no shortage of support walls. Since half the main floor was going to have a large great room, they'd add a couple stout wooden columns located above the stone columns in the cellar. The rest of the main floor would include kitchen and pantry walls to support the floor above.

Having reached a good stopping point, they left Thomas to do some measuring and planning, and headed back toward the center of town. It was

past noon, and both friends had skipped lunch. They found several tables set up outside the new warehouse with some of the meager supply of food the villagers had brought with them set out. Deciding not to reduce the limited supply, the friends moved to the bench Alexander had created earlier, and ate some travel rations from their bags.

Sasha returned with the wagon and the crafters, extremely excited. "There is indeed a quarry, about a mile from here!" The two masons were quite animated. There was high quality marble in the quarry. The dwarves of Broken Mountain were experts at quarrying stone, and this was a valuable resource. After making a quick proposal to Thea, Alexander called for the mayor yet again.

"Mister Mayor, we have a business proposition for you," he began. "The two young masons here have discovered that your quarry contains a quality grade marble. They would like to arrange for a dozen or so dwarves to come here full time and extract the marble. They'll pay you a fair price for the marble, and provide you with a crew of carpenters and stone masons to help you build. You would, of course, have to pay a percentage of the quarry's earnings to the king, and we'll need to get permission for the dwarves to set up here permanently. But I think we can assure you that he'll grant it."

"In the alternative, if you'd prefer to work the quarry yourselves and sell the marble, we'll provide your men with training to do so. For a permanent discount on the purchase of the marble," Thea interjected.

The mayor looked to Alexander. "What would you advise, Alexander. I know the king has appointed you Knight-Advisor. If he trusts in your wisdom, I certainly will as well."

Looking at Thea, Alexander winked.

"Well, I think you should bring in the dwarves, but I think you should demand a bit more. Dwarves are handy fellows to have around, especially if you live in the wilderness. Having a dozen or so at hand in case of emergency could come in handy. But having more would be even better! Now, I have it on good authority that King Thalgrin of the dwarves has a need for large quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables, and you have yourselves a lot of fertile land here, but you don't have the manpower to farm it." He looked at Thea again, she was smiling and nodding her head.

"Thea here is basically a dwarven princess. The king is her uncle. I think. I'm not really clear on the family tree. But I'd bet she has the authority to negotiate a trade agreement with you. Further, I'd be willing to bet there are a few dwarven farmers who are frustrated with the rocky soil of their mountain, and might be willing to relocate here in return for a lease on some land to farm. I'm thinking a percentage of their crop goes to feed the village as payment for the use of the land. The rest they are free to sell or ship home. We'll even offer the use of our portal for quick transport, so the food is still fresh."

"That sounds most acceptable, thank you," the mayor said. He and Thea moved toward his home to negotiate the details of the agreement.

Sasha, no longer able to contain herself. "We found a dungeon!" she blurted out. Alexander thought she'd come back a bit too excited about a quarry. This explained it.

"Just after we left the village, we bumped into Max and Lainey. Max said they'd found a large number of goblin tracks coming from the north. Old ones. He warned us to be careful. We kept going, and found the quarry. While the dwarves were checking out the stone, I was bored, so I started looking around for herbs at the edge of the forest. I spotted a cave in the side of the ridge above the quarry, and it looked like a whole bunch of people had walked out of it. There was a dungeon portal right there at the entrance!"

Alexander was now just as excited as Sasha. *An unknown dungeon!* Based on the area they were in, it might be low enough level for them to clear. He thought probably the goblins had somehow escaped the dungeon and attacked the village. That would explain the large number of old tracks coming from that direction.

They went to follow the mayor and Thea. Stepping into the mayor's home, previously the lair of the goblin boss, the group's appearance interrupted the trade negotiations.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have an urgent question. Mr. Mayor, were you aware there's a dungeon portal near the quarry?"

The man looked distressed. "No! I've lived here thirty years and never seen a dungeon. Our hunters have not reported one, either."

"Well, it seems you have one now. We'll go investigate it soon. In the meantime, let everyone know to be extra vigilant. No one wanders off alone." Alexander looked meaningfully at Sasha. "I'm going to port back to the city and update the king. Thea? Have you and the mayor reached an agreement? Shall I notify the king of a dwarf invasion in Whitehall?" He smiled at her alarmed look. She nodded her head.

"Sasha, update the others on what you found, and ask the crafters to see what they can do about repairing the gate. Brick, can you do something about a door and shutters for the warehouse in case something happens and we need to defend the place? I'll ride back from the city as quickly as possible." Remembering his mount, he grabbed his figurine and dismissed the tiger. "Anybody need anything while I'm there?"

Hearing nothing, he pulled out one of the king's teleportation scrolls. He didn't think the king would mind him using one to provide a warning about another dungeon that could potentially hold demons. He activated the scroll.

It turns out it was tuned to the inner bailey of the palace. There were guards stationed nearby, and one of them immediately ran over to Alexander, weapon drawn. Recognizing Alexander, he pulled up short, sheathed his sword, and saluted. "Sir! Can I be off assistance?"

This whole Knight-Advisor thing comes in pretty handy.

"I need to see the captain as quickly as possible. And probably the king, though I'll leave that up to the captain to decide," he replied.

"Right, sir! The captain is with the king in his study. I'll show you the way. Please follow me, sir!"

The soldier led him quickly to a room off the main hall and knocked on the door. Upon hearing the king shout "enter" the soldier opened the door for Alexander.

"Alexander! An unexpected pleasure. What brings you here this fine afternoon?"

Alexander bowed his head. "Your Majesty, Captain. I've just come from the village of Whitehall, to the northeast. Our guild had agreed to escort the refugees back to the village after we cleared it of goblins. While helping

them get reestablished, and scouting for potential resources, we located a previously unknown dungeon nearby. From the signs still available, it looks like the goblins that sacked the village emerged from the dungeon. I'm concerned that they may have been pushed out by a more powerful new inhabitant-"

"Demons," the king finished for him. The captain nodded his agreement.

"I thought you'd want to know right away. I'm afraid I used one of your teleport scrolls to get here more quickly with the news," Alexander apologized.

"Nonsense! That's exactly why you have them, Alexander! Use them as you see fit. We can always get you more. Fitz makes them for me. I'll bribe him with some of my newly acquired dwarven ale!"

Alexander laughed. "I'm afraid he's been helping himself to a good bit of Brick's supply, so he might not be so easy to bribe!"

This got a chuckle from both the captain and the king. "Yes, I was quite surprised to see that tower the other morning. Seems the old goat has adopted you lot."

"I think he's mostly staying for the food and the dwarven spirits. Speaking of dwarves, Majesty, we took our dwarven crafters from Broken Mountain with us to help the villagers rebuild. They discovered a marble quarry nearby, and are negotiating with the mayor of Whitehall to have a crew come and mine the quarry. In addition, I'm afraid I suggested the dwarves send a few farmers as well, as the village needs to grow and produce food. Most of their able bodied men were killed in the goblin attack, and the dwarves have a need for fresh produce. But before they finalize anything, I wanted to get your approval."

The king looked thoughtful for a moment. "You have my approval, of course. And Brick is already authorized to negotiate trade with Broken Mountain on my behalf. He's done very well, so far." He paced back and forth a few times. "Captain, do we have the resources to send guards to Whitehall?"

"I could send a few dozen guards on rotation. The village is only about four miles away by road, so we could switch them out once per day-" the captain began planning.

"Captain, if I may?" Alexander asked. The captain indicated for him to continue.

"My friends and I are happy to investigate the dungeon. If the inhabitants aren't too strong for us, we could clear it for you as well. While having guards would be helpful, rotating them out every day seems like a lot of effort. Would you maybe have some guards with families who'd be interested in a new home? Or some recently retired guards who could still train villagers and stand a watch on the wall? The village currently has more homes than occupants, and I'll be building more. Brick and I are going to build real stone walls and gates with towers to help in the defense. The mayor will begin recruiting soon. The village will earn a good income from the quarry, and will be able to pay a small guard force. They could also use any good crafters who are looking for a new home."

The king spoke up, "In answer to your first point, I would like you to clear the dungeon if you can."

Quest Received: Investigate with Prejudice

Investigate the new dungeon at Whitehall. Clear it of any hostile inhabitants if possible

Rewards: variable

"As for the rest, it seems you've decided to not only restore one of my villages, but make it into an overnight boomtown!" the king chuckled. "I assume your guild will be receiving some of the profits?"

"No, Majesty. We plan to help them rebuild, arrange for their continued security, and then leave them to it. We did agree to let them use our portal to transport fresh produce to broken mountain, but we'll not charge them. It's our duty to help, Majesty. I believe you called it 'doing something useful' when I'm not needed here as an advisor," he grinned at the king.

"HAHAHA!" the king and the captain both had a good laugh. "Indeed, Alexander. Well put! I see I chose well."

"Aye, Majesty. Lydia and I have spent a great deal of time with Alexander

and friends. They are good people, one and all, and have accomplished some surprising things," the captain agreed.

"We will arrange for a dozen guards to accompany you back to Whitehall. They will watch over the village in the short term while we put the word out for interested citizens. I believe the captain may already have a few in mind?" The captain nodded.

"Tell the mayor that as my personal apology for being unable to protect his village during the recent attack, I hereby waive all taxes due to the crown for the next two years. I suggest he use that time to grow and prosper. We will send him what aid we can in the short term. I'll have the guards meet you in an hour at the east gate. There will be a dozen mounted men, and a wagon with supplies for one hundred people for a week. We'll throw in some tools for farming, and leave the horses and the wagon there for the village's use. Anything else you can think of, Captain?"

Captain Redmond nodded his head. "I'll accompany you back to the village. I want to observe this dungeon myself. If you can wait a bit longer than an hour, I believe I can have a few new villagers ready to come with us. Master Holston, the baker killed by those PWP, well, his family hasn't the heart to keep running the bakery. Too many memories. Lydia spoke to his wife, and she was talking about leaving. Whitehall would be a change, and still close enough that she could visit friends. I'll send Lydia to speak with her. There are a few others I know of. Good people who would be a benefit to the village."

"Thank you, Captain. These people had to flee with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. They lost most of their able-bodied men in the battle. The remaining villagers are mainly women, children, and elders. I think the baker's family might find the village a good place to heal, sharing the same recent loss as the folks there. I'll make it a priority to build them a new home, and bakery if they are so inclined. Speaking of building, I'd like to get back as quickly as possible to build some accommodations for the guards and new residents, as well as help with the walls."

The king interrupted. "Build? How are you building so quickly? How many crafters did you bring along?"

"Ah, sire. Fitz taught the boy earth magic. He can already raise several tons

of stone from the earth and shape it. He and Brick raised and built the portal columns in their compound, and he raised several tons of obsidian for the dragon forge they've just constructed in the last day or so," the captain explained.

"You've built a DRAGON FORGE? In just a day?" the king gaped at Alexander.

"Yes, Sire. I sort of, overdid it. Did too much too fast. But all I did was raise the stone. Brick shaped it, with the help of three crafters. It's quite beautiful."

"That settles it!" The king began to pace again. "Guard!" he shouted, and a guard came running in from a side room. "Tell my personal escort that I'm leaving the palace. We are going to the Greystone compound, then to the village of Whitehall. I want to be ready to leave in ten minutes." The guard took off like a shot. "Captain, you get your men together. Choose men whom you think might be inclined to stay in the village, with or without families. And round up whichever citizens you had in mind. Provide guards, horses, and carts to help them carry belongings if necessary. We'll be rousting that grumpy old wizard and teleporting to the village immediately. You'll follow as quickly as you can. In the meantime, I'm going to see this dragon forge for myself! Alexander, you're with me. I'm inviting myself to your home. Let's go!"

Alexander followed the king. They headed out into the inner bailey courtyard. Though it had been less than ten minutes, a contingent of ten of the king's guard were already there, preparing their horses. "Change of plans!" the king called out. Put away your mounts. We'll be traveling via teleport for the foreseeable future!" The guards all dismissed their mounts, gathering in formation around the King. Alexander was politely but firmly excluded from the formation. The guard took their ruler's security seriously, especially when leaving the palace. The king shrugged apologetically. A good ruler knew when to allow his men to do their jobs. Speaking of jobs...

"Heading back via teleport shortly. Bringing the king with me. This evening maybe 30 more folks are coming. Guards and families who want to move. Warn the mayor! Do what you can to get the first floor of the inn habitable." He broadcast in guild chat.

They walked the few blocks to the Greystone compound. Alexander dashed ahead briefly to ensure the wards would allow everyone through. The king walked through the bailey gate tunnel shouting "Fitz! Wake up and get out here! We need you to…" his voice trailed off as he caught sight of the smithy.

The king walked slowly toward the building, taking in the obsidian walls. Stepping through the door, he saw the glow from the swirls of silver and glass additives Brick had worked into the stone. Running his hand across one of the workbenches, he whispered, "This is... you two created this in a day?" He stepped over to the forge, with its very realistic looking dragon head. Touching the runes, he asked, "My dwarven is a bit rusty. What do these say?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask Brick, sire. I don't read dwarven at all. I would assume they either enhance the heat, or protect the forge from the stress of the heat. Maybe both?" Alexander responded.

"The runes enhance the magic already inherent in the stone, sire." Fitz had entered the smithy. "The boy correctly guessed the heat regulation and protection aspects. There are also runes that gather energy from the stone itself, and enhance the ability for whatever is heated within to absorb magic. It's a sort of circle of power, sire. As dwarven smiths work at creating, say an enhanced sword, they will infuse that sword with their own magic. Some of that magic will be absorbed into the weapon. The rest would normally dissipate into the air. But this structure will absorb the leftover magic instead, and feed it into the forge, which will in turn make the next weapon forged absorb magic more easily. Also, the forge will be heated with dragon fire, which is pure magic. This forge will create better and better weapons over time as it absorbs more magic." Fitz finished. Both the king and Alexander were stunned.

"You bellowed for me, sire," Fitz moved on.

"What? Yes! I need you to cast a few mass teleports. Alexander and his friends are helping to rebuild the village of Whitehall. Oh, you tell him!" The king waved at Alexander and went back to examining the forge.

As quickly as possible, Alexander brought Fitz up to speed. While he spoke, the king wandered off exploring. He returned a few minutes later, as

Alexander was telling Fitz about the captain bringing guards and migrating citizens later in the day for teleport.

The king handed a bottle of dwarven spirits to Fitz. He held one in his other hand, and had one sticking out of each of his coat pockets. "This is for AFTER you teleport the other group, understand?" he admonished the wizard.

"There is one issue, sire," Fitz began. "I don't know the coordinates to Whitehall, and have never been there. I cannot teleport you there without one or the other."

"I've been there, and can picture it. Can you somehow read my mind and do it that way?" Alexander asked.

The wizard chuckled. "No, boy. Magic has its limitations. Though I hear you've been pushing them lately!" Alexander looked embarrassed. "But you've given me an idea. Come here boy. You've learned some about portal magic. So this should be easy for you. Relatively."

Knowing what was coming, Alexander stepped forward. The wizard placed a hand on his head, and magic flashed through his brain once again. It wasn't nearly as bad as the first time. Either Fitz was correct and the partial knowledge helped ease the impact of the new spell, or his brain was just getting used to the trauma.

The wizard stepped back. "You now have the knowledge to cast a personal teleport, and a group teleport. Your range is limited to about five miles until you get stronger. Also, you should try to limit the number of sentient beings you try to move at once. Sentients are harder to transport, because the mind naturally fights against the concept of instantly moving great distances. The power of your spell has to overcome that disbelief. So to begin with, no more than 15 or 20 people. Otherwise the results could be... unpleasant. Understand?"

"So, you're saying that my first time ever casting this spell, I'm going to teleport our king and ten guards, and if I screw it up, we all die?"

"No pressure," said the king. He and Fitz both chuckled. The guards didn't look the least bit amused.

Fitz put a hand on his shoulder. "Relax, son. You'll do fine. You have a remarkable gift for understanding and even modifying spells. The first time you tried to raise that obsidian block out back, you did better than most 2nd or 3rd year students. Which reminds me, you've improved your Earth Mover ability enough that I've unlocked the next level for you. You'll find it takes less effort to accomplish the tasks you're undertaking at the village."

The king spoke up. "Trust me, Alexander. Fitz would not allow you to teleport me if he didn't have complete faith in you. The old goat is ornery, and disrespectful, but he loves me like a son and would not risk my life on a whim. You can do this. There's no time like the present!"

The king stood next to Alexander in the middle of the courtyard. Fitz tossed him a stone. "Place this in an open area and keep people away. I'll be able to focus on it to teleport the next group."

With that, he closed his eyes and pulled up the new spell in his mind. Then he pictured the open area just outside the village gates, off to the side of the road. Inhaling deeply, he activated the spell.

Chapter Fourteen

Goblin Ain't Easy

When Alexander opened his eyes he, the king, and all ten guards stood safely in the field outside the village gate. As Alexander placed the beacon stone off to one side of the road, a shout went up from inside, and the mayor came forward, along with Brick and Sasha. The villagers all kept a respectful distance. None had ever met the king, and few had even seen him before.

As the king strode up to the gate, still surrounded by his guards, the mayor dropped to one knee and bowed his head. The others all followed his lead. "Your Majesty! I apologize for the condition of our village. We were ... not expecting a visit. And I'm afraid we have little to offer for refreshment," the mayor said quietly.

The king reached down and gripped the mayor by his shoulders, lifting him to his feet. He looked to the rest of the villagers. "Nonsense! Please rise, all of you. No more kneeling or bowing today, okay?"

Looking back to the mayor, he continued, "It is I who must apologize. I am responsible for the lives of all my citizens. I failed to protect you when you were attacked by the goblins. That will not happen again!"

The gathered villagers went from looking worried to hopeful smiles. Their King was here to help.

"Later this evening, a caravan will arrive. It will include a dozen guards who will remain here and help defend the village. It may also include some potential new residents, as we have put out the word that Whitehall is being rebuilt, and has need of quality people. There will also be food and other supplies to help you get back on your feet! I know many of you lost family members in the attack. I offer you my most sincere condolences. I can only imagine what you've been through."

The king did something unheard of then. He moved through the crowd, shaking hands with each man, hugging mothers and children. To each one he gave small reassurances, "it will be okay, now", or "things will get better".

Moving back to stand with the mayor, he said, "Please, all of you. I must discuss with Mayor Stanton how we can best help Whitehall to prosper

again. Don't let me keep you. I know you all have much work to do." With that, the people dispersed.

Seeing Thea and her dwarves standing off to the side of the crowd, he called out to her. "Lady Thea, would you join us, please?" he shot Alexander a glance with raised eyebrows.

"Her grandfather is the king's uncle," Alexander whispered. He still didn't know what her proper title would be.

Alexander guided the king to the benches and table he'd raised near the inn for his conversation with Thomas. The mayor looked like he needed to sit. Alexander quickly extended the length of both benches and the table, then raised a high-backed chair at one end for the king.

Taking a seat in the chair, the chuckling king waved for them to join him. Alexander, Brick, and Sasha sat on one bench, while the mayor and Thea took the other. The guards formed a perimeter at a respectful distance.

"Lady Thea, I thank you for agreeing to join us, and for all your efforts of late. My compliments to you and to Master Brick on the creation of the dragon forge. I've just seen it, and I am truly impressed!" he bowed his head slightly to the blushing dwarfess. "I will be meeting with your uncle King Thalgrin in a few days. I hope our two nations will become close allies and friends."

Thea bowed her head, "Thank ye, Majesty. I am honored to meet ye. And I too hope for friendly relations between our kingdoms. I know me King feels the same."

With the formalities out of the way, the king moved on. "Young Alexander here explained to me about the quarry, and your desire to operate it. I hereby give my approval. Further, I authorize citizens of the Broken Mountain to travel and settle here in order to farm, craft, or establish businesses. I will leave it to Mayor Stanton to approve any new residents. As for the terms of the business dealings, Master Brick is my trade emissary, and is authorized to approve whatever terms you agree upon."

Both bowed their heads, "Thank you, Majesty."

"Now!" the king leaped up from his chair, surprising everyone. "If there is no

more business, I'd like to look around. Lady Thea, Mayor Stanton, it has been a pleasure."

Alexander had to learn how he did that. The king could say "go away" in the most gracious and diplomatic manner.

Walking toward the partially completed inn, the king asked, "And how long did it take you to build this... inn, is it?"

"Yes, sire. About an hour? I'm leaving the rest for the carpenters to finish in wood, so there won't be as much weight pressuring the supports."

"I see." The king stepped inside the door and paced about the first floor. He looked up through the open floors above at the support beams, and stepped partway down the stairs to inspect the cellar. "Very impressive. You clearly put some thought into this."

"I had help, sire. Brick here and a retired carpenter named Thomas gave me good advice."

Stepping back outside, the king strode toward the gate. "Well, then. Let's see what you can do. We can't have this gate standing wide open if demons invade, now can we?"

Alexander stepped forward. He activated his mage sight, then his earth magic, and looked below the open gateway and surrounding walls. Seeing the same bedrock he found below the inn nearby, he went to work. He moved forward and stood in the gateway, the king and others following behind.

Reaching into the earth, He pulled up a section of bedrock roughly three feet thick and 30 feet long. He pulled it until it rose 20 feet above the ground, approximately 20 feet out from the old wall. Then he pulled another next to it. Leaving a space about 20 feet wide for a gate, he pulled up two more sections on the other side. Behind the new walls, he began to construct two identical towers. One on each side of the gate. They were simple structures, tall boxes rising 40 feet high with a flat roof and a stairway winding up the inside. Next to the towers, built right up against the inside of the walls, he raised two barracks buildings. Each had a door facing the gateway. The building was 20 feet wide, filling the space between the old walls and the new.

At the back of the building was an interior staircase that opened up onto the roof. A soldier could stand upon the roof and look over the top of the wall. He opened small windows along the interior facing walls, allowing light and air into the building. The windows could also be used to fire arrows if the need arose. Inside the building he raised three columns to support the ceiling. With those, and the short run of only 20 feet between walls, no beams were necessary. Then he hollowed out the stone under the staircase to create a bathroom.

Finally, he raised two more large panels, each ten feet wide and fifteen feet tall, to be used as gates. He set them snug against the walls on either side and held them in place. "Brick, do you think you could manage hinges?" he asked.

"Aye, we figured it out while working on the warehouse," Brick responded. He stepped forward and laid his hands on the right hand door and the wall. After a moment, a set of three massive pins grew out of the back edge of the wall. At the same time, the corresponding female side of the hinges grew out of the door, wrapping around each of the pins in three places. The dwarf went and did the same for the left hand door, then stepped back. "Ye can cut it now," he said.

Alexander severed the connection at the base of each door panel, and lowered the rock below about half an inch. Then he molded massive handles on each door about four feet off the ground. "Majesty, would you like to do the honors?"

The king stepped forward and grasped the handles. He leaned backward and pulled hard, expecting the resistance one would expect from several thousand pounds of rock. With a slight grinding noise, the doors swung open easily. Brick's hinges worked perfectly. They'd need a little grease to reduce wear, but that was easily done.

"Well done!" the king beamed at them as he closed the doors again. "I see now how you were able to complete that forge so quickly. You both have a tremendous gift."

Alexander noted that as the doors closed there was a slight gap where light shone through between them. He quickly modified the edges so that they would interlock as they closed. "I'll leave it to our stone masons to figure out how they want to lock it, and we'll finish that before dark," he said.

The group then followed the king into one of the new barracks buildings. He inspected the interior, then moved up onto the room. Walking back and forth, he looked over the wall. "Can I assume you intend to extend the stone all the way around?"

"Yes, sire, that is the plan. It'll take several days. I'll continue the new wall roughly twenty feet outside the old, so that when I get tired I can just make a connecting section and stop for the night."

The king nodded. "I think we could recruit Fitz to help you, which should speed things up." Then he walked toward the tower at the end of the building. He was facing a blank wall with a small window. "It would be helpful if the guards could access the tower here, as well as down below," the king offered.

He was right. Alexander quickly opened a doorway into the tower wall at the same level as the rooftop. Then he altered the stairwell inside, creating a wide landing at the doorway with room for soldiers going up and down or moving in and out to pass each other. Lastly, he raised a rail at the back of the landing to keep anyone from being knocked off. After more thought, he realized that 40 feet was a long way to climb with no landings. So, he completely redid the stairway from the bottom up. He also added three columns at the top of the tower, and put a small domed roof over it to protect the guards from the weather. And he raised the front wall of the tower four feet to offer some cover from arrows and spells. With that, he needed a rest.

"I'm sorry, sire. But I'll have to fix the other one later. Fitz was right, I can do the work more easily now, but I still get tired."

The king walked down the newly revised tower stair and out the ground floor exit. They strolled up the village's main street as the king observed the burned out buildings. Before long, they came to Theresa's newly constructed house. It still had no door or window shutters, as Brick had been busy at the warehouse. The king walked over to inspect the building, and was surprised by little Danny rushing out through the doorway. The child ran right into the king's legs, then fell backward onto his butt.

"Your Majesty!" Theresa gasped in horror. "Please, forgive him."

"What have we here?" The king reached down and lifted the boy in his arms. "And what would your name be?"

Scared by the horrified look on his mother's face, the boy was very quiet. "Danny?"

The king smiled at him. "And is this your house, Sir Danny the Rambunctious?"

The boy nodded, still unsure.

"Alexander, I take it this is your work?" he asked.

"Yes sire. Theresa here lost her husband and her home in the fire. I built this for her and her family this morning."

"It seems you didn't quite finish the job," the king nodded toward the vacant doorway. "Have you recovered enough to conjure up a door?"

"Of course, Sire." Alexander and Brick worked quickly to create and hang the front and back doors, as well as shutters for the windows.

While they worked, the king sat on the porch bench playing with Danny and chatting with a very nervous Theresa. When they'd finished, the king made a big show of inspecting the door, having Danny test it several times. Then he thanked Theresa for her hospitality, warned Danny to listen to his mother, and bid them goodbye.

"Sire, while we have a quiet moment, I wanted to thank you for coming here. You've given these people hope and inspiration."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Alexander, but I think you and your friends have given much more. As you seem to do everywhere you go," the king replied.

They continued on to the warehouse, which the king dutifully inspected, noting with a wink that the building had proper doors. Coming out of the building they found Max and Lainey standing at the supply tables, unloading the deer and rabbits they had brought in.

By this time the captain and his group had arrived. The guards led the procession, followed by the promised wagonload of supplies. The captain directed the guards to help unload the wagon into the warehouse while he introduced the new arrivals.

Before he even started, the king stepped forward to hug an elderly woman who had two grown daughters behind her. "Millicent. I'm so sorry. He is greatly missed by all of us."

Turning to Alexander's group, he said "it is my honor to introduce lady Millicent Holston. Wife to the recently departed Baker Holston."

They all bowed their heads and murmured condolences.

"As a boy, I would get Fitz to help me 'sneak' out of the palace. I know now that everyone was aware of what we were doing, but for me it was high adventure! He'd dress me in rags and have me roll around in the garden so I looked like a peasant boy, and I'd do little errands for Master Holston in return for a pastry. Best I ever had. Millicent would wink and give me an extra one, payment for Fitz. She wasn't fooled, and knew exactly who I was, but she never treated me differently than the other kids."

He turned to the mayor. "This woman is precious to me. Protect her and treat her well." The mayor nodded fervently.

The others were quickly introduced, and the king thanked them all for their adventurous spirit. There were two retired guards, both had been sergeants. There was a carpenter and his family, including two sons who were apprentices. Alexander advised them to seek out Thomas once they were settled. There was a farmer who was tired of dealing with dire wolves (his farm had been west of the city) and his family. Also a priest who wished to build a small chapel.

"There will be more coming over the next few days. I'll leave you a list," The captain said.

Still concerned about Millicent, the king said, "Millicent, come with me. Alexander here is going to build you a new home. There are some areas that have become empty where homes were burnt down. We'll let you design the house as he builds it! First though, let's pick a spot."

He offered the woman his arm, and they slowly toured the village. Lydia had come along with the captain, and she and Sasha and Lainey went to go see about cooking a meal for everyone. Fitz heard the word 'food' and followed them. Max went to talk to the carpenters about finishing the floors and walls of the inn, as they were expecting more people soon. Brick stayed

with Alexander to work on Millicent's home. He motioned for the two stone masons to join them.

Millicent chose a spot about halfway between the gate and the mayor's house. Alexander proceeded to clear the topsoil in preparation for building.

"Now, Millicent. The first question you must answer is, what do you want Alexander to build? Is this just a home for you and your lovely girls? Or do you want a bakery as well?"

Alexander was glad the king asked, because he hadn't wanted to bring it up himself.

"I intended to come here and just retire quietly," Millicent said. "A little house, a garden, a little peace. But now that I see these people, how little they have and how they're suffering, and I think maybe I'd like to help. All I know is baking, though my girls are both good seamstresses. I don't know how long I'll have the energy, but if you'll make me a small bakery, I'll do what I can. Maybe I'll find an apprentice here, teach them what I know and then just supervise." She smiled and patted the king's arm.

I caught the king's attention and mouthed "Theresa" at him. His smile grew bright, and he sent one of his guards off to fetch her.

Alexander raised two tables and four benches just off the street in front of where he was about to build Millicent's home and bakery. He figured later on customers could sit and eat pastries. She and the king sat down, and Alexander sat as well. This was going to be a lot of work. Brick produced a charcoal pencil and they sat down across from the king. After some discussion with Millicent and her daughters about the size and shape of the home, and the space needed for the bakery, they had a rough plan sketched out on the table. He was ready.

He began as he had with the inn, cutting out sections of stone for walls, columns, and beams, creating a cellar. This time he remembered early to add a ramp access from ground level. The footprint of the building was 40 by 40 feet, and it would be two stories. Once he'd set up the wall sections and removed all the stone from the cellar, he raised three columns, placing one every ten feet down the center of the room. He then set cross beams on them, and laid a 6" thick stone floor on top. He opened a slot in the back corner for

a stairwell, then grew one up from the cellar floor. He made the first-floor walls two feet thick, just to be safe. Millicent's design had the entire back of the first floor as kitchen, storage, and general work areas. He added interior walls, dividing the kitchen and storerooms in the back from the 20x20 customer area in the front. The other half of the front side he left as a "room to be named later".

Having enough walls to bear the weight of the upper floor, he ran 3" stone flooring to begin the next level. Plenty thick enough to support the weight of furniture and such, but light enough not to stress the structure. For the upper floor he used one-foot thick exterior walls. He added in divider walls to create a master suite with its own bathroom, a suite for each of the girls, and a guest suite. As he reached this point, Fitz appeared, holding his dwarven spirits in one hand, and a block of cheese in the other. He insisted that Alexander adjust the walls a bit, extending the end of the upper hall, above one of the kitchen pantries. Alexander complied, then moved on to the roof. He set beams across the tops of the walls, again having plenty of bearing walls to support them. Then he created a set of lightweight stone trusses sloping the roof from front to back. He added an inch-thick stone roof with several openings that Brick would fill with glass skylights. Then Alexander raised a platform at the back of the house, and added a rainwater cistern. They were going to install real plumbing, with water sourced from the same underground spring that fed the village well. But he wanted a backup just in case.

Alexander sat down to rest while Brick and Fitz moved into the house. Fitz created some doors and shutters, which Brick began to hang, starting with the front door of the shop. While he did that, Fitz went into the kitchen and created two large ovens, two small ovens, two sinks, and yards and yards of countertop. He added shelves on each side of the pantries, and created the staircase leading up to the 2nd floor, right above the one leading down to the cellar. Then he putzed around, enchanting the ovens, turning one of the pantries into cold storage, etc. Brick came in and worked the stone to form water supply and drain pipes in the walls for the kitchen and bathrooms. Fitz then created a channel directed toward the underground creek, and put an enchantment on it to draw water on command. He put another enchantment on the cistern to heat the water inside, and had Brick add a supply pipe for that as well. Now the kitchen and baths would have hot water as well as

cold.

While Alexander went back inside to create display counters in the bakery and add fireplaces in various rooms, Fitz commandeered all twelve of the guards who came with the captain's group. He loaded them in the large Greystone wagon, and without hitching up the horse, teleported them away.

Fifteen minutes later, Fitz and the guards reappeared with a wagon full of furniture. He had taken them back to Millicent's house and grabbed all of her furniture. The guards immediately began carrying beds and chairs and tables into the house.

The king motioned for his escort to help. The guard had managed to track down Theresa, and she arrived carrying her daughter, Danny trailing behind. The king stood to greet her, and whispered for a few moments in her ear. Her eyes grew wide, and she nodded her head yes, smiling. "Millicent, this is Theresa," he said, leading the woman over to where Millicent was sitting. "Theresa lost her husband and her home in the goblin attack. Alexander was kind enough to provide her with a home this morning, but she still needs a way to support herself. I believe she'd make an excellent baker's apprentice."

Millicent began to cry. Fitz literally shoo'd away the king, sat down next to her and gathered her in a hug. "All of this, for me?" she whispered.

"All of this for the woman who slipped extra pastries to a young prince to give to a grumpy old man," Fitz said as he hugged her tighter.

As the last of the furniture went inside, Fitz lifted Millicent to her feet. He escorted her inside to look around. She kept crying over every little detail, saying it was too much. Her daughters were crying as well. When they had finished touring the first floor (there was nothing really to see in the cellar that she hadn't seen before it was closed off), Millicent paused at the stairs.

Her daughters moved to help her climb, but Fitz stopped them. "She can get upstairs on her own," he said. Taking her hand, he led her into the pantry. On the back wall was a full length mirror. He stood her in front of the mirror, looked over her shoulder at their reflections, and said, "Upstairs."

From the second floor they heard a surprised, "Oh, my!" followed by a faint giggle. They ran up the stairs to find her standing next to Fitz in the extended

section of hallway he had insisted upon. There was a matching mirror on the back wall. He had created a teleport for her.

"All you have to do is look into the mirror and say 'upstairs' or 'downstairs' and it will send you there. You can do the same in the cellar," he said to her. She blushed and thanked him, then toured the upstairs. Reaching her bedroom, she said she was a bit tired and would like to rest for a bit. The king kissed her forehead and bade her farewell. Reminding her that she was always welcome at the palace, no invitation needed. They all left her and her family to get settled, and headed back outside.

"Thank you, all of you. Especially you, old goat. Who knew you had such a soft heart?" the king chuckled.

"If you could make pastries like she does, I'd be nicer to you, too!" Fitz returned.

Lydia walked up to them, hugging her brother. "Dinner's about ready," she said.

"I'm afraid I cannot stay," the king said sadly. He let out a long sigh, then took a more formal tone. "I'm glad things here are so well in hand. Captain, I look forward to a report on the dungeon as soon as possible. Fitz, please stay here and help Alexander with the perimeter walls. He's pushing himself too hard, even if it is for good cause." Fitz nodded his head and slapped Alexander on the back of his.

"Lydia? Are you coming back with me? Or would you like to stay a while?"

"There's so much to do here, I think I'll stay a day or two." Lydia hugged him again.

"Very well then. Time for us to go. Thank you all again for your kindness and hard work here. It will be remembered. Fitz, if you would?" The king and his escort grouped up, and disappeared. The captain took control of the guards, assigning them shifts and patrol routes. The rest of the group headed back toward the warehouse, where a large meal had been prepared for everyone.

Once everyone had been fed, they organized sleeping arrangements. Most of the villagers elected to sleep in their own homes, feeling secure with the guards and adventurers there.

The captain and Lydia elected to accept an invitation to stay with the mayor. The remaining villagers and new residents set up bedrolls in the upper floor of the warehouse. Alexander and the rest decided to sleep in the first floor of the inn. The guards were setting up in the barracks by the gate.

The companions all called their mounts to them, then set them loose outside the walls to hunt and forage at will. One of the guards was detailed to let them back in the gate when they were through.

With that resolved, they all enjoyed a well-earned night's rest.

The next day began much as the last had ended. They gathered by the warehouse for breakfast, before Alexander, Fitz, and Brick went to work creating homes for those who still needed them.

The captain, Max, and Lainey rode out to scout the area around the dungeon. The captain intended to poke his head inside, just to see what he could see.

Sasha and Lydia took the two sergeants and the remaining big cats and Bacon out into the forest to find herbs for making potions. Bacon was quickly sent back, as he kept eating the herbs before they could be collected. The sergeants were there partly for security, and partly to learn the lay of the land.

The new carpenter and his sons went with Thomas to the inn. After a short discussion, all but Thomas went out to cut some timber. Two guards were sent along with the big wagon to bring back the lumber. The farmer climbed atop one of the towers and surveyed the area around the village. Finding a likely spot not far from the gate and just off the side of the road, he headed down to walk the land and check the soil. Seeming more than satisfied, he went back and retrieved his horse and plow, and began to turn the soil. The tower guard kept watch over him as he worked.

After a few hours' work, Alexander, Fitz, and Brick had finished constructing homes for the day. Rather than going to work on the walls, which were already serviceable, Fitz suggested they go to work on a plumbing and sewage system for the village.

Thus directed, they delved down into the earth, redirecting small underground streams into the natural spring that already fed the well. Then

they narrowed the fissure that pushed the water up to the well, creating greater pressure. From there, they created a series of larger main line pipes that transported water to different quadrants of the village. Then smaller pipes branched off of those to run along a line of houses. And from there, smaller lines branched off into the homes themselves. Fitz showed Brick and Alexander how to cast the spell that would allow the water to be turned on and off at the touch of a 'lever', and the spell to infuse a pipe with heat for hot water lines. They stopped at lunchtime. The adventurers had agreed to join the captain at the dungeon after lunch to get a report, and potentially to clear the dungeon.

The group, including Lydia and Fitz, made their way to the dungeon entrance. Once they were all together, the captain updated them on what they knew about the dungeon so far.

"We stepped inside. If there are not goblins in there now, there were recently. I didn't see anything living, but we don't go more than a few steps. I think we should check out the first floor, at least."

As there were too many for a normal dungeon group, Alexander formed a raid, and invited everyone. Sasha, Lainey, Lydia, and Fitz all cast buffs that between them raised every major stat. Then the group stepped inside.

They were standing in a rectangular room, maybe 20 feet deep, that led to a stone corridor. Torches on the wall provided meager light that faded into the distance. They paused for Alexander to use his earth magic and get a sense of the dungeon. He closed his eyes, and dove into the ground with his mind. He could not get much info on the first floor, other than what was within sight. This magic only let him see what was underground. It did let him detect underground traps in the first floor, though. He could sense another level of tunnels below, stretching out several hundred yards in a rough square around them. He took a minute to describe what he saw, following tunnels around to find the occasional dead end. He also noted several traps set in the ground and the walls, which he called out. Fitz was making a map as he spoke.

Alexander then moved down and found a third level of tunnels. He took a few minutes to describe those as well. Below the third level was only a single stairway leading down to a large room. He had no way to tell what

was in the room, but assumed it must be a boss room or a portal chamber.

The group moved forward. As usual, Brick was in the lead. Lainey, Max and Alexander followed next, then Sasha, Lydia, and Fitz, with the captain bringing up the rear.

The corridor extended on for another 50 yards before opening into an empty room with a door on each of the other three walls. Not having any particular indicators on which way to go, they chose the left hand door. Following a short corridor, they approached a round room with a domed ceiling. About 50 feet wide, the room's floor sloped down toward the center. At the low spot sat a large glowing red crystal that gave off heat the group could feel from the corridor. Piled around the crystal, seemingly all asleep, were imps. "Well, that answers that question," the captain whispered.

Demon Imp Level 25 Health 1200/1200

Easy enough. With the DPS this group could generate, an imp would die in seconds. The problem was, there were roughly 30 of them, all piled together. To aggro one would mean to pull them all. And imps could cast magic. Usually fire balls and dark missiles.

Alexander had an idea. He motioned for the group to move back, then whispered his plan. Fitz actually chuckled. They moved forward again. First, he used earth mover to raise a wall about 4' high across the corridor at the entrance. Then he reached out with his mage sight and earth magic to carefully examine the crystal in the center of the room. It was a large chunk of simple quartz, heated with magic. He took a moment to study the heat spell with his mage sight before he reached into the crystal with his earth mover skill.

When he was ready, he raised his hand, and Brick, who had climbed up on the wall in the corridor, began to curse loudly. The imps awoke with a cacophony of screeching and gibbering as they stood. Brick dragged his hammer across his shield, activating its taunt ability. Then he hopped down behind the wall and shouted, "Now!"

Alexander pumped a massive burst of mana into the crystal, and willed it to

burst. Even behind the wall, the group felt the blast of heat as they heard an explosion, followed by the screams of imps, and the sound of a thousand small impacts against the wall.

After waiting a second to make sure the fire had dissipated, Alexander lowered the wall and Brick stepped into the room, shield up and ready.

He needn't have worried. There wasn't a live imp anywhere in the room. There wasn't even a remotely whole imp. The room was painted with black blood spatters and scorch marks. Pieces of imp dripped from the ceiling.

Level up! You are now level 17! Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 6 free attribute points available

Not bad! Killing 30 imps roughly ten levels above us is good xp.

Max and Lainey looted what was left of the corpses, while Fitz cast a detection spell looking for any hidden caches or secret doors. Finding none, and seeing no other exits from the room, they headed back the way they came. Arriving back in the room with four doors, they opened the next door to their left. This one revealed a long straight corridor that contained one of the underground traps Alexander had identified. A hidden spike pit spanned the width of the corridor and was about a dozen feet wide. Before heading down, they decided to open the last door in the room. The captain didn't want to leave potential enemies behind them.

The last door opened to reveal a shorter corridor that ended in a T intersection. The group advanced, and Max stealthed to move ahead and check the cross-corridor. "Hallway's clear, closed doors at either end," he reported in raid chat. The rest of the group moved to the intersection, and Alexander motioned toward the right hand door. Opening the door, Brick peered into the room.

There was a group of half a dozen imps working in what was clearly a large kitchen. One imp, larger than the rest, had a chef's hat on its head, and was working with two cleavers. They were preparing meat of some kind, chopping, seasoning, and skewering chunks to be set over a fire. A small cage with a pathetic looking goblin in it spoke volumes about what kind of meat the imps were cooking.

Lainey and Max each hit an imp in the head with an arrow as Brick stomped into the room and slammed down his shield. He began cursing and shouting at the imps, motioning at the nearest with his hammer and blasting it with Holy Smite. The imp dropped dead instantly, while the others attacked Brick. *Nothing like a little light magic to piss off demons*.

The larger imp with the hat charged at Brick, slamming one cleaver after the other into his shield. The other imps, including the two with arrows in their skulls, moved to one side of the room and tried to shoot fireballs past Brick's shield. As soon as they stood still, Sasha cast thorn trap on them, and Alexander hit each of the four with wizard's fire. As usual, the vines caught fire, and the imps began to fry. Lainey and Max put another arrow into each of them, killing the two who'd already been hit once. Leaving the others to burn, the group focused on the chef imp. It was still pounding away at Brick's shield and the dwarf spouted his love poetry and occasionally reached out to strike it with his hammer. Being infused with light magic, the hammer blows were doing respectable damage to the demon.

Chef Beebog Greater Imp Level 30 Health 1200/1900

So a named mob. Not exactly a mini boss, but higher level and tougher than the others so far.

Max and Lainey shot arrows at it while Alexander hit it with magic bolts. Sasha focused on healing Brick. No need to trap the imp, it wasn't going anywhere. It was so enraged by the light damage from Brick's hammer that it didn't even notice the hits it was taking. As soon as his cooldown expired, Brick hit the imp with Holy Smite. It screamed as its health dropped to zero.

The group moved into the room and Max looted the corpses. Beebog dropped both his cleavers, which were a unique set with pretty good stats. They'd likely fetch several thousand at auction.

The goblin in the cage made a pathetic mewling sound, curling up in the corner and trying to be as small as it could. It began to mumble to itself and rock back and forth.

Lainey raised her bow and was about to put an arrow into it when Fitz said,

"Wait!" He walked to the cage, and said something to the goblin in its own language. The goblin's eyes grew wide and leapt up, grabbing the bars of the cage and babbling frantically.

"What's it saying?" Lainey asked.

"One moment." Fitz cast a spell on the goblin, and it was suddenly speaking common.

"-chased our people up and out of our homes!"

"Stop!" Fitz yelled at the goblin, which froze with its mouth open. "Start from the beginning. Speak slowly. What is your name?"

"Me Fibble," said the goblin. "Fibble good goblin! No kill Fibble! Fibble not food! Taste bad!"

Goblin's aren't the most intelligent of creatures.

"No, we no eat Fibble," Fitz chuckled. "Fibble, tell us what happened."

"Fibble was in bottom room. Servant to Overlord. Bring food, clean room, work hard. Fibble good servant! Overlord only beat Fibble one or three times day. Boss send Fibble to kitchen for food. Fibble go upstairs from bottom room, see flash of light! Big circle! Demons run out of circle. Fibble run back down to bottom room, scream for Overlord. Demons! Demons! Overlord grab sword and run upstairs. Yell very loud. Much fighting. Fibble not fighter, so Fibble hide under bed. Fighting sounds go away. Fibble fall asleep under bed. Wake up, no sound. Still, Fibble wait, scared. Sleep again. Then Fibble get thirsty. Sneak out to get bottle of wine on table. Scary demon shoot Fibble with fire! Demons catch Fibble, lock him in cage. Many Fibble's friends in cages, too. Then demons start to grab friends, cook them. Eat them." The goblin sat down in the cage and began to cry.

"Poor little thing," Sasha said. "It must have been terrified, watching its friends being eaten one by one."

The goblin sniffed, wiping a runny nose on its sleeve. "Yes. Fibble scared all time. Fibble die, it okay. Goblins die. But Fibble not want to be food. You kill Fibble now. Promise no eat?" the little thing looked hopefully at Sasha.

"Nobody is going to eat you, or kill you, Fibble," Sasha said emphatically. Earning her looks from the other members of the group.

"Sasha, we have the information we need. If you don't want to kill it, we can just leave it here," the captain said.

"And let him starve? The poor thing hasn't eaten in at least a week. We're not leaving him." She looked determined.

Fitz spoke up. "Fibble, you know these tunnels? You know a fast way to bottom room?"

Fibble's eyes got wide. "No go bottom room! Big demon! Many demons in tunnels! All humans and elves and dwarfy get caught! Be food for demons!"

Sasha tried to reassure the goblin, seeing a reason to keep him alive. "Fibble, its ok. We kill demons. You saw us kill them. Even the big one with the hat."

At this, Fibble snorted, "Stupid hat."

Sasha smiled at the goblin. "Yes, stupid hat. If you show us the way to the bottom room, we will kill the demons who ate your friends. We'll keep you safe."

The little goblin trembled at the thought of facing the demons again. But he looked at the dead imps on the floor, then at Sasha and the adventurers. Taking a deep breath and puffing out his chest, he said, "Fibble brave! Fibble help you kill demons. Show you fast way to bottom. Then you not kill Fibble?"

"Deal!" Sasha said. "Now stand back".

At a look from Sasha, Brick sighed, and smashed the cage's lock with his hammer. The lock and a good portion of the door shattered.

The goblin stepped out gingerly, clearly still expecting to die. After a moment of nobody attacking him, he looked to Sasha. "Please, Fibble thirsty. Water?"

"Oh! Of course!" Sasha pulled a flask of water from her bag, along with some travel rations. She handed it all to the goblin. He immediately

swallowed an entire biscuit, and washed it down with big gulps of water. Munching on a piece of jerky, he went to hand the flask back to Sasha, who made a face that clearly said "Fibble cooties" and told him to keep it.

"Thank you, Sasha?"

So the little runt is smart enough to have caught Sasha's name when the captain used it.

"You are welcome, Fibble. Now. You stay close to me. When we stop, you point the fast way to the bottom room, okay?" The goblin nodded rapidly, causing his large ears to flap.

Brick led the way back out into the corridor. Again the captain insisted they check the other door, so as not to leave a roomful of enemies at their back. Brick opened the door to a nearly empty room. It was a small room, maybe 12×12 . The only thing in it was a large chest sitting on the floor.

"Loot!" Brick smiled and pumped a fist in the air.

Max moved forward to check for traps on the chest. As soon as he stepped into the room, there was a faint screeching sound behind them. The captain moved back down the corridor to check their rear. Seeing nothing, the followed the corridor back the way they came. After a few moments, he returned.

"Clever trap. Step in this room, and an alarm goes off in the room with all the imps. If the door hadn't been open, we'd have never heard it. So someone stepping into this room would be distracted by the chest while a herd of imps closed on them from behind, trapping them here."

Alexander smiled "Always go to the left first!"

Laughing, Max proceeded forward and checked the chest. Finding no traps, he opened it. Inside he found 1,000 gold, some small gems, one large ruby, an invisibility potion, and a rare quality one-handed sword. Lydia asked to see the potion, saying she wanted to analyze it when she got back to her shop. She hoped to learn how to duplicate it.

Fitz quickly checked the room for hidden treasures or doors, and again found none, so the group moved back out to the corridor, and into the hub room.

They turned down the long corridor that lead to the spike trap, as that was the only direction left to go.

As they got about halfway down, Fibble cried, "Wait!"

The group stopped, looking around. Fibble shyly stepped past Brick and moved ahead a short way down the corridor. He looked at the left hand wall for a moment, then pushed in on a block. There was a grinding noise, then nothing.

"Fibble fix! Bad trap with sharp floor. Safe now." The goblin promptly demonstrated by walking forward over the trap door, which didn't give way. Alexander used his earth magic to confirm that the trap had been disarmed.

"Good job, Fibble!" Lainey said, and handed the goblin another piece of jerky. Fitz rolled his eyes. Brick snorted.

I'm noticing a trend here.

They continued on to the end of the corridor. Fibble pointed them to the most direct route down. Along the way they fought several patrols of imps. Fibble disabled a few traps. He even ran from his usual hiding spot behind Sasha and stomped on the head of a nearly dead imp during one of the battles, at which point he stuck out his chest again and said, "Fibble warrior!"

"BWAHAHA!" Brick laughed. Reaching in his bag, he pulled out a low level mace that he'd taken from one of the PWP they'd killed. He handed it to Fibble. "If any imps get past me, you protect Sasha, yes?"

The goblin's eyes got bigger, and he hesitated a moment. Then he reached out to take the weapon. He needed both hands to lift it from Brick's grasp with a grunt of effort. "Heavy stick! Good to smash demon heads! Fibble make sure no demon eats Sasha!" Throwing the mace over one shoulder, he stepped into position in front of Sasha and looked as fierce as he could.

They proceeded down the corridor. During the next fight, which was a patrol of four imps, Brick said in raid chat, "Take one down to red, then stop hitting it. I'm going to let it through."

So Lainey stunned one of the imps with an arrow, then Max shot it in the

shoulder, taking it down to just a sliver of health. The injured imp went straight for Max. Brick 'accidentally' let it get past him before shield bashing the others and knocking them down.

Seeing the imp rushing past the tank, and heading in the general direction of his new pet human, Fibble screamed and charged at the imp. He lifted the heavy mace from his shoulder and swung it at the demon. The nimble imp dodged to the side, taking a swipe at the goblin, tearing a wide gash in his back. Fibble screamed again, then wildly swung his weapon back around. He made enough contact with the imp to take it down before losing his balance and falling.

Bleeding profusely, the goblin sat against the wall, breathing hard and crying. Sasha knelt in front of him. "Fibble die now. Saved Sasha. You keep promise? No eat Fibble?"

"Silly goblin. You will not die. You are my hero! You protected me from the nasty demon!" She cast a heal on the little goblin, who jumped up in surprise and spun around a few times, trying to look at his miraculously healed back. He looked like a dog chasing its tail. He quickly got dizzy and stopped.

"You fix Fibble! Sasha magic!" Goblins had shamans who could do magic, but they were rare. Their magic was dark magic, and wasn't much good for healing. What healing magic they did have would not be wasted on a common goblin. Goblin lives were cheap, and a serious injury usually meant a slow death, so it was likely Fibble had never been healed in his life.

"Yes, I am magic," Sasha giggled. "All of us are magic." She indicated the rest of the group. "Big magic. We'll use our magic to kill ALL the demons! And fix Fibble if he gets hurt," she assured the brave little goblin.

Fibble grinned and nodded his head. He went to lift the heavy mace again, but Fitz took pity on him. "Fibble, give me that stick. I have something better for you." Fibble looked unsure about giving up his weapon until Sasha nodded at him. He allowed Fitz to take the mace, and was handed a wand to replace it.

The little goblin looked at the wand dubiously. Then he looked up at the wizard. "Small stick? No good to smash demon heads! Give big stick back?"

he asked hopefully.

"That stick is not for smashing, Fibble. That stick is for shooting. Magic stick!" Fibble quickly dropped the wand and stepped back from it, eliciting a chuckle from everyone.

Fitz picked up the wand and told Max to go pull the next patrol.

"Fibble, this magic stick is good magic. Light magic. Very bad for demons. I'll show you." Fitz waited for Max to come back with three angry imps. Once Brick had picked them up, Fitz said "Watch carefully." He pointed the wand at an imp, mumbled something under his breath, and a bolt of light magic struck the imp in the face, killing it instantly. The group quickly disposed of the other two imps, then all eyes went to Fibble.

The wizard handed the wand back to the little goblin, who held it gently in both hands as if it were a holy relic. Then he took it one hand, copied the way the wizard had held it, and waved it around a bit.

Alexander asked, "Is there an activation word?"

Fitz shook his head. "It's a healing wand. Works from intent. But it might be easier to give Fibble a focus word." It was a smart choice. Any stray bolt of light magic the goblin might hit one of them with would simply heal them, but it would have the opposite effect on demons.

As if on cue, Fibble asked, "How magic stick shoot?"

Smiling, Alexander took a knee next to the little guy. "You point the magic stick at the demons, and you say 'Pew!'."

Brick snort-laughed somewhere behind him, and Sasha giggled. Fibble took the wand in his right hand, pointed it down the hallway, and said, "Pew!". Unfortunately, he was holding the wrong end, and the wand was pointed at him. A bolt of healing light shot him in the chest. He dropped the wand again and grabbed his chest with both hands, looking for a wound.

"It's ok Fibble. Magic stick only hurts demons," Sasha reassured him.

Alexander couldn't speak as he was rolling on the ground laughing. The very confused Fibble decided to take the laughter as a good sign, and picked the wand back up. "We go now, kill demons!"

The greatly amused adventurers got themselves back into formation. They continued through the halls of the first floor, killing demons as they went, following Fibble's directions. Eventually they reached the first floor miniboss, a large red imp with fiery eyes and wings. Not understanding anything of strategy, Fibble jumped into the room and screamed, "PEW!" as he pointed the wand at the demon. The bolt of light magic took about 5% of the boss's health, and it immediately took off after Fibble. The goblin panicked, and ran. Every few steps he would shout, "Pew! Pew!" and shoot bolts at the demon. The winged imp was fast, but few things are faster than a terrified goblin. It stopped to throw a fireball at Fibble, but the goblin was long gone before it hit. "Pew! Pew!"

"BWAHAHA!!" Brick fell over, helpless with laughter. Seeing that the tank wouldn't be taking aggro, and panicking for her new protector, Sasha cast thorn trap on the imp. Lainey and Max shot arrows at it. Lainey hit it, but Max was laughing too hard and his arrow went wide. Alexander managed to cast wizard fire and a couple of magic bolts at it. Fitz, Lydia, and the captain all just watched with amusement. They had agreed before entering the dungeon not to get into the fights unless absolutely necessary. The adventurers wanted to develop their skills.

Fibble scooted back toward the group, still shooting the demon, and actually doing more damage than anyone else. "Pew!" he shouted again as he moved to his place in front of Sasha. His last bolt finished the demon, and a flash of green light enveloped Fibble. He looked amazed, then looked questioningly at Sasha.

"Did he... just level up?" Lainey asked.

"Yeah, I think he did," Alexander confirmed. "Makes sense. He's not in our group, and he did more DPS than we did. Plus he got the kill shot."

The others just shook their heads. As an experiment, Alexander tried something. "Fibble, would you like to be part of our raid party?" he asked.

Fibble looked confused. "Party? Not kill demons?"

Sasha stepped in to help. "It's a demon killing party, Fibble. You say 'yes' and help us kill demons, and you get bigger and stronger and smarter!" She smiled at him.

"Yes!" Fibble shouted.

Just like that, our raid party includes a goblin.

Achievement Earned: Light from the Dark

Through patience and kindness, you have turned a monster class character to a friendly citizen.

They looted the boss, searched the room, and found a hidden panel with a chest in it. The chest contained 2,000 gold, six health potions, and an epic obsidian spear.

Fibble led them down a stairway at the back of the room, and they proceeded to clear the level. Fibble pointed the way, and disabled traps. The group killed patrols and groups of mobs in room after room. The enthusiastic goblin cried, "Pew! Pew!" through each fight, to the ongoing amusement of the adventurers. After a while, the wand ran out of juice, which confused the poor goblin to no end. He kept pointing it and saying, "Pew?". Fitz recharged it for him, and handed it back. At which point he promptly shot himself in the face with it and causing Brick to nearly pee himself. And they moved on.

By the time they reached the second-floor boss, the group had managed to teach Fibble a bit about strategy. He waited patiently while they discussed how the fight should go, rather than just charging in. *The little guy is taking his demon killing very seriously*.

The boss was an unnamed Minor Demon Warrior. Basically the same critter they'd fought in the first demon dungeon, only a much lower level. He carried two swords, and wore a chainmail chestpiece.

Minor Demon Warrior Level 35 Health 2500/2500

The group decided to approach this as a straight up no frills fight. Brick would grab aggro, the others would DPS. No fancy plans unless something unexpected arose. Fibble would protect Sasha.

Brick strode into the room, stopped about ten feet from the boss, and hit it with Holy Smite. He let the angry demon move toward him, building up

some momentum. Then the dwarf hit his shield rush ability, rushing forward to bash his shield into the demon's face. The impact stunned the demon, knocking it down. Alexander hit it with rapid fire magic bolts. Lainey and Max played "who can shoot the demon in the eye first".

Sasha was about to heal Brick, but an errant shot from Fibble hit the tank first. To be fair, when the goblin had started the shot, the demon had been in the space Brick now occupied. So we're going to blame it on the tank.

Instead, Sasha cast thorns on the demon before it could rise, trapping it on its back. The group all poured on the ranged DPS, and Brick, not needing to block, crushed its head with a two-handed hammer blow backed by holy magic. That was the end of boss #2.

Max looted the boss, and began to laugh. In addition to dropping his two swords, which were both rares, but not exceptional, the demon dropped a goblin chainmail shirt. "This must be for our new mascot" he said, handing it to Fibble.

"Me Fibble. Who mascot?" the goblin asked, taking the shirt and then looking around as if Max intended him to pass it on to someone else.

"My mistake, Fibble. The shirt is for you. Go ahead, put it on."

Fibble took a minute to figure out the shirt. He'd never worn anything but the standard goblin loincloth. Finally, Sasha helped him get his arms and head through the proper holes. The armor didn't automatically adjust to his three-foot frame, so the shirt reached down to his knees, looking more like a nightgown.

Lainey pulled a leather strip out of her bag, and made him a makeshift belt. "Quite the handsome goblin!" Lydia smiled at Fibble as he spun around admiring himself, then did a little dance of goblin joy.

Uh, *oh*. *Definitely seeing a pattern here. We're never getting rid of this goblin*, Alexander thought.

They checked the room for hidden doors, and Fitz actually found one. Upon opening the door, they found a large chest with a small chest on either side. The loot-loving faces of everyone in the group lit up, except Fibble.

"What big deal? Just shiny stuff. Fibble's bed is better." The little goblin

walked away, bored.

Max entered the room and began to check for traps. He disarmed one on each of the smaller chests, and was working on the larger when he made a mistake. There was an audible click, and Max had time to say, "Well, shit," before an acid cloud burst from the chest. It enveloped everyone in the group, who had all pressed forward to see the loot, and had inhaled in surprise at the explosion, drawing the cloud into their lungs, except for Fibble, who had wandered away.

As the others began to cough and choke Fibble turned and saw what had happened. Recognizing the trap, he immediately began to shoot his new companions. "Pew! Pew!" He began with the ladies, who had been much nicer to him than the others.

The quick heals gave Sasha and Lydia time to cast larger heals on themselves, then on the others. Meanwhile Fibble kept up the rotation, shooting each of them again and again until Sasha told him it was okay to stop. "Thank you Fibble, you saved me again! You saved all of us!" she smiled at the tiny warrior.

Max looted the chests, which all combined produced another 2,000 gold, several gems, a spell scroll, and an epic, scalable, one handed sword. "Jackpot!" Brick shouted. Since none of them had a need for it, they could sell it at auction. It would bring maybe 10,000 gold.

Moving down to the third floor, they once again followed Fibble's lead. This floor featured fewer imps and more lesser demons as the standard mob, with a few minor demons mixed into some of the rooms. The team burned through them, and within a reasonably short time, reached the boss. This one was a larger, winged demon with a deep crimson hide, ebony ram horns curling back from its forehead, and a spiked tail. It held a two-handed sword in one hand as it sat in a massive chair in the middle of the room. Behind the demon was a pitch black vertical disc. The portal the demons had used to enter the goblin's territory.

Gortax Greater Demon Level 40 Health 4000/4000 The adventurers had only reached level 19 as they moved through the dungeon killing demons. With the much higher leveled Captain, Fitz, and Lydia in their party, they were receiving less xp than they normally would, so this demon was more than twice their level.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity, Alexander said, "I want to try an experiment. Captain, Fitz, Lydia, what would happen if you left our party? Would you instantly teleport out?"

The captain answered. "If this were a real raid dungeon, then yes. It would teleport us back to the entrance. However, this is just a normal dungeon. We'd just stay where we are." To demonstrate, he left the raid party. When nothing happened, Lydia and Fitz did the same. They could still jump in and help if needed, and now they weren't lowering the xp gained for the rest of the group.

"Thank you. This will help us grow faster. I promise you'll still get your shares of the loot!" he grinned.

Fibble looked terrified. He hid behind Sasha's leg and refused to even look at the demon. "What is it, Fibble?" Lainey asked, getting down at his eye level.

"This nasty demon that shoot Fibble with fire and put him in cage!" the goblin whimpered.

"Don't worry, Fibble. We will kill nasty demon. You can help! When we say, you just shoot him fast as you can. Ok?"

The goblin nodded his head, though he still remained behind Sasha's leg.

"Right," Sasha began. "Ok, this is the last dungeon boss. In addition to the big stabby sword, we now know he can cast fire magic, at the very least. Judging by the size of those wings, he might be able to fly as well. Let's do the same pull as always. As soon as Brick hits him, I'll trap him. Alexander light him up. Watch for adds. Max, you silence the first cast. Lainey, you interrupt his casts as often as possible. Everybody keep an eye out for adds. If they come in, let Brick pull them in and then we burn them down around the boss. Let's go!"

Brick stepped into the room and gave the others a moment to file in behind. Then he walked forward, and started his standard demon pull. He hit the boss with Holy Smite, and waited for it to charge.

When it did, he activated shield rush, and shot forward to nail the boss in the knees with his shield. The boss wasn't stunned, but it was thrown slightly off balance, making the first swing of its sword miss the tank completely. Sasha hit it with thorn trap, and Alexander cast wizard fire. Lainey and Max each put an arrow in the side of its head.

Unable to move, the frustrated boss began to chant in the demon language. Max shot it in the head with a silence arrow, interrupting the cast. Brick smashed one of its knees with his hammer, doing physical and holy damage, and causing the boss to favor that leg. The group had time for another round of arrows, magic bolts, and hammer blows before the silence de-buff wore off.

The demon waved its left hand and the group was hit with an instant 50% haste de-buff. This slowed both physical movement and magic casting times. The demon swung his sword down at Brick's head. The dwarf was able to raise his shield in time to block, but just barely. The attack turned out to be a feint. Instead of hitting the tank's shield, the demon simply let go of the sword and grabbed onto the shield with both hands. It lifted the shield, taking Brick with it. Then it flung the tank in the direction of the healer. Brick flew over Alexander's head, bashing into both Lainey and Max, knocking them back into Sasha. All of them took some physical damage from the impact with the plate-covered dwarf.

As they tried to untangle, the demon bent and lifted its sword. It raised both arms in the air and let out a roar that lasted a solid five seconds. Brick was back on his feet, the others still rising, as six lesser demons charged into the room from a staircase behind the boss. Brick charged forward, scraping his hammer across the face of his shield, his Serpent Screech ability drawing the attention of all the demons in the room. He charged the boss, smashing his shield into its already damaged knee, causing it to drop to one knee. Then he slammed his shield into the stone and made his stand as the other demons slammed into him.

Sasha cast her AOE thorn trap, rooting them all in place. Alexander hit the boss and four others with wizard fire, the demons screaming in frustration more than pain.

Demons, especially demons with fire magic, had a high resistance to fire.

The only reason they were taking as much damage as they were, was because this was wizard's fire, sort of like napalm in the real world.

Clearly the mobs weren't going down fast enough. "Brick, take a step back, I have an idea!" he called out. He activated his earth mover, and sunk a pit underneath the pile of demons, lowering the still burning demons down about ten feet into the stone. He'd gotten this idea from the "oven" he'd built around the PWP players at the cemetery. Heat was more effective in an enclosed space. He motioned the others over. They circled the top of the pit, firing arrows and spells at the boss.

It began another cast, but Fibble chose that time to start shooting it in the face. "Pew!" the bolts of healing magic proved an effective interrupt.

"Re-cast your thorn trap, Sasha," Alexander said. A new set of thorny vines grasped at all the demons in the pit, shredding their legs. Alexander cast wizard fire again on the boss, and on two more demons before he was nearly out of mana. He used the last that he had to close the top of the pit with a stone lid. The screams of the lesser demons ended quickly, but the howls of the boss could still be heard through the stone. After another ten seconds or so, they knew it had died.

Level up! You are now level 20!... Level up! You are now level 21!...

Achievement earned: First Kill!

You are the first to complete the "Stolen" Dungeon and slay Gortax

Goblin-eater

Fame points awarded: 1,000

Experience: 11,000

First Kill Reward: Epic or Legendary level item

Level up! You are now level 22!...

Level up! You are now level 23!

Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 11 free attribute points available

Alexander removed the lid from over the pit, and a blast of scorching air burst up at them. There was no way the boss could be looted until they

cooled down some, so Max and Fitz began to search the for hidden yummies. Alexander raised the floor of the pit back up, allowing the heat to disburse more quickly. Finally, Fitz got tired of waiting and hit the demon pile with a blast of arctic air. Max looted the corpses.

All told, the minor demons dropped less than 500 gold, one epic quality two handed sword, one superior quality soul crystal, and a few rare quality weapons and armor bits.

The boss, on the other hand, had better loot. First Kill loot. Lainey's prize was first.

Demon Bone Bow

Item Level: Unique, Epic

Stats: +10 Strength, +10 Agility

Formed from the heat-fused spine of the demon Gortax and strung with its tendons, this bow is more flexible and powerful than wooden bows. For those with the strength to draw it, it will generate demon-bone arrows with +10 damage against all targets, and +20 damage against targets with dark affinity. Class Bonus: Demon-bone arrows infused with Valkyrie Shock spell extend duration of stun effect by 100%.

Surprisingly, the next item was for Fibble. It was a 3-foot-long staff with two horns on top.

Goblin Staff of Demon Killing

Item Level: Unique, Epic

Stats: +10 Intelligence, +10 Wisdom

This staff will absorb damage from dark or fire magic attacks, and convert them into charges of light magic. Race Bonus: Attacks against targets of dark affinity will do +25% damage. Spells cast on targets of light affinity will do +25% healing.

Max held out the staff to Fibble, who looked confused. Lainey, realizing the little goblin couldn't read, said, "That is for you, Fibble. Big important stick. Kills demons better. Big heals for friends, too."

Grinning, Fibble grabbed the staff, shouting, "Pew!", and blasting Max in the face with a healing spell. Everyone, including the goblin, had a good laugh.

There wasn't an item for everyone this time, possibly because the dungeon had been low level.

Fitz pointed out that the throne was the source of magic powering the portal, and Brick wasted no time. Putting away his shield, he took his hammer in both hands, and hit the throne with a massive overhand blow that he combined with his Holy Smite spell.

The stone throne cracked, then fell into two halves, revealing a dark orb that had been concealed underneath. Fitz took one look at the orb, and warned everyone to stay back. "Alexander, I need a box. Obsidian. Just big enough to hold this thing."

Alexander produced a mana potion and drank it down. He'd drained his mana in the fight. When he had sufficient juice, he reached into the earth with his earth mover and raised a roughly ten-pound chunk of obsidian. Taking over, Brick hollowed it out and smoothed it until it was roughly box-shaped, with a hinged lid. Fitz then cast several spells on the box, explaining that he was infusing it with light magic and protective magic and a time dilation spell that would make time pass inside the box at 1/100,000th of normal speed. For each second that passed within the box, a little more than a day would pass in the normal world.

Fitz scooped the orb into the box, then closed the lid. He had Brick fuse the lid on all four sides so it could not be opened. Then he slid the box in his inventory, saying he'd explain later. The moment the box was sealed, the portal disappeared with a pop.

"Why you put overlord's surprise in box?" Fibble had been peering curiously at the box until Fitz put it away.

"Overlord's surprise?" Fitz asked.

"Dark ball thingy. Was present for overlord. Man in dark hood bring. Overlord out hunting, so man put ball under throne. Said not to tell overlord. Big surprise for later." Fibble thought about it. "Bad surprise," he said, sadly.

"Well, that explains some things," Fitz said.

Leaving it for later, they searched the room for treasures and hidden doors, as

usual. Finding nothing, they followed Fibble down the stairs to "bottom room", which turned out to be a sort of office and sleeping quarters for the goblin boss.

As the group fanned out, Fibble looked up at Sasha. "Humans kill Fibble now? We reach bottom room. No need Fibble."

Everybody in the room paused. It hadn't occurred to any of them that the goblin had still believed all this time that they'd kill him when he'd served his purpose. The little guy stood there, no trembling, just accepting his fate.

They had a dilemma. They couldn't exactly take Fibble with them. The villagers had lost so much at the hands of the goblins. He most certainly would be killed on sight.

Sasha wasn't able to answer the little goblin, so Fitz saved her. "Fibble, we are not going to kill you. You have earned that at least. But your people killed many humans, and those humans would try to kill you, just like you killed all these demons for eating your friends. Do you understand?"

The goblin nodded. "Humans always kill goblins. That why we hid in caves. Only sneak out at night to hunt. Caves not safe anymore, still demons we not kill. Leave Fibble some food so he can hide under bed?"

Shaking his head, the wizard said, "Fibble, how would you like to see a real wizard's tower?"

The goblin asked, "This mean wizard? Put Fibble in cage?"

Doh!

"Me, Fibble. I'm the wizard. It's my tower," Fitz nearly pulled his hair out.

"Oh! You good wizard. I go. Never come back here?"

The wizard nodded.

"Fibble go to his hole and get picture of family, then we go!"

"Yes, you do that." The wizard was already back to searching the overlord's desk. The others returned to searching the room, looking for any useful information or valuable loot.

Fibble moved over to a wall near the stair, and pushed in a section. A small door opened, and he rushed in. He came out a moment later carrying a ratty blanket, and piece of paper, and moved to his customary spot near Sasha.

Sasha noticed him standing there looking at the paper. "Can I see, Fibble?" The little goblin smiled and reached up to hand it over.

Sasha smiled when she saw what was on it. It was a drawing with stick figures, much like a very small child would create. They were clustered together and holding hands. "This is your family?" her eyes were tearing up. Lydia came over to see, and had the same reaction.

"Yes. Little one is me. Big one is mother. Other ones not so little are brood brothers and sisters. All gone now." If the little goblin wasn't so filthy, he might have been the center of a group hug just then.

"Holy shit!" Max said. Everyone turned to see him looking at the door to 'Fibble's hole'. He stepped closer and bent down to get a better look.

"What? Fibble forget something in hole?" The goblin looked at his picture, and his blanket. "Nope. This all Fibble's stuff."

Max moved aside and the rest of the group bend down to look through the door. There was a room the size of a large walk-in closet. Stacked nearly floor to ceiling were piles and piles of loot. Weapons, armor, chests big and small. Mounds of gold and silver coins.

"This is way more than a goblin clan could have gathered. This must be left over from the original inhabitants," Fitz said.

"What? Shiny things? Bah! Hard to sleep on. Can't eat. Fibble find hole one night time when cleaning. Overlord out hunting. Fibble touch wall and it opens. Smell funny at first. Then Fibble hide blanket and picture in hole so overlord not find and take. Keep hole secret!" The little goblin walked up to the entrance and looked around again. "Humans like shiny things, Fibble give! Present for killing demons!" He smiled his biggest gobliny smile.

Brick had dropped down on his knees and was mumbling, "Oh, sweet Durin."

Max was speechless. The lootmaster himself. The man who always had a clever comment. Speechless.

I don't blame him.

Just a short peek inside told him there were hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of golds worth of items in there. Not to mention all the actual gold. Several of the items glowed, clearly enchanted. On a whim, he activated mage sight. The blinding glare from inside the room made him look away. He smiled as a thought occurred to him.

Tapping Fitz on the shoulder, he leaned in to whisper in the wizard's ear. A mischievous smile appeared on the wizard's face as well. Alexander cleared his throat loudly. "Hey, guys?" he said loudly. When all eyes turned to him, Fitz covertly cast a blanket mage sight spell on everyone.

Brick, used to the effect, looked questioningly at Alexander before it dawned on him to look at the loot pile. The dwarf just fell flat on his back, passed out.

Max looked with alarm at both the change to his sight (he'd never experienced mage sight before), and his friend seemingly dropping dead. "What did you do, wizard?"

Fitz just laughed and pointed toward the loot pile. "It's called mage sight. It lets you detect magic."

As Max turned his gaze toward Fibble's hole, his eyes widened, then shut tight. After a moment they opened again. As the realization of what he was seeing sunk in, his legs got weak beneath him and he sat abruptly on the floor.

After having a good laugh over their new fortune, Max began to worry about them being able to carry it all. Even with their weight reducing bags of carrying, the sheer volume and weight of all that loot was imposing. Fitz solved the problem for them by waving his hand and teleporting it back to their compound. He said they'd find it in their dining room.

I wonder if the table will hold up.

"What shall we do about the rest of the demons? We left maybe a third of them alive as we took the short route down here," the captain asked.

Fibble wasn't shy about his opinion. "Kill! Kill all demons!"

Fitz disagreed. "It's supper time, and they're not going anywhere. The portal is destroyed."

Alexander tended to agree. "We've still got things to do in the village. We can come back in a few days and finish them off. Good xp if nothing else."

As none of them were inclined to walk all the way back out of the dungeon, Fitz told Alexander to mass teleport the group. But first he had to take care of Fibble.

"I'll take him back to the tower's first level. I'll Fibble-proof it, make sure he's got food, and get Rufus to watch over him. Then I'll rejoin you at the village." With that, the wizard and goblin were gone.

Alexander closed his eyes and focused on the teleport spell. And a few seconds later, the bottom room was empty.

Chapter Fifteen

There Ain't No Cure for Stupid

Back at the village, the sun was setting. The adventurers headed toward the warehouse, where, as before, a meal was being distributed. With the notable addition of wondrous smelling bread and pastries!

The captain, asserting his role as a representative of the king, raised his arms and called out for everyone to gather. After allowing a few moments for stragglers, he began, "Many of you know, a dungeon was discovered near the quarry yesterday. Today we went and investigated. The dungeon had appeared in a cave system that was home to a goblin colony. The demons managed to open a portal on the lowest level, and drove the goblins out of their homes, straight toward your village."

He paused as there were cries of outrage, sorrow, and fear. Once they'd died down, he continued. "We killed many of the demons, including their leader, and we destroyed the portal. In a few days' time, we'll go back and clear the area of the remainder of the demons. Whitehall will be a much safer place!"

This time there were some ragged cheers. "Now please, enjoy your meals and get a restful night's sleep!"

As the captain stepped back toward the group, Alexander gathered them together. He made a quick proposal.

"These folks lost so much to the goblins. Some of this may have been theirs. Even if it wasn't, I think they deserve a portion?" They others all agreed. They did some quick inventory trades and were ready. Alexander stepped back toward the crowd. He raised a block from the ground under him so that he was tall enough for all to see.

"People of Whitehall, we have one other announcement. The goblins and demons we killed inside the dungeon left behind some... resources. We have decided that a portion of those resources are yours!" He held up a bag of coins. "Where is Mayor Stanton?"

"He went into Stormforge for supplies!" Thomas shouted from somewhere in the back of the crowd.

"Does the town have a vice mayor, or a treasurer?" He was greeted by total silence. Looking around, he spotted Millicent and her daughters sitting on a bench. "Millicent, as there's no village official to accept this, I'm entrusting these funds to you, as you currently have the most secure home in the village. If that's alright with you?"

Millicent nodded her acceptance, sending one of her daughters to retrieve the bag. The young woman took the bag from Alexander, nodding her thanks. She took two steps toward her mother, and froze. Eyes wide, she stammered, "There... there's five thousand gold here!"

After a stunned silence, there was much more enthusiastic cheering than the captain received.

Alexander waived his arms until the crowd quieted down. "This money is yours to do with as you see fit, but I would make two very strong recommendations. First, keep it quiet. Rumors of large amounts of gold will draw thieves. The city is only a short walk from here. Second, use this money to invest in the village. Buy tools and building supplies. Purchase crafting materials that you can't harvest yourselves. Even buy some training. What we want more than anything for you is not just survival, but for you to be able to thrive and grow!"

Ragged applause from the crowd was the only reaction.

Having said his bit, Alexander stepped down and went to dish up his supper. After he'd eaten, he went back to working on the walls, raising section after section until he got tired. By the time he was finished, the new stone walls circled just over a third of the village.

They mayor had returned, bringing back a wagon load of supplies. Surprisingly, he brought back a couple of players with him as well. Alexander found them wandering around the village, clearly narrating a recording. A woman was talking to some of the villagers, asking them about the attack, and the rebuilding that was going on. The other player, a man, was doing the recording, shifting angles and moving in for close-ups.

"Can I help you with something?" Alexander asked them.

The man looked surprised to see him. "Oh! We didn't think you were here.

The mayor told us you were out clearing a dungeon."

"We were. We're back now. I'll ask again. Can I help you with something?" Alexander didn't like the idea of people filming the vulnerable village. Most players had little or no respect for NPC's, and would take advantage of them if it served their interests.

"Got some suspicious players near the town square. Filming villagers. Thought we weren't going to be here. Might need some backup," he sent in guild chat. Then he turned his own recorder on.

As the son of a famous man, he'd had his share of run-ins with paparazzi and half-assed reporters who were looking for quotes they could use to validate whatever story they were pushing. It had been especially bad after his mother was killed. Everybody wanted photos of the grieving boy. These guys felt the same.

The man looked hesitant, then decided to go on the offensive. "It's a free world, man. We can be anywhere we want to be. What's your problem?" The woman had stopped talking to the villager and stepped next to her partner.

"My problem is that you're recording me right now without my permission. And that you just told me you're here because you thought we wouldn't be. That tells me you're up to something, and this village is under my protection. So explain yourself. Or my problems are quickly going to become your problems."

With a wave of his hand, Alexander raised stone walls behind and on either side of the duo. Now if they wanted to move, their only way to go was through him.

"Easy there, Alexander. We mean you no harm. We're just here for a story," the woman said. "We were in the market in Stormforge, and we heard the mayor talking about the group who had saved his village. We thought it would make a good human interest story."

Brick, Max, Lainey and Sasha came trotting over. The captain was approaching as well, but Alexander made a motion for him to hold. This was a conversation that NPC's didn't need to hear. In fact, he turned to the

villagers that the woman had been talking to, and in a loud voice, said "These are bad people. They do not have your best interests at heart. Spread the word that talking to them is a bad idea. The attention they bring won't be good for the village." The villagers nodded, and without hesitation spread out to warn the others.

The man in the box got angry at that. "Just who the fuck do you think you are? You can't control who we talk to!" He stepped forward. Instantly Max and Lainey had arrows nocked and bows drawn.

"You knew who I was when I walked up, so you've seen the PWP videos. You know we won't hesitate to kill those who threaten us, or those we protect. You purposely came here while my friends and I were not here. That tells me you have a motive you know I wouldn't like. I'll say it again. This village is under our protection. Now, who are you, and why are you here?"

"You can't hold us here! It's against the rules to detain or imprison players!" the man was getting angrier.

"You are not in any way detained. I have simply blocked your view, to prevent your recording this village. Which, by the way, is not a right guaranteed by the game. You can record stone walls all day long, but that's all you're going to get here. And you still haven't answered my question. This is the last time I'm going to ask. Who. Are. You?"

The woman put a hand on the man's shoulder, pulling him back. "We're just a couple of players who heard a cool story and decided to come investigate" she tried.

"Bullshit. You were doing recorded interviews. You were trying to avoid us while doing them. Try again."

"And tell the truth this time," Brick growled. "Me patience has worn thin."

"Fine. We work for HoloNews Network. We were sent to do a follow-up on the —"

"BULLSHIT!" Alexander growled. "Any network reps would have jumped at the chance for an in-game interview. Your friend here was not happy to see me in the least. Now you've lied to us." Alexander looked at Lainey, who infused her arrow with electricity, making it spark and arc. "And you STILL have not told me your names." Alexander waved the captain over.

Alexander sent a group chat. "Guys, I think they're PWP. I see an opportunity here. Turn on your recorders, and equip your SEEE YA T-shirts. We're gonna have some fun!"

When the captain arrived, Alexander asked him. "Captain, the king has declared that all PWP members are enemies of the kingdom, and should be arrested or killed on sight, is that correct?"

The captain took a moment to look at Alexander's bright yellow "SEEE YA!" shirt, and smiled. "That is indeed correct."

"And, as Captain of the Guard, do you have an ability to detect whether a particular adventurer is, in fact, a member of PWP?"

"Yes, I do. I can see the reputation of all citizens and adventurers. It helps in fulfilling my duties."

Alexander motioned for the captain to step closer so that he could see the two 'reporters' inside the box. "Can you tell us if these two, who have been talking to villagers and asking questions about the rebuilding efforts, are members of PWP?"

The captain concentrated on the woman for a moment.

Quest Received: Protect the Realm

An enemy of the realm has been identified. Detain them if possible. Kill them if necessary.

Reward: 100 gold per enemy adventurer.

"You are correct, Alexander. Both of these people are affiliated with the guild PWP," the captain said. Then turned to address them. "You are under arrest as enemies of the Realm. Your presence here and the actions described suggest Espionage. If you are found guilty, you will serve a minimum of one year at hard labor. Drop your weapons, now." The captain put two fingers to his mouth and let out a high pitched whistle. Within seconds, guards were running toward them from several directions.

Anticipating that the players would rather die than be captured, Alexander

said, "Lainey!". A stun arrow hit the man in his groin area. The woman raised her hand and began a cast, and Max hit her with a silence arrow. She pulled a dagger and jumped at Alexander, who was still blocking the entrance to the stone box. The dagger slammed into his chest, but failed to penetrate his mithril shirt. Surprising everyone, the captain drew his sword and made a single swift strike, cutting off the hand holding the dagger.

The woman screamed in rage and pain. "PWP will have your heads! We will never stop!"

By this time, the guards had arrived. Alexander lowered the stone walls, and both players were subdued.

"You look to me like you've been stopped. Again." Max's smirk was priceless.

Many of the villagers had gathered round as the guards had charged in. Most had been in the city when Alexander had brought in the first group of PWP's, and when PWP had attacked the city and killed several citizens.

"As you have all just witnessed," the captain began, "these adventurers attempted to murder Alexander here. They did so in full view of myself and several members of the guard. The charge of attempted murder will be added to the charge of espionage!"

As the guards began to lead the prisoners toward the barracks to be locked up, Brick began his classic two-handed wave. "SEEE ya!" he shouted.

Laughing, the others of the group joined him. "SEEE YA!". Recognizing the tradition from the city square, many of the villagers took up the chant and the wave as well. "SEEE YA!"

Alexander couldn't help himself. He shouted, "When you talk to Henry, tell him I said to stop recruiting stupid people! Its making him look bad!"

Alexander then approached the captain. "Captain, I suggest you teleport those two immediately to the city. As long as they are out here, their friends may try to rescue them. Your men's lives are in danger." He couldn't tell the captain that they'd likely try to kill themselves or each other to escape.

The captain nodded his head, and called his guards back to him. He grabbed

one player in each hand, and teleported away. Hopefully, they'd not had time to share whatever footage they took of the village. Once in the dungeon, their bind point would be set there permanently, and they'd have no access to mail or chat. The GMs would make sure of it.

Alexander addressed the crowd. "Unfortunately, not all adventurers are good people. As with any group, there will be some who care only for themselves, and will take from you your possessions, even your lives, without a second thought. You all saw this when PWP attacked Stormforge. I am not telling you to fear all adventurers. Most of us are basically good, if unruly and inconsiderate. But if you see any adventurers acting suspiciously, as these here were today, please let us know immediately! Thank you."

Alexander was now very worried for the people of Whitehall. If PWP connected the village to himself and his guildmates these people would become targets. To his surprise, he was not the only one thinking along those lines.

Millicent walked through the loitering crowd. She stepped up to Alexander, and put out a hand. "Do you have an extra sword?" she asked. "I may be old, but my husband and I did some adventuring in our youth. I still know my way around a weapon. And if those murdering scum who killed my husband come to my new home, I intend to make them suffer for it!" The elder lady was trembling with rage.

The gathered crowd looked shocked. Alexander chuckled, and began to search his inventory for an appropriate weapon. Max beat him to it, handing her an enchanted sword they'd looted from one of the demons. It was small and lightweight enough that she should be able to swing it.

Millicent thanked him, then stepped back and took a few practice swings. The villagers let loose a roar of approval. Had she not been swinging a sword, Alexander would have hugged her at that moment.

Brick and Max began handing out looted weapons, just common ones, from the dungeon and from PWP players to any villagers who asked. Lainey called over the two retired sergeants and arranged for them to provide daily training sessions for any villagers who wished to learn. She gave each of them an enchanted sword as a reward. The two old soldiers saluted the Valkyrie, swords across their hearts, and went off to begin organizing. Though it was getting late, Alexander went back to wall building. Whitehall needed to be secure as soon as possible. As he was working, the captain returned with two dozen more guards, as well as Fitz and an earth mage from the Mage's Guild. The two of them pitched in, and progress sped up immensely. So much so that by midnight they had at least a rudimentary stone wall 20 feet high around the entire village.

There were guard towers every 200 feet around the entire circle, and a four-foot wide shelf that ran around the inside of the wall, allowing the guards to patrol the entire perimeter from above, watching both outside and in. As they completed each tower, a guard would take up his post and begin a watch.

Exhausted, Alexander crawled into his bedroll and fell asleep. He dreamt of players attacking the village and slaughtering NPC's. It was not a restful night.

The next morning, he, Fitz, and the earth mage began fine tuning the defenses. The earth mage pushed over the logs of the old wooden palisade and jammed them up against the inside of the wall. Pushing dirt against those, he created a berm that provided reinforcement to the wall itself, and quick access to the top of the wall from inside the village. Fitz began casting enchantments on the walls to strengthen them, protect them from magic damage, and make them impossible to scale. The enchanting gave Alexander an idea. One of the enchantments that the old gnome had taught him was a simple light spell.

Alexander recruited Brick, and the two of them went outside of the walls. They walked out the gate and stepped to the side of the road roughly 100 feet out from the wall. Alexander raised a stone marker, much like the signpost he had created back at the main road, about four feet in height. He asked Brick to work some sand into the top, and mold it into thick glass. Then he enchanted it with the light spell, and raised it up to a height of about ten feet. For the finishing touch, Brick tied the enchantment to the earth below, allowing it to draw power. Effectively, they had made a lamp post. They went to the other side of the road and repeated the process. The whole thing, once they got a system down, took about two minutes. The pair of them walked around the entire wall, setting up a light post every hundred feet from each other and the town's wall. This would assist the guards in spotting any incoming threats. They'd have to check the brightness and

spacing again once it got dark, to make sure the coverage was sufficient.

When they got back inside, the priest that Captain Redmond had brought from the city approached them. "Sir Knight, might I have a moment?" he asked.

"It's Alexander. And this is Brick, a paladin of Durin."

The priest bowed his head to Brick. "Holy one. My name is Father Ignatius, of the church of Asclepius. I've come here to see to the needs of these poor villagers who have suffered so much. I intended to build a small chapel and offer services and healing within. Then yesterday I heard the captain's announcement of demons in the nearby dungeon. Since then I've been thinking about how best to help defend against the possibility of their return." Asclepius was the Greek god of healing.

I like him already. "How can we help you, father?" Alexander encouraged him.

"Well, I want to consecrate the ground in and around the village. Make it painful for demons or those of dark magic to even set foot here. Consecration of that nature involves a massive initial blessing, tied to a power source that can maintain it. That power source should be within the chapel where I can protect it. I thought with yourself, and the wizard Fitz, we could work together and accomplish this task?"

"Aye," Brick said, "I'll help as well. There will be dwarves livin' here too, and Durin'll be wantin' to look out for them. We'll put the favor o'two gods into the land!"

"Where do we start, Father? I can construct a chapel for you. Have you spoken to the mayor about a location?"

"I have. He gave me permission to locate the chapel wherever I find room. It should be as close to the center of the village as possible to maintain coverage over the entire area." The priest pointed to a place where three homes had been burned to the ground. "That should be acceptable. I just need a small structure. Nothing fancy. There are less than a hundred souls here in the village."

"Ah, Father. But we're going to grow the village. No point in having a

chapel so small you outgrow it in a year. As for fancy, I'm afraid I'm too new at this for fancy. I can make it strong and secure, a place of refuge in case of attack. That, I'm good at," Alexander said.

"Fair enough," chuckled the priest.

Alexander cleared the debris from the burned homes. He decided to set the chapel back a bit from the road. They had some room, since the new stone walls were 20 feet further out than the old palisade.

As with the inn, he hollowed out a cellar, cutting large wall sections and raising them up above ground level. He made the dimensions 40 feet wide by 100 feet deep. He raised columns from the bedrock floor, and placed beams across them. He created a stone staircase with a nice curve leading up to ground level. Then he paused.

"Father, you said you needed a power source. Shall we place it in the cellar? Or would it be better underground?"

"In the cellar will be fine. That way I can watch over it, and access it if there's a need to recharge."

Alexander decided to get creative. He raised a medium sized block of obsidian from the earth, approximately four feet square, and placed it in the exact center of the cellar. He placed floor sections across the cellar beams, leaving an opening at the stairwell. Then he extended the first-floor walls up to a height of 20 feet, with a three-foot thickness. He placed more beams across, but these were only temporary, to hold the walls together. Picturing in his mind some of his favorite gothic cathedrals, he created a series of four ribbed vaults growing up from the walls. Once those were in place, and the ceiling secure, he removed the cross beams. He opened tall arched windows along each side, and created a tall arched doorway, six feet wide for the main entry.

The three of them moved inside, and Brick took over. First, he went to the back wall, and laid his hands on it. He pulled sand up through the stone, and created a large circular opaque glass window high up on the wall. It was about ten feet in diameter, and let in a significant amount of light. He then began to do the same for each of the windows.

While he was working on that, Alexander created a few interior walls in the back corners of the chapel to act as office and living space for the priest. He included a bathroom in each, and connected them to the water line underground. Then he stepped out back, and raised a 20-foot-wide bell tower, with a door connecting it to the chapel and an interior stair. The tower rose up a total of 40 feet in the air. "Father I'm afraid you'll have to get a bell on your own".

Stepping back inside, he found the priest and Brick waiting for him. They went into the cellar, and the priest cast a light globe so that they could see. When they reached the block of obsidian, Brick began to shape it. His hands moved across the stone, and it flowed into the classic shape of an altar. On one side he etched the Warhammer, symbol of Durin. On the other the staff with coiled serpent, symbol of Asclepius.

Finished with the basic work, Alexander added a few touches. He cast a light enchantment into each of the columns in the cellar so that they'd emit a soft glow. Just enough to see by. As they headed upstairs, he offered to create stone pews.

The priest laughed, "Thank you, Alexander. But stone is cold and gets hard on the bones after a while. I'll obtain some wooden pews."

"That could take a while, Father. How about I make some simple stone benches for now, and we can get rid of them as you bring in pews later?"

The priest agreed with that, and Alexander raised ten rows of benches, leaving a wide center aisle.

Having nothing else to do in the chapel, Alexander headed out. Brick was going to stay and work with the priest to prepare for the consecration. They asked that he send them Fitz if he turned up.

Being close to lunchtime, it was not hard to find Fitz; he was where the food was. Alexander grabbed some food and sat down next to the wizard. They discussed the plan to consecrate the ground. He expected the wizard to scoff at the idea. After all, they had closed the portal, and would be going back to finish off the remaining demons soon. Instead, the wizard supported the idea fully. Stuffing down the last of his sandwich, he made his way to the chapel.

Checking in on guild chat, he found that Max and Lainey were once again out hunting. There were a lot of hungry mouths in the village. They had brought one of the farmer's sons, and one of Millicent's daughters, as both were interested in learning to hunt.

Lydia and Sasha were combing the woods for herbs and mushrooms. They'd taken the mist cat and Alexander's tiger along for protection.

Alexander decided to head down to the inn to check on progress. Thomas and the carpenter, with the help of his sons, had competed the thick wood columns and beams and a staircase on the first floor, and had installed a floor for the second floor. They were busily constructing walls to create individual rooms on the second floor when he walked in.

"You're really making progress, Thomas!" he said.

"Aye, Markham and his sons are hard workers, and they work smart. We'll be done with the third floor and the roof in a few days. You and your lot will be able to sleep in regular rooms tonight. Though not on beds. Those'll take quite a bit longer," Thomas replied.

Alexander thanked him for his hard work and moved on. Wandering through the town aimlessly, he decided it was a good time to work on his enchanting skills. Finding himself in front of Millicent's, he sat at one of the tables he'd created and pulled out some of the loot he'd collected over the last several days. These were all low level enchanted weapons and gear that weren't worth selling at auction. He focused on the first item, a sword enchanted with extra strength.

First he activated his mage sight. Then he activated the "study" skill from his enchantment skill tree. He watched as a thin thread of magic wrapped itself around the weapon, seeking out the enchantment. He began to see the form and texture of the magic, the intent behind it. Strength. Increased force. Increased resistance. The power of the earth. Then, as if a bubble had burst, he understood how to duplicate the magic. He had learned a strength enchantment!

Unfortunately, the weapon dissolved to dust in his hands. Master Baleron had warned him this could happen. But Alexander considered it a good trade.

Next, he decided to try his new enchantment. He removed one of the small

gems from his bag, part of their loot from the dungeon. He wrapped his hand around the gem and focused on the idea of strength. He poured his mana through that idea, into the gem. After a moment there was a brief flash of light that leaked out between his fingers. Opening his hand, he found an enchanted gem.

Gem of +5 Strength Quality: Uncommon

So, not the best quality, and only a +5. Still, not bad for his first effort! This proved that he could accurately learn enchantments on his own, and use them, as opposed to the 'pre-packaged' enchantments that Baleron had taught him, like the light spell. It felt better somehow to think and learn for himself.

Following that train of thought, he wondered if he could alter or combine enchantments. He didn't want to waste a gem on wild experimentation, so he reached into the ground and pulled a small hunk of his old friend, obsidian. The dwarves had said it holds enchantments well. He set a roughly five-pound piece on the table in front of him. Breaking a very small chunk off one corner, roughly the same size as a gem, he readied himself. He'd try for strength again, but he was going to do it differently.

Reaching into the earth with his earth magic, he held ready the strength enchantment at the same time. He imagined the strength of a mountain, its immovable permanence. The power of an earthquake, the giant plates of unyielding energy grinding against each other. The pressure of a volcano, hot magma pressing against stone, trying to burst free. Channeling that strength up from the earth and through himself into the gem, there was a flash of light, and searing pain as the spell was completed. His UI was flashing red, indicating he'd taken some damage. It felt as though his entire body had been burned from the inside out. Too weak to even hold the gem, he let it fall from his hand as he slumped over the table. The burning sensation continued.

"What did you do!?" Sasha demanded in group chat. She must have seen his health bar drop in their group UI.

"Enchanting experiment. Might have overdone it. Burned myself, I think."

"You THINK?" This was Lainey. "When I get back there I'm shooting you in the balls with a stun arrow. You seem to enjoy pain. Moron."

"I be with father Ignatius right now." Brick this time. "Where are ye? We'll come toss ye a quick heal."

"I'm sitting in front of Millicent's."

Alexander sat there patiently, still unable to raise his head. It felt like his body was cooking inside. Slowly. He was used to enduring pain, but this pain was frightening. He didn't know what it was, or what was causing it. Other than his being a moron.

After a few minutes, he felt a hand on his head. There was a cool, tingling sensation. Not a heal. More like a probe. He heard the priest's voice, "What have you done, Alexander? I've never seen anything like this before."

Fitz snorted. "I have. The boy was playing with fire. Literally."

The priest rested a hand on each of his shoulders, and began a prayer. Alexander felt the cool wash of holy magic flood through him. The pain subsided. He felt 100% better.

"Thank you Father," he said. Lifting his head up, he sat up straight on the bench. He looked around to see Fitz looking quite amused, and Brick and the priest looking confused.

"What did ye mean, Father? Never seen what before?" Brick asked.

"His blood was literally boiling. His body was cooking from the inside out," the priest said.

"BWAHAHA!! Ye nuked yerself! Ye might as well have crawled into a microwave!"

Brick is never going to let me live this down.

"Let me guess, boy. You were trying to enchant something with fire," the wizard chortled.

[&]quot;We're coming back," Sasha again.

[&]quot;No need. I'm fine. Keep doing what you're doing."

"Strength, actually." Alexander considered. "But I WAS imagining a volcano when the spell activated. I was trying to channel the strength of the earth into the stone, to see if it would make a stronger enchantment."

Fitz looked around, then picked up the bit of obsidian Alexander had been working on. Looking at it, he whistled. He handed the stone to Brick, who was suddenly not laughing. Brick handed the stone to Alexander.

Elemental Stone

Item quality: Unique

This stone has been infused with the power of the earth, and the element of fire. When affixed to a weapon, it will provide a bonus of +20 to Strength. In addition, the weapon will inflict +150 fire damage.

"Well, shit," Alexander muttered. On the one hand, this was a damned impressive stone. On the other, he'd very nearly killed himself to make it. So, no making another one. He needed to rethink his experiment.

Father Ignatius took the stone from his hand and examined it. "Ah. I see. You channeled elemental fire. And you were holding the stone when you did so?"

Alexander nodded.

Fitz finished the thought for the priest. "You just learned enchanting two days ago, boy. If you had studied longer, you'd know that there is a limit to how much magic any particular substance will hold. You got lucky, in that you chose obsidian. Not only does it hold magic well, but its origin is fire based. The material was more willing to accept what you fed it." He looked grim for a moment.

"But when you feed too much magic into an item while enchanting it, one of two things happens. The item is destroyed, often in an explosion. Or the magic will feed back into the enchanter, which is what happened to you. You would have died if we arrived a minute or two later."

Not one to miss a chance, Brick broadcast in group chat, "Our boy literally nuked his self. Like a microwave burrito, all normal lookin' warm crust on the outside, fiery hot on the inside! Father Ignatius healed him. He be fine."

This was met with complete silence. Alexander sighed. He was going to pay

for this when Lainey and Sasha got back.

Fitz sat down with him as Brick and the priest went back to the chapel. "Listen to me, boy. You have a wondrous mind, and a rare talent for magic. All kinds of magic, as far as I can tell. I watched you and the others fight in the dungeon. It was impressive the way you've altered and combined magic. But you lack patience, boy. You sprint ahead where you should tread carefully."

The wizard paused, as if considering whether to continue. "I'll let you in on a little secret. Or rather, make you aware that I know YOUR secret. I know that when you do something stupid and kill yourself, your soul does not move on. Your body is recreated good as new, and your soul re-occupies it as if you've never died. It is so with all adventurers."

Alexander looked at the wizard in shock. NPC's were NOT supposed to know about respawns. They weren't even supposed to know that adventurers were from another world instead of another land. Like when Brick mentioned microwaves a minute ago, any player conversation about items or concepts foreign to the game world don't even register with NPC's, as if they never heard them. They'll just wait patiently until the player re-engages in conversation within their context.

He needed to know more. "Well, not good as new. We suffer a loss of experience. And we lose some of our possessions and gold." Alexander said. "How is it you know of this, Fitz?"

The wizard laughed. "Alexander. I am a several-thousand-year-old wizard. I have completed quests on behalf of the gods, and rival some of them in power. I have the knowledge and abilities one would expect of an entity that has been studying magic and the world in general for millennia. I know there are other worlds, other dimensions, like the void from which the demons spring. And I can see the difference in the souls of adventurers." The wizard paused to waggle his eyebrows. "Not to mention the fact that you all act like complete morons and throw yourselves into the meat grinder at every opportunity. It doesn't take a genius to realize you have no fear of death! More than once I've seen a dead adventurer walk into a tavern after being mauled by some beastie in the woods. Besides..." Fitz paused for dramatic effect, "Odin is a friend of mine!"

Alexander laughed in spite of himself. "And who else knows this?"

"Very few, boy. The king and Captain Redmond know. As do most rulers on Io. The head of the Mage's Guild. The other one. Not me. Well, obviously me, too. Maybe a very few others who have figured it out. But it is a closely guarded secret. We cannot have it become common knowledge that you adventurers are immortal. It would destroy our society. Faith in the gods would be destroyed. Adventurers would be feared by common folk. Who wouldn't fear someone who could kill them with no consequence?"

"But we're getting off topic. You must learn to think before you just go off and try something new with magic. You nearly killed yourself raising the stone for your portal. You nearly killed yourself again doing the same for Brick's forge. And again just now. Those are only the times I witnessed over the last four days! I let those go with a mild warning, because in each instance it would have been only you that died. But today, sitting where you are, with the power you put into that stone... if it had exploded, you'd have killed Millicent and maybe several others. Let me be clear. It SHOULD have exploded. Only the most amazing luck, or maybe the intervention of the gods, kept it from doing so!"

It was as if the wizard had kicked Alexander in the stomach. *I nearly killed Millicent! And her daughters. All these innocent people I've been trying to protect.* He felt physically sick.

"Don't misunderstand me, Alexander. You should experiment. As I said, the way you and Sasha have combined spells is smart and effective. But practice those experiments in dungeons where the only ones who can be hurt are yourselves. And when you want to do experiments like this stone, check with me first. I'll tell you if your idea is sound, how dangerous it might be. And I'll help you put protections in place for unexpected explosions."

Alexander could only nod his head.

"Speaking of protections. I'm going to teach you a healing enchantment. It won't heal you of minor cuts and wounds, but if you receive a fatal blow, it will keep your health from hitting zero. It will only work once. Meaning if you take two fatal blows in rapid succession, like in combat, the second will indeed kill you. In an instance like today, if this stone had exploded, it would protect you from death."

Fitz put his hand on Alexander's head and shared with him the enchantment

formula called Undying. Compared to the pain of the boiling blood, he hardly felt it.

"Thank you, Fitz. And I'm truly sorry. I didn't know. You're right. I'm new to magic, and haven't learned nearly enough of the basics to be experimenting as I have. I'm like a child who just learned to crawl, trying to run across a room. A room that's on fire. And full of sharp things. I'll be more careful now. I couldn't live with myself if I'd hurt anyone here today."

And he absolutely meant it. With every fiber of his being. If he'd caused an explosion here and killed villagers, he'd be worse than the asshole who set off the bomb that killed his mother. He wouldn't have done it out of some misguided belief, but out of simple thoughtlessness.

"If... you don't mind, Fitz, I think I need to be alone for a bit. What I almost did..."

"Aye, son. Find yourself a quiet spot. Someplace at a distance from here. In case your contemplation leads to more experimentation!" the wizard winked at him.

Alexander wandered toward the village gate. He needed to be away from people. The people he had nearly killed. Leaving the village, he simply walked into the forest. Lost in thought, he paid no attention to where he was headed. He simply walked until a tree or bush got in his way, turned to avoid it, and kept going. What he really wanted to do was log out of the game and talk to his dad, but ending the immersion early would cause other problems. Some time alone would have to do.

Eventually he stopped walking and took in his surroundings. He was standing at the edge of a small clearing that surrounded a creek-fed pond. It was a lovely setting. No picturesque fountains or manicured grass. Just simple nature. He sat down with his back to a tree to rest. After a few moments of listening to the sounds of the creek as it burbled into, then back out of, the pond, he realized something wasn't right.

Though he was in a thick forest, there we no signs of life. Sure, he had been clumsily stumbling through the brush, probably scaring off all the bunnies and squirrels. But where were the birds? The crickets and frogs?

His first thought, being in a game, was that he'd wandered into a boss area.

Some kind of mutated version of Nessie, or a freakishly large and hungry murloc was going to lunge out of the pond and try to eat his face. He stood up to try and leave quietly before whatever it was discovered him.

He realized he was wrong when he heard a familiar voice beside him. "I want my gear back."

Henry. Alexander looked toward the voice, turning on his recorder as he did so, and the PWP leader blinked out of stealth roughly three feet away. "*PWP boss at my location!*" he sent into guild chat. "Hello, Henry. You just don't know when to give up, do you?"

"We'll get Fitz to port us to you! Just hold on!" Max replied.

"No. I got this. I'm going to get this bastard out of our hair. But gather in the village with Fitz, just in case. If I fail, port to me and deal with him."

"I've been following you for an hour," Henry said, unsheathing two new and savage looking daggers. "Your guildies won't get here in time to save you."

"I was actually just telling them to stay away," Alexander smiled at Henry, who looked less smug than he had a moment before. "I can deal with an idiot like you alone. Just like I did before."

Alexander put up a magic shield between Henry and himself as he spoke. He was going to have to be clever. He couldn't defeat the level 80 player in combat, he needed to outsmart him. And he needed time. "You aren't getting your armor back, by the way. We put it on training dummy in the compound. We named it 'Dummy' in honor of you." Alexander focused his earth mover magic as he talked. He was very gently creating a 20x20 hole in the rock below Henry. Leaving the ground at his feet intact, like a trap door. "Anyway, it's still in pretty good shape, as we haven't used Dummy much. You've seen Brick's mount? The battle boar? His name's Bacon. Bacon apparently didn't like your scent, cuz he pee'd all over Dummy and your armor. And, I mean, he's a big pig, so there was a LOT of pee. I don't think you'd ever get the smell out. It is leather, after all."

Henry snarled at him. "You're gonna die slowly, noob. I don't know how you killed me before. But I won't give you the chance to do it again!"

The rogue lunged toward Alexander. At the same time, Alexander liquefied

the ground underneath Henry's feet. The rogue struck the shield with his dagger, and pierced it. Henry was, after all, 60 levels above Alexander. The resistance caused enough of a deflection that the dagger stabbed at Alexander's shoulder instead of his chest. The legendary mithril shirt did its job, preventing the dagger from penetrating. Alexander was pushed back a step, while Henry, having lost all momentum, fell into the pit below. In his surprise, he tried to save himself by jamming his off-hand dagger into the ground like an ice axe. But it didn't hold, and he lost his grip on the dagger trying to hold onto the edge of the pit.

Alexander quickly closed the roof of the pit, except for a small hole through which he could hear Henry cursing. He stepped forward and looked down into the pit. "How bout we have a little conversation, Henry?" he asked.

"Fuck you!" Henry replied, pulling out a teleport scroll.

Before he could fully open it, Alexander hit him with wizard's fire. The damage interrupted the teleport cast, burning the scroll and making Henry scream.

"All I want is a conversation, Henry. We can do this all day. You're an enemy of the realm. I have a quest to detain you, which I have just done. And as you pointed out, we're an hour away from everyone. I've had the guards notified, and they're on their way, but we've got lots of time before they get here. In the meantime..." Alexander focused on Henry's remaining dagger. He used earth magic to fill the dagger with power, just as he'd done with the heat crystal in the imp barracks. With a massive shove, he put half his mana into the dagger, causing it to explode.

Henry screamed again. "You blew off my fucking HAND!"

Alexander had stepped back from the hole as the dagger exploded, not wanting to catch any shrapnel. Now he looked back down the hole to see Henry covered in bloody shrapnel wounds, his arm a ragged stump above the wrist. "I don't know what you're talking about Henry. I didn't touch your dagger. I think you must have pissed off the gods or something." Alexander tossed down a healing potion. "Drink that. It'll stop the pain." He held his breath to see if Henry would drink it. Henry's only hope at this point was to let himself die. One of his daggers was up top with Alexander, the other had just exploded. Without those, his best bet was to bleed to death. Otherwise

he'd be arrested and his toon would be useless for a year. But up till now, Henry had proved to be nearly as stupid as his brother.

True to form, Henry drank the potion. It wasn't nearly enough to heal him completely, but it stopped the bleeding, which was what Alexander needed. To be safe, he cast another enchantment. This time he enchanted Henry's belt. He used the Undying healing enchantment Fitz had given him. If the stupid man somehow managed to kill himself before Alexander could prevent it, this would buy a few precious seconds. To cover his bases, he asked "Brick, please notify the captain that I've captured Henry, and to send a couple guards to my location. Slowly." in guild chat.

As Henry glared up at him with pure hatred, Alexander began again. "Ok. Let's recap. You tried to kill me. Again. What is this, like the fifth time? As a wanted murderer and enemy of the realm, I have detained you and placed you under arrest. You will be held here until the king's guards come to collect you, at which point you will stand trial and be locked up for a full year. Your people killed NPC's right out in the open, Henry. And you admitted to telling them to do it."

"Fuck you," drifted up from the pit.

"All I want is a conversation, Henry. Give me what I want, and I might even kill you so you can come back and try again."

"Fuck you and your little dog, too." Henry produced another scroll.

Alexander hit him with wizard's fire again. There was more screaming. Alexander wasn't worried about killing the man. His health pool at level 80 could handle wizard's fire for hours. His sanity was another matter.

"Every time you try to resist or escape, I have to stop you, Henry. It's my duty. I'm not enjoying this any more than you are. Well, that's a lie. I'm quite enjoying this. But why make this more painful than it needs to be? Let's just talk."

That did it. Henry ran at the closest wall and began to scratch at it, trying to claw his way up one-handed to kill his tormentor. He screamed, "The dark one will come for you! He'll tear pieces from you as you scream for mercy! I'll find a way to get out of here! And when I do, I'll sacrifice you to him as a

gift!"

Still concerned that the now unbalanced man would manage to kill himself, Alexander liquefied the stone under Henry's feet. He watched the man sink into the mud, then solidified it when it reached the level of his armpits. With both arms now secured, there would be no more attempts at escape, via death or otherwise.

"Who is this dark one? I thought you were the leader of PWP. Are you working for somebody else, now? Or have you just gone completely nutballs?"

"Fuck you, noob. You should never have started this. You're going to pay. You, your guild, all those people in the village. All dead."

Blind anger raged through Alexander. He nearly dropped wizard fire on the man again, but he was currently helpless and hadn't moved to escape or attack. Alexander decided to fix that.

"Good one Henry. You can't even kill yourself, let alone me. But I tell you what. You tell me who the dark one is, and I'll teleport you right on out of there. You're no threat to me. And I'm getting bored. The guards will be here before too much longer. What do you say?"

"Let me out, and I'll tell you."

Alexander shook his head. *Damn this guy is stupid*. "I'll compromise, Henry. I'm going to let you out of the floor. You're going to toss me your inventory bag so that I can be sure you don't try another teleport scroll. Then you'll tell me what I want to know. When I'm satisfied, I'll give you back the bag and teleport you out of here. Deal?"

Henry was quiet for a while, clearly plotting something. Alexander wasn't worried.

"Fine. Free me. Let's just do this."

Alexander liquefied the stone around Henry, and pushed him gently back up to the pit's floor level. He kept wizard fire ready, just in case.

Henry removed the inventory bag from his belt with his one good hand and held it up. "I can't toss it through that tiny hole," he said.

"Just drop it over in the corner," Alexander said. Henry complied. Alexander pushed the rock underneath the bag upward, raising it to ground level, and retrieved it. He stuck it in his own inventory.

"Tell the captain to recall his guards. I'm going to teleport Henry to our bailey tunnel in about five minutes. Have men ready to secure him. Warn them not to touch the wards. They'll be set to kill. He has no weapons and is missing a hand, but I don't want him to be able to kill himself. You guys get Fitz to teleport you and meet me there." He quickly made Sasha group leader in his UI. "Add Lydia and the captain to the group. And Thea too, if she's close. We're all gonna get some levels."

"Now, who is this dark one?" Alexander asked politely.

"The dark one is the patron god of rogues, moron. He rewards us for acts of murder, theft, and betrayal. When I betrayed Martin and took over the guild, he made me his priest."

That didn't make sense. Hermes was the god of thieves in Io, and he wasn't a 'dark one'. Still, Henry was talking, so he played along. "Now I get it. You took over a guild of light priests and healers by betraying your friend, and you've been working to corrupt them. Ok. Dick move, and a shitty way to play, but I get it. So why spend so much time on me?"

"You made PWP look foolish. If you had just killed my brother and his men, we probably would have let it go. I'd have punished him for being incompetent. But you spawn camped him, then turned him in, making his toon useless. Then you published that video-"

"Just to be clear, I did not publish that, or any other, video," Alexander interrupted. Which was technically true.

"Fucking liar. Who else would?" Henry threw at him.

"Think about it genius. I was IN most of the shots from the video. As in somebody else was recording me from a distance. If it was my video, it would be from my perspective."

"Whatever." Thinking was not Henry's strong suit. "The videos slowed our recruiting down. The raid took out most of my roster. This made the Dark One angry. The only way to redeem myself is to bring him your head.

Which I WILL do, noob."

Alexander stepped back and opened the roof of the pit. He raised Henry up so that he was once again at ground level. Then, without warning, he cast the mass teleport spell.

They found themselves standing in the guild compound's inner bailey. Alexander was between Henry and the outer ward. While Henry took a moment to absorb what happened, Alexander touched his medallion and set the outer ward to kill. He stood within a short step of it. The captain and the others, including Thea and the dwarven crafters, all stood just inside the inner ward. The captain began to approach at Henry's back. Once he'd entered the bailey tunnel, Alexander motioned him to stop. He drew his sword.

"No, Henry, you won't have my head. You just aren't capable of killing me. Anytime in the last hour you could have stuck a knife in my face from stealth. Instead, you followed me out here, then revealed yourself by speaking. You were focused on getting back your armor. Which, if you'd thought it through, you had no hope of accomplishing. Even if I'd had it in my bag, which I don't, you couldn't take it out even if you killed me. Bags can only be removed voluntarily. Like you did when you dropped yours, which gave me full access to your inventory. I want to say thank you for that."

Henry's face grew red with rage.

"You just don't think critically. You've got to plan better. How do you think a noob like me keeps beating you? Even now, Henry. I've formally placed you under arrest. As Knight-Advisor to the king, I have the power to place your bind point at the prison. Which I now do."

The captain took the hint and waved his hand behind. A flash of light washed over Henry.

"So the next time you die, wherever you are, you'll respawn in the prison and serve your year."

"You fucking liar!" Henry screamed. "You said you'd let me go!"

"No, Henry, I said I'd teleport you. I didn't say where. Now, look at you. You're getting all angry. Stop and think, Henry. You can surrender

peacefully, and the captain there will take you to a nice cell. They'll even restore your hand so you can work. Or you can try to get past me, and make a run for it. But I wouldn't recommend it. That didn't go well for you last time."

Henry snarled. His bright red face twisted in a mask of rage, actual saliva spraying from his mouth as he breathed. He took a step closer to Alexander, then another, growling "I. Will. Kill. YOU!" He leapt at Alexander, who cast wizard fire on him in mid-air. The man screamed as he slammed into Alexander, biting at his neck. Alexander simply fell to the ground, not having time to dodge the flaming PWP. Henry landed on top of him, and rolled forward, just enough to touch the ward. It didn't quite kill him. The life enchantment kept him alive long enough for the next tic of wizard fire to finish him.

Chapter Sixteen

Money for Nothin', and Yer Pints for Free

Alexander felt the cool tingle of a heal wash over him, eliminating the minor damage he'd taken from his own wizard's fire.

Level up! You are now level 24! Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 11 free attribute points available

Level up! ... Level up! ...

Level up! You are now level 27!

Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 16 free attribute points available

It worked! Alexander learned his lesson last time. He'd gotten no xp from killing Henry the first time. He suspected it was because Henry never attacked. He simply let the man hit the ward. This time he'd made sure to provoke Henry into attacking him, in front of witnesses. Then he hit him with wizard's fire, which was enough to give him credit for the kill. Killing a level 80 brought some serious xp, even with a large group.

He walked toward the group in the compound, patting the captain on the shoulder as he reached him and paused to ask very quietly, "Please tell me that flash meant you really did bind him to the prison."

"Aye. It did. And he'll be there shortly." The captain looked at him with a grim face. "Listen lad. I'm no fool. I see how you set this up. He is a murderer, no doubt. And he did attack you, more than once. But you set him up, bringing him here, purposely sending him into a rage. You stacked the deck against him. While there was nothing illegal in what you did... well, it's damn close to the line."

Alexander looked the captain in the eye. "I respect you, Captain. I consider you a friend, and I understand your feelings. There are some things you don't know. Like the fact that he confessed to working for a god called 'The Dark One', who claims to be the god of thieves. And that this god of his was going to send him after the village just to spite me. He's going to send

others, and we've got to get stronger to stop them. Killing a top level adventurer, with all of us here, gave us several levels worth of experience. I think maybe you even got a level yourself."

The captain nodded at this.

"We both know that it wasn't a permanent death. Everyone who did not witness this will think he was simply teleported. He'll rave like a madman. If things go the way I expect, his access to Io will be revoked."

Alexander stuck out his hand. "So, I hope that you will see the necessity behind what I did, and know that it was not just done on a whim. No mercy."

The captain looked at him for several moments. Finally, he shook Alexander's hand. "No mercy."

Alexander heard a resounding "BWAHAHAHA! before he was hit by a running tackle from Brick. And further crushed a second later by Max. Then Sasha and Lainey piled on. The others were a bit more reserved, standing close by with smiles on their faces, especially the dwarves. The young ones had been invited to the party, and had each just leveled up more than a dozen times. Thea looked like she wanted to join in the dogpile, but was maintaining her reserve, but just barely.

"That was BRILLIANT!" Brick was ruffling Alexander's hair.

"Thank you. Can you get off me now, please? I'm gonna need a heal after that crushing tackle!"

The group untangled themselves and got up. Max went to loot the body, as usual. Lainey and Sasha didn't seem mad at him for taking some damage, but they were certainly mad about other things.

"Idiot! Why would you take him on alone? We were standing around with nothing to do but worry that you'd get your fool throat cut!" Lainey smacked the back of his head. She was wearing a gauntlet. It hurt.

Sasha, who'd been about to say the same thing, had to satisfy herself with an indignant, "Yeah! Idiot!"

"Listen, guys. He was stealthed, and had been following me through the

woods. I was an hour away from you. By the time you could have gathered and teleported, I already had him trapped in a pit. I couldn't let it come to a battle. He's much stronger than we are. I controlled the situation. The only time he even touched me was there at the end. I'm sure you all saw that from the group UI."

He motioned for them to move toward the house. "Once I had him in the pit, he mentioned this 'dark one' character who commands his people to murder and torture. I thought about what Fibble said about a hooded man delivering the orb. I needed him to talk, and he wouldn't have done it with all of you there. Especially since the captain would have been bound to arrest him and take him away before I could get answers. So, I'm sorry, but it had to be that way."

In guild chat, he said, "You can all watch the video later. I was fine."

"And as for the fight at the end, well, he had no weapons, and only one hand. I was inches from the ward, and it was set to kill. The only doubt I had was whether the captain could bind him or not. I decided the levels were worth the risk. Besides, I tricked him into dropping this," he produced Henry's inventory bag. "A level 80 guild leader. Any bets on what kind of goodies are in here?" Before he forgot, he reset the outer ward to teleport.

Max grabbed him in a bear hug and lifted him right up off the ground. Reaching for the bag, he said, "Gimme gimme!" Max rushed ahead of them into the house and began to empty the bag out onto one of the tables in the lounge. The dining room table was already groaning with all the loot from Fibble's hole. They'd have to deal with that soon.

Max didn't even notice the pile in his glee over looting Henry's bag. Even on their old toons, they hadn't reached level 80 yet. If the armor that he'd dropped the first time he died was any indicator, Henry's bag should hold some really good stuff.

He must have been looting the guild vault.

The first thing Max did was check the gold. Acting casual, he said, "Meh. He was only carrying SIXTY THOUSAND gold!" He grinned as the party loot system automatically split that up equally between everyone. With the five guild members, the four dwarves, Fitz, Lydia, and the captain, that was

5,000 gold each.

Then he was going through the items. "There's a whole kit with different poisons here." He handed it to Lydia. She'd want to analyze them. "About 20 teleport scrolls..." those would go in the guild vault.

"There's a lot of high level priest and paladin gear in here. Light based stuff. I think maybe he was planning to auction this stuff?"

Alexander spoke up. "You guys all heard what Amelia said about the original PWP. Henry confirmed that he betrayed the original guild leader, his friend Martin, to earn his way into the dark one's favor. He was corrupting what had been a light guild for the same reason. I think we should set aside that gear. We can wait and see if Martin really does re-establish PWP as a light guild, or create a new one. If they live up to expectations, this gear could help them purge the guild and defend themselves against Henry when he gets out."

Everyone agreed. Max added, "There are keys here. Presumably to their guild keep and vault. Maybe we'll get lucky and Henry didn't trust anyone else with keys? In which case whatever's left in there is safe."

"Here's a complete armor set, and he was wearing another one when he died. Both leather. Good agility stats!" he looked at them both for a moment, then handed one to Lainey.

Looking sad, he said, "That's about it. Some health, stamina, and agility potions. Guess he was focused on filling his bag with sellable items." Something about the loot was bothering Alexander, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

"Okay folks. Let's take an hour and transfer all that dungeon loot to the guild vault. You guys get started sorting it. I'm gonna clear a whole section of the vault just for this so we can keep track. We want to make sure everybody gets their share. I want to set some aside for the village, in case they waste or lose the 5,000 we already gave them."

They spent closer to two hours before they were done sorting and storing all the loot. Even setting aside dozens of items they thought they might use in the future, they had more than a hundred epic or higher rated pieces to sell, each of which would earn at least several thousand gold at auction. Many were worth tens of thousands or more, just on their own. Max had made a list and his best estimate was that they had somewhere north of three million worth of weapons and gear. There was more than a hundred fifty thousand in actual gold pieces. About half that in silver. There were items that they couldn't identify or put a value to. Those were simply stored in the vault. The guild kept 10% of everything. The rest was divided up among the members, though Alexander didn't take part in the selling of loot for cash. He had no need, so he left it to the others to divide the proceeds. In any case, there was no doubt that Brick would be able to pay off his house in a year, maybe less. It would take them a while to sell all the items without flooding the market.

With the immense windfall of loot and the money it would bring to the guild and the individual members, they had no need to sell common dungeon loot. They talked about it and agreed to donate half the weapons to the village (there were only about 60 residents, and many of them had already been armed) and sell the rest to the king's guard to help equip recruits. The captain was kind enough to take charge of those. He also offered them the 100 gold reward for Henry. They asked that he give it, and the proceeds from the weapons, to the families of those who lost people in the PWP raid.

Having gotten that out of the way, Fitz teleported them all back to the village. It was nearing dusk, and they needed to finish preparations for the consecration of the chapel. They all grabbed a quick bite of dinner as the smells from the cooking area were just amazing. Afterward, Fitz and Brick headed to the chapel to find the priest. Alexander pulled the mayor aside, and explained to him what they intended. He encouraged as many people as possible to attend.

As the light faded further, Alexander climbed to the wall. Looking out at the lamp posts he and Brick had installed earlier, he noted that the light was a bit brighter than he expected. He called over the nearest guard. "What do you think? Is the light too bright? Will it hurt your night vision? The guard shook his head "I've been watching small critters scurry around at the tree line since the sun set below the ridge. They're coming out to investigate the light. And I think that if anything wanders in closer than the posts, we'll be able to see them backlit. It'll do just fine. Thank you, sir."

As they spoke, Alexander noticed a guard walking out toward a light post. Drawing near, the guard began bending down and plucking what looked like arrows from the ground. "Kayla, sir. She's one of our archers. She got it in her head to use the lights as distance markers. Been practicing to get the feel for the range."

That was actually a brilliant idea. He would commend her to the captain when he got to the chapel. After making a round of the entire wall to look for gaps in the light, he did.

By this time, full dark had fallen. Most everyone in the village except for the guards on duty were gathered around the chapel. The doorway was wide open, as they'd not built doors yet, so the view inside was clear.

Max and Father Ignatius stood in front of the doors. The priest raised his hands and said, "We are here to consecrate this land in the names of Asclepius, God of Healing, and Durin, God of the Dwarves. Let all who enter here find understanding, strength, comfort and healing!"

The priest knelt on both knees, while Brick took a knee and slammed his shield into the ground. He raised his hammer in the air, and both men began to pray.

Within moments, two beams of holy light shone down upon the center of the chapel, like twin spotlights on a theater stage. There was a sound of waves, breaking on a shoreline. Then a boom of thunder that rolled through the village. Then a twin fork of lightning struck the chapel roof with a flash of light so bright it nearly blinded all those present. The chapel structure seemed to absorb the light, and then there was a concussive <whump!> as it changed direction and a wave of light dispersed in a growing ring with the chapel at its center. As the ripple of light washed over the crowd, there were gasps and a few sobs. The light continued to spread out through the village, past the walls, and continued until it met the ring of light posts.

As it had spread through the village, there was one cry of dismay, as a rogue was unstealthed and rendered unconscious by the holy spell. Since that would only happen to one who was a servant of darkness, the rogue was immediately seized and taken to the captain, who confirmed that he was PWP. He was stripped of his weapons and bound, and Fitz teleported him to the prison. The captain and Fitz looked meaningfully at each other, then at

Alexander. They needed to find out more about this 'dark one'.

The priest invited everyone into the chapel for a short service to thank both deities for their blessing. As they filed in, there were more gasps and cries of astonishment. The entire cathedral roof had turned into clear crystal. The stars above could be seen almost as if there were no roof at all. The chapel glowed with a soft light. A crystal altar had grown at the back of the chapel. Most amazingly to Alexander, his simple stone benches had been transformed into full pews of what looked like alabaster.

The priest noticed the direction of his gaze and laughed, "I guess one of them decided to save us some work!"

Alexander took a seat, finding it comfortable and slightly warm to the touch. Seeing him sitting, the others all followed. Brick stood next to the priest as he gave a short prayer of thanks. When it was over, villagers began to filter back outside to finish their day's business or retire.

Brick led the adventurers, included Fitz, Thea, and the Redmonds, down into the cellar. There they found the obsidian altar, but it looked nothing like it had earlier in the day. The basic shape was still the same, but the pitch black obsidian had become clear crystal with a light that pulsed in its center.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Lydia exclaimed. She stepped forward with the others, and laid a hand softly on the top of the altar. As she ran her hand along the smooth top, she gasped and stood very straight.

Sasha immediately rush to her, Heal at the ready. "Are you okay?"

Lydia's eyes closed, and she smiled. She whispered, "What? Yes. I'm wonderful! The baby... I just felt a connection to the baby. I could hear his thoughts. So much love..." she drifted off as her husband gathered her in his arms.

Giving the Redmonds some privacy, the others headed upstairs. Father Ignatius spoke quietly.

"The gods were generous. This place has so much more power than I had expected. No being of darkness would survive long here. The ground itself now has healing powers. I think you'll find that minor wounds will heal much more quickly when you're within the altar's area of influence."

Heading for the inn, Alexander told the group he'd need a piece of armor from each of them. He planned to give each of them the life enchantment, to be sure Sasha had time to heal them if they happened to take a fatal blow, especially the NPC's, who would not respawn. As it turns out, Fitz had already done so for the captain and Lydia, so he would focus on the others.

Stopping at Millicent's on the way, he retrieved the small chunk of obsidian he'd left on the table after his nearly disastrous enchanting experiment. Locating Fitz, he asked a few questions about what he planned. Fitz told him it was relatively harmless, and simply warned him not to overtax himself.

Setting up back at the inn, which now had proper sleeping rooms and a few rough tables and chairs in the common room, he called Lainey to him. He asked if she could use leather straps to make either thong necklaces or bracelets. She sat with him and went to work.

First he enchanted armor pieces for Thea and the other dwarves. Then Brick, Lainey, Max, and Sasha. He tried to enchant his own chest piece, but it wouldn't accept the spell. There was a limit to how much magic a single item could hold.

Alexander and Sasha worked late into the night. He broke off pieces of the obsidian and enchanted them with the Undying spell. Lainey then attached them to a necklace or bracelet. When they were done, they had one for each villager and guard. He had drained his mana several times, and boosted it back with potions.

Lainey helped him to his room, where he simply fell into his bedroom and passed out.

Alexander woke the next morning to the smell of breakfast. Sasha and Lydia had decided to test the new kitchen at the inn with bacon, eggs, and oatmeal with honey. Alexander has risen late, and arrived downstairs to find Lydia waving a wooden spoon at the wizard, trying to preserve the last of the food they'd set aside for Alexander.

"You old goat! You'd eat till you explode if I let you! Three full plates is enough!"

Laughing, Alexander ducked past the wizard and under Lydia's menacing

spoon to scoop up his plate and make a break for the common room. He'd made a point of leaving a bit of eggs and a slice of bacon for Lydia to surrender to the wizard.

After breakfast, Alexander, Fitz, and the earth mage began to work their way through the village, replacing the wooden structures that survived the fires with stone. For the homes housing families, they enlarged the structures, making some of them two storey. All of them were connected to the new plumbing and sewage lines, and all of them were built with defense in mind.

It occurred to Alexander that the inn's wooden roof would be a liability, so he found a good spot off to one side and created a simple potter's shop with two large kilns. If one of the villagers had skill in pottery, or if they could recruit someone who did, then ceramic roof tiles could be made.

After lunch, he left Fitz and the mage to finish the last of the homes, while he went with Thea, the dwarves, and the Greystone clan to finish clearing the dungeon.

They began in the main corridor of the first floor, and worked their way through, room by room. Max checked every room and corridor for hidden doors and traps, and Alexander used his earth magic to double check what he could. Having cleared the first floor, killing several dozen imps that they'd bypassed with Fibble's shortcuts, they moved down to the second. Again, they cleared every room and did their best to search every corner. They found half a dozen secret compartments which held decent loot to add to their stockpile. The dwarves all got several levels from the mass killing, and the adventurers were all approaching level 28 by the time they headed for the third floor. The demons were tougher on this level, and they nearly lost Harin when the team had gotten a little careless and pulled three groups at once. Harin had gotten a lucky crit on one of the demons, drawing aggro and taking a vicious sword slash near his collarbone that severed an artery. Sasha was able to heal him in time, but it had been a very close thing.

After that, they were much more careful. They used the opportunity to test different fight mechanics, tightening up the teamwork of the larger group. They experimented with different attack types, to learn what attacks were effective, or not, against demonkind.

Normal fire spells were nearly useless. Lightning was moderately effective

as a stun, but did little damage. Holy spells were by far the most effective, followed by simple physical damage from weapons and kinetic spells like magic bolt and Sasha's thorns. They also learned that any demons stepping into range of Sasha's AOE heals would take damage as well, so she began targeting the spell so that it covered the group and extended just a few feet in front of Brick to damage any demons stupid enough to stand there and pound at him. Which was pretty much all of them.

After nearly two hours in the dungeon, they finally reached the final boss room with its broken throne. Max took the opportunity to search that room, as well as the bottom room, again while the others rested. Finding nothing else, they grouped together and Alexander mass teleported them back to the road outside the village.

Walking toward the mayor's resident, Alexander saw that the remainder of the structures in the village had been converted to stone. Including the mayor's now larger home, which was doubling as the town hall. It was nearly the same size as the inn, with the ground floor functioning as the mayor's office and a meeting room large enough for a hundred people or more. The upper two levels were the mayor's residence and a couple of guest suites. The mayor insisted on being prepared if he had another royal visit.

Locating the mayor himself, Alexander reported that the dungeon had been completely cleared.

Quest Completed! Rebuilding Whitehall

You have far exceeded the mayor's expectations for this quest. You literally rebuilt the village, even adding to its original size. You cleared a demon horde from its doorstep. You provided strong defenses, magical and holy protections, and opportunities for growth. He has nothing to offer as a reward that would be sufficient to express his gratitude to you.

Reward: 1,000 gold. Your reputation with the village of Whitehall is now Revered. Safe Haven – in times of need you will always find protection and allies within the walls of Whitehall.

Experience: 9500

Level up! You are now level 28! Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 16 free attribute points available Alexander insisted the mayor keep the gold from the reward, and use it to hire more guards and buy weapons. The village would need the added security in the coming days.

Sasha and Lydia had gone off with the farmer and his sons to look at something in the fields. Alexander decided to join them and see what was going on. Walking toward the gate, he passed by Millicent's bakery, with its tantalizing aromas of fresh bread and pastries. Sticking his head in the door, he saw Theresa setting out a display of freshly baked scones. He gave her a quick wave and a smile, and continued on. It was good to see folks adjusting to their losses and finding ways to move forward.

He'd only gone a short way when a small voice called "Mister 'Zander!" behind him. He turned to find Danny running after him.

Catching up, the boy held up a warm scone, "Mum says you need to eat more, to grow up big and strong!"

Alexander took the scone and ruffled the boy's hair. "She said that, did she?"

Looking slightly annoyed, the boy replied, "She says the same thing to me, only I have to eat *vegetables*! How come you get treats?"

Laughing loudly, Alexander broke off part of the treat, handing it to the boy with a wink and a "don't tell your mother" gesture that needed no words. The boy grinned and took off to consume his prize in a safe place.

Passing through the gate, Alexander located the ladies and the farmer in the first patch of ground he'd tilled, just to the left of the road. They were bending over and looking at some very small plants sprouting from the ground. He had almost no knowledge of farming, and no clue what the plants were.

"It's a miracle!" the farmer was telling the ladies. "I just planted these seeds two days ago. It should be weeks before they've grown this far."

Lydia was examining one of the seedlings. She replied to the farmer absently, "Sasha and I cast a druid's blessing on the fields as you planted them. But while our magic can increase the speed of growth, the blessing is mainly for increased health and production. It shouldn't have done this."

Not knowing what to look for, Alexander activated his mage sight. What he saw caused his jaw to drop. "Uhh... you guys should see this." He cast mage sight on each of them. Each spell was accompanied by exclamations of surprise.

He didn't blame them. He was seeing magic infusing the entire field. Each plant pulsed faintly with the glow of magic that it was pulling like water from the surrounding soil. But it wasn't just the normal 'green' magic Alexander had seen in the plants and trees in other places. There was a silvery white thread wound through the green as it flowed up from the earth.

Lydia whispered, "It must have been the consecration of the chapel" she placed one hand on her belly as she spoke. "When the holy magic spread out from the chapel, it must have somehow enhanced the blessing we put on the land. I've never seen druid magic and holy magic combined…" her voice drifted off.

"Aye, like I said. A miracle." The farmer nodded, "And at this rate, we'll have a crop of corn to harvest in two weeks. Maybe less! I hadn't planned to be able to harvest for seven or eight weeks. And the wheat in the next field has sprouted already. What should be a four-month crop will be ready in one!"

"We're very happy for you," Sasha smiled at the man. He looked sheepishly at the ground, and cleared his throat twice. Clearly, he wanted to say something, but was embarrassed.

"This causes a problem for you somehow, doesn't it?" Alexander created an opening for him.

"Aye, it does." The farmer looked up quickly, then back down again. Shifting some soil with his boot. "The thing is, with the seedlings sprouting so soon, I ain't had time to make proper protection. Normally I'd have a fence up by the time they cleared the soil. But now they're here, and I've already had to chase off all kinds of hungry critters. Deer, and rabbits..."

Alexander couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing, followed shortly by Sasha. Lydia and the farmer just looked confused.

"Wait... wait, please," he gasped. "I need to call in...a... specialist!"

In guild chat he sent out an urgent call. "Brick! We need you in the farmer's field outside the gate!! There has been an invasion of fluffy bunnies devastating the new crops!"

He and Sasha both held their breaths through the silence that followed.

"Kiss me armor plated arse!" Brick's reply sent them both to the ground, unable to control themselves. It only got worse when Lainey piled on. "If they kill him again, will he respawn all the way back on that hill where we started?"

After taking a few moments to recover, Sasha patted the unsettled farmer on the shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll help you keep the rabbits away."

She and Lydia walked to the edge of the field, and began to cast spells. In front of them, thorny vines rose from the earth and coiled about each other as they grew. In just a few moments, there was a section of brambles that formed a thick barrier about three feet high that stretched a dozen or so feet along the field's boundary. Splitting up, they walked opposite directions along the boundary line, raising brambles and extending the barrier until they eventually met up on the opposite side of the field. They left an opening wide enough for a wagon to enter and exit.

"I'm afraid you'll have to figure out a gate on your own," Lydia said.

The farmer bobbed his head. "Oh, aye! Easy enough! Thank you, Lady Druids!" He started shouting for his sons to gather materials for the gate.

Alexander left Lydia and Sasha to create thorn fences for the remaining fields. Heading back to the inn, he found Thea sitting on one of his benches, waiting for him.

"Alexander. I were hoping ye'd have a moment?" she asked.

"For my favorite dwarven princess? Always!" He gave her a wide smile, which made her blush.

"Erm, yes. Well, I were hoping ye'd take me back to me home? I'd like to inform me King about the trade agreements fer the quarry'n farmers'n such. Get me people here quick as can be."

"Certainly. We've a few hours before suppertime. I'd be happy to take you

back. Is it just you?"

"Aye, Harin's at the smithy working on a project, and the other two be in the chapel basement, carving tributes to Durin in the stone," she replied.

After a quick message in guild chat to let the others know where he was going, he stepped closer to Thea, and activated his group teleport. Once back in the compound, he opened the portal to Broken Mountain.

Stepping through, this time they caused only a short pause in the training activities before being recognized, then mostly ignored. Two guards, who had apparently been posted to watch over the portal, bowed their heads slightly to Thea as she and Alexander began the walk to the great hall to see the king.

As they walked through the main gate to the citadel, a couple of young runners dashed off, presumably to alert the king or others that they had guests. Thea took the time as they continued through the hallways to ask Alexander some questions about his friends in the guild. He couldn't help but notice that most of the questions were about Brick. After a particularly awkward and indirect query, he happily confirmed for her that Brick was indeed single. The intensity of her smile was nearly matched by his own face-spanning grin.

Upon reaching the great hall, they were met once again by the king, Master Ironhammer, and a few members of the council. When the formal greetings were accomplished, they all sat at the same large table as before. Thea outlined what had happened at Whitehall, the goblins and demons, the quarry, and the agreements she'd made on their behalf.

When she was through, the king looked to Alexander. "What me niece has said is true? Yer King Charles offers us these contracts?"

Alexander shook his head. "No." At the confused looks from the king and Thea, he chuckled before adding, "The king offered nothing. Thea here negotiated like a lioness to secure the contracts with the village. The king merely approved of them afterward."

"BWAHAHAH!" the king slapped Alexander on the shoulder. "Ye had me going there, boy!" he said, as Thea gave Alexander a dirty look. The

dwarves then fell to a discussion of the quarry and the available farmland, manpower (dwarfpower?) and supplies. Alexander took the time to wander around the hall, taking in more of the battle scenes carved into the stone that had so impressed him upon his first visit.

Dwarves being an organized and efficient people, it only took ten minutes for decisions to be reached and runners dispatched. When brought into the conversation to discuss logistics, Alexander hadn't been comfortable trying to teleport a large group of dwarves, wagons, ponies, and supplies, so they'd agreed to use the portal to the Greystone compound and drive the wagons to Whitehall. Thea said they'd all be ready to go in an hour. More dwarven efficiency. In the meantime, Alexander was offered some fresh fruit to snack on and ale to drink while he waited.

As he munched on slices of a melon that tasted a bit like cantaloupe, Alexander looked up to find Master Tomebinder approaching. The ancient dwarf took a seat next to him, and popped a slice of fruit into his own mouth before speaking.

"Welcome back, lad. After yer last visit, I decided to look about me archives a bit more for information on yer Baron Dire." The dwarf produced a scroll that was so old and brittle Alexander worried it would crumble before it could be opened. The elder saw his look of concern. "Fear not, lad. It be preserved with magic," he said before handing over the scroll.

Alexander still unrolled the paper as gently as possible. Upon discovering the page covered in what looked like very old dwarven runes, he said, "I'm afraid I don't read, or speak, your language, elder Tomebinder."

"Ach! O'course ya don't! What was I thinkin? Here, let me." The elder took the scroll back and began to scan down the lines of runes. "Here! This be the good part!" he began to read aloud.

"The Dire Baron arrived at the south gate with a wagon o' ore and gems from his mines. He offered trade by weight fer armor and weapons crafted by Broken Mountain smiths. The king asked but one question: 'It be said that ye use slaves to work yer mines. Be there any truth to this?'. The Baron grew angry, yelling at the king to mind his own lands. Taking it as confirmation, the king yelled back 'Ye'll get no weapons nor armor from me to help ye enslave free people!'. The Baron was given two hours to leave our

lands and never return. He swore as he left to get revenge for the insult. The next morning two border scouts failed to report. The king swore it were the Baron who took them, but no proof was found."

"Thank you, Master Tomebinder. This baron guy, he was a real shit, wasn't he?"

"Aye, lad. That he was." The elder nodded. "He were a large part of our decision to withdraw from our dealings with humans. If he'd not been killed by the wizard, likely we'd have gone to war." The elder patted Alexander on the shoulder, wished him good luck, and departed.

The Wizard. Have to remember to ask Fitz about this, Alexander thought to himself.

Soon enough, Thea led Alexander back toward the portal. He found a dozen carts and wagons pulled by twice as many ponies. The carts were stacked with what looked like mining gear, farming equipment, furniture, and more than a few barrels of ale. There were a dozen dwarves in spiked boots with chisels and hammers on their belts that were clearly miners or masons. Another, slightly larger group, looked to be three or four farmers and their families, including two very small children, who couldn't have been more than two feet tall, racing about among the carts.

Thea led them all to the training ground, where they lined up in front of the portal. Alexander, realizing suddenly where he was about to lead these folks, jumped up on top of the lead cart and waved his hands for attention. Then he called out. "Before I open to this portal, I need to say three things. First, you are all welcome guests at Greystone compound." *That should take care of the wards...* he thought. "Second, as Knight-Advisor to King Charles, and as a friend of the Village of Whitehall, I welcome you to both the kingdom and the village!"

At this, there was a smattering of cheering and fists raised in salute.

"Lastly, and just as importantly, some of you know my guildmate Brick is a paladin of Durin..." he paused while several of the dwarves nodded their head. News got around fast. "As you may also know, your King will be visiting the human kingdom in just a few days. Brick has prepared a surprise for King Thalgrin's visit. Before I open this portal, I need your word, each of

you, that you'll not discuss what you see with anyone until after the king's visit!"

This caused some concerned grumbles among the dwarves. Until Thea, who knew what Alexander referred to, laughed. She made a big show of stepping in front of Alexander, bowing slightly and loudly stating, "I swear by me beard that I'll not utter a word o' what I see on the other side o' yer portal until after me king's visit."

Upon seeing this, each of the dwarves in turn made the same gesture and swore the same oath. Even the children mimicked their elders, swearing something close enough for a smiling Alexander. With that, he turned and opened the portal. He had Thea hold them back long enough for him to step through and make sure of the wards, then he motioned them forward. The caravan moved into the guild compound courtyard, forming up in a circle around the portal as each one moved aside to make room for the next. Once they were all through Alexander let the portal close.

Allowing a giddy Thea to lead the caravan around the residence toward the gate, he walked next to her and watched for the first of the dwarves to spot the dragon forge. They didn't disappoint.

The driver of the lead wagon was the new quarry master, Master Stonebreaker. As they rounded the residence, he turned his team of ponies toward the gate. Looking up, he spotted the forge. Yanking back on the reigns he stood in the wagon, eyes wide, and shouted, "Durin's balls!"

Fearing they'd been led into some form of trap, especially after Alexander's mysterious oath, the other dwarves instantly took weapons to hand and rushed forward. Each of them, eyes scanning the courtyard for danger, stood absolutely still upon seeing the forge. Some dropped weapons along with their jaws.

The quarry master stepped down from his wagon, and approached the dragon forge. Several paces away, he stopped, and turned to look at Alexander, a question on his face. Alexander nodded, and the dwarf stepped forward. He laid a hand on the doorway, and Alexander guessed he was using his earth sense to inspect the structure.

"BWAHAHAHA! Now I see why ye demanded the oath!" he roared.

"When me king and Master Ironhammer see this... why they'll... they'll... shit diamonds!" He shook his head, still laughing.

Recovering from their initial shock, the other dwarves all began to laugh and joke as they approached and inspected the smithy. Each of them got quiet, though, as they stepped inside. There was a silent reverence among them all.

After a few minutes, Thea pushed them all out and back to their wagons, and the caravan headed out. As they proceeded through the human city, the parade of nervous dwarves was greeted with a few odd looks and concerned stares, but they received many more smiles, waves, and well wishes from the growing crowds. Some were even given small gifts of food or flowers.

When they reached the gate, the guards on duty saluted Alexander as a Knight Advisor to the king. Then, surprisingly, they repeated the salute for each cart and wagon that passed through. Each of the dwarves saluted with fist to heart in return.

Upon exiting the gate, Alexander hopped up next to the quarry master in the lead wagon. With everyone riding, and the ponies moving at a trot, and the improved trail, the trip to the village went much faster than it had with the refugees. They arrived in less than an hour. Having alerted the others in guild chat, Alexander and the dwarves were met at the gate by the mayor and a significant number of villagers.

"Welcome to Whitehall!" the mayor called to them. "On behalf of all of us, I wish to thank you for your willingness to help us grow our small village into a safe and prosperous home. We have prepared a modest meal to celebrate your arrival. Please, come in! Come in! There is room for your wagons near the inn. I'm afraid that's the only lodging we can offer until more permanent homes can be built. And once again, welcome!" The crowd applauded and cheered the mayor's speech and their new arrivals.

The wagons and carts were pulled through the gate and moved to the grassy area behind the inn. Ponies were unhitched and allowed to graze. Ropes were strung between the wagons to keep the ponies from wandering too far, not that they would. Accustomed to the sparse scrub grass of their mountain home, this lush green meal was likely the best they'd had.

The thirty new dwarves then followed the villagers, and all moved to the

warehouse area where more tables and seats had been arranged. There was roasted venison, pork, and rabbit, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables. Millicent and Theresa had brought fresh bread, and covered an entire table with an assortment of pastries and cakes.

The dwarves, not wanting to be outdone, opened a half dozen kegs of ale they'd pulled up on a hand cart. The food and drink flowed, and humans mingled freely among dwarves. The celebration went well into the evening. Stories were told, and friendships were begun. Brick was especially popular, as each of the dwarves came to pay their respects at some point during the evening. Their amazement at seeing the dragon forge had not quite worn off.

Brick, enjoying the attention, decided to show off just a bit more. Gathering the new arrivals, he led them all to the newly consecrated chapel. Seeing the hammer symbol of Durin on the altar, the dwarves all took a knee and bowed their heads in a moment of silent prayer, which was followed by gasps and exclamations as he led them downstairs, recounting the consecration as they marveled over the twice-blessed altar. The stone masons in particular were enchanted by the infused and now crystal clear obsidian.

As it turned out, a half dozen of the homes that Fitz and the earth mage had converted from wood to stone did not have owners, as they'd belonged to folks killed in the goblin raid. The four farmers and their families each claimed one, and with the help of many of the villagers, were able to move enough of their belongings inside that they could spend the night in their new homes. A couple of them would need some enlarging, but that could be handled tomorrow.

The stone masons asked for use of the empty barracks at the gate house. There were now three working bathrooms and showers in the back of the building that Fitz had connected to the water supply and sewage system. The small armory was sufficient space to store their tools and supplies. The dwarves preferred to sleep on the stone bunks that Alexander had raised, as opposed to the beds at the inn. Master Stonebreaker declared the barracks more than satisfactory, at least until a more permanent arrangement could be made.

With everyone situated for the night, Alexander and friends retired to the inn

and their beds.

The next morning, Alexander bribed the mage guild's earth mage with a large supply of Millicent's cakes to stay one more day and assist the dwarven families with expanding their homes. Two of the families had four children, and the standard two-bedroom homes were a bit crowded.

Alexander asked Fitz to join him on his trip to Millicent's to make the arrangement. Fitz was, of course, more than willing to tag along. After paying Theresa for enough pastries and cakes to last the Mage's Guild a week, he and Fitz grabbed a few for themselves and sat outside to enjoy their breakfast.

"Fitz, I've been meaning to ask you something," Alexander began. The wizard, mouth full, just nodded for him to proceed. "The day we met, Lydia was teasing you about the wife you never married. The woman you rescued from a keep?"

"Agatha," the wizard chewed more slowly as he began to recall memories of her. Alexander gave him a minute. "Yes, what about her, boy?"

"Well, you see, when we cleared the first demon dungeon last week, we were each given a golden key that was called "Key to the kingdom". We took them to the king, but neither he nor his archivist knew anything about them. I showed one to the dwarves, and Master Tomebinder was able to identify the sigil of the Dire Baron on them."

"Tomebinder! Ha! Is that wrinkled old stone hugger still alive? I really must pay a visit to the citadel. It has been too long," Fitz mused.

"What can you tell me about the keep, Fitz?"

"Ah, well," the wizard chuckled. "I can tell you that I knocked half of it down!"

Alexander sighed. "Yes, Fitz. I remember you saying that. And we've seen the ruins, but we have these keys. Keys that were found on an altar at the bottom of a dungeon filled with demons. Keys that have the Dire Baron's sigil on them..." he gave the wizard a significant look.

"Yes, I see what you mean." The wizard stroked his beard, which was full of

pastry crumbs. "The baron was a distant cousin or something of the old king. He'd been given the land by Dire Falls to oversee the production at the mine, and to keep down the dire wolf population that threatened the local farms. Though I think mainly the king put him there to get some distance from him. He was a truly miserable shit."

"So I had gathered from the dwarves," Alexander agreed. "They told me he kept slaves, and that he nearly caused a war."

"Slaves. Yes. It didn't start that way. He was put in charge of a hundred or so citizens when he was given the land. Miners, hunters, support staff like crafters, cooks, farmers, and the like. He made a deal with Broken Mountain for the dwarves to build him a keep. He paid them with ore and jewels from the mine. For several years, he did as he'd been bid by the king. He culled the wolves, operated the mine, protected the farmers. There were rumors of abuses, daughters stolen from families to become concubines, and such. Nothing the old king wasn't willing to overlook." Fitz began to look angry.

"Those were different days. The nobles of the land treated peasants as property, and the baron was worse than most. Once his keep was completed, he sent the dwarves away and locked the gates. Within a year, the rumors increased. Citizens were disappearing. Taxes owed the king went unpaid. The dire wolf population began to grow unchecked."

Fitz paused. The look on his face showed he was reliving some event from that past. "At that same time, a nasty old minor lord who'd made a daughter with a poor servant girl in his household, decided to marry that daughter to the baron, thinking it would earn him a wealthy son, and more access to the king. Agatha was that daughter. A lovely young thing, 16 years old at the time. She'd been a friend of the princess, and would often be found singing songs to the birds in the palace garden. Everyone in the palace loved her." Fitz was smiling to himself.

"The old king requested I escort Agatha and her father to Dire Keep to meet her future husband, and to inquire about the unpaid taxes. The poor girl tried to be brave, though she'd heard the terrible rumors about the baron. She was half noble born, and determined to embrace her fate in service to her family. I remember being proud of her and sad for her at the same time."

"When we arrived at the keep, it was nearly silent. The guards opened the

gates for us without a word. Silent stable hands came for our horses and the carriage. The Chancellor spoke a brief welcome, and escorted us to the great hall, where a feast had been prepared. The baron was all smiles and gracious welcomes. He offered food and wine, served by silent servants, and conversed at length with Agatha's father. Though after the initial welcome, he barely acknowledged Agatha all evening. When she couldn't take it anymore, and I began to see tears in her eyes, I took pity on the girl. I told the baron she wasn't well, and that I'd escort her to her room. He simply waved us away without even pausing in his negotiations with the old man." Fitz's face took on a dark look.

"I settled Agatha in her chambers, put a sleep spell on her to ease her mind, and a magic seal on her door as I left. My rooms were down the hall, and having no desire to spend more time with the baron, I retired myself."

"An hour later, I remembered that I'd not asked the baron about the king's tax money. Resigned to my duty, I rose from my bed and headed back to the great hall. There was no sign of the baron or the old lord. I cast a seeking spell, and followed it to one of the two towers in the keep. As I approached the top, I felt foul magic in the air. I recognized it of course. Necromancy!" Alexander didn't think it possible, but Fitz's face looked even angrier.

"I rushed to the top of the tower and destroyed the door. Inside I found the baron standing over the old lord, who was laid out on a dark altar, a knife in his gut. I rushed to the old man, thinking to heal him. As I did, the baron fled down the stairs. I cast my strongest heal on the old lord, but his soul had already been devoured by whatever dark god had corrupted the baron. I removed the cursed dagger, then removed the old man's head so that he could not be raised as an undead. Then I went after the baron."

Fitz was on his feet now, pacing. One of Millicent's daughters came outside with more treats, but upon seeing Fitz, she fled back into the shop.

"That was my mistake," Fitz growled. "I should have killed the baron as soon as I entered the room. While I was dealing with the old man, the baron fled down the tower. He had time to call up a small army of undead he'd been making of his own people! Guards, crafters, miners, servants. By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs myself, he had gathered dozens of them to him. He shouted for them to kill me, and fled down the hall. Being who I

am, they were no match for me. In my anger, I did not even try to spare them. I burned some to ash, collapsed walls on others. Destroyed them all as I moved down the hall, room to room, burning everything, shouting for the baron to show himself. There is NOTHING I despise more than necromancers! I was in a blind rage."

Fitz sat back down, as if suddenly defeated. "Had I stopped to think, I would have run straight to Agatha. I was, after all, charged to protect her. But in my anger, all I could think of was to destroy the baron and his keep, to make sure no trace of his foul magic remained. Just as I was reaching the great hall, I felt the magic of the seal that I had placed on Agatha's door break. As I rushed to her room, I heard her scream. Rage was replaced with the cold clarity that I had failed her. I instantly teleported to her room, to find the baron standing over her, dagger in hand, chanting a spell. Without thinking, I hit him with a blast of pure mana that knocked him through several walls, blowing out a large section of the building. I grabbed Agatha and carried her out through the holes in the walls. I had to set her down in order to destroy more of the undead who came at us. By then, my mana was too low for a teleport. She followed me to the stables, where we took two horses and fled."

"And you lived happily ever after?" Alexander tried to lighten the mood

"Ha! Hardly!" Fitz smiled a sad smile as he looked down at his hands. "I took her to my tower, where I knew she'd be safe. I left her there to go and report to the king. He sent me back with a company of soldiers to make sure the baron was dead and his minions destroyed. It took half a day to search every room and kill all the undead in the keep and in the mine. There was no sign of the baron's body, but with the spell I'd hit him with, I assumed it was simply destroyed. By the time I returned to my tower, Agatha had cleaned everything and cooked me a meal. She begged to stay with me, afraid that her family, if they knew she was alive, would marry her off again. And there she stayed. For nearly sixty years." The old man wiped a tear from his face.

"I'm sorry, Fitz," Alexander patted his shoulder. "I did not mean to bring back such sad memories."

"No, lad. No sad memories there. That woman yelled, and teased, and lectured me every day. But I wouldn't trade a single one of them for

anything." The wizard rose to his feet again. "Why are we just sitting around here?! Let's round up our short, bearded friends and go see if we can cause some trouble at the quarry!"

Alexander grinned at the feisty old wizard, and followed him toward the gate.

It turned out that Master Stonebreaker and his gang had left before dawn to go explore the quarry, so Fitz and Alexander headed out the gate. As they turned off the road to head through the forest, Alexander paused. "Hey, Fitz?" The wizard stopped and turned to him.

"The dwarves are going to need to bring the stone from the quarry to the city. Either to take it through the portal to Broken Mountain, or to sell it to merchants. Those wagons are going to be heavy. I think we should make them a road so that they don't get stuck in mud or break an axle."

"Aye, good thinking, boy," Fitz nodded. Combining their efforts the two of them worked together, raising stone in a strip twenty feet wide. They didn't bring the stone all the way to the surface, leaving a couple of inches of grass and soil to act as a cushion for the wheels. Alexander raised a marker on either side of the road every fifty feet so that the road could be navigated in deep snow. Walking slowly as they built, the two of them traveled the mile through the trees to the quarry. It took until nearly lunchtime for them to arrive.

Master Stonebreaker was standing at the lip of the quarry pit as Fitz and Alexander approached. On either side of him, ropes were tied to stakes driven into the rock, and led over the edge. Looking down, Alexander saw dwarves hanging from the ropes, tapping at stone and listening to the echoes. Others were standing at the bottom, hands on the stone, eyes closed.

"This quarry be all that Thea said, and more," the dwarf reported. "From just what me senses have found already, there be a good ten years of work here."

"Glad to hear it!" Alexander nodded his head behind them. "Fitz and I have come to see what you might need as far as structures."

"Aye, thank ye lad. Wizard." The dwarf bowed his head briefly, then began to walk back toward the trees. Seeing the road markers, which hadn't been there when he'd passed by a few hours earlier, he looked questioningly at the

two mages.

Fitz grunted. "Yes, well, the boy thought you should have a proper road to move those ridiculously heavy rocks over."

Looking at the undisturbed grass, the quarry master put his hand on the first of the road markers. He bowed his head and closed his eyes, using his earth sense. When he found the road, his head jerked up, then moved slowly to left as if he were surveying the path. When he opened his eyes, his head was shaking.

"That be twice in two days I doubted ye. Thea told us ye did crazy things to help the folk in the village. I should have known after seeing the dragon forge that ye didn't do things in small measures!" He reached out his hand to Alexander. "I'll not doubt ye again!"

Your reputation with Quarry Master Stonebreaker has improved to Respected

Alexander shook the dwarf's hand. "Thank you, Master Stonebreaker. We are allies now, and I hope, friends. We believe in helping our friends, and it is no great hardship for us."

"Aye! The boy needs all the practice he can get!" Fitz added with a grin. "Tell us what buildings you need, and where you want them."

Chuckling as Alexander rolled his eyes, the dwarf led them back about 100 yards from the edge of the pit. "We'll be expanding yonder hole as we go. But this should be far enough." He said. "Can ye make us a building like the barracks where we slept? And maybe a small masonry shop for shaping and cleaning the stone?"

"Bah! We can do better than that!" Fitz shouted, making the dwarf jump slightly. "How many dwarves will you have here once the operation is going?"

"Maybe two dozen?" the dwarf responded after thinking about it for a moment.

"And what about families?" Alexander asked.

"Families?" Master Stonebreaker hesitated. "We were not told..."

"Bah!" the wizard made him jump again, cutting him off. He winked at Alexander. "Of course your families are welcome here! Our King would not force you to leave them behind to earn your living! Now. Two dozen dwarves. All with families? How many are we talking about in total?"

Master Stonebreaker pulled out a parchment and pencil and began to make a list of each man, whether he had family, and how many. After looking at the list, Fitz declared "You're going to need a building bigger than the barracks just to store your ale!"

That gave Alexander an idea. "Master Stonebreaker, the village is only a mile away. Rather than having wives or husbands and children running about underfoot while you're working, would it not be better for them to live in the village? We can build your shop here, and a barracks for single dwarves or guards you wish to leave here at night. The rest of the housing we can build inside the village walls where they'll be safer, and more comfortable."

"Aye, thank ye lad. Tha'd be most welcome. We'd not expected to be treated so well. Though, by what I've seen so far, I dunno why. Old habits, I'd guess."

With that settled, they went to work. Alexander started on a workshop building, while Fitz teleported back to the village with the list. He would enlist the help of the guild mage to start on the housing there. Also, it was lunchtime.

Alexander didn't need a cellar for the workshop, so he simply cleared the topsoil in a 50x50 area, and raised the stone below up to ground level. He then grew thick stone walls on all four sides, leaving a 12ft wide doorway in the wall facing the road. He added small windows all around, for defense more than for light. He raised wide stone pillars in two rows across the floor, and placed massive support beams across them, connecting the front and back walls. Next he grew very thin stone slabs to cover the beams to make a roof. Then, just to show off, he decided to try one of Brick's tricks. He didn't have the natural shaping skill that Brick, had. But he thought he might be able to combine his own skills to mimic his friend.

Using his earth sense, he searched the edges and the bottom of the quarry pit. He found sand and stone dust aplenty. Moving them up through the ground, then up the walls of the building, he liquefied the mixture to the consistency

of mud, and spread it across the roof slabs until it covered them all in a layer roughly four inches thick.

Now came the hard part. Closing his eyes, Alexander took several deep breaths. He concentrated on his wizard's fire spell. But rather than simply casting the spell, he focused on the components of the casting. The direction and intent of the spell. The source of the heat. The duration the fire would burn. Holding them separate in his mind, he targeted the entire roof of the structure, and began to slowly apply the heat of the wizard's fire. At first it was difficult, with some sections heating much more quickly. He focused harder and smoothed the heat out evenly. At the same time, he kept his earth mover skill focused on maintaining the shape of his creation. After just a few minutes, as his mana began to approach empty, he ceased casting and opened his eyes. He smiled to himself.

"Durin's hammer, boy! What've ye done?" Master Stonebreaker's mouth was open.

"Stone shaping is delicate and detailed work," Alexander replied. "I wanted you to have plenty of light to work by!"

The entire roof of the building was now a single sheet of five-inch thick glass. It wasn't perfect by any means. There were areas that were slightly opaque, and the surface wasn't completely smooth. There were bubbles in several areas. Walking inside with the quarry master, Alexander thought that the midday sun shining through the imperfections actually made some pretty cool designs on the stone floor. "What do you think, Quarry Master?"

"BWAHAHA! I think me shop's to be the envy of every stone mason in Broken Mountain!" The dwarf thumped him on the back hard enough that he took a step forward for balance. "Come with me lad."

The dwarf stood outside and cupped his hand around his mouth, hollering, "LUNCH!" Then he looked to Alexander. "Watch their faces."

As each dwarf cleared the top of the pit and headed toward them, Alexander got to see the various amazed and confused looks upon their faces. It was totally worth the effort.

While the dwarves inspected the shop building, and began to unload tools and

supplies from their wagons, Alexander went back to work. He created a simple three-sided shelter with a sloped roof large enough for half a dozen ponies to take shelter from the sun or the weather. Around this shelter he raised a wide circle of stone fence posts with two slots in each one. The dwarves would have to cut their own wooden slats to finish the corral. Until then they could use rope.

He took a break once the dwarves had finished their unloading, and shared their lunch of bread, jerky, cheese, and ale. There were many toasts in his honor, so many that he took a short nap in the sun before he was sober enough to get back to work.

Next he built a shorter version of the barracks building. He gave it a cellar, with a ramp leading down for ale storage. The first floor was long enough for two rows of six bunks each. At the back of the building he created three bathrooms and a set of showers. Since this building was mainly for sleeping, he made the roof regular stone, with just three small glass skylights. He was much more pleased with his glass work on these. Whether it was because it was his second effort, or because the spaces were smaller and easier to work with, the glass came out with a lot fewer imperfections.

Alexander spent the rest of the afternoon on detail work. He raised twelve stone bunks inside the barracks, with stone shelves above each one. He added plumbing and drain lines in the bathrooms and showers. Both buildings got a rain cistern, and a fireplace.

He met with Master Stonebreaker, and at his direction added some work benches in various locations around the shop. In one corner, he added a small kitchen area with a sink, and the pipes to go with it.

Alexander stepped outside, and using his earth magic, located an underground stream. He extended a stone pipe, which was really just a very small tunnel through the stone, up into the bed of the stream, so that gravity and the current of the stream would push water through the pipe to the buildings.

At the dwarves' request, he also routed a second pipe from the stream to the edge of the pit. Apparently, water helped them in their stone cutting process. He routed all the sewer drains deep into the ground where he found a natural cavern big enough to function as a septic tank.

He raised two stone troughs that could be used to feed and water the ponies. Then he created a stone walkway that led from the workshop to the barracks, and from both out to the road. Lastly, he created a loading dock near the shop entrance by cutting a ramp down into the earth so that, when a wagon was backed down the ramp, the wagon's bed would be level with the shop floor. That way heavy stone could be loaded on sleds or rollers instead of lifted up into the wagons.

Finding himself with some time before sunset, he messaged Fitz to come and help him with something. When the wizard appeared, he explained what he wanted to try. After a brief discussion, the wizard gave his consent.

Alexander focused on his enchanting skill. He targeted the cistern above the barracks. As before when he'd enchanted the stone outside Millicent's, he concentrated on a heat source. Only this time, instead of the awesome power of a volcano, he pictured the warmth of a hearth fire. He transferred mana into the stone of the cistern slowly, adding more and more heat, until Fitz tapped him on the shoulder. Fitz routed a water supply line up into the cistern, and filled it a quarter full. They waited about 20 minutes, then went and turned the valve on one of the showers. Warm water! It hadn't had time to get much more than luke warm, and the amount of heat Alexander had put into the cistern stone would never heat the water to boiling, but the dwarves would at least be able to take reasonably hot showers.

Before they headed back, Fitz added some magic of his own. He taught Alexander a pre-set enchantment for hot water pipes that would heat cold water as it passed through. He added a small magic stovetop in each building for cooking, and a cold storage closet in the workshop. Admiring Alexander's glass roof, he added a complicated enchantment that he explained to Alexander and Master Stonebreaker as he went. To avoid excess heat from the sun in summer, and to provide heat in the winter, he enchanted the glass to absorb the heat of the sun. He installed a dial on the wall that allowed the heat to either be disbursed upward, or downward. In the summer, the heat being disbursed upward would help keep the shop cool. In the winter it could be used to heat the shop by transferring heat down into the stone floor, or melt snow off the roof to keep the glass clear.

Then he added one last enchantment that allowed the shop roof and barracks

skylight to absorb light energy that could be used to light the buildings after dark. The dwarves all returned from the pit just as the sun was setting, and began to hitch the ponies back to the wagons for the return trip to the village. When they were done, darkness had fallen, and they all watched quietly as Fitz adjusted the light dial on the workshop wall. As he turned the dial, the roof went from emitting a soft glow to light nearly as bright as day. It faded quickly, though, as the enchantment hadn't had much time before sunset to charge.

Riding back to the village, the dwarves all praised the smooth yet quiet roadway. Alexander offered to enchant the markers to glow, but was told there was no need. He'd forgotten that dwarves lived in tunnels, and could see quite well in the dark, at which point he felt a little foolish for all his glass work on the quarry buildings. Master Stonebreaker quickly assured him that it would come in quite handy and was much appreciated.

If nothing else, it was good practice, he thought to himself.

They arrived back at the village to find that Fitz had recruited a second guild mage (who was working for kegs of dwarven spirits), and the three of them had managed to raise 14 new housing structures. Each of them had a main room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and three bedrooms. Those nine men with families could take a home for themselves. The other five homes could house three single men each. Any extras could stay at the barracks or the inn.

Once again there was a celebration, this time hosted by the dwarves. There was good food, music, drinking and storytelling that lasted well into the night. The children spent the early part of the evening playing with the guild's mounts. There were games of tag, during which the giant cats chased screaming children around buildings and through crowds, to eventually pounce upon them before turning to run away with the children in pursuit. Bacon gave literal piggyback rides, which more often than not ended with a child or three dumped into a nearby mud puddle. Once the children were put to bed, Bacon amused several of the adults by catching bits of meat and fruit thrown in his general direction. The big cats refused to participate, preferring to remain aloof and preserve their feline dignity.

Alexander, having learned his lesson at lunch, drank sparingly. As he tumbled into his bed, he was just tipsy enough to sleep soundly.

Chapter Seventeen

A Pair of Kings

The next morning, after breakfast, the Greystone members, the Redmonds, Fitz, and Thea and her three crafters all teleported back to the compound. This was the last day of their one-week immersion, and the day King Thalgrin would be visiting Stormforge, and King Charles.

They all retired to their rooms for showers and a change of clothes. Fitz went back to his tower to freshen up, and to see about Fibble, who'd been locked up in there for days.

"When you get a chance," Lainey said to Fitz, "I was practicing my leatherworking, and I made some clothes for the little guy. He can't be running around in a loincloth."

Laughing, Fitz said, "I'll send him over to you. But make him bathe before you dress him. He's quite ripe."

Alexander finished getting cleaned up, and headed downstairs. He passed Lainey on the stairs with the tiny goblin.

She was using food to lead him up the steps. "C'mon Fibble. I've got some nice new clothes for you! But first you need a bath!"

The goblin kept jumping up, trying to grab the fruit in Lainey's hand. "What is bath?" he asked.

Chuckling to himself, he headed out to the back courtyard. It was nearly time for the king's visit. He found Fitz, Brick, Sasha, Max, and the Redmonds already there. Thea came walking out of the workshop where her quarters had been set up. The king was at the palace. Though he'd dearly wanted to see Thalgrin's reaction to the dragon forge, this was an official state visit, and protocol required the meeting take place in the main hall.

Alexander opened the portal. On the other side stood King Thalgrin, with War Master Stonehand, Master Ironhammer, and several of the King's Guard. Behind them was a line of wagons. "I formally welcome King Thalgrin and his entourage as guests," he said for the benefit of the wards. Just in case. He really needed to talk to Fitz about that.

The king and his group stepped through the portal, and everyone took a knee, except Fitz, who bowed respectfully. "Bah! Please, get up off yer knees!" Thalgrin said. "Brick! I brought yer next payment of drink, and promised weapons!"

The king motioned the wagons forward. The first through the gate was filled with barrels of ale and spirits. With a huge smile on his face, Brick directed the driver toward the ramp leading to the cellar. Half a dozen dwarves followed the wagon to help unload.

The next wagon through contained crates. The king motioned the wagon to one side to clear the portal exit, and then had the driver open one of the crates. Inside were ten swords in leather scabbards. The king withdrew one and unsheathed it, handing it to Brick.

Dwarven Steel Sword Item Level: Uncommon

Stats: +5 Strength, +5 Stamina,

Enchanted: Sharpness

"There be ten crates of these," King Thalgrin said, "as agreed. Enchanted to never lose their edge, even when ye be knock'n horns off o' demon heads!"

Brick handed the sword to the captain for him to examine, and bowed his head to the dwarven king. "Thank ye, me king. These be exactly what the human army needs! This be Captain Redmond of the King's Guard, and his wife, Lady Lydia, sister to King Charles."

Lydia and the captain both bowed their heads. Lydia spoke first, "Welcome, King Thalgrin, to Stormforge. We are very happy to have you here. I know my brother is anxious to meet with you."

The captain stepped back several paces and took a few practice swings. "Perfect balance, solid grip." He bowed to the king as well. "My compliments, Majesty. Your smiths truly live up to the legends!"

"Bah!" the king smiled. "These be the work of apprentices. But if ye appreciate a good weapon, come visit Broken Mountain. Master Ironhammer here will see ye fitted with a REAL sword!"

"Thank you Majesty, I certainly will!" The captain smiled. "In the

meantime, I'm sure the king will wish to discuss with you terms to purchase these fine weapons for our army."

The king looked confused, then turned to Brick. "Did ya no' tell 'em?"

Brick coughed, and blushed furiously. "Ah, no, me king. We meant for it to be a surprise."

The king looked expectantly at Brick, who turned to the captain.

"Ahem. Well, ya see, these swords be already paid for. We traded some obsidian to me king in return for... well, things. Including these enchanted weapons for yer men."

Lydia raised an eyebrow. "Those 'things' you traded for, wouldn't happen to include that large wagonload of ale over there, would it, master dwarf?"

Brick blushed an even deeper red.

"BWAHAHA!" the king bellowed. "Lady Redmond, thank ye for the gracious welcome. I'd be honored to have ye and yer husband at me table anytime!" Lydia smiled and curtsied.

The last of the wagons had come through, so Alexander closed the portal. Besides the wagon full of swords, there were five others. Those all appeared to be filled with supplies of one kind or another, presumably for the dwarves of Whitehall.

"Now!" King Thalgrin looked at Thea and the three young crafters that had been sent to build Brick's smithy. "Did ye do the job I sent ye here for? Have ye built a smithy worthy of Brick, here?"

Thea looked at her feet. "No, me king. Er, what I mean is, yes. The smithy be completed. But we had little to do with it." Her voice was just above a whisper.

"WHAT!!" Thalgrin looked angry. "I sent ye here to pay a debt in me own name!" he began to berate his niece.

"Me king!" Brick interrupted. Thalgrin looked at him, breathing deeply and red in the face. "Me king, please. Thea be understating the help yer folks gave me. They advised me from the start. And it be because of them that me

smithy turned out so well. Please, take a look, and ye'll understand."

Brick led a confused and slightly less angry dwarven king around the corner of the residence toward the smithy. The king was followed closely by the two Masters and Thea. His guards and the rest of the gathering followed behind.

As soon as the king looked up and saw the obsidian structure, he stopped in his tracks so quickly that Master Ironhammer bumped into him.

"Bah! Nephew, did ye forget how to..." Ironhammer never finished the sentence, standing with mouth agape, much like the monarch he'd nearly stepped on. He too had caught sight of the smithy.

Completely forgetting themselves, the king and his advisors rushed the fifty yards or so to the structure. They immediately laid hands on the black stone, eyes shut. After just a moment, Master Ironhammer exclaimed, "It canna' be!" and rushed inside. The king was just a step behind.

The two men faced the forge with the obsidian dragon's head above it. As they stood there, Brick, Thea, and the others crowded in behind them. Even the king's guards, normally on constant alert for threats, had lowered their weapons and were reverently touching walls, and benches.

"Ye built... a Dragon Forge?" Thalgrin whispered.

"Aye, me king. I asked yer young ones for advice, as I never built a smithy. They helped me plan the dimensions, and the layout. We got to talkin', and I asked young Harin what be the best possible forge to make. He said a dragon forge. Wanting the best, we made one."

"Just like that!?" Master Ironhammer was yelling. "'We made one.' he says." The Master Smith began to stomp around, mumbling to himself.

"Me king," Thea said softly to her uncle. "Alexander here raised the stone from the ground. Then Brick, he be a shaper. He just... stepped into the stone, pushin' it this way'n that. We helped where we could, but..." she hung her head in shame again.

"What? No, no." The king came to his senses. "Ye did fine, lass. I be sorry I yelled at ye." He gathered his niece in a bear hug. Then he nodded at each

of the young crafters.

Alexander spoke up. "Majesty, you should know that Thea, Harin, Garen, and Dvorn were a great help in the rebuilding and securing of Whitehall. We could not have accomplished what we did there without them."

"Aye, thank ye, lad. I'll make sure they be properly punished," the king winked at him. He instructed the three young dwarves to escort the supply caravan to Whitehall.

Then he looked at Brick. "Ye built a damned DRAGON FORGE!! D'ya know what tha' means?"

Brick looked confused. There was really no way to answer that question. "Me king?"

"BWAHAHA! It means me uncle here, the old grump," they all looked toward Ironhammer, who was still stomping and mumbling, "he'll be at me day 'n night wantin' one o' his own!"

The dwarven master didn't hear a word his nephew said. But he noticed the prolonged silence that came after. He looked up from his pacing to see everyone smiling at him. "Me king!" he cried, "ye must let me contract with these imps ta build us a forge in the mountain!" He looked confused when everyone laughed.

Brick stuck out a hand to the old dwarf. "Master Ironhammer, it'd be me honor if ye'd come and make use of me forge. I ask only two favors in return."

Ironhammer instantly looked suspicious. "And what'd those be?"

"First, some training. I be a journeyman smith. I'd like to learn enough to be worthy of this forge."

Ironhammer nodded his head. "Easily done. What else?"

Brick smiled at the old man. "I need ye to help me light the damned thing!" As they shook hands, everyone, including the old smith, had a good laugh.

Alexander cleared his throat. "King Thalgrin, I believe that King Charles is awaiting your arrival at the palace?"

"Aye! Good point lad!" the king looked regretfully at the forge. "Let us go!"

The Redmonds led King Thalgrin and his entourage toward the gate of the compound. Just as they were nearing the inner bailey gate, there was a loud bang as one of the front doors of the residence was thrown open, and a naked and panicked Fibble streaked toward the wizard's tower yelling, "Noooooooo bath! Crazy humans!" followed by a frustrated and madly blushing Lainey.

As one, the king's guards drew their weapons and began to advance after the goblin. Fitz jumped in front of them, hands held up to hold them back. "No! He's with me. He's our new... well, just don't kill him." Fitz stuck out a finger and a bolt of lightning hit the fast-moving goblin in the ass, stunning him and causing him to fall into the garden fountain.

King Thalgrin looked from the wizard to Brick, who was flat on his back laughing. He then looked to Lydia who was doing her best to contain her own laughter. Shaking his head, the king motioned for his guards to stand down, and for Lydia to lead the way again.

Upon reaching the street, they found an honor guard of 200 of the king's finest lining both sides of the street, extending the full distance to the palace gate. There were citizens gathered behind the lines of guards, who began clapping and cheering upon seeing the dwarven king.

As they walked along the short distance to the gates, folks tossed flowers and waved ribbons. At first, the dwarven guards were jumpy at all the activity, attempting to surround their king. At a word from him, they fell back and relaxed a bit. Seeing this, Fitz nudged Alexander and shot him a wicked grin. With a wave of his hand a quick phrase, he conjured up a burst of fireworks in the sky above them, which delighted the crowd, and caused a short panic within the dwarven guard.

They made it to the great hall of the palace without further incident. King Charles formally greeted King Thalgrin. Gifts were exchanged, and a brunch was served. The two kings chatted about the dragon forge, possible trade opportunities, and the potential for a political alliance. The captain presented his king with the sample sword the dwarves had brought, and Charles praised the dwarven smiths. Which brought them around to a discussion of Broken

Mountain smiths traveling to Stormforge in order to work at the dragon forge, and the need to bring a dragon to light the forge. King Charles granted formal permission without hesitation, requesting only that the dwarves craft a sword he could gift to his son the prince upon his fifteenth birthday.

As the meal was cleared away, Thalgrin mentioned that he'd brought more supplies for his people at Whitehall, and was hoping to visit the village.

"Excellent idea!" Charles thumped his mug, now empty of dwarven ale, on the table with gusto. "Let's all go!" He waved at the captain, who quickly assembled a small honor guard.

The two kings moved to a clear space in the center of the room. Surrounding them were twenty dwarven and human guards, five Greystones, two Redmonds, two dwarven Masters, one dwarven princess, and a wizard.

Looking at the crowd, King Charles chuckled. "They're going to think they've been invaded! Fitz! If you would?"

The royal invasion force arrived just off the road outside the gates of Whitehall. The captain sent a runner to notify the mayor of their arrival while the two kings and the rest of the group admired the new walls, towers, and the ring of light posts. Just as they entered through the gates, the mayor came rushing up. He and the villagers behind him all dropped to one knee and bowed their heads before the two kings. After being told to stand, he welcomed them most sincerely to the village. Thalgrin asked for a tour, and the mayor was happy to oblige.

The supply wagons had arrived ahead of them, and were parked with the others behind the inn., the ponies happily grazing away. Supplies had been unloaded, some to the warehouse, some at the inn. The mayor thanked King Thalgrin for the support, and assured him the dwarves were a welcome addition to the village. With the additional men for the quarry, and their families, the dwarven population of Whitehall was nearly equal to the human.

Indeed, as they walked along the main road, the group was mobbed by a small crowd of human and dwarven children who'd been playing "defend the castle" with wooden sticks as swords. They were all outfitted in tiny leather armor sets that Lainey had crafted for them while practicing her leatherworking skills.

One of them had decided the kings were an invading force, and the whole group had charged from behind one of the buildings, shouting battle cries and waving their weapons. Both kings pretended to be terrified and immediately surrendered, much to the amusement of the gathered adults.

King Charles, spotting a face he recognized, said "Danny, come here." The boy approached the king, looking up with a smile. The king returned his smile with a grave demeanor. "Kneel before your king!"

The suddenly frightened boy dropped his 'sword' and fell to both knees. Bending to pick up the stick, the king tapped the boy on each shoulder. "I name thee Danny the Ferocious! Defender of Whitehall and scourge of kings!" The king then lifted the now confused boy and tossed him in the air as the laughing crowd applauded the new title. Seeing that the king wasn't angry with him, the boy became all smiles.

Danny took the king's hand and began to tug him toward Millicent's. "Mum's got a treat for you, you have to come!"

Both Kings obediently followed the young boy, as the other children ran ahead. By the time the group reached Millicent's, she, her daughters, and Theresa had all emerged from the bakery with trays of cupcakes and pastries which they set out on the tables outside.

Everyone helped themselves to a treat or two, while King Thalgrin and Fitz seemed to be in a contest to see who could put down the most. Millicent finally swatted at Fitz with a towel and told him there would be more available at dinner. King Charles formally introduced Millicent to Thalgrin, who bowed deeply and thanked her for the delicious treats.

They moved on to the new chapel, and both men were amazed at the altered stone and glass ceiling. Brick told them the story of the consecration, and introduced them to Father Ignatius, who led them downstairs to see the clear obsidian altar. They spent a good bit of time there, as both kings, and thus everyone in the room, knelt to offer a prayer to the twin deities who had blessed the chapel. Both men were nearly as impressed with the chapel as they had been with the dragon forge.

Moving on from the chapel, they toured the rest of the village, stopping to inspect the warehouse, the mayor's residence, and several of the homes

created for the dwarven farmers and stone masons. Thalgrin wanted to inspect the quarry as well, so the group strolled the mile down the new roadway to the quarry.

Upon seeing the workshop with the glass roof, Thalgrin laughed. "Let me guess. Alexander, be this yer doing?"

Alexander looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid so, Majesty. I completely forgot that dwarves can see in the dark, and nobody stopped me." He half mumbled. Thalgrin just laughed even harder and slapped him on the back.

Seeing he had visitors, Master Stonebreaker emerged from the shop and bowed to both kings. He immediately launched into praises for Alexander and Fitz and the work they'd done. Then he reported on the findings in their quarry investigation so far. The different types of stone, quality, and likely quantity. He relayed the invitation that Fitz had extended for the masons' families, and added that the human mages had already constructed new housing for them.

Then the group walked inside both buildings, admiring the construction and the details like plumbing, heating, and the loading dock. Thalgrin hooked himself to a rope and rappelled down into the quarry to have a look for himself. When he climbed back up, he praised Thea for her find, and for having the presence of mind to negotiate the trade agreements. The entire group, accompanied by the group of masons, then headed back to toward the village. Sunset was approaching, and there would be a feast in honor of the royals visiting.

Walking back to the village, the two kings discussed other potential areas of trade. Thalgrin was excited to have access to a port city and the potential to trade with other nations. He was especially fascinated when Charles told him about something from an island nation across the sea called a coconut.

As they moved through the last of the trees close to the village, there was a flash of light ahead, followed by a thunderous boom. The entire group dashed forward, emerging from the tree line to discover a group of adventurers attacking the village gates. There were close to thirty of them spread out across the road near the gates. A group of six mages were hurling fireballs at the gate, while a similar number of archers were firing arrows at the guards on the wall.

In front of the ranged attackers were a line of warriors forming a shield wall, protecting the casters and healers from the few arrows the village guards managed to fire. Dashing back from the walls were four rogues who had apparently tried to sneak into the village who had their stealth cancelled by the divine protections inside the ring of light posts. The guards were doing their best to shoot the fleeing rogues, while dodging incoming arrows.

Alexander noted that the stone doors of the gate were holding against the barrage, but were starting to turn red from the heat. Heated stone would eventually become brittle and break. As he took in the scene, one of the guards on the wall took an arrow to the chest. The bodies of what looked to be one of the human farmers and his sons lay on the ground nearby.

"It has to be PWP!" Alexander shouted. "Fitz! Brick! Let's make some mud! I've got the tanks. You guys get the casters!"

Alexander and Fitz waved their hands toward the group of players, while Brick dropped to one knee and placed a hand on the ground. Within seconds, the earth under all the players softened, and their feet began to sink into quickly liquefying mud. About half were quick enough to jump free, while the others sank to their knees, then their waists. The mud then solidified around them, effectively trapping them in place.

The two kings conferred briefly, then commanded their men to attack. The human guards ran to the right, while the dwarves went left. The kings, with Alexander and his group, along with the stone masons, moved directly toward the rear of the PWP's. They effectively boxed in the players, cutting off any escape route. Three of the archers who'd been quick enough to escape the mud turned and fired at the approaching kings. Alexander threw up a magic shield that deflected the arrows. Brick cast Holy Smite on one of them, while Lainey stunned another. Sasha cast an AOE thorn trap on a group that was trying to move away from the trapped players, and Alexander hit three of them with wizard's fire.

As the burning players screamed, the guards from both kingdoms slammed into the confused players from the flanks. The impact of the heavily armored dwarves and men moving at a full run knocked the players back toward their center, where they tripped and fell over the players stuck in the earth. The guards proceeded to stab and cut at the players, mostly warriors, who

remained standing.

"Don't let your men kill them!" Alexander pleaded with both kings. "We need to capture and question as many as we can!"

War Master Stonehand and Captain Redmond began bellowing at their men to disable the enemy and capture them. A few of the players heard this, and began trying to kill each other rather than be captured. Fitz raised his arms and a cloud began to form over the players. After about 15 seconds, lightning bolts began to strike the players, stunning them. As each one was stunned, the guards would leap onto them, disarming and binding them.

Sasha and Lydia ran past the group of PWP to see if they could save the farmers. Brick chased after them.

When all the PWP players were subdued, Alexander and the kings approached. There were 22 PWP's captured. Six of them had been killed or managed to kill themselves to escape capture. Two of the human guards had been seriously injured, while three more were slightly wounded. Only two of the dwarves were wounded.

The gate opened, and one of the retired guard sergeants walked out to report to Captain Redmond. Three of the guards on the wall were injured. The one who'd taken the arrow to the chest was killed. One of the dwarven children had taken a stray arrow in the back. The priest was already healing those inside.

Sasha and Lydia came back, the farmer and one son walking with them. The farmer was carrying his youngest son, whom they'd not been able to save.

King Charles began to yell, "PWP murderers! Why would you attack a village of innocent civilians?" In his rage, he kicked one of the trapped mages in the head. Hard. Blood and teeth sprayed some of the players behind. The guards of both races took that as a sign to express their opinions of the adventurer scum in similar manners. None were killed, but it was close in a few cases.

"I place you all under arrest as enemies of the state. I further declare that I place a bounty of 100 gold on the head of any PWP member, not just in my Kingdom, but in every Kingdom on Io! I will do my utmost to have my

fellow rulers declare you enemies of their states as well. THERE SHALL BE NO PLACE SAFE FOR YOU!"

Just as enraged, King Thalgrin bellowed, "Aye! I'll match yer 100 gold for the heads o' these dogs! And on behalf o' every dwarven Kingdom on Io, I pronounce ye enemies o' the dwarves! Any dwarf who comes upon a member of PWP is to kill 'em on sight, or capture 'em for questioning! Word will go out that any city or nation what harbors these scum risks war with the dwarves!"

The PWP members were all stripped of their belongings, which were piled up on the road outside the gate. Guards began questioning the players about who sent them, and where their headquarters were.

There was a cry of outrage and sadness from inside the walls. After a moment, a dwarf ran out of the gate, belt knife in hand, and headed straight for the players with murder in his eyes. "Ye killed me boy!"

The dwarven farmer was stopped by Thalgrin's guards before he could kill anyone, though it took four dwarves to hold him back. Thalgrin himself went to embrace the farmer. He barked a command, and three of his guards ran into the gate.

Thalgrin led the farmer over to where Charles stood. They spoke quietly, and the human king looked grim before nodding his head. He motioned for Fitz to step close, and murmured instructions to the wizard. Fitz looked toward Alexander for a moment, then nodded his head to his king. He moved over and instructed the guards to move the prisoners closer together. The players, sensing something was wrong, began to demand to know what was happening.

The three dwarven guards returned pulling a cart. Following them out the gate were a large crowd of villagers, both human and dwarf. The priest walked at the front, carrying the dwarf child who'd been killed. He walked over and handed the child to Thalgrin.

King Charles called out to the villagers, "Someone take the children back inside, and close the gates. This is not for them." Millicent's daughters and a few others quickly rounded up the children and took them inside.

When the gates were closed, Thalgrin stepped forward, still holding the dead child. With a voice scratchy and thick with grief, he spoke. "Dwarves live hard lives. We live fer honor, and fer battle!" The dwarves around him shouted once and slammed weapons to shields. "We live long, but have few children, and that makes each child more precious to us than any treasure!" Another burst of sound from the dwarves. This time the human soldiers joined in. "Ye filth ha' come here today to this peaceful place with murder in yer black hearts! Ye've taken from us one of our most precious gifts from Durin his self!" The noise from the soldiers was accompanied by thunder in the sky.

King Charles nodded at Fitz, and the ground beneath the prisoners sank slowly, until they were in a pit roughly ten feet deep. As they sank, the dwarves removed kegs from the cart they'd brought out. The broke open the kegs and began pouring spirits into the pit, soaking the still bound players, who began to shout and scream, "You can't do this!"

Alexander stepped forward to the edge of the pit. He waited until the players grew mostly quiet. Then he asked, "Who's the leader here?"

One of the warriors jumped up on his feet, hands still bound behind his back. "I am! You're going to pay for this. You can't torture us! I'll have you banned!" The other players shouted agreement.

"No, you won't," Alexander replied calmly. "You assholes picked on the wrong citizens. They are doing this on their own, as retribution for your despicable acts. I won't be lifting a finger to hurt you." He turned to look at the two kings, who both nodded at him.

"You have one chance. Tell me who sent you, and where your guild headquarters are." The dwarves continued to empty spirits into the pit, which now had a pool nearly an inch deep at the bottom. Others, including villagers, were tossing scraps of wood and some of the player's own clothing into the pit.

"Screw you, noob!" the warrior shouted. The Dark One will protect us! When you kill us here, we'll return to his shrine, and be back here in two days to finish the job!"

"Are you really that stupid?" Alexander laughed loudly, to make a point.

"You've been arrested by the king himself. On his lands. You are now bound here. For a year. Have you not paid ANY attention at ALL?"

"Antalia!" one of the archers cried out. "Our guild house is in Antalia. Please, let me out of here! I don't want this! I answered your question! Free me!"

"It's not in my power to free you. You've murdered citizens in front of the kings of two kingdoms. One of them a child. For all we know, it was your arrow that killed that boy. You morons just never learn." Alexander stepped back from the pit.

King Thalgrin began a song of mourning. His voice low and gravelly, the sound of the earth itself. The other dwarves took up the song, the sound swelling until it resonated in the land around them. They beat their fists against their shields in rhythm. After a moment, the human soldiers joined in.

The king handed the murdered boy to his father. One of his guards handed him a lit torch. He stepped toward the pit.

"Ye will never know the pain ye've caused today. But ye WILL know pain of yer own!"

The priest stepped toward the edge of the pit and began to pray over the adventurers. Brick stepped forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. Shaking his head, he guided the reluctant priest away.

King Thalgrin raised the torch in the air, preparing to toss it into the pit. But before he could, a bolt of lightning shot from the sky, into the pit. There was a crack of thunder, followed by a softer <whoomp!> as the spirits burst into flame. The players screamed as they burned alive. Most were still low on health from the beatings they'd taken, so they didn't last long. Still, it was long enough.

Level up! You are now level 29!...

Level up! You are now level 30! Your wisdom has increased by +1. Your intelligence has increased by +1 You have 21 free attribute points available Alexander looked to the kings, who were both still gazing into the pit. Then he looked to Captain Redmond, who just nodded. "No mercy," the captain said quietly.

"No mercy!" Alexander replied.

"No mercy!" his friends took up the chant.

The kings looked to each other. "No mercy" they said in unison.

When the fire had burned out, Fitz closed the earth over the crisped bodies of the players. The kings directed their soldiers to gather logs and stone for funeral pyres, then headed into the village to console the families of those where were lost.

Within an hour, the pyre was built, right on top of where the pit had been. The villagers and guests all gathered in the chapel, where the bodies of the guard, and the two farmers' boys, were laid out under white sheets. The priest gave a short but heartfelt funeral service, and the bodies were gently moved outside onto the pyre. Once all had said their goodbyes, Fitz and Alexander cast wizard's fire, and the pyres began to burn. The only sound was the crying of the lost ones' families, and of some of the villagers who had now lost friends to violent attacks twice in as many weeks.

The feast that had been prepared for a night's celebration became a wake. Folks talked quietly as they ate. Mothers hugged their children and kept them close. The kings spoke with the mayor, pledging an additional dozen guards each to help protect the village. Fitz handed out freshly made teleport scrolls. He gave two to each King that would teleport squads of soldiers from their cities to the village. He gave several to the mayor; single teleports that could be used by guards to instantly call for help in the event of an attack, and mass teleports that would evacuate groups of 20 villagers each directly to the main square in Stormforge.

Max had sorted through the loot stripped from the PWP's and piled on the road. There was more than 4,000 gold, as well as an assortment of weapons, armor, potions, scrolls, and general supplies. All were given to the mayor, to be passed on to the families of those who were killed. Max kept the player's empty bags of holding for the guild vault.

As the evening wound to a close, and families began to drift off to their homes, Fitz teleported the two kings, the Redmonds, Thea, the two Masters, and the Greystone members back to the Greystone compound. Both kings left their guards at the village to serve until replacements could be sent.

The two kings said their goodbyes, and Fitz opened a portal to Broken Mountain. He accompanied the king and his people through the portal, saying he wanted to visit old friends in the mountain, and work with Master Tomebinder to see what information they could find regarding the "Dark One" that PWP kept referring to.

King Charles set off toward the palace with the Redmonds, vowing to ask his own archivist, Master Gando, to look into the Dark One as well. At the mention of Master Gando, Alexander remember that he'd left a key with the archivist for research. He thought he had a good idea what the keys were for now, so he accompanied the king back to the palace, and retrieved his key. Master Gando questioned him briefly on exactly what the various PWP members said regarding the "Dark One". Alexander, in turn, requested that the archivist research any information available on the fate of the Dire Baron.

With that taken care of, Alexander returned to the compound. The others were gathered in the lounge.

Lainey looked at Alexander, and quietly asked, "Is this our fault? Did that little boy die because we took on PWP?" Tears began to form in her eyes.

"NO!" Sasha stood up, fists balled. "Don't even think like that, Lainey. Those assholes were killing NPC's before we found them, and they'd have kept on doing it. They serve this 'Dark One' who claims to be a god, and is sending them out to murder and steal. What we've done is slow them down."

"Aye, lass," Brick added. "This be none of our doing, but we're in it now. We need to find this asshole who pretends to be a god, and kill him good! And all his minions. Me king will help."

Alexander decided it was time to catch the team up on what he had learned.

"Everybody sit. I've learned a few things you should all hear." He took a seat next to Sasha. "First, Fitz, both kings, Captain Redmond, and apparently

most of the rulers on Io know that adventurers are players from another world, and that we respawn when killed." He waited for the instant barrage of questions to die down, holding his hands up. "I'm not sure why, but they've been at least partially excluded from the block we put on all NPC's when we coded the game. I'm betting Odin has something to do with it, as Fitz mentioned that they're old friends. I'll find out when we get to Olympus in the morning."

He looked around. "I'm telling you this, because you need to know that the kings knew exactly what would happen when they burned those PWP's. They knew those bastards would respawn at the prison. The burning was partly to teach them a lesson, and partly for the benefit of the villagers." He paused to let that sink in. "The king left his guards at the village for protection, but he could have had Fitz port in a new group. He wanted time to have the prisoners locked in a deep dark hole before anyone made the connection between the ones that burned and the ones that appeared at the prison. The NPC block should manage to keep the secret from there, preventing the jailers from discussing the new arrivals with the guards who fought them."

Seeing them all nod their heads, he continued. "Henry said the Dark One was the god of thieves. That's not right. Hermes is the god of thieves in Io, and also the god of travelers. He is not a 'dark' god, and would not have his thieves murder and steal from travelers. The thing is, either Odin has allowed the creation of a new god, or this is somebody pretending to be one. Again, we'll find out tomorrow."

"Next. My conversations with the dwarves and with Fitz have led me to believe that we need to go to Dire Keep, the ruins by the waterfalls near the demon dungeon. The keys we got from the dungeon bear the sigil of the Dire Baron, a real asshole who ran that keep, kept slaves to work his mines, practiced necromancy, and nearly started a war with the dwarves before Fitz got moody and knocked the whole thing down almost 200 years ago." He smiled as Brick chuckled at the visual. "We also need to go to Antalia, and see about the PWP guild headquarters."

Lainey raised her head. "Where's Antalia?".

Max opened his map and shared it with her. "It's about a two-day ride from

Stormforge. It's the name of both the city and the kingdom, just like Stormforge, though the city's not as big. Last I heard, they are allies of Stormforge so they should honor the king's request to arrest any PWPs found there. Though I doubt they'll risk attacking the guild headquarters outright."

"No, I think that's meant to be our job," Alexander said, "but Antalia's a higher level zone. The mobs in the area are mostly level 30-40. And we don't know for sure that the locals will honor the king's request. That means we need to prepare for the possibility that we'll have to fight our way in and then out again, which also means we'll need to level up. Same with Dire Keep. The dire wolves were easy kills for us before, but that was on our old toons, when we were all in our 70's. We need to be at least level 35 before we head out there. Probably higher."

Sasha asked, "How do you want to level up? And where do you want to go first? I vote we deal with PWP first. I don't like the idea of them targeting the village!" Lainey nodded her head emphatically in agreement.

"I think the village will be ok for a little while. With three dozen guards, plus two dozen masons and whatever villagers can fight, they can hold off an attack the size of one we saw today. The two guild mages stayed when we ported out. I have a feeling Millicent's treats and the dwarves' alcohol will ensure the village has protection from the Mage's Guild as well!" The others smiled at this.

"Plus, I think we took down most of PWP's current roster. Only a few escaped to respawn. With the videos that I'm sure have already been posted of the child being killed, and the players being burned, I'm guessing they'll have a harder time recruiting. PK's are cowardly shits at heart. While lots of them are willing to take on weaker players or NPC's, or even stronger players one on one... now that they know the kings themselves are willing to torture and kill them, and to go to war to get at them, I believe they'll think twice before joining PWP. I think that guild has pretty much become useless to this Dark One. What I'm worried about is what he will do next."

"We'll find him," Lainey said with a growl in her voice, "and when we do, I'm shooting him in the balls till I run out of arrows!" They all smiled at this, Brick giving her a fist-bump.

With nothing else to discuss, the friends all drifted up to their rooms to sleep.

In the morning they'd be back at Olympus for their usual round of testing.

Alexander awoke in his pod, and began his usual post-immersion ritual. Once he'd showered and dressed, he headed out to the living room.

Lainey and Sasha were there, with serious looks on their faces. There were also three of his father's security team. The men were dressed in black combat gear, holding automatic rifles. Two were keeping watch out the windows, while the third was talking with Lainey.

"Our instructions are to bring you to Olympus ASAP, ma'am. As soon as Alexander is ready, we'll head out."

"I'm here, sergeant... Wilson, right?" Alexander said. He vaguely remembered the man from a weapons training course his father had put him through a few years back.

"Yes, sir. Good to see you again. We need to move. We can talk in the car." The man headed for the door, motioning Alexander and the ladies to follow. The other two men brought up the rear as they moved through the house.

Exiting the house, they found three armored SUV's waiting for them, along with five more armed guards in various positions around the vehicles. The three didn't have time to take in much more, as Wilson all but shoved them into the back seat of the middle SUV. He joined them, sitting next to Alexander, as he radioed for the team to move out.

As the vehicle began to move forward, Alexander asked, "What's going on, Sergeant?"

The man's face was grim. "There was an attack on Olympus last night. At about 4:00am a car bomb struck the front gate and exploded. Behind it was a van full of people with assault rifles and rocket launchers. They were well armed, but not professionals. They misjudged their explosives, or the strength of the gate. The bomb didn't do its job, and they didn't get in. They managed to shoot a few rockets over the gate from on top of the van before we took them out."

"You killed them all?" Sasha asked, her eyes wide.

"We killed a couple of them. The ones with the rocket launchers. As far as we can tell, one of them detonated a grenade or a vest that took out the rest. The FBI is investigating. It's only been three and a half hours since the attack, but we should have preliminary findings soon."

"Were any of our people hurt?" Alexander asked, afraid to hear the answer. This was way too much like the attack that killed his mother.

"Two of our guys took some minor shrapnel hits from the second explosion. They've been treated and released." Wilson grinned at him. "I'll let them know you asked about them."

Alexander had always been a favorite among the Jupiter employees. When Olympus was built, he and Sasha would run about the compound playing "Cowboys and Indians". They were always the Indians, sneaking up on the guards at the security stations to "ambush" them and take their scalps. Those men protected him and his father like they were family. They were very well paid, well trained, and given the best equipment money could buy. After Angela was killed, Richard and Michael took security extremely seriously.

As they traveled up the mountain toward Olympus, Wilson continued. "The boss has opened up the hab wings, and initiated Chelone protocol. For all of our facilities, everywhere."

"Chelone?" Lainey asked.

Alexander shook his head. "Chelone was a Greek god, and a tortoise. Chelone protocol means we're "turtling". Gathering everyone together in the compound for protection. All employees have assigned rooms in the habitat wings at Olympus. If they feel the need, they can bring their families in as well."

Wilson nodded. "Bosses made sure there was plenty of space for everyone. We have a whole team that does nothing but keep track of employee numbers and family sizes, and works out logistics for housing, food, etc. When Olympus was built, they added six wings of apartments, three above ground, and three below. There are more than 400 separate living spaces, along with an extra cafeteria and some common rooms. That's separate from the two guard barracks. All told, we can comfortably house close to two thousand

people here for a good long while. Another thousand with folks sleeping on cots or doubling up in housing spaces. If necessary, we can add tents within the walls."

Just then they reached the turnoff from the highway to Bifrost Lane. There was a new guard checkpoint here. Cars and occupants were being thoroughly searched by about a dozen security team members, while an armored vehicle with a machine gun mounted on top stood off to one side. Two bombsniffing dogs were being led around by men in FBI jackets.

Their little convoy was waved through with just a cursory sniff from the dogs. As they traveled up the nearly mile-long Bifrost Lane, Wilson pointed out additional security teams moving through the woods to either side of the road. "Your dad brought in extra guys this morning, and more are on the way. By noon, a mouse won't be able to fart within a mile of here without us knowing."

Reaching the gate, Alexander felt sick. There were the twisted remains of the car that had exploded at the gate, as well as the slightly less damaged van. There were sheets draped over bodies and body parts scattered around the area. Teams of people in FBI jackets were moving about the area, taking photos and bagging bodies. Others were working inside the two vehicles.

The gate was still operable, as it had not taken much direct damage. Heimdall had apparently activated the steel posts that rose up from the driveway about a dozen feet in front of the gate. These posts rose four feet above ground, and extended twelve feet below. They could stop a moving tank in its tracks.

With the area outside the gate being an active crime scene, the vehicles could not pass through, so they parked off to the side and a team of six escorted them on foot around the edge of the scene and through the gate. There were three gator ATV's waiting for them inside to shuttle them the rest of the way. As they moved across the compound, they could see areas of scorched walls and debris where rockets had impacted the buildings.

They parked at the usual tower entrance and were escorted inside. Bethany was not at the reception desk, probably stuck in the traffic jam back at the checkpoint. They proceeded down the elevator, and were led to a conference room where Richard awaited them with breakfast.

Before Alexander could even ask, Richard said, "Brick and Max are on their way. Should be here in ten. And I sent a security team to watch over Brick's family at their new house."

The three of them sat down at the conference table. Lainey and Sasha began to help themselves to bagels and fruit, but Alexander couldn't even think about food.

"Do we know who they were? Why they attacked?" he asked his father.

"Not yet. We ran the vehicles, but both came up stolen. The FBI is going to run DNA on the bodies, and trace the weapons they used. Our latest theory is that they're an isolated group. None of our other facilities anywhere have been attacked. For the rest, let's wait for Brick and Max so I don't have to cover this twice. Try and eat something."

Morris Talbott, Jupiter's chief of security, stuck his head in the door and motioned toward Richard, who excused himself and left the room.

Lainey handed Alexander a plate of fruit and a bagel with peanut butter. "Eat. Your body needs fuel." Her tone made it clear she wasn't going to take no for an answer. He picked up a bit of cantaloupe and popped it in his mouth, chewing slowly.

They are mostly in silence, Lainey and Sasha making a few awkward attempts at small talk that quickly faded. After a few minutes, Max and Brick walked in and sat down. "Holy shit," Max released a long breath. "Have they told you any details yet?"

Alexander shook his head. "Our security chief was just here, and I think dad's getting an update now. He should be back in a minute. Brick, they told you a team's watching over your family?"

Brick nodded. "Thank you for that."

Alexander smiled at him. "Grab some food."

Brick didn't need to be told twice. He quickly had a bagel in each hand and was trying to decide between cream cheese, peanut butter, or salami and cheese to top them.

Again the room drifted into silence as the friends consumed their breakfasts.

Richard re-entered the room and sat at the table. He looked slightly shaken. The others all instantly forgot their food, waiting for him to speak.

"They found a wallet on one of the bodies. One of the guys that had been on the roof with a rocket launcher. He fell to the other side of the van before the explosion." Richard set a photo of the dead man on the table. He looked familiar.

"His name is Delbert Simms," Richard said.

"Delbert! That's the same name as..." Sasha didn't finish. She put her hand over her mouth.

"That's the PWP warrior from that first group. The one in the video that got banned for threatening the GM," Alexander finished for her.

Richard leaned back in his chair, looking exhausted. He must have been up all night. "Of the more than one hundred PWP members you've managed to lock up, 14 have been banned from the game for reasons similar to Mister Simms. We've given the FBI the names of each of them, along with the names of all the PWP members we're aware of. All of them were on a local server."

"But... it's only a game..." Lainey whispered.

"For many people it is much more, Lainey." Richard explained. "There are millions of folks like Max and Brick here, who earn their living in the game. Being banned may have taken away their livelihood. And then there are those who just can't separate the game world from real life. To them, the game IS their life."

He leaned forward and clasped his hands together on the table. "Right now, I'm hoping with all my heart that those bodies outside are just that. Players who are... were... angry about being banned. Because the alternative, that they're part of some organized effort, I don't even want to think about that."

END OF BOOK ONE

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents. They gifted me with The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings when I was just a level 9 human. JRR Tolkien's Master-level Storytelling skill opened my young eyes to an amazing world of elves, dwarves, orcs, dragons, and magic. My love of fantasy was born there and then. My folks encouraged me to read, and to write. I began a quest to devour every fantasy and sci-fi novel I could get my young hands on. I wanted to be like Tolkien, Asimov, Heinlein, Hubbard, Piers Anthony, Salvatore, Jordan, and so many others. And though I started several novels over the next three decades, I never found the time or motivation to finish them

.

It wasn't until I stumbled across the LitRPG genre a year or so ago that I found that motivation. The books I read, the combination of standard fantasy fiction with elements from MMORPG's, they spoke to me. Being a long-time gamer, I have a love for the questing, the fighting of monsters for epic loot, and working with friends and guildmates to take down a boss. As well as the city building and crafting elements found in some of the best MMORPG's. And I spent more than my share of time cursing game devs for what I perceived to be fatal flaws in their games, or for nerfing my beloved characters.

The amazing authors in the LitRPG genre showed me a way to create my own game world exactly the way I envisioned it. And to share that world with others who might enjoy it as well. Or curse my name for perceived flaws and plot holes.

I want to thank my folks again for being my alpha readers, and for the continued encouragement (demanding more pages to read). A big thank you to Jo Hoffacker, and JD Williams, editors extraordinaire. They took on a draft that was certainly hard to read, and poked and prodded it into becoming something better.

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If you enjoyed this book, or even if you didn't, but you DO enjoy the LitRPG and GameLit genre, then I recommend you check out the following Facebook pages:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPGsociety/ https://www.facebook.com/groups/GameLitSociety/ https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPGGroup/

Or my own Greystone Guild page for information on upcoming books https://www.facebook.com/greystone.guild.7

You can also get great information and reviews from Ramon Mejia's LITRPG Podcast at https://www.facebook.com/litrpgpodcast/

I'd also like to recommend you check out some of my favorite authors within the genre.

Daniel Schinhofen https://www.amazon.com/Daniel-

Schinhofen/e/B01LXQWPZA

Blaise Corvin https://www.amazon.com/Blaise-Corvin/e/B01LYK8VG5
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Alexey Osadchuk https://www.amazon.com/Alexey-

Osadchuk/e/B01AFCEV5W

If you've never played an RPG game...

Here's what you need to know. This story takes place (mainly) inside a game that was created in a virtual reality (VR) environment. Players of the game enter the game world using various types of VR gear and internet access. To the players, it seems as if they're in a whole new environment that has cities, nations, even entire continents filled with characters and monsters.

Completing quests, killing monsters (mobs), and even discovering new lands, all grant the players experience points (xp) which cause their characters to grow. This is called leveling up. Players play the game in many different ways. Each player chooses their own individual path. There are quests to complete, and monsters to fight, which is called playing against the environment, or player versus environment (PVE). There are players who choose to craft useful items via skills like blacksmithing, carpentry, alchemy, and the like. They can use these crafted items to enhance their own game performance, or sell them to earn money. Some players choose to open shops and play as full time merchants, buying and selling goods or services for profit.

There are battles between players, one-on-one or in groups as large as several hundred. This is called player versus player, or PVP. Most of this is sanctioned and organized within the game in duels, tournaments, or guild versus guild battles. But there are players who, through laziness, immaturity, or just some twisted need, focus on targeting and killing weaker, lower level players. These are called Player Killers, or PK's. They are generally detested in any gaming world. We especially don't like them. Boo!

When a player logs into the game for the first time, they must create an avatar (also called characters, or toons). If you've seen the movie "Avatar" then you get the general idea. Only instead of growing a body for a player to inhabit, taking several months or years, the avatars in the game are created virtually in minutes. Players control their avatar through the manipulation of a User Interface, or UI. This displays everything from a location map, or the name of a player in front of them, to quest logs, and detailed descriptions of their avatars.

Avatars have what are called statistics (stats) that determine almost everything about them. The most basic are Health, Mana, and Stamina.

Health is the number of health points (hp) they have. In this game, it is measured by a sliding bar at the top of the UI. An avatar may start with 100 health points, as an example. If they are bitten by a wolf, or shot with an arrow, they take damage, which costs them hp. If their hp bar drops to zero, their avatar dies.

Mana is a measure of a player's magical battery, so to speak. Mana is also measured in a bar, just like health. Mana is for spell casters. Each spell they cast costs a certain number of mana points. So to follow my previous example, a mage might have 100 mana points. He casts a fireball spell at an angry goblin, and that spell costs 20 mana. The mage is now down to 80 mana points. When their mana reaches zero, they can no longer cast magic.

Lastly, Stamina is similar to mana, only it is a measure of physical energy. Every avatar has a stamina bar located at the top of their UI along with health and mana bars. When a player exerts themselves in a strenuous manner (running, swinging a heavy sword, climbing a steep mountain) they use up stamina points. If they drain their stamina to zero, they can no longer move about, and must sit and wait for it to recharge.

All three major stats (health, mana, stamina) recharge naturally if a player ceases to use them. Just like in real life, when you sprint until you can't breathe. If you sit and chill for a few minutes, you can get up and do it again. The three main stats can also be instantly recharged via the consumption of health, mana, or stamina potions. Think 5-Hour Energy shots that tempt you at every gas station checkout. There are also potions, and magically cast 'buffs', that temporarily increase the other attributes. Like +5 to strength for two hours.

In addition to the basic three stats, there are several primary stats or 'attributes' that affect an avatar's 'build'. In this book, those are Strength, Agility, Dexterity, Luck, Charisma, Intelligence, and Wisdom. These terms are pretty self-explanatory. What you need to know is that as players level up, they receive attribute points, which they can assign to one of the stats above, increasing their avatar's performance accordingly. For example, an increase to strength would allow them to lift heavier objects, carry more weight, or more easily muscle around a sword and shield to overpower an enemy. Increases to intelligence would mean an increase in their available mana, or allow them to learn more difficult spells, etc.

Players must first select a race. There are several to choose from. Human, Elf, Dwarf, Orc, Ogre, Goblin, the list goes on. And there are options to play hybrids. Like a half-orc, half-ogre. If you do not know what elves, orcs or goblins are, I really don't think this book is for you.

The choosing of race is important, as it impacts the available playing style for the avatar. For example, a player who wants to swing a large club and bash smaller players into the ground might choose an ogre for their size and strength. However, if they later decide they'd like to focus on magic casting, which is based on intelligence and wisdom, their poor, slightly smarter than a rock, ogre is just out of luck.

Which brings me to the general classes. While there are lots of different subclasses of avatars in the game, they all boil down to a basic few.

Tanks: Tanks are pretty much what they sound like. They are considered a melee class, dependent mostly on stamina to power their abilities (though some, like paladins, also use magic). They typically focus on strength and stamina. These are players wearing heavy armor, normally carrying big shields, that can take a lot of damage without dying. The role of the tank is to get, and hold, the attention (aggro) of the enemy, and absorb abuse while they, or their allies, do as much damage as possible, as quickly as they can, to the enemy. This is commonly referred to as damage per second, or dps. Some of my favorite people play tanks.

Melee DPS: Again, just what it sounds like. These are physical fighters who prefer to do their damage up close and personal. This could be warriors with massive two-handed swords, or a sword/shield combination. It could be monks, who punch and kick their foes into submission. Or rogues, who sneak up behind enemies to stab them in the back, then run away. This is a mixed bag, with some focusing on strength and stamina, and others on agility and stamina. They wear varying types and weights of armor, from heavy plate or chainmail for warriors, to light leather for rogues and monks.

Casters: This is one of two divisions of what's called "ranged dps". These are your mages, sorcerers, wizards, and such. They use magic as their primary offensive and defensive tool. Their focus is on intelligence and wisdom. As a result, they have low strength and stamina (which means a smaller health bar). Dangerous at a distance, they generally hover near the back of any battle and do their damage from there. They are often easily

killed if an enemy gets in close, or they run out of mana. Due to their lack of strength, they most often wear cloth armor (robes) and carry lightweight weapons (staves or wands).

Ranged: The other division of ranged dps are your long distance physical damage dealers. This includes archers, hunters, rangers (who all shoot bows or crossbows), as well as some rogue types who throw knives or axes. This class' main stats are normally agility and/or dexterity. With some strength thrown in to add power to their hits, or to allow them to draw larger bows. They most often wear leather armor, and can be found near the back of a battle near the casters. Able to take more damage than casters, they are still somewhat 'squishy' compared to warriors and tanks.

Healers: This last category is, in my opinion, the most critical. Healers keep everyone else alive. They are almost always casters, and have the ability to magically regenerate a player's health points. They cast a variety of spells to accomplish this, using several different schools of magic. Druids use nature magic to heal. Priests and paladins use holy magic. And there are different types of heals. Direct heals are targeted at a single player. Area of effect (AOE) heals blanket a specific area of ground, and heal all allies within that area. Some heals instantly restore large amounts of hp. Others, called heal-over-time spells (HoTs) provide smaller amounts of hp in regular increments over a period of time.

Again, in this book, in the game world of Io, there are an almost unlimited combinations of race, class, and attributes that players are able to mix and match. Making each experience unique.

Once a player has completed their character creation, they are dropped into a "noob" area, or starter zone. This is typically a town or city, where players can pick up beginner quests like "Find my lost dog" or "Kill ten rats in the cellar". These quests are low difficulty and generally bring small rewards. Their purpose is to teach the player how to better interact with the game. As they gain experience and level up, their attributes increase, and they are better able to handle progressively harder quests. With higher level mobs. Players can also team up, allowing them to take on tougher challenges. A level one noob would not be able to kill a level ten wolf by themselves. But a group of four level one noobs might pull it off, if they work well together.

These starter zones are also 'safe zones' meaning players cannot attack each other within these zones. Or, if they do, they suffer harsh penalties. Usually this means being quickly killed by town guardsmen. Attacking and killing another player gets a player marked with a red "PK" skull above their heads for 48 hours. Being tagged with a PK mark means other players can kill you with impunity. However, if player A is attacked by player B, player A can kill in self-defense with no penalty whatsoever.

The game world is populated by computer-generated characters that interact with players. Most often referred to as non-player characters, or NPC's. In Io, we call them citizens. Citizens are all the butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers that make up a town. They give out quests, rewards, and experience. They tell stories, and provide history that helps put quests in context. They buy the loot collected by players from dead mobs, and sell weapons and armor to players who need upgrades. They are the glue that holds the game world together. They refer to players as "adventurers", whom they believe have journeyed from a faraway land in search of... well, adventure. They are not aware that their world is a game, and keeping this information from them is vital. After all, if you were told you weren't real, that the world was just a game, would you show up for work every day?

Hopefully, this is enough information to get you non-gamers through the book without too much frustration. Luckily, RPG's have been around long enough, and been played by enough geeks, that nearly any term you don't understand can quickly be googled with helpful results.

Unfortunately, there are some references in this story to very specific happenings in other books or games, that while funny for gamers, won't be amusing to you. Even googling may not help. It's sort of a "you had to be there" thing. Like "Gnomes Rule!"

Good luck! And I hope you enjoy reading The Greystone Chronicles.